

### András György DEÁK – Alex ETL – Zoltán FELMÉRY: Hungarian public opinion on security, defense and threats (2021)?<sup>1</sup>

#### Executive Summary

- ISDS commissioned a societal survey, which was conducted in December, 2021.
- 33% of respondents have accurate information on Hungarian defense spending.
- The largest group of respondents (46%), believes that defense spending should remain unchanged.
- Defense education programmes are supported by the majority of respondents.
- Germany, the Visegrad Group and the United States are considered as the most important partners for defense cooperation.
- Germany enjoys the highest level of trust in the field of collective defense guarantees. In addition, Hungarian society can be characterized by general lack of trust.
- Compared to our 2019 survey, the proportion of Hungarians who said that Hungary should support its NATO and EU allies in case of an external attack has fallen significantly.
- Social skepticism concerning the use of military force is also reflected in public attitudes towards international operations of the Hungarian Defense Forces.
- The majority of Hungarians do not consider it likely that the country will be directly affected by a major security crisis in the next decade.
- The majority of Hungarians do not perceive an immediate threat and are rather positive about the country's security and defense policy situation.

**The Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies (ISDS) conducted a new societal survey to analyze the main characteristics of Hungarian security perception. This analysis presents the primary results of the survey, specifically highlighting the societal attitudes and knowledge concerning defense expenditures, military capabilities, allies and threats.**

#### Introduction

ISDS commissioned a societal survey, which was conducted by M-METER Kutató és Elemző Kft. in December 2021. The survey used Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technique on a sample of 1 000 participants and it is representative in terms of age, gender, education, and settlement size of the Hungarian population. The survey aimed to highlight the perception of the Hungarian society with regards to security and defense policy and the Hungarian Defense Forces (HDF). Besides, we also aimed to analyze what the Hungarian society thinks about the country's alliance system as well as the security and defense policy challenges affecting the country. Some of the questions were already part of our previous survey in 2019, thus providing an opportunity to compare the current data with the results gained earlier.<sup>2</sup>

#### Defense spending: information and expectations

Hungary has spent 1.6% of its GDP on defense in 2021. This value was so large last time in the early 2000s. Compared to the low point in the mid-2010s (0.8% of the GDP), there has been a real increase in defense spending recently.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as the GDP as

a benchmark has also expanded significantly in recent years, the increase in nominal terms is much higher than the ratios. Spending in this area has already increased by around 70 percent in 2019 compared to

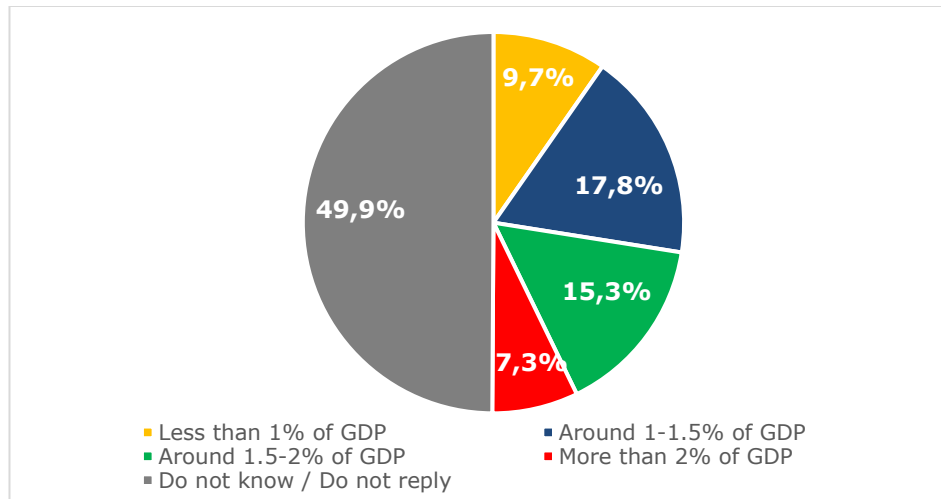
<sup>1</sup> The authors are research fellows of the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies at the National University of Public Service ([svkk@uni-nke.hu](mailto:svkk@uni-nke.hu)). "Project no. TKP2021-NVA-16 has been implemented with the support provided by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the TKP2021-NVA funding scheme."

<sup>2</sup> Alex ETL: [The perception of security in Hungary](#), [online], 4 March 2020. Source: [svkk.uni-nke.hu](http://svkk.uni-nke.hu) [Accessed: 7 February 2022] and Alex ETL – Péter TÁLAS: [The transformation of Hungarian security perception between 1999 and 2019](#), [online], 4 March 2020. Source: [svkk.uni-nke.hu](http://svkk.uni-nke.hu) [Accessed: 7 February 2022]

<sup>3</sup> SIPRI: [Military Expenditure Database](#), [online]. Source: [sipri.org](http://sipri.org) [Accessed: 2 February 2022]

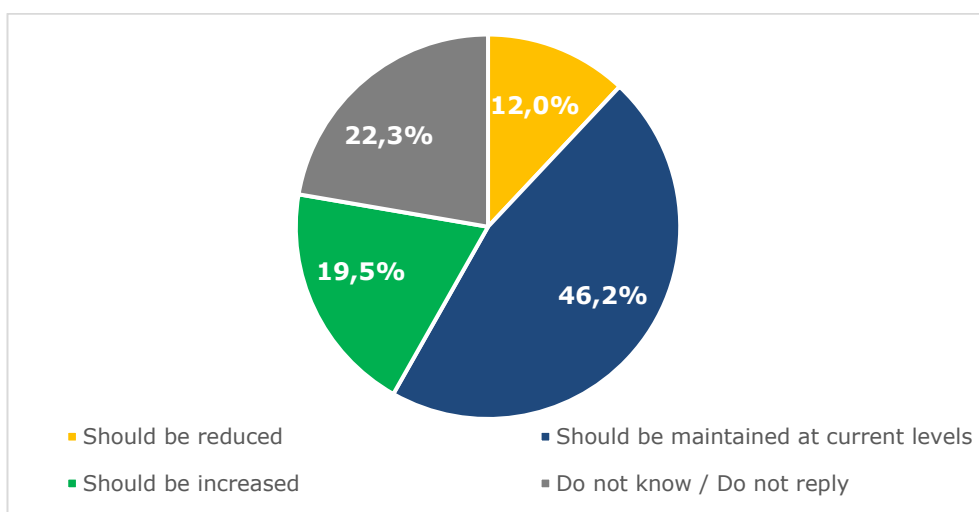
2014,<sup>4</sup> and growth has continued ever since. Therefore, we decided to analyze societal knowledge concerning this issue (Figure 1).

