

Alex Etl:¹ The perception of security in Hungary²

Executive Summary

- The Hungarian society perceives climate change and uncontrolled migration as equally threatening for the security of the country, whereas Hungarian defense policy professionals are more concerned with the issues of uncontrolled migration, international terrorism and hybrid threats.
- Both the broader Hungarian society and defense policy professionals are committed to the country's alliance system. They are ready to support attacked allies with military means and they perceive the other V4 member states, the US and Germany as key military partners.
- On the one hand, Hungarian society is strongly in favor of establishing joint European military structures, even if this would mean delegating governance competences to the EU. On the other hand, the opinions of defense policy professionals are rather diverging on this issue.
- The majority of society would either keep the defense budget at current level or increase it even further. The defense community is strongly in favor of the recent increase of Hungarian defense expenditures.

The Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies (ISDS) has conducted various studies on Hungarian threat perception since the 1990s. This analysis follows these efforts and aims to introduce how Hungarians think about security, defense and military-related issues based on the results of a recent social survey commissioned by ISDS. Besides, this study is also an attempt to contextualize social perceptions with the security perception of those defense policy professionals who are participating in the formulation of Hungarian defense policy within the Hungarian Ministry of Defense.³

Methodology

For the analysis of social perceptions, ISDS commissioned a societal survey, which was conducted by IPSOS Zrt in December 2019. The survey used Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technique on a sample of 1000 participants and it is representative in terms of age, gender, highest education, and geographic location of the Hungarian population.⁴ The questionnaire was based on the 2008 survey of Lajos Radványi, complemented by additional questions.⁵ The current analysis highlights this complementary part of the results only, while the rest of them are published in a separate paper that compares the current data with the results gained from earlier matching surveys, conducted in 1999 and 2008 respectively.⁶

The 2019 societal survey was complemented by a panel of expert interviews. For the analysis of defense policy professionals' perceptions, ISDS conducted 10

semi-structured interviews at the Hungarian Ministry of Defense in October 2019. The interviewees were working in various positions in the Defence Policy Department and the Department for International Cooperation

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³ I would like to express my gratitude to Tamás Csiki Varga, Péter Tálás and Balázs Mártonffy, whose suggestions and comments helped to improve this study.

⁴ Confidence level: 95%; Margin of error: +/- 3.2%

⁵ The 2008 survey was commissioned by TIT Hadtudományi és Biztonságpolitikai Közhasznú Egyesület and Zrínyi Kommunikációs Szolgáltató Kht. See: Lajos RADVÁNYI: A magyar lakosság biztonságfelfogása és értékpreferenciái, 1999–2008, *Nemzet és Biztonság – Biztonságpolitikai Szemle*, 2009/2. 9-22.

⁶ Alex ETL – Péter TÁLAS: The transformation of Hungarian security perception between 1999 and 2019. 2020. *ISDS Analyses* 2020/4.



below the Deputy State Secretary level.⁷ The questionnaire was circulated among the potential interviewees a priori the sampling. These 10 interviews represent 19% of the two departments' staff and they can help to understand institutional perceptions within these departments at the Ministry. At the same time, 10 interviews alone cannot fully represent the broader Hungarian security community, which includes other departments at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; at the Prime Minister's Office as well as various think tanks and the Hungarian Defense Forces. The interviews can still provide new and valuable insights concerning defense policy professionals' security and threat perception. Further, I hope that this attempt can be a small step on a longer journey to understand the internal dynamics of the traditionally rather close-knitted Hungarian security community.

The Hungarian society's perception on security and threats

A fear from climate change and migration

Perhaps the most surprising result of the current survey is how Hungarians rank various factors that have negative impact on their security. In this regard, the fear from climate change and uncontrolled migration are clearly dominating the Hungarian threat perception. Approximately 37% think that climate change has a negative impact on the security of Hungary and practically the same amount of people would state the same for uncontrolled migration. Whereas concern for the latter was at the forefront of the Hungarian public discourse since 2015, the issue of climate change has only started to appear on the Hungarian political horizon. Interestingly, the third most perceived negative factor is also a strongly non-conventional issue: almost 30% think that Hungary's dependence on natural gas has a negative impact on the country's security. The fact that natural gas dependence is ranked so high on the societal agenda might be related to the fear from climate change and the general desire to create a sustainable energy supply mix based on more renewable resources.

Besides these factors, 23.3% and 21.4% think that international terrorism and economic vulnerability can have a negative impact on Hungary's security, which fear is probably drawn from contemporary experience of terrorist attacks in Europe, as well as from the impact of the 2008 financial and economic crisis. 20.5% of respondents perceive that conflicts in the Middle East can affect Hungary negatively, which is higher than the share of those who are concerned with the armed conflict in Ukraine. This is probably in line with the general fear from migration, since the 2015 migration and refugee crisis was primarily perceived to be triggered by the conflicts in the Middle East. The analysis also reveals that the majority of Hungarians do not perceive any conventional military threat and they do not link their threat perception to any countries. Less than 10% of respondents think that the Russian military threats, the weakening US support towards NATO, or the increasing Chinese influence would have a negative impact on the security of Hungary. Although the general instability in the Balkans heavily affected Hungarian security policy thinking in the 1990s, this issue has become overshadowed by other, more recent challenges.

