

Alex Etl:¹ The perception of the Hungarian security community

Executive Summary

- During the autumn of 2020, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies.
- These members of the security community perceive that the security and defense policy situation of Hungary is generally stable, although the global security architecture is deteriorating.
- Respondents identified the United States, Germany and V4 as the most important allies of Hungary.
- All respondents agreed that there is currently no state which would pose a direct military threat to the security of Hungary. Nonetheless, 15 respondents identified various countries (e.g. Russia, Ukraine, China) that might pose non-military threats to Hungary.
- Concerning non-state threats the perception is primarily dominated by the issue of terrorism, cyberattacks and migration (although this latter has a rather ambivalent characteristic).
- The interviewees agree that there is a need to strengthen or establish joint European defense capabilities, but there is lack of consensus concerning the practical aspects of this project.

The Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies began to analyze the perception of security in Hungary, based on the results of a representative social survey and 10 semi-structured interviews that were conducted at the Ministry of Defense during the autumn of 2019. As a follow-up to this initial research project, the perception of those security and defense policy professionals who work either at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade or at various background institutions was also analyzed. During the autumn of 2020, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies. This study aims to introduce the results of these interviews and compare them to the results of the interviews from 2019, to provide a more comprehensive picture concerning the perception of security and perception of threats within the Hungarian security and defense policy community.

A note on methodology

In total, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted during the autumn of 2020. Out of these 23 interviews, 10 were conducted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. These interviewees were working in various positions below the Deputy State Secretary level in the Department of Security Policy and Non-

Proliferation, the Department of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and Neighbourhood Policy. The rest of the interviews were conducted within the Hungarian think-tank world. Out of the remaining 13 interviews, 7 were conducted at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade and 6 at the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies. The questionnaire was circulated among the potential interviewees a priori the interviews. All interviews and results were anonymized.

The questionnaire was the same during the 2019 interviews at the Ministry of Defense, thereby it is possible to compare their results. Nonetheless, the different timing of the interviews might point out certain changes within the perceptions. Most importantly, the coronavirus pandemic or the Greek-Turkish crisis and their various effects appear only in the results of the 2020 interviews. Together with the 2019 round, the sample size is now 33 interviews. Although I do not claim that this would completely represent the Hungarian security policy community, but I do believe that the results of these interviews can provide important insights into this closed community and might help to understand the dynamics of Hungarian security and defense policy processes.

¹ Alex Etl (etl.alex@uni-nke.hu) is an assistant research fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies of Eötvös József Research Center at the National University of Public Service (Budapest, Hungary).

The concepts of security and threats

First, the interviewees were asked to define what comes to their mind when they hear the words “*security*” or “*threat*.” More than half of them did not interpret “*security*” in itself, rather as the “*lack of threats*” – while some interviewees pointed out that this interpretation is linked to their own, personal educational background and therefore resembles a textbook definition. A few interviewees also noted that security can be interpreted as an ability to prevent or neutralize threats, while another respondent defined this word as “*a kind of growth*” and “*a state of being*,” in which the individual is free and exists without any coercion. Several respondents noted that security has various levels (e.g. state and non-state levels), and it can have various sectors apart from its traditional military and political interpretations (e.g.: some interviewees pointed out its economic, social, technological aspects, whereas another one associated it more concretely with “*NATO*” and “*EU*”). This holistic approach is similar to the results of the 2019 interviews conducted at the Ministry of Defense.²

Concerning the associations linked to the word “*threat*”, almost half of the respondents pointed out that threats can have a wide scope and can affect various sectors of security. In parallel to this, they also noted that threats can not only be military threats, but they can have economic, technological and environmental characteristics, while one respondent added that threats might have public health consequences as well. Many interviewees noted that threats might change dynamically and they can have various levels as well. A few respondents gave more concrete examples in their answers. Two of them associated it with Russia and China as well as with Russia, China and Iran. One respondent associated to the decline of the middle class, one to the polarization of the political sphere, whereas another one to the technological vulnerability of the society and the economy. Three interviewees emphasized the subjective nature of threats, and one even pointed out that some threats (e.g. terrorism) aim to change the subjective perception of the society, and the state has to react to this, in order to maintain the trust of the people.

The security and defense policy situation of Hungary

A visible consensus emerges concerning how the interviewees see the security policy situation of Hungary. There was no respondent at all, who had evaluated the country’s security and defense policy situation as generally negative. One of them even noted, that “*the defense policy situation has never been so good.*” According to most of the interviewees, the country’s situation is secure, stable, which is first and foremost linked to the alliance system of Hungary. A few interviewees added that this positive situation is also supported by the fact that no concrete threat can be identified currently, which would challenge the territorial integrity of Hungary.