Based on our data, it is immediately apparent that regardless of the significant increase in expenditures, at least half of the respondents had no information about how much Hungary spends on defense. 18% of respondents thought the expenditure value was in the GDP 1-1.5% range, while 15% thought it was in the GDP 1.5-2% range. In fact, only the latter is true, but since the former statement has been correct for years, it is somewhat plausible to say that a third of respondents had near-correct information concerning expenditure ratios. In addition, 10% significantly underestimated actual expenditures, while 7% overestimated it.



**Figure 1: How much do you think Hungary spends on defense in a year?**

After this, we analyzed the preferences of the society for the future level of defense spending. These preferences over the next five years are shown in Figure 2. Contrary to what we saw at the actual expenditure level, in this case only 22% of respondents did not answer the question. This means that one in five respondents do not have an opinion on how much should be spent in the next period on an issue that fundamentally affects Hungarian security and defense policy, including the financing of the Hungarian Defense Forces.



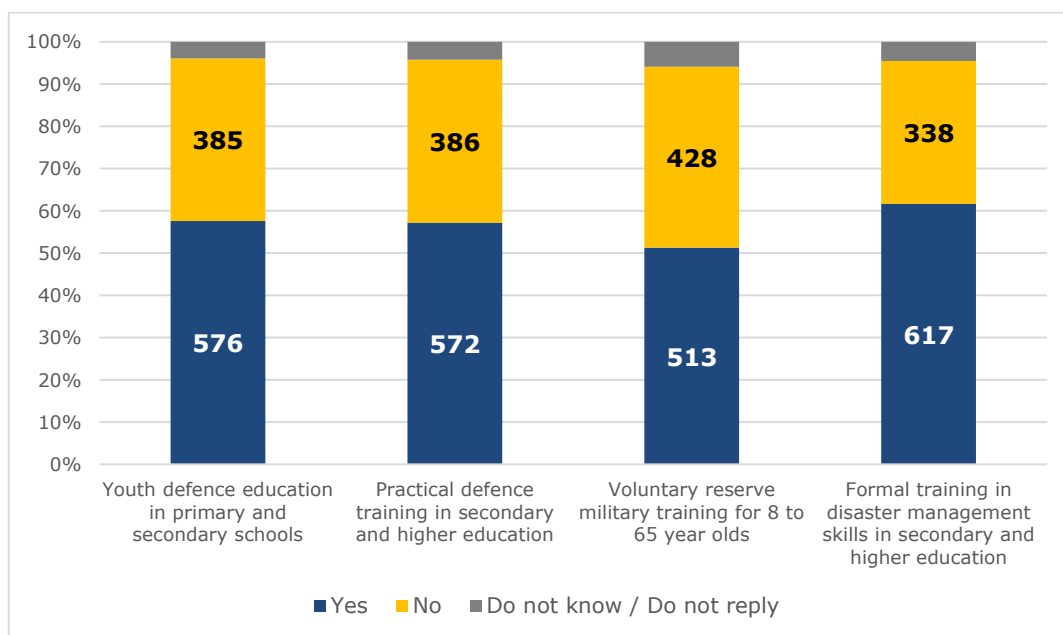
**Figure 2: What is your opinion on the funding of the Hungarian Defense Forces for the next five years?**

<sup>4</sup> Tamás CSIKI VARGA: [Trends in Hungarian defence spending, 2004–2019](#), Nemzet és Biztonság 2019/1, [online], 2019. Source: nemzetesbiztonsag.hu [Accessed: 2 February 2022]

46% of respondents think that spending should be kept at the current level, while 20% would like to see further increases. Therefore there is only 12% preferring the reduction of defense spending. Based on the Hungarian government's actions announced so far,<sup>5</sup> we can assume that in the next few years we will either see at least the same level of defense expenditures, or further increase of spending. Since the majority wants to keep spending at least at the same level, the government's vision and societal expectations in this area do not diverge.<sup>6</sup>

### Military capabilities: training and actual operations

Besides the evaluation of defense expenditures, respondents were asked to assess the potential citizen engagement with regards to security and defense policy.<sup>7</sup> Respondents assessed the legitimization of four training programmes: youth defense education in primary and secondary schools, practical defense training in secondary and higher education, voluntary military reservist training for 18 to 65 year olds and formal training of disaster management skills in secondary and higher education (Figure 3). On the one hand, the number of respondents not answering the question was relatively low. On the other hand, societal attitudes concerning this issue diverge. The majority of respondents supported all four forms of training, but 30-40% high rejection rates cannot be ignored either. There were significant differences in the level of support of various trainings, since formal training in disaster management had the highest and voluntary military reservist training the lowest support. The former was considered important by 617 respondents and the latter by 513. In addition, 576 people supported youth defense education and 572 people supported practical defense training.



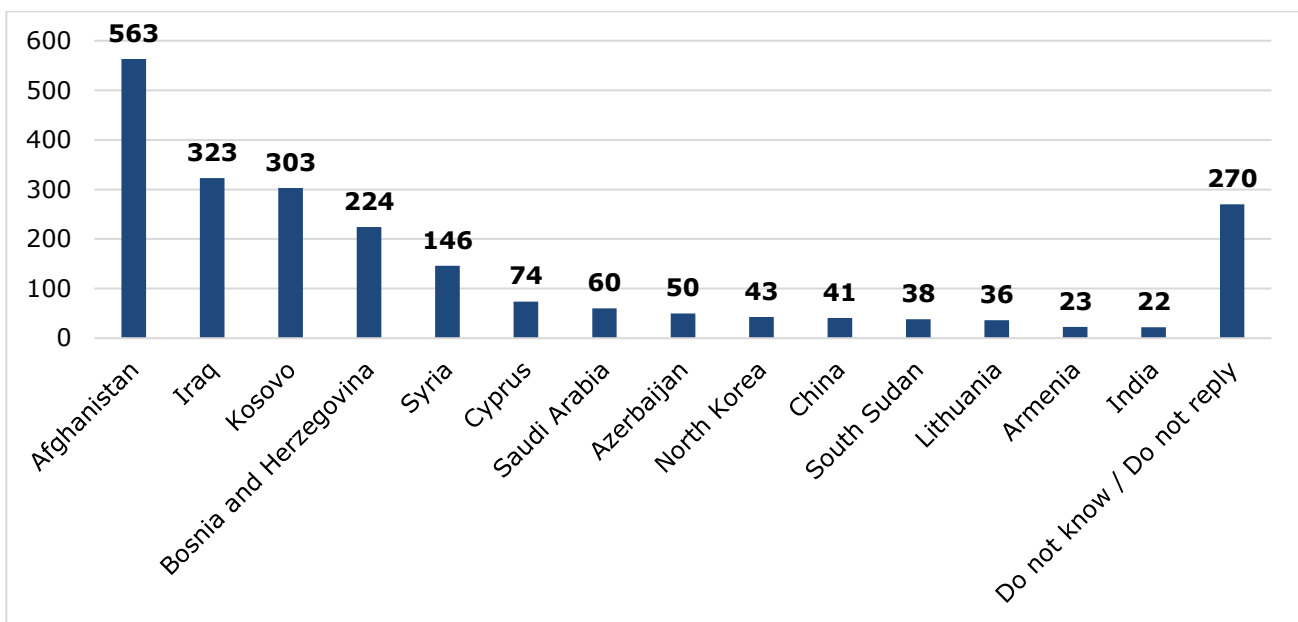
**Figure 3: Do you think it is necessary for all citizens to participate in the following trainings?**

