

Alex Etl – Péter Tálás:¹ The transformation of Hungarian security perception between 1999 and 2019²

Executive Summary

- Since 1999, Hungarian security perception has been primarily dominated by the notion of financial prosperity and existential security. The Hungarian society writ large links security primarily to the individual level and personal experiences.
- In contrast, the majority of individual Hungarians tend to interpret threats in an abstract way and do not perceive direct military threats for the country.
- Existential security is the most important sector of security for society since 1999, while the second most important sector is public safety.
- Also since 1999, the ratio of those who think that the government should decide on the security policy of the country has significantly increased, and in parallel to this the ratio of those who think that this should be the task of the parliament/National Assembly has decreased.
- Hungarians' value preferences are primarily based on the values of *peace*, *existential security* and *personal freedom*, although their dominance has somewhat decreased since 1999.

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 the transformation of Hungarian security perception between 1999 and 2019, based on the results of three societal surveys conducted in 1999, in 2008 and in 2019. The surveys focused primarily on four related areas: the conceptualization of security and threats; the importance and the perceived level of security within various sectors; the right to decide on the field of security policy; and the value preferences of Hungarian society.³

Methodology

The study analyses the transformation of Hungarian security perception between 1999 and 2019, based on the results of three societal surveys conducted in 1999, in 2008 and in 2019. The 1999 and the 2008 surveys were commissioned by the *TIT Hadtudományi és Biztonságpolitikai Közhasznú Egyesület*, in cooperation with the *Zrínyi Kommunikációs Szolgáltató Kht.* and the *Szonda Ipsos Média-, Vélemény- és Piackutató Intézet*.⁴ For the

analysis of the societal perceptions in 2019, the Institute for Strategic and Defense commissioned a societal survey, which was conducted by IPSOS Zrt in December 2019. The sample size was 1000 in 1999 as well as in 2019, and 3000 in 2008. All three surveys are representative in terms of age, gender, highest education, and geographic location of the Hungarian population.⁵

The original survey questionnaire was established by Lajos Radványi in 1999, and later on complemented by him in 2008. The 2019 survey also builds on this questionnaire, though we recognize its methodological

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³ The authors would like to express their gratitude to László Szabó I., Tamás Csiki Varga and Balázs Mártonffy for their suggestions and comments that helped to improve this study.

⁴ Lajos RADVÁNYI: A magyar lakosság biztonságfelfogása és értékpreferenciái, 1999–2008, *Nemzet és Biztonság – Biztonságpolitikai Szemle*, Vol. 2., Issue 2., 9-22

⁵ Confidence level: 95%; Margin of error: +/- 3.2%

limitations in certain cases.⁶ Nevertheless, we decided to continue to rely on and use the original questionnaire in order to make comparative analysis possible. At the same time, we also complemented the 2019 survey with additional questions, whose results are analyzed in a separate paper.⁷

The transformation of Hungarian security perception between 1999 and 2019

The concept of security and related associations

The primary aim of all three surveys was to analyze how Hungarians conceptualize the word *security*. First, respondents had to share what comes into their mind when they hear this word. These questions were open-ended and answers were later listed into pre-established response categories (Table 1.). One answer might fit into one or more categories, depending on its content. Answers referring to some kind of technical protection (e.g.: door, padlock, seat belt etc.) were listed into the category of *protection, closed doors*, whereas answers referring to health or health care were listed into the category of *safety of life, personal safety*. There were several answers that touched upon the issue of a good feeling or harmony that we listed into the category of *well-being*, while the *other* category includes answers that we were unable to categorize (e.g.: freedom, morning coffee, insurance company).