Nevertheless, the perceptions concerning the international security environment reflect on more problems and challenges. Most of the answers noted that the international security environment shows a negative pattern, due to the deteriorating global security landscape. Several interviewees added that the challenges connected to this problem are not traditional, but they are rather linked to the non-military aspects of security (e.g. COVID-19 and its economic consequences, illegal migration, social challenges, impoverishment, cyber threats, global power shift, social disintegration). Seven respondents pointed out that besides the deteriorating global security environment, Hungary’s direct security environment also shows some negative tendencies, primarily because of the armed conflict in Ukraine. In parallel to this, a few answers pointed out that the instability of the Western Balkans poses a direct but non-military challenge to Hungary. At the same time, one interviewee emphasized a different opinion, noting that the Russian ambitions in Ukraine “*reached their limits*,” while the situation on the Western Balkans is stabilizing. Another respondent added that challenges of the Western Balkans could have greater consequences for Hungary but they have currently limited probability.

Compared to the 2019 interviews, one can see an emerging consensus concerning perceived stability with regards to the security and defense policy of the country, and this stability is primarily supported by the alliance system of Hungary.³ Nonetheless, the 2020 interviews point out the deteriorating tendencies

² Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 8.

³ Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 8.

more significantly, which notion is also in line with the security policy forecast of the 2020 National Security Strategy of Hungary.⁴

Hungary and its allies

There is also some perceptual consensus concerning the most important allies of Hungary, since practically all respondents listed EU and NATO allies among these. With only a few exceptions, three allies were mentioned the most often by respondents: the United States, Germany and the V4 (although the consensus with regards to the United States and Germany was a bit stronger). Nonetheless, there is an important difference concerning the perceived role of these allies, while the US was mentioned primarily because of its position within NATO, Germany was mentioned because of its economic and political importance as well as because of the ongoing Hungarian defense procurement processes. On the other hand, the interviewees emphasized the normative and political importance of the V4, while there was a respondent who argued that the V4 is not among the most important allies, due to the limited cooperation of the group. Another one differentiated between Poland and the other V4 members, adding that only the former is among the most important allies of Hungary. Concerning the US, a few respondents pointed out that Washington's foreign policy might be unpredictable for Hungary and Europe in the future.

Apart from these partners, three interviewees mentioned France among the most important allies, due to the country's role concerning European defense policy. Similarly, three interviewees mentioned the United Kingdom, two mentioned Italy and the other neighboring countries among the most important security and defense policy allies.

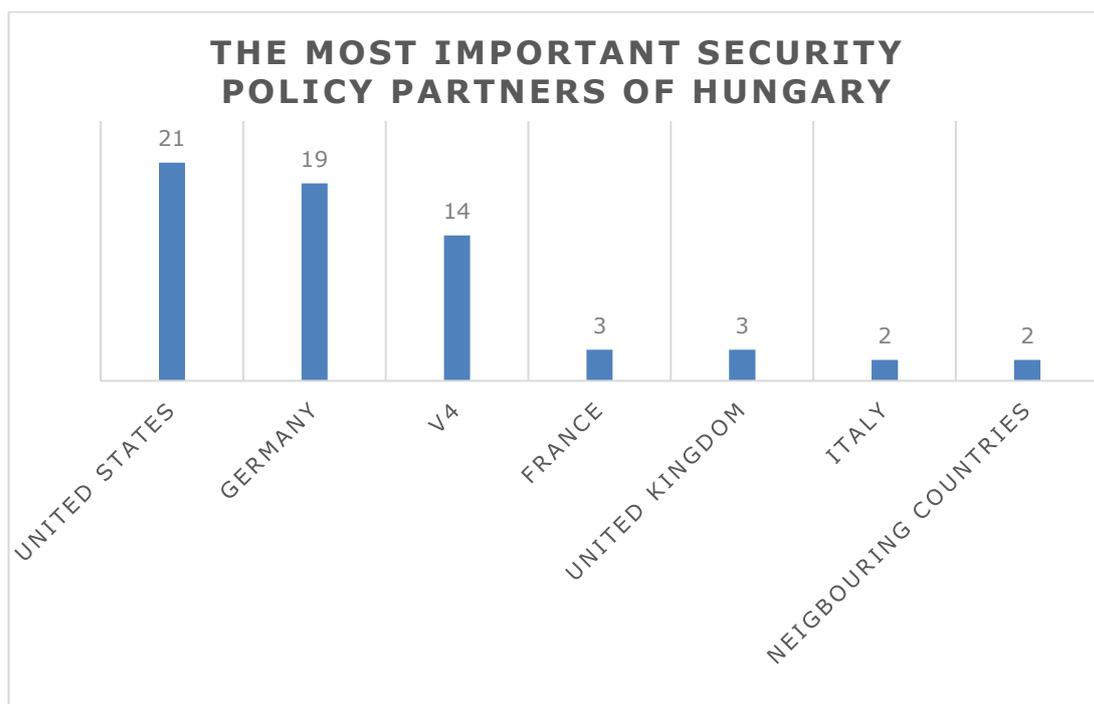


Figure 1: The most important security policy partners of Hungary. Numbers represent mentions by interviewees.