<sup>5</sup> MK: [1393/2021. \(VI. 24.\) Government Decision on the National Military Strategy of Hungary](#), [online], 24 June 2021. Source: [magyarkozlony.hu](#) [Accessed: 2 February 2022]; Ministry of Defence: [Chapter of Budget 2020](#), [online], 11 June 2019. Source: [parlament.hu](#) [Accessed: 2 February 2022]

<sup>6</sup> However, we do not know the reason for this. The government may be aware of the needs of the public in this area and naturally shape its policy agenda accordingly. At the same time, it is also possible that the public correctly perceives government ideas and consciously modifies its own expectations accordingly. Presumably both effects are behind the numbers.

<sup>7</sup> In a simplistic way, the Voluntary Reserve System is now included in this type of engagement. The reason for this is that the activities of the Volunteer Reserve Corps in "peacetime" are limited to exercises aimed solely at maintaining and developing skills while they work normally like civilians.

We also analyzed societal knowledge concerning the Hungarian Defense Forces. We asked the respondents to identify the countries where Hungarian soldiers have participated in military operations in the last 10 years. The distribution of countries is shown in Figure 4. Most of the respondents (563) were aware of the Hungarian mission in Afghanistan. Many respondents have also heard about Hungarian military presence in Iraq (323), Kosovo (303) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (224). Some of them also had information on smaller military engagements (Cyprus, Lithuania) that have received less media attention recently. However, many did not answer the question (270) and our survey identified a lot of misinformation as well. Most importantly, 146 respondents falsely believed that Hungarian soldiers were involved in operations in Syria. This non-existent mission was nominated by twice as many people as the longest peace-keeping mission of the United Nations with Hungarian participation, the mission in Cyprus. Moreover, dozens of respondents voted for countries (North Korea, Saudi Arabia, India, China, Armenia, South Sudan and Azerbaijan) where there has never been, or has not recently been, Hungarian military involvement.



**Figure 4: In which of the following countries have Hungarian soldiers participated in military operations in the last 10 years?**

### Defense cooperation and allies

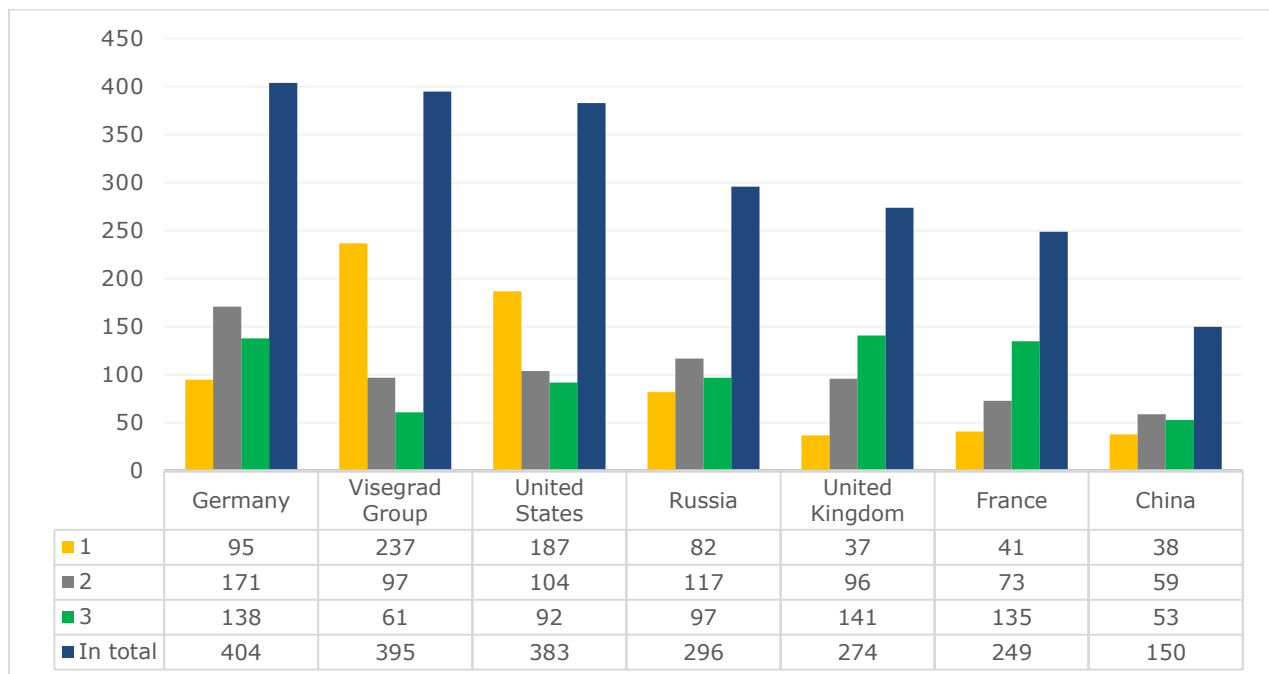
Our survey also examined attitudes towards various forms of defense cooperation. Respondents were asked to rank the countries with which Hungary should develop close military cooperation. Figure 5.1 illustrates how many respondents ranked each partner first, second or third on their own list and the aggregated number of options of these three rankings. Figure 5.2 shows the distribution of the number of votes given for each country. Based on aggregates of the first three rankings, Germany (404), the Visegrad Group (395) and the United States (383) are considered as the most important countries in terms of military cooperation. It is also worth noting that although all three countries received a large number of nominations, and thus cooperation with them was considered equally important, Russia (296) was ahead of the United Kingdom (274) and France (249), which is certainly noteworthy. China is slightly behind the countries mentioned above (150).