⁷ For the organizational structure of the Ministry of Defense (in Hungarian): [Honvédelmi Minisztérium – Szervezet](#), [online], Source: [kormany.hu](#) [2020. 01. 27.]

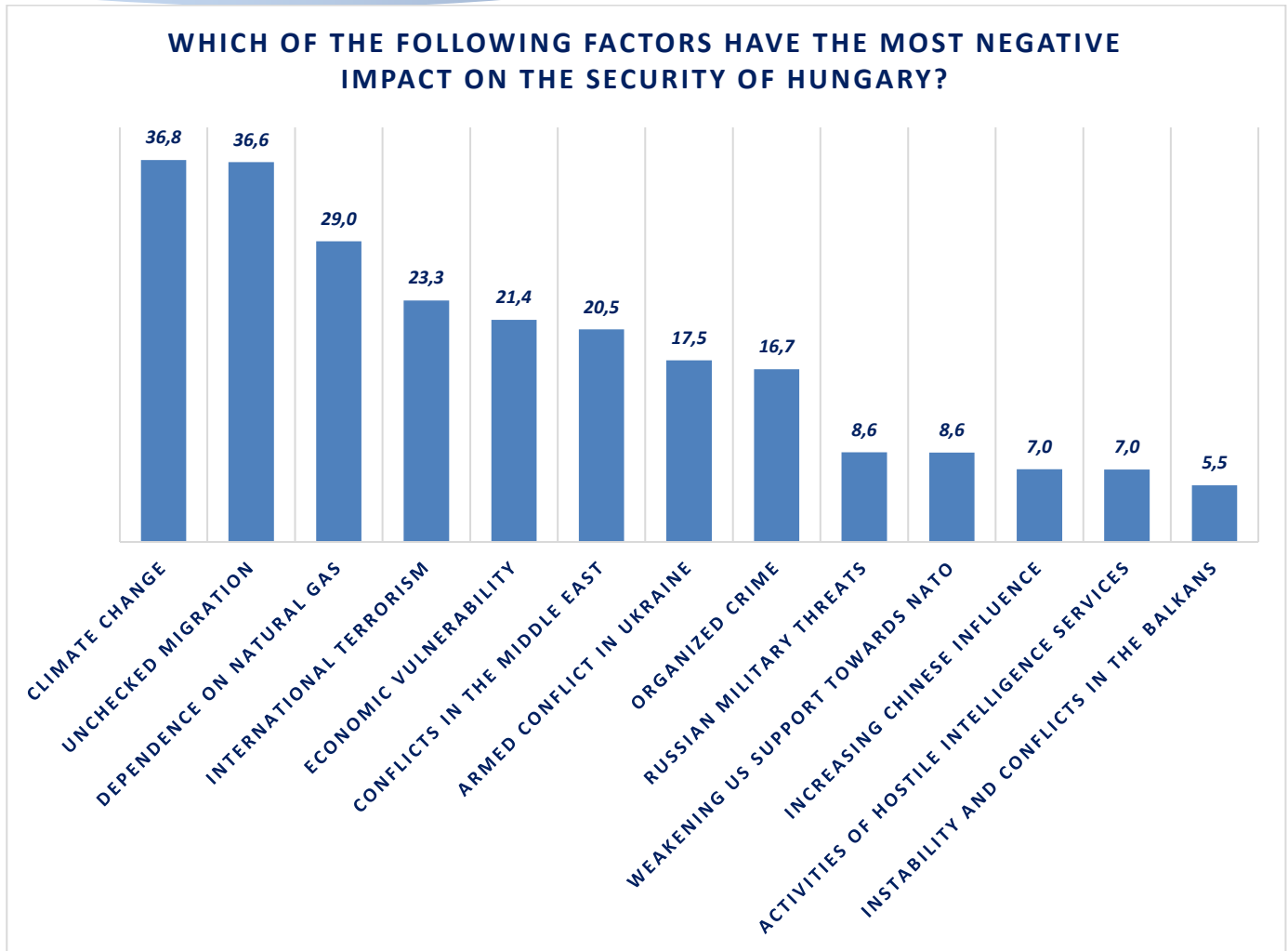


Figure 1: “Which of the following factors have the most negative impact on the security of Hungary?” Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

The V4, the U.S. and Germany are key allies

When discussing the future of military cooperation, the Hungarian society has a strong regional focus. The Visegrad countries, including Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are seen as key military partners in this regard. The survey reveals that the military cooperation with these countries is even more important for Hungarians than the cooperation with great powers, as 34% of the respondents ranked the V4 in the first place. Nevertheless, the United States has still a prominent place within the society’s thinking about security. Washington was ranked by 22% as the most important partner when it comes to future military cooperation. Moreover, the cumulative sum of those who ranked the United States among the four most important partners is the higher than the number of those who listed the V4 among the first four countries. Somewhat less prominent, but still an important partner is Germany, as almost 12% ranked Berlin in the first place of this list. Similarly to the ranking of United States, Germany overtakes the position of the Visegrad Group when counting the cumulative sum of the first four most important partners. 8% of respondents ranked Russia as the most important partner from the perspective of future military cooperation. The data also demonstrates that the society is more divided on the position of Russia, since almost 33% ranked Moscow as sixth or least important partner on our list, which can symbolize a general commitment towards Western alliances. At first sight, France and the United Kingdom are seen as less important allies, since only 3.4 and 3% qualified them as the most important military