When the interviewees were asked with which countries should Hungary intensify its military cooperation, the answers were more diverse. More than half of the respondents mentioned that the security policy pillar of the V4 should be strengthened. Another two respondents mentioned Romania,

⁴ A Kormány 1163/2020. (IV. 21.) Korm. határozata Magyarország Nemzeti Biztonsági Stratégiájáról, [online], 21.04.2020. Source: kozlonyok.hu [28.07.2020]



adding that a more intensive security policy cooperation could improve bilateral relations as well, while another two interviewees noted that the cooperation with the Czech Republic should be intensified. On the other hand, two other respondents pointed out that the cooperation with the Czech Republic and Romania would remain limited. Four respondents mentioned France among these countries, emphasizing that the cooperation would be important due to emerging European defense initiatives. Two interviewees mentioned the United Kingdom, pointing out that there is a need for a proper security policy relation with London after the Brexit. Three respondents noted that Israel could be an important partner for Hungary.

In general, the perceptions are similar to the 2019 interviews, in which respondents also emphasized the primacy regarding the importance of Germany, the United States and the V4.⁵ Thus, the Hungarian security policy community perceives these allies as the most important security policy partners. Nevertheless, the 2020 interviews pointed out more significantly the need for a strengthened cooperation among the V4 countries. Similarly, France appeared in both the 2019 and the 2020 interviews as a country, which would be an important partner, due to its role in the future of European defense cooperation.

There was also a consensus among the interviewees when they were asked whether Hungary and the Hungarian Defense Forces should support their NATO or EU allies in cases of an external attack. The respondents agreed that Hungary should help its allies under these circumstances, especially because the internal coherence of the alliance as well as the security of Hungary are based on this premise. Several answers noted that in a reverse case Hungary could only rely on these similar security guarantees and would therefore expect help from its allies. Thus, the 2020 answers are similar to the 2019 answers at this point, since they show a strong commitment towards the alliance system of the country.⁶

During the 2020 interviews, two respondents noted that the allied commitment is not necessarily the same towards non-NATO EU member states, adding that the political/legal framework of such a scenario is not completely clear. One respondent emphasized that the EU mutual assistance clause might be intentionally unclear, while another noted that the mutual assistance clause does not necessarily refer to military assistance, but rather to any form of assistance that is needed. At the same time, the 2020 interviewees tended to perceive that Hungary has similar allied commitments towards non-NATO EU member states as well, which might be a small difference compared to the 2019 interviews, which were more divided concerning this question. This, however, might be the result of the fact that the question emerged more often on the EU's agenda during this year.

Although it is clear that respondents agreed on the importance of allied solidarity of an external attack, a few respondents noted some restriction on this. One emphasized that in case a member state "*jumps*" into an unprovoked conflict with Russia, then Hungary has to review whether it is worth fulfilling its allied commitments. Another two respondents noted that the difficulty in attributing cyberattacks makes the usage of Article 5 questionable in such situations; whereas one of them added that it would not be useful to initiate an Article 5 response in case a member state suffers a cyberattack. Two other respondents pointed out that the volume of the assistance should always depend on the current situation. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these interviewees also agreed that Hungary should support its allies in case they suffer an external military aggression.

Threats

After this, the interviewees were asked to name those challenges that can affect most negatively the security of Hungary. Altogether eight respondents mentioned the coronavirus and its economic/social consequences, which shows that the pandemic has become an important element of their perception.

Besides, five answers contained references to the intensifying conflict between great powers that can negatively affect the security of the country and might reduce the room for maneuver for Hungary. One interviewee described this, as a situation, in which "*we cannot win.*"

While evaluating non-state threats, almost half of the respondents mentioned terrorism in their answers, although most of them added that Hungary is currently not a primary target of this threat. Others emphasized that although there was no precedent for a terrorist attack in Hungary on a similar scale to the terrorist attacks in Western-Europe, the issue cannot be ruled out completely. Two respondents even

⁵ Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 9.

⁶ Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 10.

noted the transit role of Hungary concerning terrorism, whereas two other interviewees argued that Islamist terrorism is less threatening in Hungary, because the Muslim communities are “well-integrated.” Concerning the issue of terrorism, only one answer contained references to the past attacks on the Roma community in Hungary.