As far as the ranking is concerned, most respondents clearly ranked the Visegrad countries and the United States as the most important partners. These two were followed by Germany, which is not primarily seen as the most important partner, but the values clearly show that the country certainly has a place among the most significant allies. The situation is similar with France and the UK, although they are not

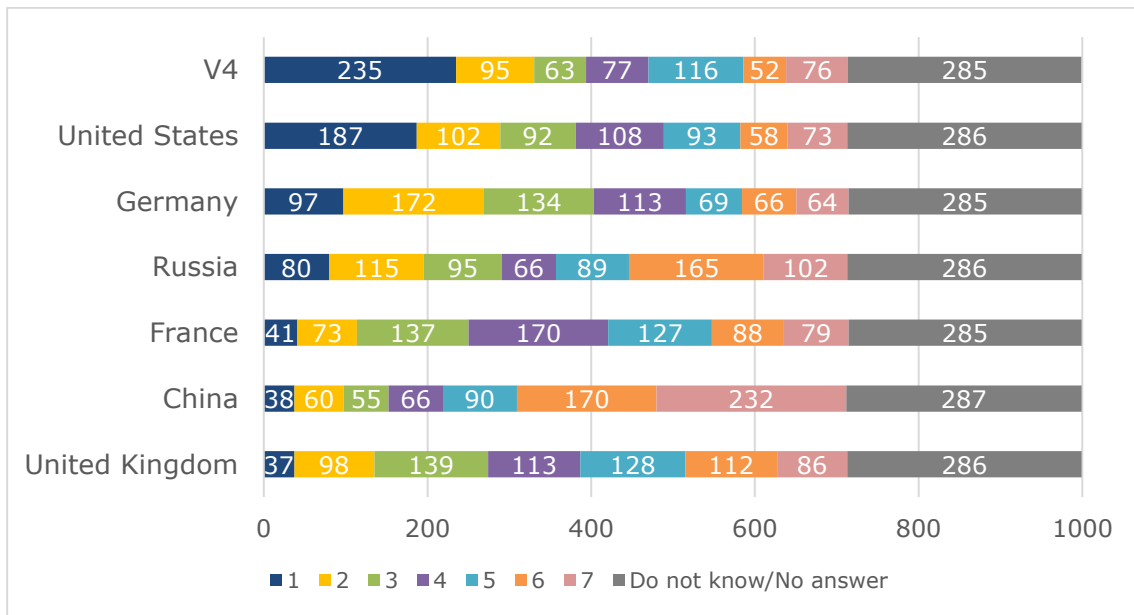
considered by respondents to be primary allies, their role among the first few cooperating partners is unquestioned. As the aggregate data showed, Russia was about twice as important regarding cooperation as China. However, it is also worth pointing out that these two countries were the least supported partners as well (many respondents put them at the bottom of the ranking), so there is a certain societal polarization concerning their role.

We also examined alliance preferences in the context of an aggregate variable. We ranked every respondent by creating a numerical variable characterizing their respective preferences for countries. In order to get a single numerical variable for each person, we assigned individual weights to each country (i.e. China got minus 7, Russia minus 4, V4 zero and the US plus 5) and multiplied these weights by the reciprocal of the rankings given by the respondent (i.e. 3rd China is  $1/3 \cdot -7 = -7/3$ ). The sum of these combined values constitute a unique numerical orientation variable on an interval scale for each respondent. The values of this scale were simplified into three values: 'Oriental' if China and/or Russia, 'Atlanticist' if the United States and/or Britain and 'Europeanist' if the V4, Germany or France were ranked relatively high on the preference list. It is necessary to keep in mind that such indicators can be arbitrary and misleading in themselves. They can in no way be interpreted as implying that the respondents in all circumstances have 'Oriental', 'Atlanticist' or 'Europeanist' sentiments. However, such measures are well suited to demonstrate shifts from previous records of the same methodology, to measure trends over time. Thus our observations also refer primarily to the 2019 sample.

Unfortunately, many people did not answer this question in 2021. The number of non-respondents increased from 135 in 2019 to 287 cases in 2021. All the more noteworthy that the representatives of "Eastern" sentiment increased in number even in absolute terms (from 132 to 146, according to our arbitrary delimitation). This may be an indication of the growing popularity of military cooperation with China and/or Russia. Support for the "Atlanticist" orientation declined in line with the proportion of respondents, while the largest drop happened in the "European" camp.

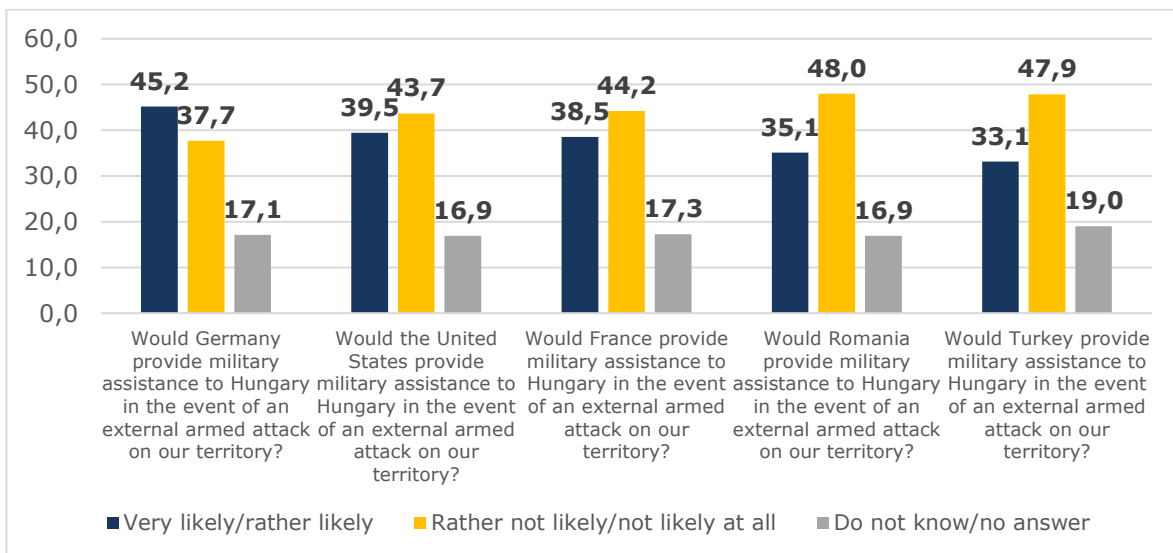


**Figure 5.1: Please rank the countries with which Hungary should establish close military cooperation. Put the country in the first place with which it is most important to cooperate. (First three places)**