partners. Nevertheless, the cumulative sum of those who ranked the United Kingdom and France among the four most important partners is higher than the number of those who put Russia on one of the first four places. This on the one hand highlights the less visible presence of Paris and London in the Central Eastern European region, but on the other hand it shows that the society is less divided on the role of London and Paris as military partners. The survey also revealed that from a military perspective China is not on the horizon of the society, as only 2% put Beijing in the first place with regards to future military cooperation, while more than 37% ranked China as sixth or least important partner on our list.

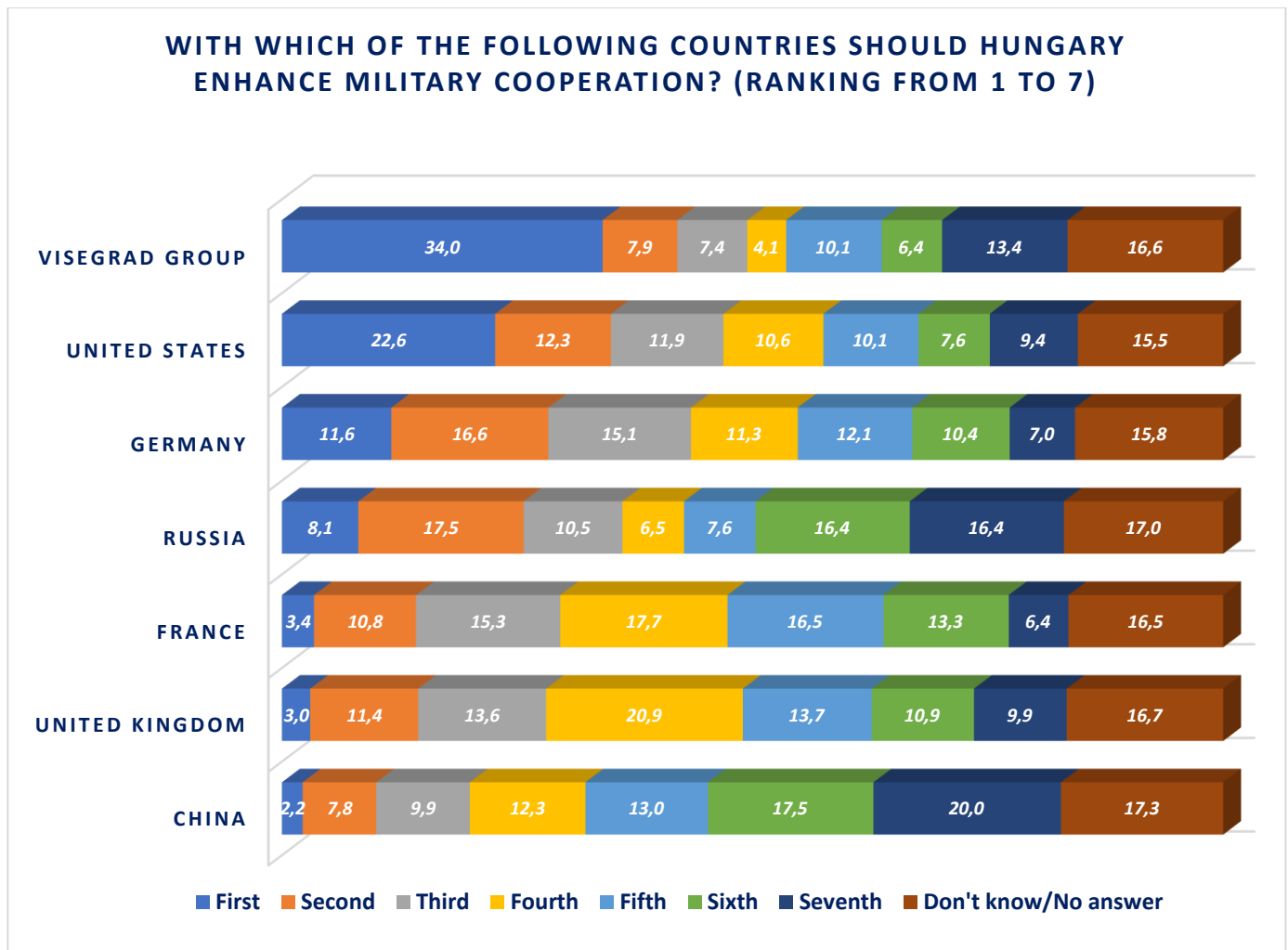


Figure 2: “With which of the following countries should Hungary enhance military co-operation? Ranking from 1 to 7.” Figures represent the percentage of those respondents who ranked the given country in the first; second; third etc. place.