What comes into your mind when you hear the word “security”? What does this mean to you?					
1999		2008		2019	
Response categories	%	Response categories	%	Response categories	%
Public safety	32	Financial prosperity, existential security	28	Financial prosperity, existential security	38
Financial prosperity	23	Public safety	16	Security of the family/home	18
Calm life	22	Calm life	12	Calm life	12
Existential security	19	Security of the family/home	11	Public safety	8
Military security	13	Living without fear	11	Living without fear	8
Security is what we do not have	6	Peace	9	Protection/Closed doors	7
Rule of law	2	Safety of life, personal safety	5	Safety of life, personal safety	6
Health	2	The work of the police/armed forces and the protection of citizens	4	Peace	4
You do not have to fear the future	2	Security in general	3	Security is what we do not have	3
Police	2	Security of the homeland	3	Security of the homeland	3
Personal safety	2	Security is what we do not have	3	Security in general	3
NATO	1	Well-being	3	The work of the police/armed forces and the protection of citizens	2
Physical security	1	Protection/Closed doors	3	Well-being	1
Other	5	Other	8	Other	8
Do not know/No answer	11	Do not know/No answer	17	Do not know/No answer	4

Table 1.: “What comes into your mind when you hear the word “security”? What does this mean to you?”⁸

⁶ Thus, for example, we are more cautious in drawing conclusions based on the ranking system of Table 3 and Table 5.

⁷ Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, 2020. *ISDS Analysis* 2020/3.

⁸ Source of the 1999 and 2008 data: Lajos RADVÁNYI: A magyar lakosság biztonságfelfogása és értékpreferenciái, 1999–2008, *Nemzet és Biztonság – Biztonságpolitikai Szemle*, Vol. 2., Issue 2., 9-22

Hungarian security perception is primarily dominated by the notion of financial prosperity and existential security since 1999 (although the 1999 survey had two different categories for these two issues). When hearing the word *security*, the majority of those interviewed associated the word with concepts such as stable income, financial prosperity, or a secure job, which are all related to the issue of existential security (23 and 19% in 1999; 28% in 2008; 38% in 2019). Similarly, the ratio of those who are associating the term security with the notion of calm life or the security of the family/home is also relatively high (22% in 1999; 11 and 12% in 2008; 12 and 18% in 2019). This shows that Hungarians link security primarily to the individual level and personal experiences, while the broader community or the state level received less emphasis in their answers. At the same time, the number of those who link the notion of security to the issue of public safety is visibly decreasing (32% in 1999; 16% in 2008; 8% in 2019), which might highlight that public safety has generally improved in the last two decades. 11% in 2008 and 8% in 2019 associated to the lack of fear and 5-6% to the safety of life/personal safety. 6% in 1999, 3% in 2008 and in 2019 defined security as something that we do not have, while only 2-4% linked security to the work of the police/armed forces. This latter tendency demonstrates that the majority does not perceive a direct military threat, while also highlighting the relatively stable security and defense policy situation of the country.

Interestingly, while society links the issue of security to the individual level, individual people tend to conceptualize threats differently. Unfortunately, we were not able to comparatively analyze this pattern, since the previous surveys did not include questions related to the concept of threats. Nevertheless, the 2019 data can still provide valuable insights concerning Hungarian threat perception (Table 2). This time, survey respondents were asked to share what comes to their mind when they hear the word *threat*. The question was again open-ended and answers were later listed into one or more pre-established response categories depending on their content. The category of *personal threats* includes answers that were referring to the immediate environment of a person and are probably drawn from the personal experiences of the respondents (e.g.: domestic violence; threats posed by the neighbor). The *other* category includes answers that we were unable to categorize (e.g.: test, court, mental oppression).

What comes into your mind when you hear the word “threat”? What does this mean to you?	
2019	
Response categories	%
Fear, danger, threatening	25
Anxiety, insecurity, bad things, harm	11
Physical pain, violence, aggression	9
Crime, lack of public safety	9
Financial insecurity, existential insecurity	7
Migration	6
Terrorism	6
War, conflict, crisis	5
Threats to the country	4
Personal threats	3
Global warming, threats to the environment	2
Health related threats	2
Lack of security	1
Other	11
Do not know, no answer	13

Table 2.: “What comes into your mind when you hear the word “threat”? What does this mean to you?”