Seven interviewees mentioned that illegal migration can pose a threat to Hungary. A few of them also added that the question of climate change might increase several migratory push factors in the long run. Nevertheless, five respondents emphasized that they would not categorize illegal migration as a threat (and another one defined it as a consequence instead of a threat). This ambivalence shows that there are diverging perceptions concerning the issue of migration.

Eight respondents noted the importance of the cyber space and threats posed by cyberattacks. Many of them also linked this issue to the problem of organized crime. Two interviewees added that cybercriminals might be non-state actors, but they can also work for state actors. One respondent emphasized that a bigger cyberattack could undermine the social trust in the state, while another one noted that a limited attack requires only limited resources, and the exposure of Hungary is increasing. Beside these problems in the cyber space, one answer also referred to the increasing influence of multinational, technological companies.

While analyzing global tendencies, seven respondents emphasized the role of climate change, and four categorized the global demographic processes as a tendency, which can negatively affect Hungary.

Two respondents noted that the decreasing internal cohesion within NATO and EU can have negative consequences, while another three pointed out that some domestic factors inflict the most negative tendencies with regards to the security of the country. These respondents mentioned the “corrupt, non-forward-thinking” political elite, the diminishing internal cohesion and the emergence of radical right-wing groups within the society, the cultural divisions and the lack of elite consensuses.

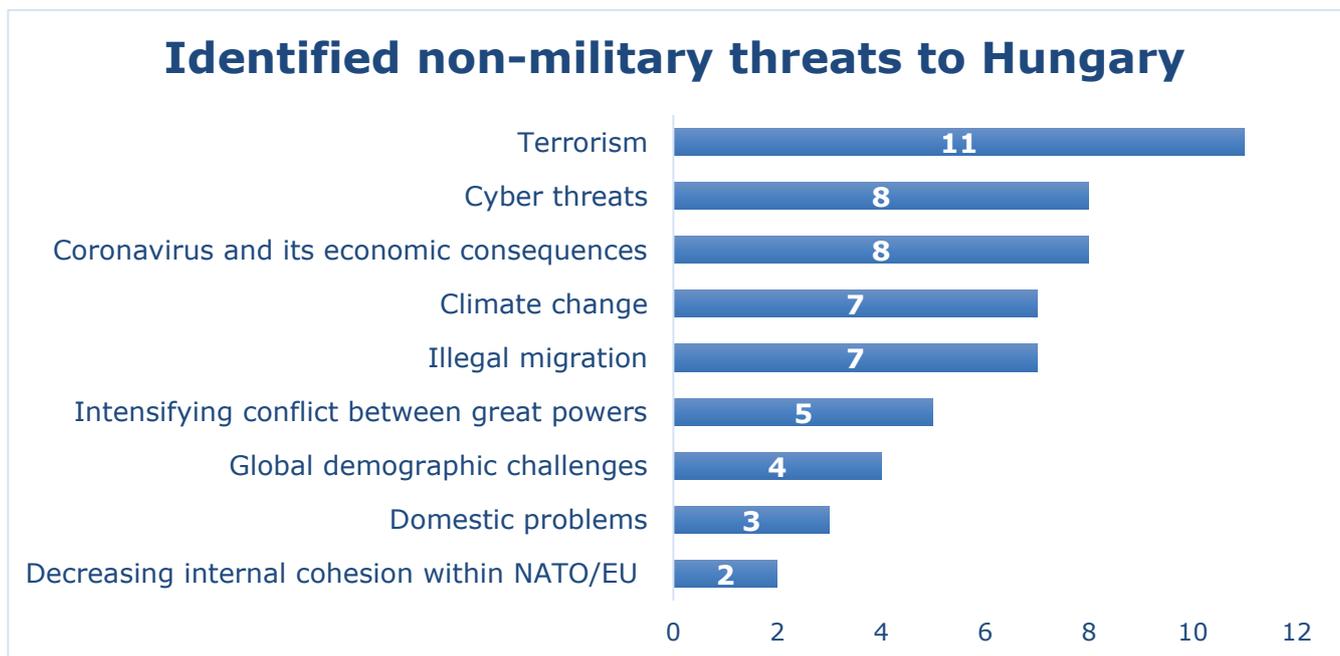


Figure 2: Non-military threats to Hungary. Numbers represent mentions by interviewees.