The V4 should work on counterterrorism and migration control

Since Hungarians would primarily enhance military cooperation with V4 partners, one might be curious what this cooperation would ideally look like from the society’s perspective. The data analysis reveals that Hungarians conceptualize this cooperation primarily in the framework of countering non-conventional military threats. According to 49.5% and 44.5% of respondents, the V4 should cooperate in the fields of counterterrorism as well as in border and migration control. Besides, other non-conventional security related aspects of the possible cooperation are also prominent among Hungarians. This includes disaster management (33.6%), energy security

(32%), as well as environmental security and climate policy (30.3%). The more conventional military aspects only show up lower in this list, since 25% of Hungarians would support developing joint military capabilities within the V4 framework. Perhaps surprisingly, intelligence sharing, counterintelligence, as well as cyber and information security are seen as less favorable areas when it comes to future V4 cooperation.

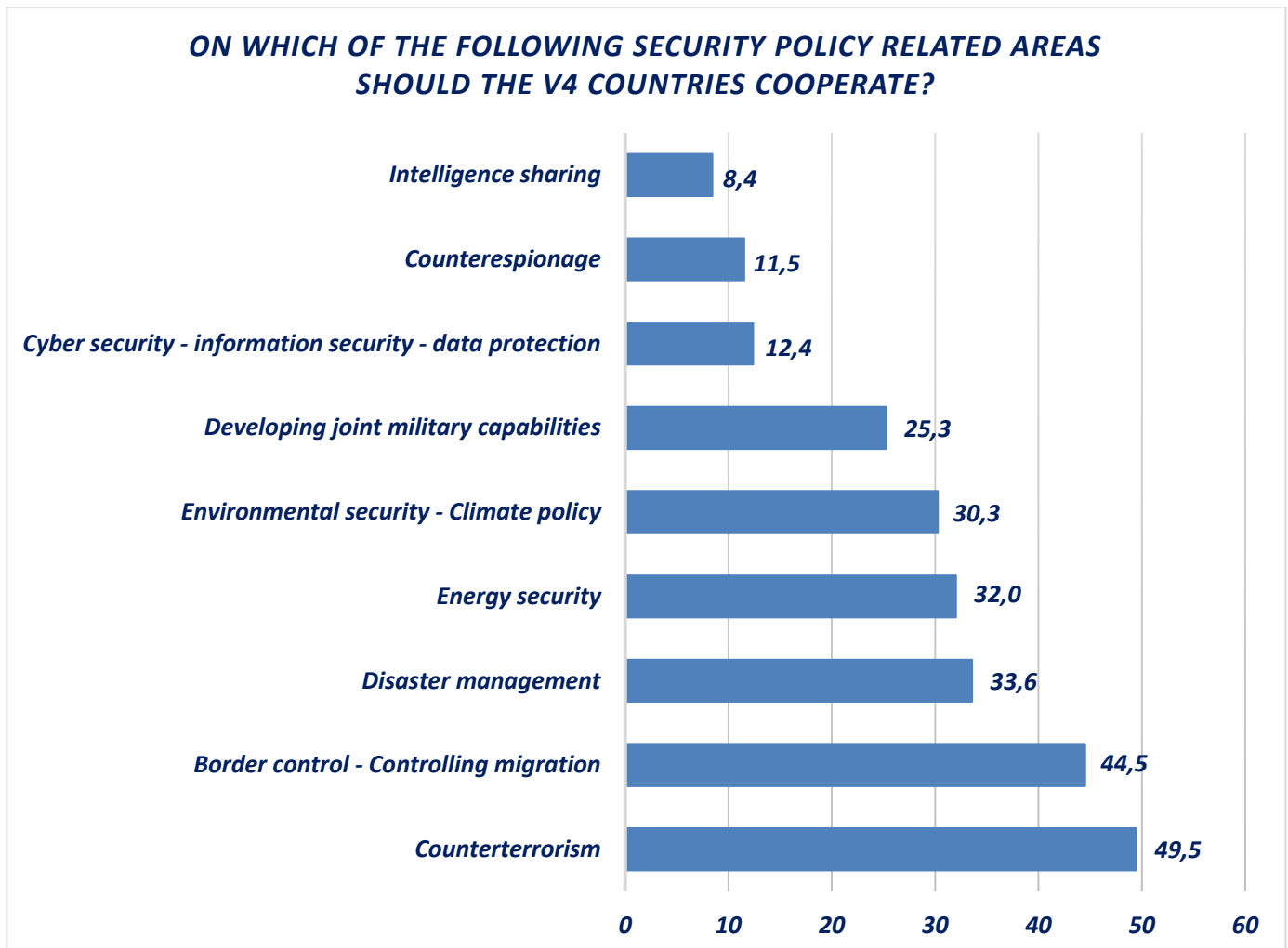


Figure 3: “On which of the following security policy related areas should the V4 countries cooperate?” Respondents were able to select maximum three answers.

Strong allied solidarity

While the V4, the U.S. and Germany are seen as key partners for future military cooperation, Hungarians’ allied solidarity is strong not only towards them. Hungarians are strongly committed to support their NATO and EU allies in case an external attack would occur against one of them. 64% of the society thinks that Hungary and the Hungarian Defense Forces should help their allies in such a scenario, while only 25% of respondents would oppose this. This shows strong societal support towards the current alliance system of the country and a willingness to show allied solidarity if needed. This tendency is probably based on the assumption that in a reverse case Hungary would also rely on its allies’ solidarity. The clear societal support behind the Western alliance system shows that this is not only a political commitment present on the elite level, but it is also strongly embedded into societal security perceptions.