The answers highlight that Hungarians tend to interpret threats in an abstract way. For most respondents the issue of threats means *fear, danger, threatening* (25%); *anxiety, insecurity, bad things, harm* (11%) or

physical pain, violence, aggression (9%), but they do not link this to a more concrete threat, which might be traced back to the relatively stable security and defense policy situation of the country. At the same time, 9% of respondents associated to *crime or the lack of public safety*, whereas 7% referred to *financial insecurity, existential insecurity* in their answers. Approximately 6-6% link *threats* to the issue of *migration or terrorism*; 5% to *war, conflicts, crisis*, while 4% associate to *threats to the country*. This once again highlights that the majority does not perceive direct military threats to the country. The data also shows that 3% of respondents referred to *personal threats*. For them, threats are primarily emerging from their immediate environment, from their direct interpersonal relations and from their family.

The importance of various sectors of security

Building on the questionnaire of the 1999 and 2008 surveys, the 2019 survey also aimed to analyze what Hungarians think about various sectors of security. Respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 5 the following sectors of security according to their importance: existential security; public safety; military security; environmental security; rule of law.

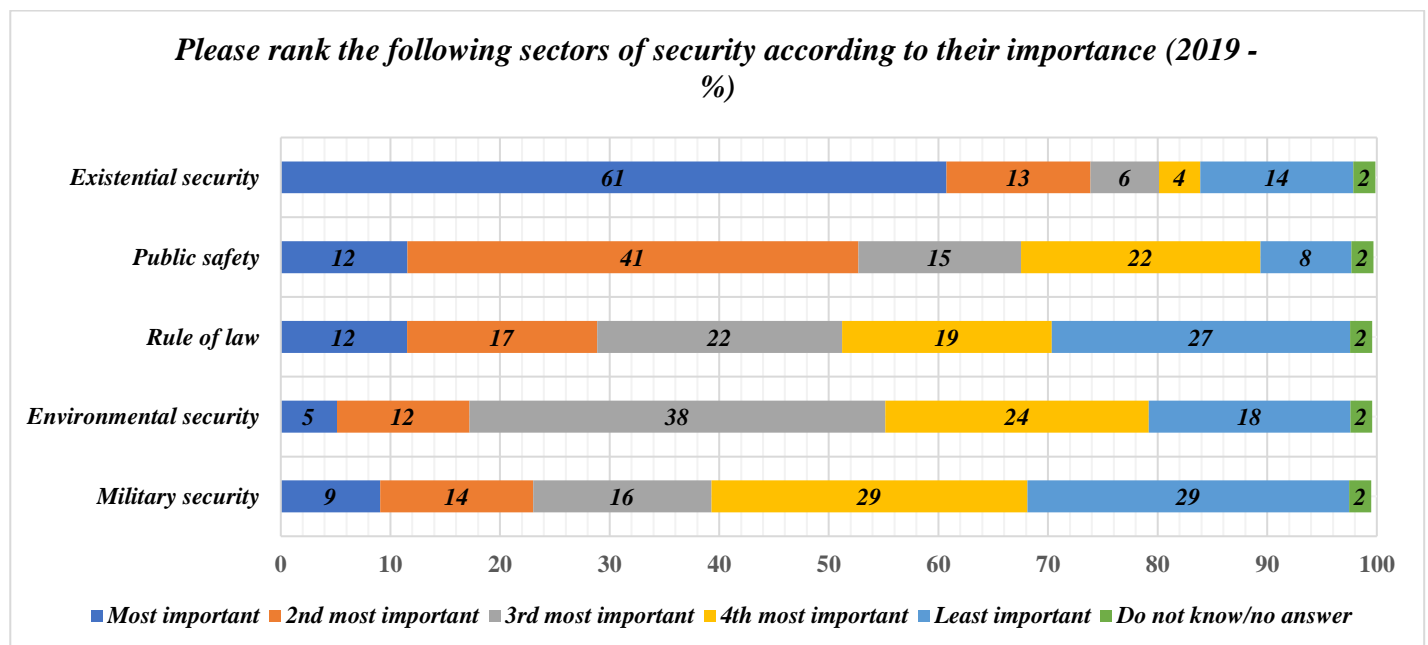


Table 3.: “Please rank the following sectors of security according to their importance.”

