

INTERNATIONAL

EU Membership Seen as Vital to East's Security

By Peter S. Green
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PRAGUE — The bear hug with which NATO has embraced Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic may have ended the Cold War political division of Europe, but analysts say it has done only half the job of ensuring the security of Central and Eastern Europe.

Only economic prosperity can truly secure the region's future, they say. But just as NATO is opening its doors to the region, there is concern that the European Union is becoming reluctant to expand eastward.

Without EU membership, said Krystian Piatkowski, senior analyst at the National Security Bureau in Poland, Central Europe will remain in a "gray zone" between Moscow and the Euro-Atlantic axis.

"A country like Poland, with our history, does not want to stay in a zone of potential instability," he said.

The EU's once ambitious plans to absorb up to 10 former Communist countries are bogged down as the Union wrestles with creating a single currency, reforming its internal workings and

tackling low growth and high unemployment. Last month's summit meeting in Amsterdam was supposed to open the door for eastward expansion, but it left Eastern leaders disappointed.

The European Commission, the EU executive body, is scheduled to decide next week whether to open accession negotiations with Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia. But the lack of EU internal reform means that any of the 15 member states could block expansion, particularly Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Greece, which would lose substantial funds to those poorer Eastern members.

Even an EU fund of 45 billion Ecus (\$50.7 billion) to aid expansion — which is to be announced in Strasbourg next week by the Commission president, Jacques Santer — could eventually be torpedoed by them.

The potential for delay worries many in the East.

"Security has several dimensions — military, political but also economic security," said Jiri Pehe, senior analyst at Radio Free Europe in Prague. "These new market economies will not really be secure from the extensive tremors and

turbulences of transition until they are fully integrated into the EU market."

"NATO and the EU are part of a single package, and the EU is the one that fosters economic security," Mr. Pehe said.

Economic crises have hit every one of the region's economies as they struggle with the difficult transition from central planning to free markets. The painful budget cuts and factory closings, and the resultant price rises and unemployment, fueled the resurgence of former communists and populists from the old Yugoslavia to Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia who made lavish promises that only left their countries deeper in crisis.

"Economic decisions would be driven far less by ideological decisions than they are now," Mr. Pehe said in support of EU membership, "because politicians would have to play on a very clearly defined playing field."

That view is echoed across the region by analysts who note a slowdown in EU efforts to promote Western expansion.

NATO membership alone will not ensure Poland's security, said Mr. Piatkowski, the Polish security official.

"The major goal of our region is not to rearm or to cope with a military threat,

because that doesn't exist," he said, "but to provide the country with all the conditions for rapid economic development. We perceive NATO membership as a first step and related to EU membership."

The EU recognizes that the East needs to join the club. The region's economies are small, and without membership in the world's largest trading bloc they will be increasingly buffeted by the winds of international trade, analysts said.

"It's better to be at the table," said a senior EU official. "In a world increasingly dominated by globalization, it's important to have a say in the decisions."

But the EU line is that aspiring members should not worry if expansion is delayed a few years.

"These countries are still in transition, and the aim of the enlargement process is to be inclusive," the official said. "It's not a question of whether they will join. In two, five or 10 years everyone will join."

Not everyone agrees with that laid-back assessment. Jan Klacek, chief economist for the Czech National Bank, warns that each year of delay could cost the Czechs more than one percentage point of economic growth.