IN CASE AN ALLIED NATO OR EU MEMBER STATE WOULD BE ATTACKED BY AN EXTERNAL ACTOR, SHOULD HUNGARY/THE HUNGARIAN DEFENSE FORCES SUPPORT THEIR ALLY?

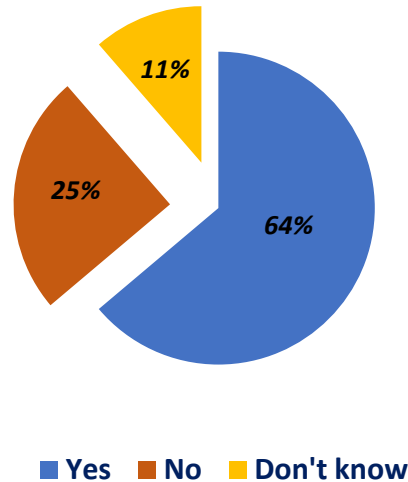


Figure 4: “In case an allied NATO or EU member state would be attacked by an external actor, should Hungary/the Hungarian Defense Forces support their ally?”

In favor of European defense integration

Euroscepticism is certainly not dominating the society’s thinking when it comes to the issue of defense. The current survey reveals the opposite, since Hungarians overall believe that joint European military capabilities should be strengthened. The majority of society is in favor of pushing the European integration project forward in the areas of military and defense cooperation. Hungarians want a militarily more capable Europe, one that would be able to act without the support of the United States. This is especially interesting when we consider the fact that 22% ranked the US as the most important partner for future military cooperation. What is even more surprising is that the majority would delegate governance competences to the European Union in order to establish a Joint European Military Force in the medium term. This is the first survey result that explicitly shows Hungarians’ willingness to restrict their national sovereignty in order to create more efficient European defense. The data clearly show that Hungarians do not consider European allies as threatening actors. On the contrary, they believe that Europeans should work together militarily against threats that emerge elsewhere.

IS THERE A NEED TO STRENGTHEN JOINT EUROPEAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES TO ALLOW EUROPEAN STATES TO ACT WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF THE UNITED STATES?

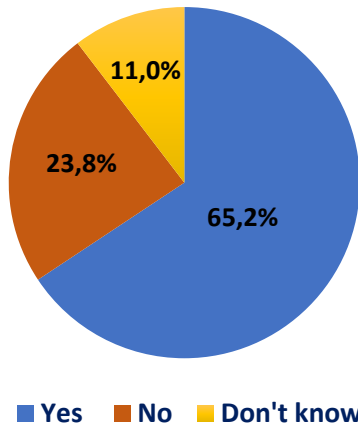


Figure 5: “Is there a need to strengthen joint European military capabilities to allow European states to act without the support of the United States?”

IS THERE A NEED TO ESTABLISH A JOINT EUROPEAN MILITARY FORCE IN THE MEDIUM TERM, EVEN IF HUNGARY WOULD HAVE TO DELEGATE GOVERNANCE COMPETENCES TO THE EUROPEAN UNION?

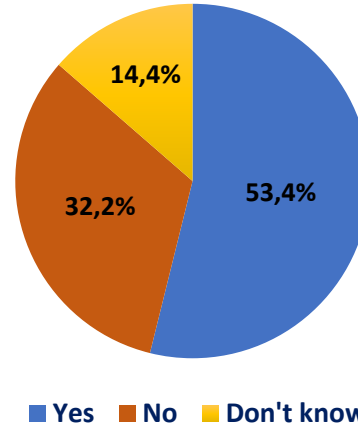


Figure 6: “Is there a need to establish a joint European Military Force in the medium term, even if Hungary would have to delegate governance competences to the European Union?”

Supporting defense expenditures

The survey reveals that the majority of Hungarians are not against the recent increase of the Hungarian defense budget.⁸ Moreover, 35% of them would support even more increases in the next 5 years, whereas 45% would keep the budget on its current level. Less than 10% of Hungarians would decrease the current budget, which shows the society’s acceptance towards defense and military-related expenditures. This tendency also highlights that Hungarians are generally not against the modernization process of the Hungarian Defense Forces that has been going on in recent years and included the procurement of several major weapon systems. The society accepted that Hungary, as a member state of a broader alliance, should spend more on defense and should be a responsible ally in the long run. Despite the fact that military threats are not dominating societal threat perceptions, this does not necessarily mean that the society would neglect the armed forces. The survey reveals that Hungarians are committed to maintaining a strong and modern defense force that is able to fulfill its allied commitments.

⁸ For more details on this issue: Tamás CSIKI VARGA: [Explaining Hungarian defense policy I. – Defense spending trends](#), [online], 2019. 02. 13. CSDS Analyses 2019/5 [2020. 01. 05.]