1999		2008		2019	
Existential security	1,7	Existential security	1,7	Existential security	2,0
Public safety	2,4	Public safety	2,5	Public safety	2,7
Military security	3,2	Military security	3,5	Rule of law	3,3
Environmental security	3,7	Environmental security	3,6	Environmental security	3,4
Rule of law	3,9	Rule of law	3,7	Military security	3,6

Table 4.: The ranking of various sectors of security according to their importance (Mean level of responses from 1 to 5. Lower level represents higher importance).⁹

⁹ Source of the 1999 and 2008 data: Lajos RADVÁNYI: A magyar lakosság biztonságfelfogása és értékpreferenciái, 1999–2008. 12.

Most respondents ranked existential security at the first place, which means that similarly to the previous surveys, this was the most important sector for society in 2019. It is also interesting to note that the three surveys show strikingly similar results in this regard. The second most important sector was public safety in all three cases, although its importance has decreased in 2008 and in 2019. The third most important sector in 2019 was the rule of law, which was ranked as least important in 1999 and in 2008. This might show the strengthened commitment of Hungarian society towards rule of law and democratic institutions. Environmental security was ranked as the fourth most important sector in all three cases, although its importance has increased for 2019. Finally, military security was ranked as the least important sector of security in 2019, due to the increased importance of rule of law and environmental security. Although the number of those who ranked military security at the first place has decreased from 15% in 2008, to 9% in 2019, a similar decrease (from 36 to 29%) can be observed among those, who ranked the sector as the least important aspect of security. Therefore, the mean level of military security's importance has changed only to a small degree between 2008 and 2019.

The respondents were also asked to rank various sectors of security according to how secure they feel themselves in each of them. Similarly to the previous question, respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 5 the following sectors: existential security; public safety; military security; environmental security; and rule of law.