All respondents agreed that there is currently no state which would pose a direct military threat to the security of Hungary. Nonetheless, 15 respondents identified various countries that might pose non-military threats to Hungary. Nine of them mentioned that Russia’s foreign policy activity might be a challenge or a threat, but the answers show no consensus concerning the nature of this problem. A few of these respondents referred to hybrid as well as national security or disinformation threats, while others rather put this challenge into an allied perspective and emphasized its effect on the broader alliance (e.g. the Baltic states), whereas one respondent linked the issue to the energy dependence of Hungary. However, as noted before, one respondent argued that the Russian ambitions “reached their limits,” while another

one argued that Russia is a rational, manageable actor, and does not pose a threat, but only a moderate challenge.

Besides Russia, eight respondents categorized Ukraine as a state that might pose challenges to Hungary. Most of them linked this issue to the situation of the Hungarian community in Ukraine, while others generally noted the internal instability of Ukraine, and the radicalization of certain groups in the Ukrainian society. Two respondents also pointed out that the situation and the exposure of the Hungarian minority in Romania might also create challenges in the bilateral relations.

Altogether five interviewees mentioned challenges posed by China, which they linked primarily to national security and technological issues, whereas one respondent defined it as a “civilizational threat.” On the other hand, one respondent argued that Hungary never had any problematic issues with China, while another one noted that the Chinese political system cannot be “applied” in Central and Eastern Europe (in contrast to the Russian political system) and therefore China does not pose such a threat to the region, while Beijing’s influence will remain limited.

Six of the respondents mentioned that the reemergence of conflicts and political instability in the Western Balkans might pose certain, indirect challenges to Hungary, although these respondents did not name any country specifically from the region.

Three of the respondents referred to the blackmailing potential of Turkey, which poses challenges to the European Union. Besides, two emphasized that the Turkish–Greek conflict threatens the internal cohesion of NATO and this problem can also undermine the credibility of collective defense.

Comparing these answers to the 2019 interviews, there is a consensus concerning the perceived non-state threats, since the perception of the security community is primarily dominated by the issues of terrorism, cyberattacks and migration (although this latter has a rather ambivalent characteristic).⁷ There is also a consensus with regards to the perception that Hungary is not threatened militarily by any states. Nonetheless, several respondents identified certain states (most importantly Russia, Ukraine, China, Turkey), which might pose challenges to Hungary in various sectors. Besides, one can also see that the coronavirus pandemic had a visible effect on the security community’s perceptions. The 2020 interviews also stress the importance of increasing global great power competition more significantly.

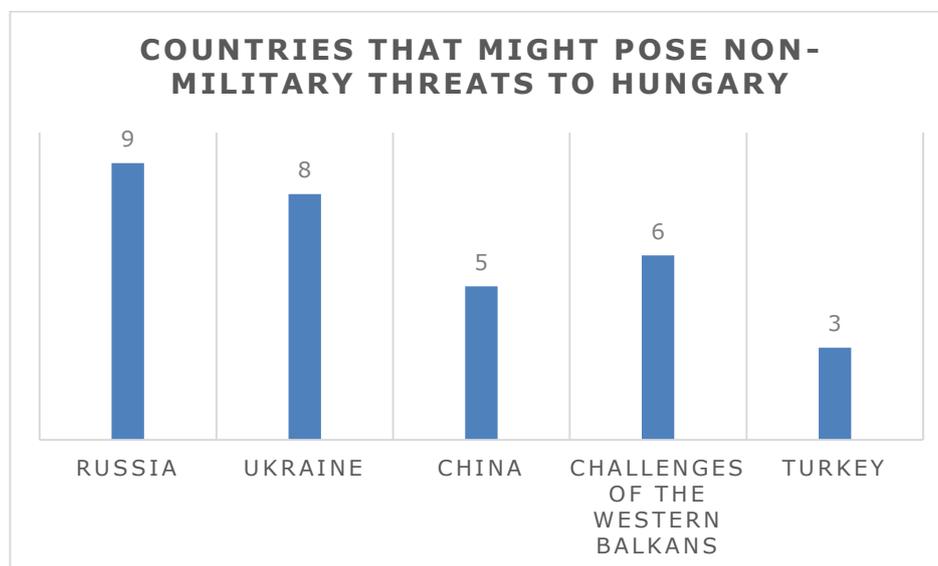


Figure 3: Countries that might pose non-military threats to Hungary. Numbers represent mentions by interviewees.

In general, the perceptions on threats are diverse and there is no single issue, which would unequivocally dominate the whole community’s perception. At the same time, there are a few issues, which were touched upon by almost half of the respondents (e.g. Russia, Ukraine, terrorism, coronavirus, migration) and therefore these constitute important pillars of the threat perception. However, it is also

⁷ Alex Etl: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 9-10.



important to note that six interviewees did not identify any non-state threats, while eight argued that there is no state, which would threaten Hungary in any way. This also shows that many respondents think that the security and defense policy situation of Hungary is fundamentally good and stable.