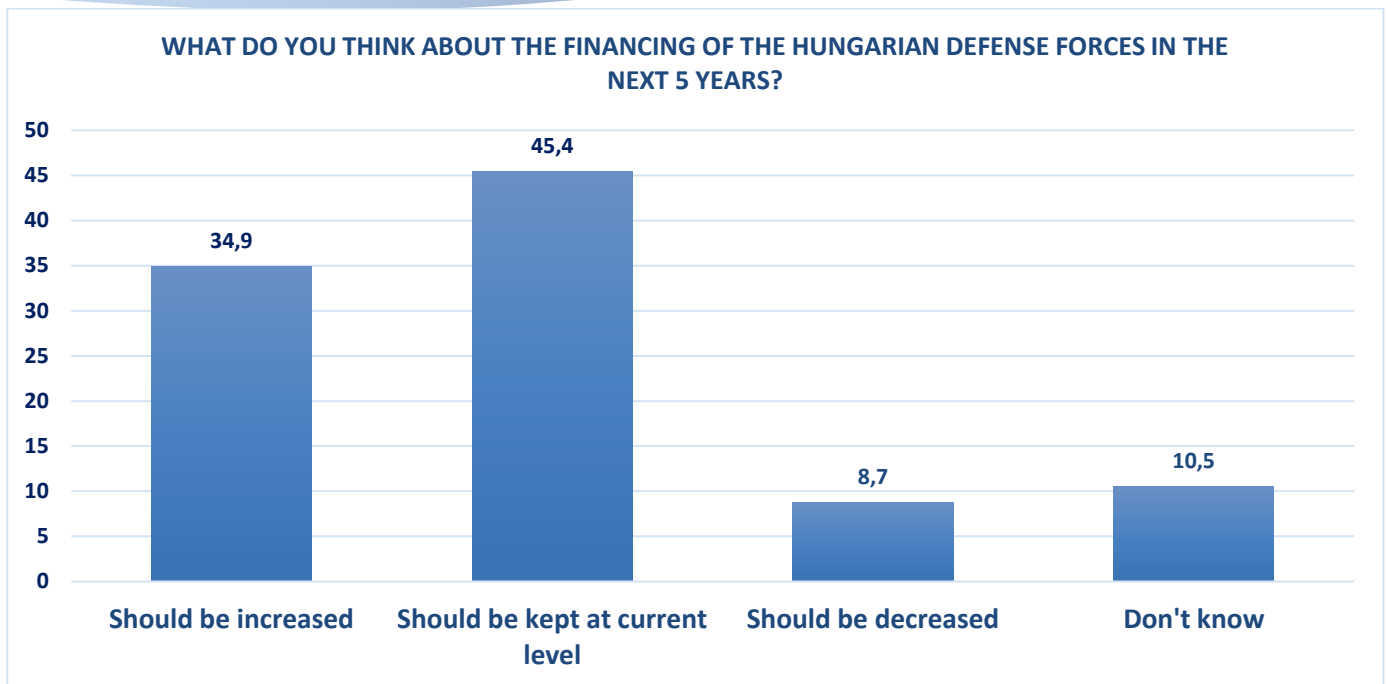


Figure 7: “What do you think about the financing of the Hungarian Defense Forces in the next 5 years?”

Security and threat perception among defense policy professionals

Besides the analysis of the societal threat perception, ISDS conducted semi-structured interviews at the Hungarian Ministry of Defense in October 2019 to understand the threat perception of those professionals who are participating in the formulation of Hungarian defense policy. First, the interviewees were asked to define what comes to their mind when they hear the words “*security*” or “*threat*”. Generally, the respondents conceptualized these words in a rather broad way. Many of them differentiated between individual and collective or state and international levels when discussing the content of security or threats and many of them also differentiated between various forms or sectors of security, like environmental, societal or military security. One interviewee also added that the content of security depends heavily on the individual who aims to interpret it. When explaining their views on security, many of the respondents used examples that are more related to the individual level and associated to words like “*peace*”, “*family*”, the “*Maslow pyramid of needs*”, or simply that they “*do not have to fear when they are walking on the streets*”, while some of them also added that security means the “*lack of threats*”. On the other hand, the word “*threat*” was rather conceptualized on the state level with words like “*terrorism*” or “*war*” and only a few answers contained references like “*rape*” or “*unrest*,” which are more related to the individual level. For many of the interviewees, “*threats*” were also related to the “*lack of security*”.

After this, the interviewees were asked to talk about the security policy situation of Hungary in general. All of them agreed that the security and defense policy situation of Hungary is stable and most of them emphasized that this situation is fundamentally based on the alliance system of the country. When discussing this alliance system, respondents consequently referred to both NATO and EU memberships of the country, which shows the equal importance of these organizations. One interviewee noted positively that this stable situation of the country is also supported by the fact that neighboring countries are either already members or aim to become members of these alliances. Another one added that a small country like Hungary would not be able to defend itself alone and therefore NATO and EU memberships provide the cornerstone of its stability. Some respondents pointed out that while the general situation is stable, newly emerging challenges like cyberattacks or attacks against the critical infrastructure are increasingly present in the current international system and these tendencies changed the nature of warfare and created new forms of threats.