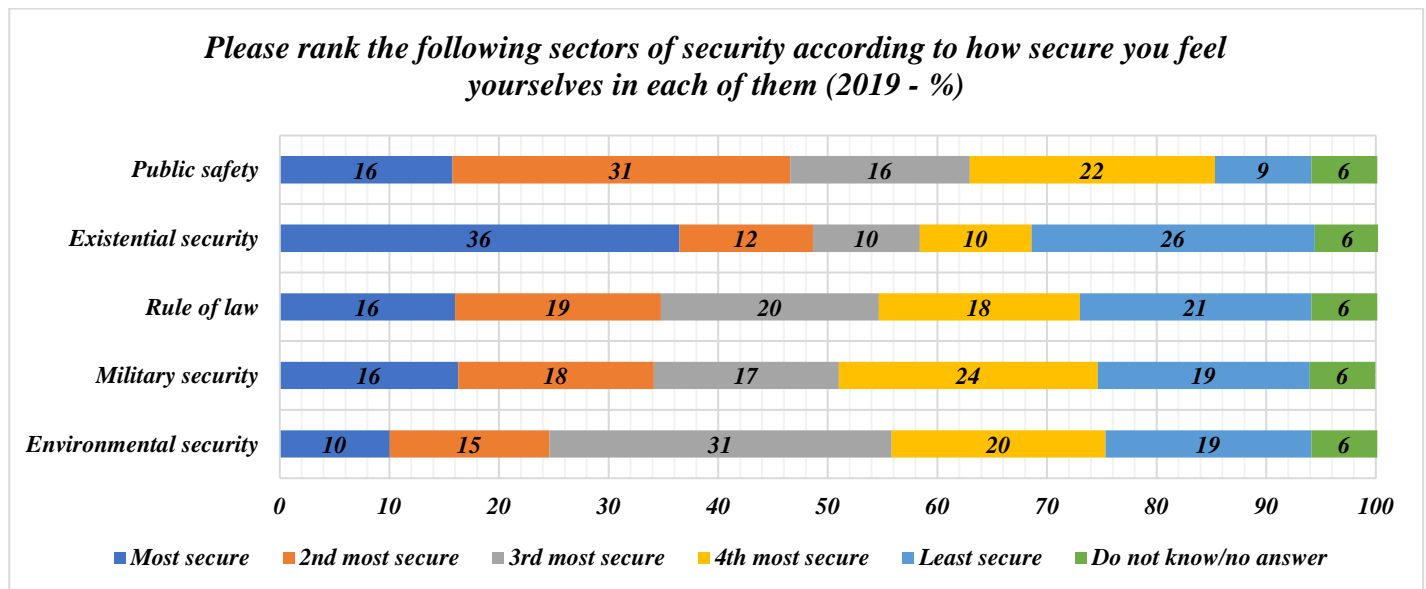


Table 5.: “Please rank the following sectors of security according to how secure you feel yourselves in each of them.”

1999		2008		2019	
Existential security	2,6	Military security	2,4	Public safety	2,8
Rule of law	2,9	Rule of law	3,0	Existential security	2,8
Military security	3,0	Public safety	3,1	Rule of law	3,1
Public safety	3,1	Existential security	3,2	Military security	3,1
Environmental security	3,4	Environmental security	3,4	Environmental security	3,2

Table 6.: The ranking of various sectors of security according to how secure the respondents feel themselves in each of them. (Mean level of responses from 1 to 5. Lower level represents higher importance)¹⁰

The data shows that Hungarians felt most secure with regards to public safety and existential security. 36% ranked existential security at the first place, while its mean level was 2,75, and 16% ranked public safety at the first place while its mean level was 2,76. (Interestingly however, 26% ranked existential security as the least

¹⁰ Source of the 1999 and 2008 data: RADVÁNYI: 14.

secure sector, which shows a division within society regarding this issue.) Mean levels were also close to each other on the third and fourth places (3,10 in the case of rule of law and 3,12 in the case of military security). Environmental security ended up at the last place in all three surveys, which shows that Hungarians felt least secure in this sector.

Between 1999 and 2019, the societal perception on existential security has changed dynamically. Between 1999 and 2019, existential insecurity has increased (from 2,6 mean level to 3,2 mean level) but it has decreased between 2008 and 2019 (from 3,2 mean level to 2,8 mean level). However, the 2008 survey was conducted in an extremely sensitive period, due to the escalating global financial crisis which heavily affected Hungarians as well. At the same time, military security shows contradictory tendencies to existential security. Insecurity has decreased in this area between 1999 and 2008 (from 3,0 mean level to 2,4 mean level) but started to increase again between 2008 and 2019 (from 2,4 mean level to 3,1 mean level). This latter tendency might be explained by the emerging armed conflicts of the last decade (e.g.: Libya, Syria and Ukraine). Insecurity has decreased since 1999 with regards to public safety (from 3,1 mean level to 2,8 mean level), while it has increased with regards to rule of law (from 2,9 mean level to 3,1 mean level). Although the mean level of environmental security shows an improving tendency, it consistently remains the last one on our ranking.