The future of European defense cooperation

All respondents argued that there is a need to strengthen (or establish) joint European defense capabilities. However, the perceptions concerning the practical aspects of this project are rather diverse. Interviewees at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade emphasized consistently that strengthening of European defense capabilities should not undermine Transatlantic, NATO structures. These respondents argued that joint European capabilities should strengthen the European pillar of NATO, instead of creating an independent European structure. At the same time, respondents outside of the Ministry were less eager to emphasize this aspect and usually argued that European defense should be more effective, while their answers focused more on the diminishing power and role of Europe.

Concerning the practical level, the perceptions are similarly diverse. Several respondents noted the importance of mobility and the strengthening of transportation, logistical and communications capabilities, which would facilitate the independent functioning of European armed forces. However, other respondents put less emphasis on the hard, military capabilities and rather argued the need for strengthened disaster management and civil protection on a European level. Two respondents mentioned the importance of strengthening joint cyber capabilities, while only one noted the question of nuclear deterrence, arguing that the expansion of France's nuclear umbrella cannot be realized "*without substantive integration.*" The same interviewee pointed out that some modern capabilities (e.g. space weapons, next generation tanks, or next generation fighter jets) are so expensive that their development would be only rational in a joint framework. However, another interviewee argued that the "*joint acquisition is only a dream,*" due to the distrust among European states. At the same time, many answers pointed out that apart from concrete capability developments, the question of European defense depends on political will, and noted that the result of the US presidential elections might accelerate the whole process.⁸

Altogether, the Hungarian security community agrees that there is a need to strengthen European defense capabilities, but there is a lack of consensus concerning its methods. There are visible perceptual differences with regards to the level of cooperation and the role of NATO as well.

Similarly, the perceptions were also diverse, when the interviewees had to answer, whether there is a need for establishing a joint European military force in the medium term, even if Hungary would have to delegate governance competences to the European Union? The 2019 interviewees were almost exclusively skeptical with such a scenario.⁹ Although this skepticism was also present during the 2020 interviews, almost half of the respondents argued that such a decision is needed. It is also true though that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán himself argued several times in 2020 that there is a need for a European military force and it might be possible that this political discourse had shaped perceptions as well.¹⁰ Nevertheless, five of these respondents added right after their answers that they do not see this option as a realistic scenario, exactly because of its impact on national sovereignty. Another one emphasized that although the European military force would be necessary, the issue leads the discourse "*towards the wrong direction*" and "*cooperation, interoperability would be needed, while bringing European perceptions closer to each other.*"

⁸ All interviews were conducted before the elections.

⁹ Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary. p. 9-10.

¹⁰ For example: [Viktor Orbán's press release after Bled Strategic Forum](#) (in Hungarian), [online], 31.08.2020. Source: miniszterelnok.hu [16.11.2020]

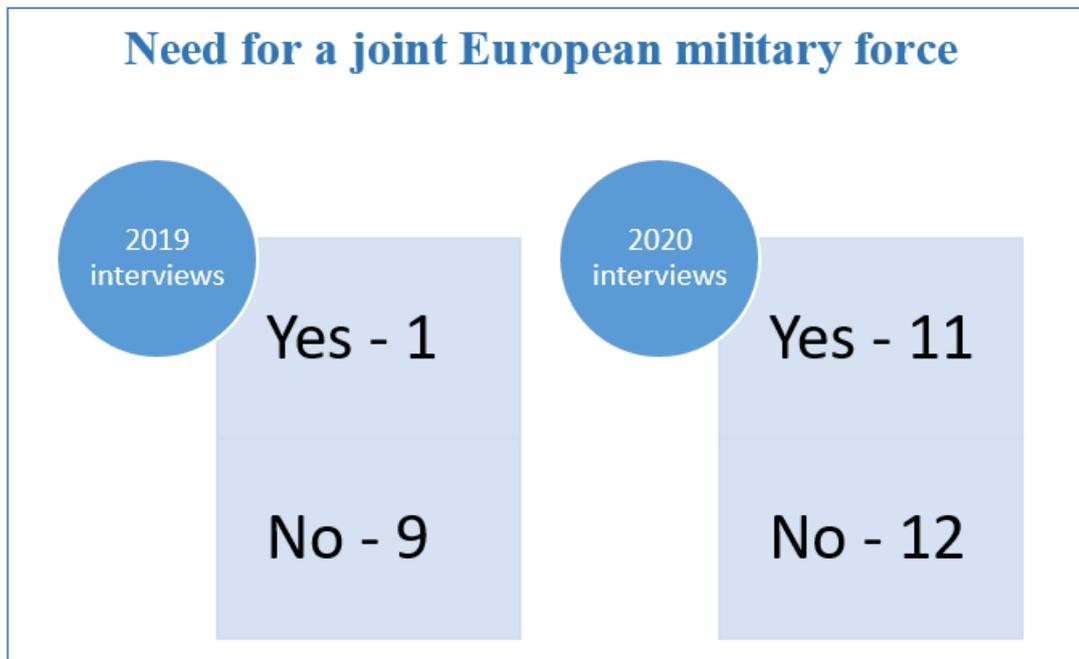


Figure 4: Is there a need for establishing a joint European Military Force in the medium term, even if Hungary would have to delegate governance competences to the European Union? Numbers represent the proportion of interviewees.