**Figure 5.2: Please rank the countries with which Hungary should establish close military cooperation. Put in the first place the country with which it is most important to cooperate. (Complete ranking)**

When it comes to collective defense guarantees, Hungarian society trusts primarily Germany. When respondents were asked whether a particular country would provide military assistance to Hungary if its territory was attacked by external armed forces, only Germany had the trust of the majority (Figure 6). In contrast, in the cases of the United States, France, Turkey and Romania, the majority of respondents were more likely to say that these countries would not help Hungary. Nonetheless, the general distrust among allies is not unique to Hungary, as several opinion polls have shown that some European societies tend to distrust collective defense.<sup>8</sup>

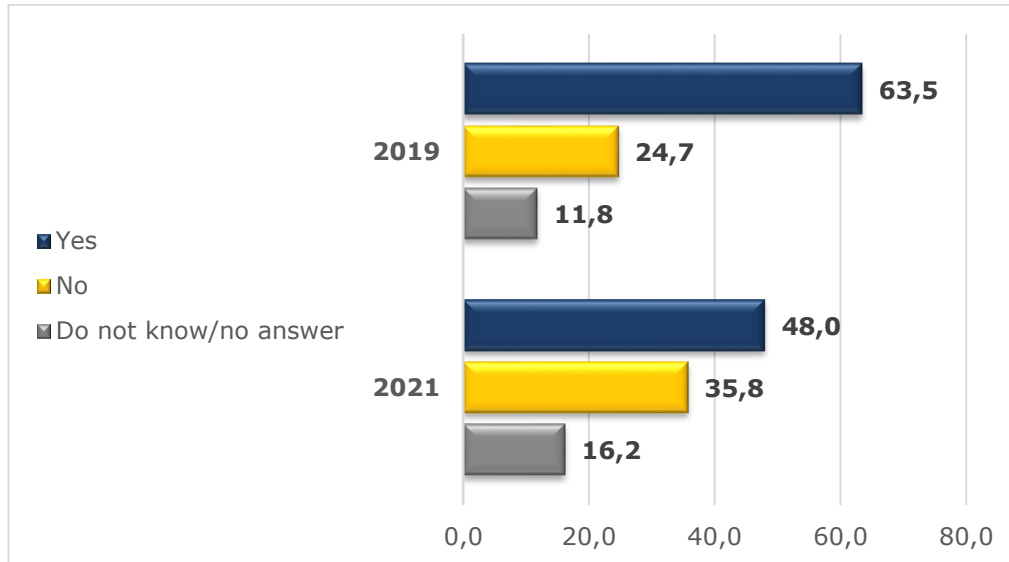


**Figure 6: How likely do you think it is that the following countries would provide assistance to Hungary in the event of an external armed attack?<sup>9</sup>**

<sup>8</sup> For example: Pew Research Center: [NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States](https://www.pewresearch.org/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-member-states/), [online], 9 February 2020. Source: pewresearch.org [Accessed: 7 February 2022]

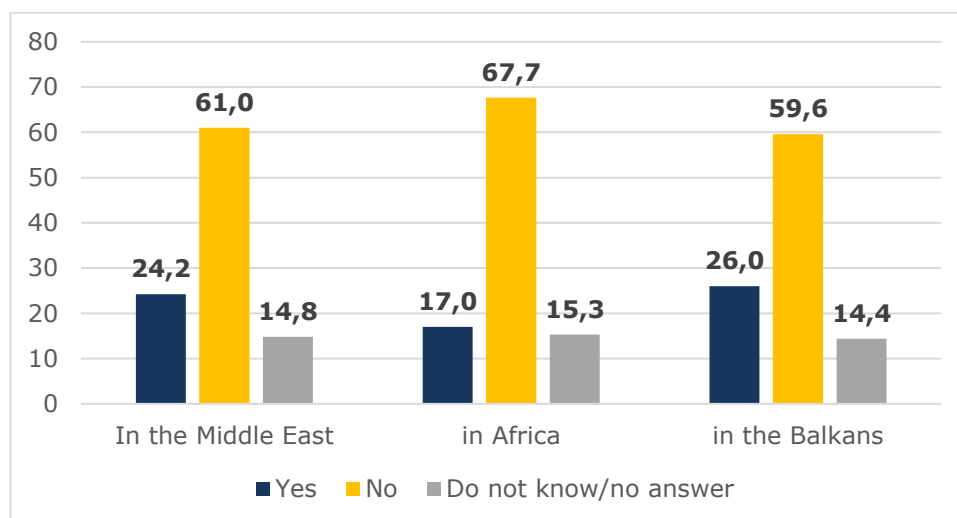
<sup>9</sup> Respondents could choose between the following categories: very likely, rather likely, rather not likely, not likely at all and after that answers were grouped.

It is important to note that we could observe a significant decrease since 2019 among those people who think that Hungary/the Hungarian Defense Forces should support their NATO/EU allies in case it was attacked by an external actor. Although 48% believe that Hungary should fulfil its allied obligations in such a scenario, more than one-third (36%) of the respondents oppose military assistance. The change is significant, since in 2019, 64% thought that Hungary should support its allies, whereas only 25% were against this hypothetical decision. (Figure 7)