1999			
Sector	Importance	Feeling of security	Deviation
Existential security	1,7	2,6	-0,9
Public safety	2,4	3,1	-0,7
Military security	3,2	3,0	+0,2
Environmental security	3,7	3,4	+0,3
Rule of law	3,9	2,9	+1
2008			
Sector	Importance	Feeling of security	Deviation
Existential security	1,7	3,2	-1,5
Public safety	2,5	3,1	-0,6
Military security	3,5	2,4	+1,1
Environmental security	3,6	3,4	+0,2
Rule of law	3,7	3,0	+0,7
2019			
Sector	Importance	Feeling of security	Deviation
Existential security	2,0	2,8	-0,8
Public safety	2,7	2,8	-0,1
Rule of law	3,3	3,1	+0,2
Environmental security	3,4	3,2	+0,2
Military security	3,6	3,1	+0,5

Table 7.: The importance and the feeling of security as well as the deviation of these two in each sectors. (Mean level of responses from 1 to 5.)

Based on these results, we are able to compare the *expected level of security* (importance) with the *perceived level of security* (feeling of security) in each of the given sectors. The comparison can highlight that one might be satisfied with something even if this has little importance, and on the other hand, that one might be dissatisfied with something even if this has more importance. Table 7 summarizes this comparison of the *expected level of security* and the *perceived level of security* based on the three survey results. In case the perceived level of security is lower than the importance of the sector, than the deviation will be negative, thus highlighting that society would expect more security in this sector. If the perceived level of security in a sector is higher than the importance of the sector, the deviation between the two will be positive. However, positive deviation does not

demonstrate that the society is satisfied with the given sector due to methodological limitations. Since respondents were asked to rank the sectors and not to evaluate them individually, sectors with lower ranking do not necessarily represent societal satisfaction but might represent only lower dissatisfaction.

The two most important sectors show negative deviation between the *expected* and *perceived* level of security through the last 20 years. This deviation was higher in the case of existential security (-0,9, -1,5, -0,8) and lower in the case of public safety (-0,7, -0,6, -0,1). It is important to note however that in contrast with the 1999 and 2008 surveys, the deviation has decreased in both sectors in the case of the 2019 survey, which shows that the *perceived* level of security started to come closer to societal expectations. This might also explain the relative decrease of the importance of these sectors (from 1,7 to 2 in the case of existential security and from 2,4 to 2,7 in the case of public safety), since societies tend to see those sectors more important, in which they perceive more threats.

In the sectors of military security, rule of law and environmental security, the *perceived* level of security always exceeded the *expected* level, independently from the changes occurring with regards to the importance and feeling of security in these sectors. Nevertheless, the scale of the deviation also changed in these sectors (0,2, +1,1, +0,5 in the case of military security; +1, +0,7, +0,2 in the case of rule of law and +0,3, +0,2, +0,2 in the case of environmental security), but these changes did not lead to negative deviation. Although previous studies interpreted these positive deviations as the sign of societal satisfaction in these sectors, we cannot agree with this conclusion due to the above mentioned methodological constraints of the ranking.

The right to decide on security policy

All three surveys examined here aimed to analyze what Hungarians think about who shall decide on the issues affecting the country's security policy. Although the available 1999 dataset is not complete, the analysis can still capture the most important patterns. The ratio of those who think that the government should decide on the security policy of the country has significantly increased since 1999, and in parallel, the ratio of those who think that this should be the task of the parliament/National Assembly has decreased. The number of those who would primarily give this jurisdictional competence to the parliament fell from 36% in 1999 to 30% in 2008 and to 20% in 2019. At the same time, the number of those who would prefer the government as the decision-maker with regards to security policy rose from 19% in 1999 to 23% in 2008 and to 37% in 2019. The ratio of those respondents who think that the Committee on Defence of the National Assembly or the President of the Republic should have more responsibilities on this area was more or less constant in the last decade (17-18 and 7-7%). However, the number of those who would delegate this right to a referendum significantly increased (from 9 to 14%).