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The respondents identified the V4, Germany and the United States as key security policy partners for Hungary, which shows striking similarity with social perceptions. Besides these countries that appeared in all answers among professionals, some respondents also added France, Italy as well as other regional and neighboring countries like Croatia, Slovenia or Austria to this list. The interviewees agreed that the security and defense policy relations with NATO and EU countries are generally good and stable. Interestingly, some respondents emphasized the importance of shared interests and security perceptions with neighboring and regional partner countries, whereas another interviewee highlighted that security perceptions might differ across the region, as they are in the case of Poland and Hungary.

After this, the interviewees were asked to name those partner countries with which it would be beneficial to further enhance military and defense policy cooperation. In this regard, most of the interviewees repeated their previous answers concerning the role of the V4, Germany and the United States but several respondents also pointed out that France could be an important partner due to its role within European defense policy and the country's defense industrial base. When discussing the role of France, a few answers contained references to Brexit, and to its impact on the increasing French influence within the EU. Some respondents also highlighted the need to strengthen military ties with Italy and neighboring countries – most importantly to support the stability of the Balkans.

Next, the respondents were asked to identify those factors that have a negative effect on the security of Hungary. Almost all of them started this list with the issue of irregular uncontrolled migration. Respondents underlined this issue primarily because its security policy-related aspects, but some also highlighted its polarizing effect on the society, while another interviewee noted that it is “*a threat and a humanitarian crisis at the same time*”. Besides, most of the interviewees identified two main threats for the security of Hungary: terrorism and newly emerging challenges, like hybrid and cyber threats or attacks against its critical infrastructure. When discussing the issue of terrorism, the answers exclusively referred to radical Islamist terrorism and the threat posed by ISIS/“Islamic State” or Al-Qaeda. Interestingly, none of the answers contained references to radical right-wing motivated terrorist attacks, which had precedents in Hungary before. However, more respondents noted that the country is not the primary target of radical Islamist terrorism, but Hungary still aims to support the fight against the “Islamic State” due to solidarity with allies. Concerning the issue of hybrid and cyber threats, the respondents consequently emphasized that these are not posed by countries but by non-state actors, nonetheless no concrete actors or groups were named by the interviewees. One respondent noted however that hybrid and cyber threats can lead to strategic surprises as it happened in the case of the Russian interference in Ukraine.

Besides these challenges, a few respondents also emphasized the threat posed by global warming for the security of Hungary and this was sometimes linked to the issue of migration as a potential push factor in some regions. Similarly, a few respondents emphasized the importance of the stability as well as the integration of the Western Balkans. One interviewee linked this latter issue to terrorism through the threat posed by returning fighters from the “Islamic State,” who might try to destabilize the Balkan. Somewhat surprisingly, only one respondent mentioned global economic challenges concerning the security of Hungary and only one answer referred to the energy diversification problems of the country.

In line with the 2012 National Security Strategy, all respondents agreed that there is no country that would be considered as an enemy or a threat for Hungary. A few answers carefully touched upon the sometimes disruptive behavior of Russia and China in the current international system, but the interviewees consequently emphasized that Hungary does not see these countries as enemies. When discussing the security policy situation of Hungary, a few interviewees differentiated between the Eastern and the Southern strategic directions.⁹ These interviewees considered the Southern direction as the more important one from a Hungarian perspective, and argued that the stability and the integration of the Western Balkans is a key priority for Hungary. Respondents

⁹ The south-east division is in line with the general approach of NATO towards the various forms of threats coming from these two directions. See: [Brussels Summit Declaration](#), [online], 2018. 08. 30. Source: nato.int [2020. 01. 05.]



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saw the Eastern direction as less challenging. One interviewee added that Russia might lead hybrid influencing attempts against the Baltic states or Poland, but it would not start a conventional war against NATO. Another respondent explained that Hungarian–Russian relations are based on mutual benefits, which might be on “*thin ice*.” Generally, the interviewees agreed that Hungary is not threatened currently by any country in a conventional military sense.

The opinions of the defense policy professionals on the future of joint EU capabilities are divergent. Several respondents articulated that there is a general need in Europe to do more for our security. Therefore, Europe should establish/strengthen its joint military capabilities. For some respondents this only means harmonized standards, interoperability and joint exercises, while for some it can even mean joint acquisitions and co-development. Most of the interviewees emphasized that strengthening European capabilities should happen in line with the United States and this should not lead to the deterioration of the transatlantic relations, but Europe should become equal to the United States. On the other hand, some answers underlined that this question affects the rather sensitive topic of sovereignty, thus these European attempts concerning the joint military capabilities are less realistic. When the respondents were asked whether there is a need for the establishment of a joint European Military Force, only one of them supported the idea and argued that it is necessary to effectively defend Hungary and Europe. As this respondent noted, Europe is not losing its security but its relevance on the international sphere if this integration will not happen and therefore European states should specialize their militaries and coordinate their procurement processes more closely. The others were rather skeptical and argued that the current mechanisms are not adequate for this integration process and member states should focus on coordinating their capabilities. Some respondents also noted that EU member states cannot even agree on less important issues, while another answer referred to the realist school of international relations when explaining why states are not willing to give up their sovereignty.