Those respondents who argued that there is no need for a joint European military force usually argued that it would affect the question of national sovereignty. One interviewee noted that the Hungarian position is not completely clear with regards to this question, since the country would support European defense integration, while on the other hand, protects its sovereignty concerning various issues. Several respondents also argued that strengthening operational capabilities does not require a joint European military force and the capabilities should be developed on the national level. Similarly, two respondents also emphasized that if the only goal of creating a European military force is to support operations in Africa led by France then there is no need for establishing such a structure.

Security policy cooperation of the V4

After this, the interviewees were asked to evaluate the security policy cooperation of the V4. There is a positive perceptual consensus in the sense that there was no respondent who opposed the cooperation of the four countries. Nonetheless, opinions are more diverse concerning the practical results of the group. Most of the respondents emphasized that the very existence of the cooperation is a promising result, or as one of them put it *"the fact that it exists is better than if it would not."* However, this also points out that there is a general skepticism concerning the depth of the group's security policy cooperation. Almost two thirds of respondents pointed out some limits with regards to the V4's security cooperation. Some of them noted the diverging threat perceptions among the four countries, others emphasized the limited resources of the group, and some respondents argued that the group's role is rather political or normative and its practical, security policy related results are less important.

Two respondents added that the issue of migration made it possible to intensify the V4 cooperation concerning border protection, although another one argued that one can rather talk about a V2+2 formation, since the Czech Republic and Slovakia are following a different course of foreign policy compared to Poland and Hungary.

On the practical level, more respondents noted the importance of the V4 Battlegroup, but one of them argued that this result is less useful for the group, due to the fundamentally dysfunctional nature of the battlegroup concept. Besides, a few respondents criticized the V4 countries because they were not able to



harmonize the modernization processes of their armed forces, which rather shows once again the limits of the cooperation.

Altogether, perceptions on the existence of the V4 security policy cooperation are rather positive, but the security community remains skeptical concerning its practical results. This resonates with the 2019 interviews, which also emphasized the importance of the V4 security policy cooperation, though they were unable to provide a deeper evaluation, due to the limits of the group.¹¹

Defense expenditures and the future of the Hungarian Defense Forces (HDF)

Another visible consensus emerges concerning the perceptions on defense expenditures, since there was no interviewee who would evaluate the defense budgetary increase of the last few years negatively. All respondents found the increase of Hungary's defense expenditures necessary, most importantly because the HDF had become underfinanced during the previous decade. Many respondents noted that this tendency of budgetary increase also adds to the credibility of Hungary within the alliance and makes the country able to fulfill its NATO commitments. This also shows that there is a perceptual consensus within the security community concerning that Hungary has to spend more on its defense. This consensus was also strengthened by the 2019 interviews, where results pointed towards the same perception.¹²

Nonetheless, the perceptions around the future of defense budgetary increase are less stable, since several respondents highlighted smaller or bigger challenges that can undermine this process. Some of the answers pointed out that the economic effects of the pandemic might reach the defense sector at the end, which could also interrupt currently positive tendencies. Others argued that the defense sector is seemingly high on the government's agenda, and therefore it will be probably less affected by budgetary constraints. Two respondents argued that there is no multi-party consensus in Hungary concerning the need for increasing defense expenditures, and a change of government might put the long term increase in danger. Another two answers highlighted that it is rather unclear how effectively the HDF can use the increased amount of resources, and one interviewee argued that the NATO 2% limit is generally useless.

Altogether five respondents noted the importance of so-called offsets concerning the ongoing modernization program, and they argued that these projects have various economic benefits outside of the defense sector.¹³ One respondent even added that Hungarian defense expenditures should not only be analyzed according to the strict defense policy related interests, but rather in line with the economic-political interests of the country.