**Figure 7: 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?**

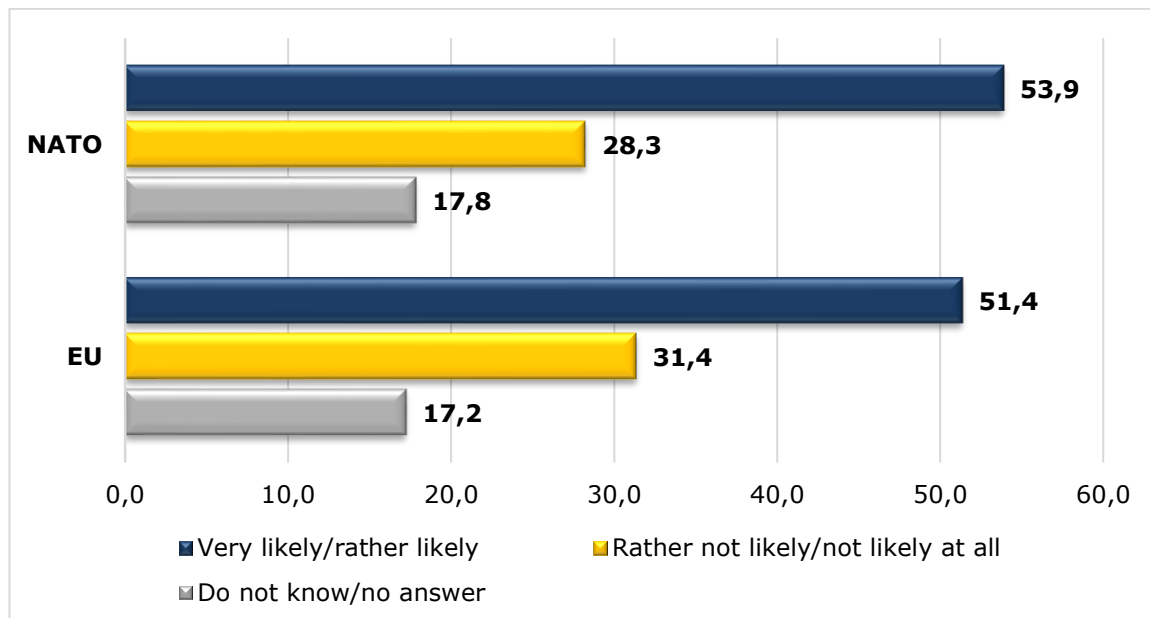
One can observe general scepticism within Hungarian society when it comes to the use of military force and the Hungarian Defense Forces in international operations (Figure 8). The majority of respondents clearly opposed any participation of the HDF in crisis management and stabilisation operations in the coming years. Moreover, the geographical scope of the operations does not influence attitudes, as almost as many respondents oppose military operations with allies in Africa (67.7%) as in the Middle East (61%) or the Balkans (59.6%). Crisis management in the Balkans has the highest public support, but even in this case, only 26% support increased engagement.



**Figure 8: Do you support the participation of Hungary/the Hungarian Defense Forces in crisis management and stabilization military operations together with its allies in the next three years in the following regions?**

This is especially interesting, given that in recent years the need to deal with crises related problems (such as refugees and migrants) locally has become a recurrent element in domestic political discourse. Our data suggest that regardless of the political discourse, society does not support such engagements. On the one hand, it is important to note that the results should be treated with caution, since a significant part of society is not sufficiently informed about the HDF presence in various operations (as Figure 3 demonstrated). On the other hand, the high percentage of those who reject the use of the HDF in operations shows that any major military engagement may carry serious political risks due to the negative public attitudes.

The majority of Hungarians (51 and 54%) think that Hungary will be a member state of the European Union and NATO in 2030. However, the society does not have a united view, since one-third of respondents think that Hungary will not be a part of EU/NATO by the end of the decade. Keeping in mind that various societal surveys conducted during the last few years showed that Hungarians are rather satisfied with the alliance system of the country, these results are especially interesting, since they highlight that a significant part of the society maintains a pessimistic view when it comes to the future of Hungary within these organizations.



**Figure 9: How likely do you think it is that Hungary will still be a member of the European Union and NATO in 2030?<sup>10</sup>**

### Scenarios and threats

The survey also aimed to capture societal perceptions concerning various security and defense policy challenges. Respondents were asked to evaluate the likelihood of various events listed in Figure 10. In general, the majority of Hungarians do not think that the country will be directly affected by a major security and defense policy crisis in the next decade. For example, 73.2% and 72% think it is unlikely that Hungary will be directly attacked militarily or that the country will be involved in a major armed conflict in the next 10 years. 59.6% of respondents think it is unlikely that Hungary will face a major cyber-attack in the next ten years and 60% think it is unlikely that an armed conflict between great powers will occur. Only a quarter of respondents (25.8% and 25.7% respectively) consider these events likely.

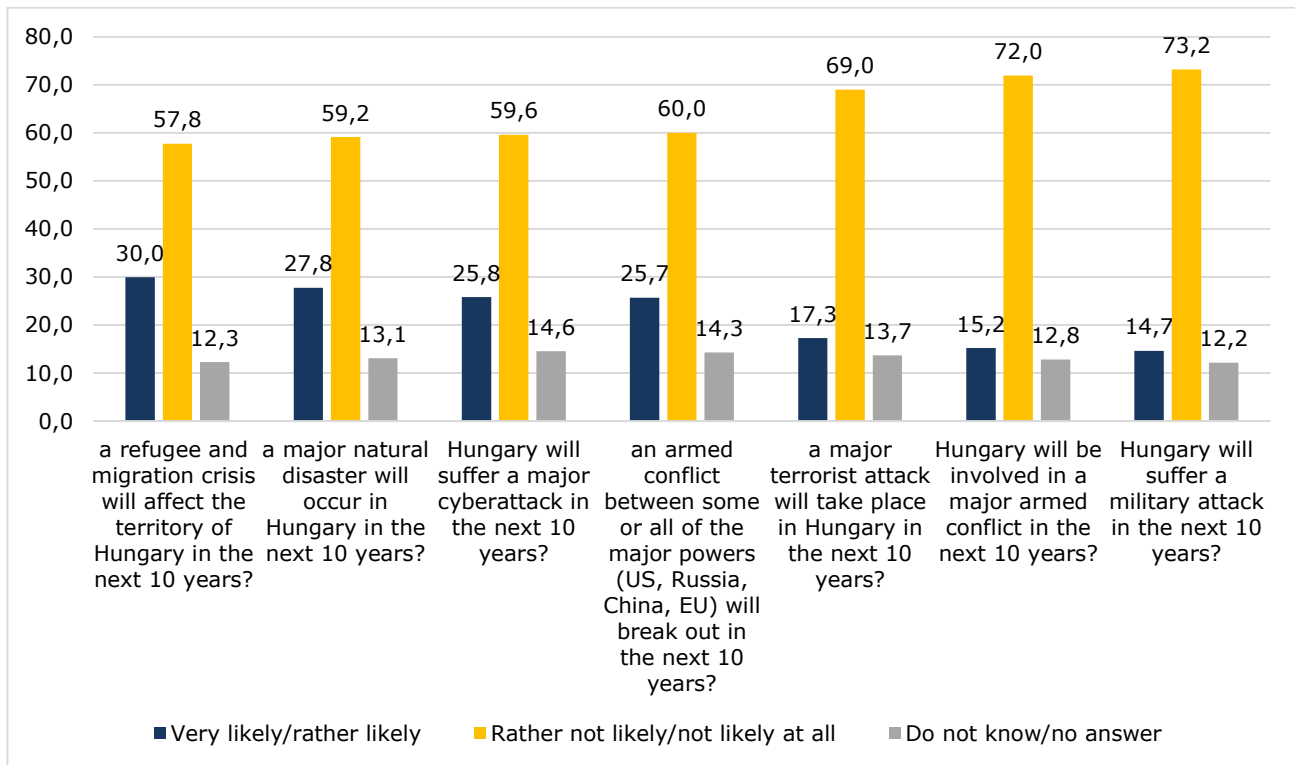
Perhaps more surprisingly, the majority does not consider unconventional crisis events to be likely in the next 10 years. For example, 69% believe it is rather unlikely that a major terrorist attack would take place on the territory of Hungary, while 59.2% and 57.8% say it is unlikely that a major natural disaster

<sup>10</sup> Respondents could choose between the following categories: very likely, rather likely, rather not likely, not likely at all and after that answers were grouped.



or refugee and migration crisis would affect Hungary. In contrast, 27.8 and 30% thought that these events were more likely to occur in the next decade.