All respondents agreed that Hungary would have to fulfill its allied commitments and provide help even by military means if an attack against a NATO or EU member state would occur. Some of them also added that this is based on a reciprocal expectation, since Hungary would also expect support in a similar situation. Interestingly, some interviewees referred only to NATO and the North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 5 when answering this question, while some of them also added Article 42.7 or the so-called Mutual Defense Clause of the Lisbon Treaty. While both of these articles are concerned with the issue of collective defense, this is still an important distinction since the former refers exclusively to NATO member states, while the latter covers the non-NATO EU member states, like Austria, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Cyprus or Malta as well. When asking for clarification whether Hungary has this commitment towards non-NATO EU member states, some of the interviewees expressed a strong and definite agreement, while some of them argued that this responsibility is present only towards NATO member states. This highlights a small discrepancy within the Hungarian security community, which probably shows that the Mutual Defense Clause of the Lisbon Treaty is not so deeply embedded in institutional thinking yet. Nevertheless, the clarification of this question can emerge as a key priority in the future for establishing a more effective strategic planning process.

Although all interviewees emphasized the importance of the V4 from a security and defense policy perspective, only a few were able to evaluate this cooperation more deeply or to point out concrete projects like the V4 Battle Group or joint exercises. The respondents agreed that the V4 has a strong regional and foreign policy value. Some answers placed the emphasis on the results and defended the potential of the V4 while some answers rather pointed out the limitations of the group on the practical level.

All interviewees agreed that the Hungarian defense budget is moving in a positive direction due to the governmental decision to reach the 2% ratio of GDP by 2024 and to modernize the Hungarian Defense Forces in the framework of the Zrínyi 2026 National Defense and Armed Forces Development Program. Many of the respondents noted that Hungary spends 20% of its defense budget on modernization and thus fulfills NATO targets in this regard. A few respondents noted that Hungary modernizes the Hungarian Defense Forces in line with NATO standards and follows the expectations of NATO when deciding on various procurement programs. When asking about which areas should be in the focus of the future development of the Hungarian Defense



Forces, the respondents generally highlighted two critical areas. First, the preparation for newly emerging security challenges, like hybrid threats or cyber attacks, as well as the protection of critical infrastructure. Some respondents also noted that while these threats are at the forefront of Hungarian threat perception, they do not appear sufficiently in the modernization program of the armed forces. The second critical area is the improvement of the general circumstances of the employees of the HDF. According to some respondents, this should include more nuanced housing allowances, solving the wage difference between military and civilian personnel, as well as increasing salaries to decrease the fluctuation and to provide a vision for individuals within the apparatus.

Conclusions

The comparison of the societal and professional perceptions of security shows several similarities, as well as some differences. Most importantly, both society and professionals demonstrate strong commitment towards the Western alliance system, including both NATO and the EU. The integration process of the 1990s and the early 2000s has become not only institutionalized but embedded into societal structures, thus leading to the establishment of a broader security policy consensus concerning the future of the country. Hungarians perceive themselves as members of the Western security community. This not only means enjoying the benefits of this system but also the willingness to fulfill the various tasks and commitments drawing from these memberships. Hungarians show strong solidarity towards their allies both among professionals and within society and they are ready to act, if the alliance would require so. Both the society and defense policy professionals think that the V4, the US and Germany are key partners with regards to future military cooperation.

There is also an emerging realization in society that defense spending does matter, even if conventional military threats are not at the forefront of the people's broader security perception. Nonetheless, the recent growth of the Hungarian defense expenditure is clearly not opposed by society and a significant part of it would encourage further increases as well, and such increases would be strongly welcomed by professionals. This demonstrates a commitment towards creating a modern and capable military force, ready for answering the challenges of the 21st century.

Climate change and uncontrolled migration are dominating societal threat perception as both are perceived in some ways negatively affecting the country's security. Whereas these clearly appear in the threat perception of professionals as well, the issue of climate change is still less visible among them. This might show that there is an emerging threat factor present in the society that remains unanswered from the policy side. On the other hand, all the professional interviews were conducted within the Ministry of Defense, which also means that the interviewees were probably more inclined to conceptualize their threat perception in line with military and defense-related issues. Climate change might be seen as something out of scope for them. Besides these two main factors, international terrorism remains high on the societal and professional agenda as well, however society is more worried about the country's dependence on natural gas. For professionals, hybrid threats are gaining more importance. Neither defense policy professionals nor society link their threat perceptions to a specific country, and both spheres perceive that conventional military threats are somewhat less possible in the current international environment.

Finally, the professional and the societal opinions on the future of European defense show slight differences. It seems that Hungarians in general are more willing to establish joint European military structures or a European Military Force, even if this would restrict their sovereignty in certain areas. At the same time, professionals are rather skeptical about the future of European defense integration and they conceptualize this process in the framework of cooperation, harmonization, interoperability and maybe joint acquisition or co-development. Clearly, this relates to the fact that the future of European defense is not yet defined, and the debates around it are still ongoing or only emerging across the continent. Nevertheless, deciding on this issue will have a primary importance and a significant impact on the future of Hungarian strategic planning processes.



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