At the end, respondents were asked to identify those areas, on which the HDF should focus its modernization process. More than half of them highlighted that the issue of human resources is one of the greatest challenges for the organization. Since the 2019 interview results were also emphasizing the importance of this question, it is likely that the challenge of human resources will have a central importance for the broader sector and the Hungarian security community.¹⁴

However, this issue has various aspects. Several respondents argued that one of the most important aspects is the future wage development and the improvement of soldiers' general living conditions. Besides, many interviewees noted that the improvement and modernization of training processes/conditions would have a primary importance as well. Similarly, many respondents pointed out that the communication processes between the society and HDF could on the one hand improve social awareness with regards to defense issues, and on the other hand could increase the number of those people in the society who are committed towards the defense of the country (e.g. through the utilization of volunteer reserve system).

¹¹ Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 9-10.

¹² Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 10-11.

¹³ For example: A 10-year-long contract to produce firearms, including the Scorpion EVO III, CZ BREN 2, CZ P-07, CZ P-09 in Kiskunfélegyháza.

¹⁴ Alex ETL: The perception of security in Hungary, p. 10-11.

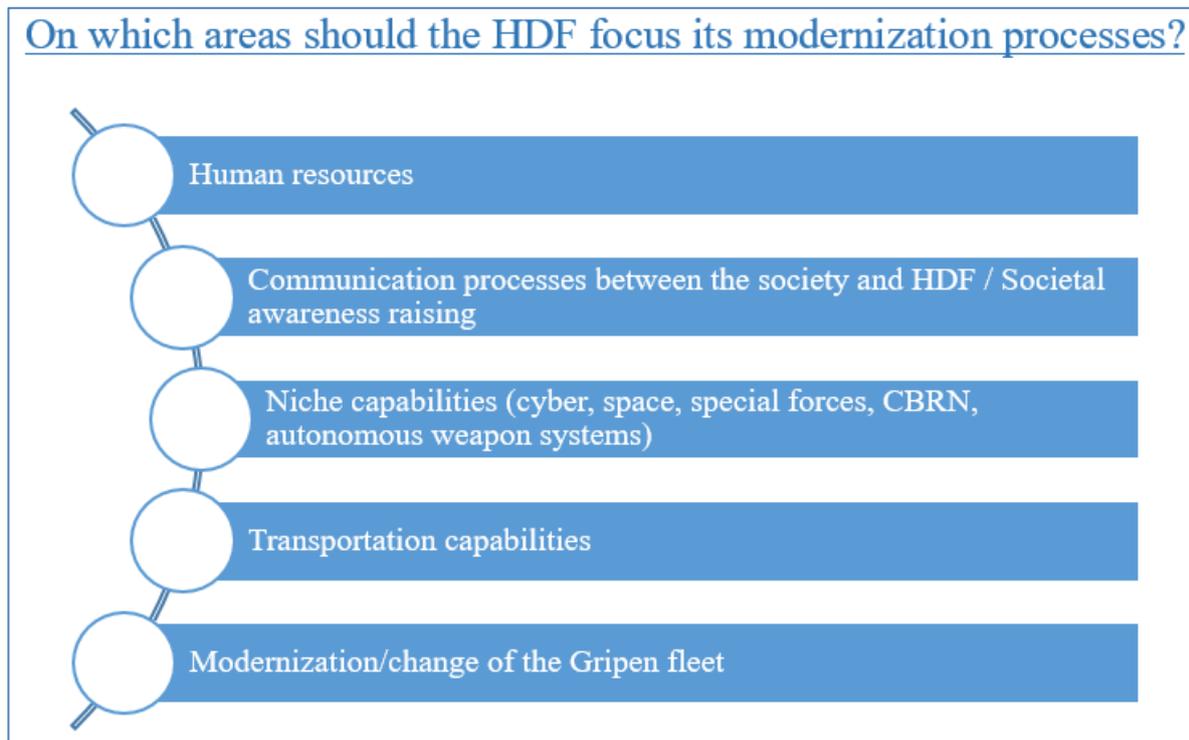


Figure 5: Areas identified during the interviews concerning the modernization process of HDF.

Besides the issue of human resources, almost half of the respondents noted that in parallel to the already announced acquisitions processes, it would be also useful to focus on some softer, niche capabilities during the modernization process of the HDF, which could also increase the international prestige and credibility of the organization. Respondents identified cyber security, space security, special forces, CBRN capabilities and the capability of developing autonomous weapon systems among these areas. This also shows some similarities with the 2019 interviews, which also pointed out the role of those capabilities, which would make the HDF effective against various new, security challenges. Finally, concerning the more concrete acquisition processes, three respondents noted that it would be necessary to modernize the transportation capabilities of the HDF, whereas two of them mentioned the necessity of modernizing/changing the Gripen combat aircraft fleet until the end of the decade.



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Edited by:
Tamás Csiki Varga, Péter Tálas

Contact:

1581 Budapest, P.O. Box. 15.

Phone: 00 36 1 432-90-92

E-mail: svkk@uni-nke.hu

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