These results show us that the majority of society do not perceive an imminent and direct threat and are rather optimistic concerning the security and defense policy situation of the country. The deteriorating security policy environment that is increasingly reflected in the perception of the country's political elite and in Hungary's strategic documents, does not appear on the societal level. This can be a significant challenge in the long run, concerning the legitimization and implementation of any security policy-related political decisions.



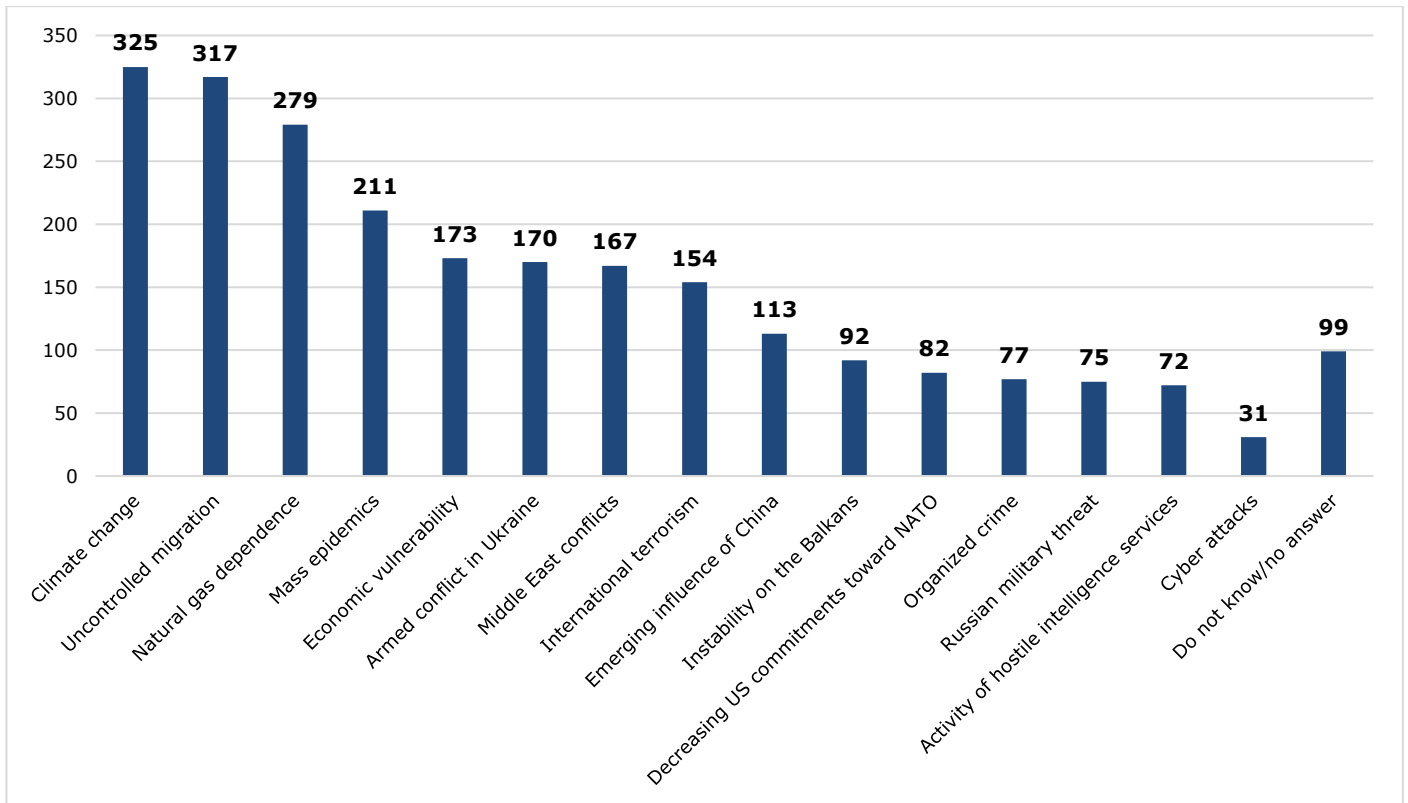
**Figure 10: How likely do you think the following events will occur in Hungary in the next 10 years?<sup>11</sup>**

Figure 11 shows the main threats perceived by the public. No military threats or direct political risks stemming from international politics were ranked in the top five. The majority of the respondents opted for civilizational and economic challenges that can only be indirectly managed by traditional political means. More than 300 people considered climate change and uncontrolled migration as issues of major concern. Besides these two major issues, more than 200 respondents identified natural gas dependency and epidemics as outstanding threats, which are followed by economic vulnerability (173 respondents). More than 150 respondents fear conflicts in the Middle East or Ukraine and international terrorism. Significantly more people perceive Chinese influence more threatening than Russian military intimidation (113 and 75 respondents). Anxiety regarding instability on the Balkans, weakening US support for NATO, Russian military threats, espionage, organised crime or cybercrime are particularly low (less than 10% of respondents).

At the same time, correlations between some particular threats reveal some societal characteristics. Cleavages between political and non-political challenges are paramount. Perceptions regarding Middle East conflicts, Ukrainian tensions, weakening US support for NATO, and to a lesser extent even foreign espionage are markedly associated. Similarly, those considering climate change threatening are also more likely to choose dependence on natural gas or epidemiological threats, and vice versa. The only exception is the association between natural gas dependence and weakening US support, with the former also being the