Who shall decide on the issues affecting the country's security policy?					
1999		2008		2019	
Response categories	%	Response categories	%	Response categories	%
The Parliament	36	The Parliament	30	The Government	37
A referendum	22	The Government	23	The Parliament	20
The Government	19	The Committee on Defence of the National Assembly	18	The Committee on Defence of the National Assembly	17
The President of the Republic	Below 10%	A referendum	9	A referendum	14
The Committee on Defence of the National Assembly	Below 10%	The President of the Republic	7	The President of the Republic	7
Other institution	-	Other institution	2	Other institution	1
Do not know, no answer	-	Do not know, no answer	11	Do not know, no answer	4

Table 8.: "Who shall decide on the issues affecting the country's security policy?"¹¹

¹¹ Source of the 1999 and 2008 data: RADVÁNYI: 17-18.



Value preferences

The three surveys can also provide insights with regards to society's value preferences. Building on the original methods of the 1999 survey, respondents were asked to choose 5 values from a list of 23 that they consider most important. The 2008 analysis argued that "*Hungarian society's value preferences are converging around the issue of security,*" while 80-85% listed *peace* or *existential security* among the 5 most important values.¹² The 2008 comparative analysis also demonstrated that value preferences of Hungarians were almost constant, since the list of most important (*peace, existential security, personal freedom, laws and regulations applying equally to everyone*) and least important (*national self-determination, ability to receive new things, solidarity, sacrifice for other nations*) values were almost exactly the same as the 1999 survey, with only small differences.¹³ At the same time, there were only four values (*equal opportunities, military security of the country, respect for national borders, cooperation among nations*) which appeared in a significantly different position in 2008 compared to 1999.¹⁴ Table 9 compares these data with the 2019 survey results.

First, it is important to note that the categories established in 1999 overlap with each other in some cases (e.g.: protecting cultural, civilizational values and protecting national traditions and cultural values). Nevertheless, as Table 9. highlights, value preferences were closer to each other in 2019 than in 2008 or in 1999, since the dominance of *peace* and *existential security* has decreased. Although these two values were still in the first two positions in 2019 (61-61%), their importance shows decreasing tendencies (24% decrease in the case of *peace* and 19% decrease in the case of *existential security*).

Compared to the previous surveys, *personal freedom* has remained on the third place (45%), while the importance of *laws and regulations that apply equally to everyone* has dropped by 23% to 12%, or from the fourth to the thirteenth place. On the other hand, the ratio of respondents choosing *democracy* has increased to 39%, which is 9% higher than in 2008. The value of *equal opportunities* has remained on the fifth place (29%), followed by the *independence of the judiciary*, although the importance of the latter has increased more significantly between 1999 and 2008. The ratio of those who chose *providing help for those in need* has dropped by 10% to 13%. At the same time, almost the same amount of people listed *patriotism* and *the military security of the country* among the top 5 values (22 and 20% in 2008 as well as 21 and 18% in 2019), while the *respect for national borders* has increased by 5% to 11%.

Between the 9th and 18th places several values show less than a 5% change compared to 2008 (including *the integrity of the individual; the acquired individual knowledge; fidelity to one's chosen principles; cooperation among nations; national self-determination; respect for and acceptance of otherness*). Since these value preferences were originally closer to each other in 2008, a smaller amount of change could impact their positions on the list. Interestingly, however, *protecting national traditions and cultural values* has dropped by 6% and lost 8 positions compared to the previous survey. Practically, the same amount of people has listed the *ability to receive new things; protecting cultural, civilizational values and solidarity, sacrifice for other nations among* as the five most important values in 2008 as in 2019. This however did not change their position and all three has remained in the least important category on our list.

¹² RADVÁNYI: 18-19.

¹³ RADVÁNYI: 20.

¹⁴ RADVÁNYI: 20.

Choose five values you consider most important					
1999		2008		2019	
Values	%	Values	%	Values	%
1. Peace	85	1. Peace	85	1. Peace	61
2. Existential security	72	2. Existential security	80	2. Existential security	61
3. Personal freedom	36	3. Personal freedom	43	3. Personal freedom	45
4. Laws and regulations that apply equally to everyone	33	4. Laws and regulations that apply equally to everyone	35	4. Democracy	39
5. Democracy	31	5. Equal opportunities	32	5. Equal opportunities	29
6. The military security of the country	31	6. Democracy	30	6. Independence of the judiciary	23
7. Providing help for those in need	26	7. Providing help for those in need	23	7. Patriotism	21
8. Patriotism	25	8. Patriotism	22	8. The military security of the country	18
9. Equal opportunities	22	9. Independence of the judiciary	21	9. The integrity of the individual	17
10. Respect for national borders	18	10. The military security of the country	20	10. The acquired individual knowledge	13
11. Cooperation among nations	16	11. The integrity of the individual	15	11. Providing help for those in need	13
12. Independence of the judiciary	15	12. Protecting national traditions and cultural values	11	12. Fidelity to one's chosen principles	13
13. The integrity of the individual	15	13. The acquired individual knowledge	10	13. Laws and regulations that apply equally to everyone	12
14. Clinging to the hometown/village/direct environment	12	14. Fidelity to one's chosen principles	10	14. Respect for national borders	11
15. The acquired individual knowledge	10	15. Knowledge accumulated during the development of human civilization	8	15. Cooperation among nations	9
16. Protecting national traditions and cultural values	7	16. Clinging to the hometown/village/direct environment	7	16. National self-determination	7
17. Protecting cultural, civilizational values	7	17. Respect for and acceptance of otherness	7	17. Respect for and acceptance of otherness	7
18. Fidelity to one's chosen principles	6	18. Respect for national borders	6	18. Knowledge accumulated during the development of human civilization	7
19. Respect for and acceptance of otherness	6	19. Cooperation among nations	6	19. Clinging to the hometown /village/direct environment	5
20. Knowledge accumulated during the development of human civilization	6	20. Protecting cultural, civilizational values	5	20. Protecting national traditions and cultural values	5
21. National self-determination	3	21. National self-determination	5	21. Ability to receive new things	4
22. Ability to receive new things	3	22. Ability to receive new things	3	22. Protecting cultural, civilizational values	4
23. Solidarity, sacrifice for other nations	1	23. Solidarity, sacrifice for other nations	2	23. Solidarity, sacrifice for other nations	3

Table 9.: “Choose five values you consider most important” (answers in percentage)



Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the three surveys shows several differences and similarities with regards to Hungarian security perception. Since 1999, Hungarian security perception has been primarily dominated by the notion of financial prosperity and existential security. The Hungarian society writ large links security primarily to the individual level and personal experiences. On the other hand, the conceptualization of threats shows different tendencies. The majority of individual Hungarians tend to interpret threats in an abstract way and do not perceive direct military threats for the country. This also shows that Hungarians feel that the security and defense policy situation of the country is stable.

Existential security is the most important sector of security for society since 1999, while the second most important sector is public safety. Their importance however, has decreased in 2019. Hungarians felt also the most secure in these two sectors, while they felt least secure with regards to environmental security. Nevertheless, the comparison of the expected and the perceived level of security in each sectors shows that the deviation has remained negative in the two most important sectors since 1999. Thus, the society would expect more security with regards to existential security and public safety. On the other hand, the perception on public safety shows a positive tendency since 1999. Furthermore, the number of those, who link the notion of security to the issue of public safety is visibly decreasing, which might also highlight that public safety has generally improved in the last two decades.

Concerning the right to decide on security policy, the analysis reveals that societal perceptions are rather supporting governmental decision-making processes. The ratio of those who think that the government should decide on the security policy of the country has significantly increased since 1999, and in parallel, the ratio of those who think that this should be the task of the parliament/National Assembly has decreased.

Hungarians' value preferences are primarily based on the values of *peace*, *existential security* and *personal freedom*, although their dominance has somewhat decreased since 1999. At the same time, values like *the ability to receive new things*; *protecting cultural, civilizational values* and *solidarity, sacrifice for other nations among* have remained in the least important category since 1999.



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