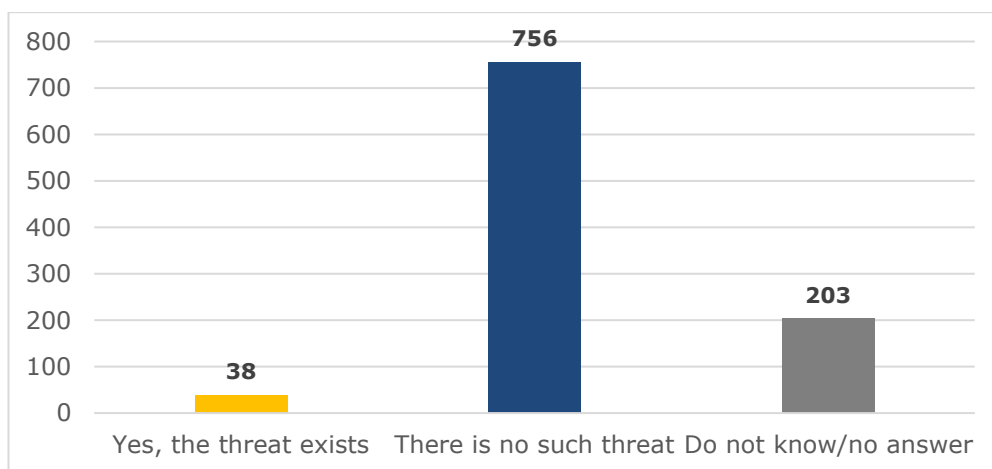
<sup>11</sup> Respondents could choose between the following categories: very likely, rather likely, rather not likely, not likely at all and after that answers were grouped.

most likely to indicate the latter. Apprehension regarding Chinese influence and Russian military threats are strongly associated, while the former shows close perceptual ties with organised crime and economic vulnerability, the latter with conflicts in Ukraine and the instability on the Balkans. Perceptions also overlap in the international terrorism – organized crime – cyber-attacks triangle.



**Figure 11: Which factor has the greatest negative impact on Hungary's security?**

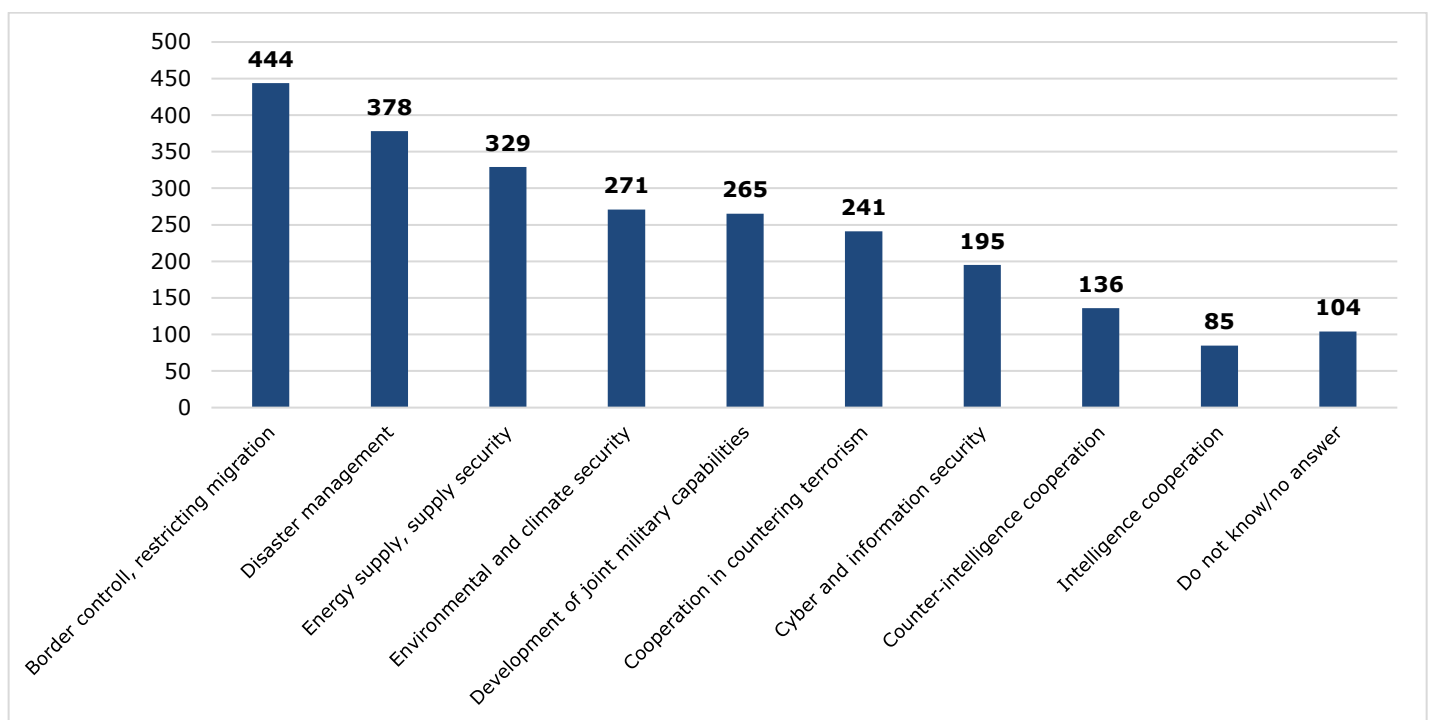
The overwhelming majority of respondents does not perceive an external military threat. Figure 12 shows that less than 4% of the population identify a military threat from a foreign country while 75% dismissed it as an existing concern.



**Figure 12: Are there any countries that pose a direct military threat to Hungary?**

### National and international military capabilities

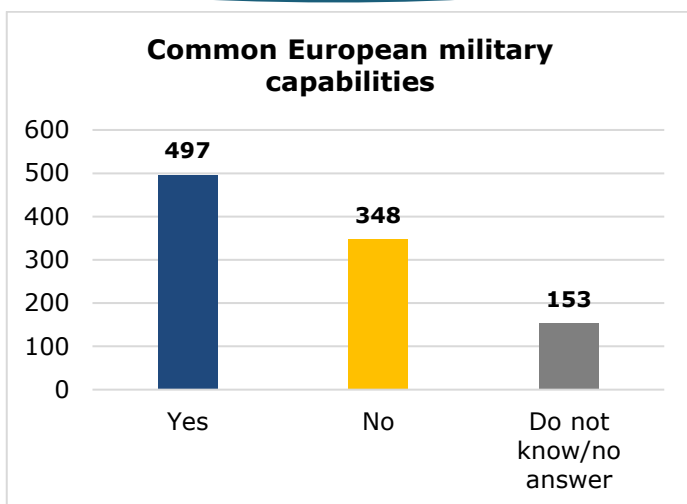
Figure 13 shows the respondents' expectations regarding security and defense policy cooperation within the Visegrad Group. These do not differ substantially from the overall attitudes and general perceptions. Almost half of the respondents mentioned border protection and migration management (444), while disaster management and energy security also have a support rate of over 300. As with general preferences, relatively few respondents chose cyber security, counter-espionage or intelligence cooperation. However, convergence between the individual objectives can also be observed, albeit in a much weaker form than for the general threat perceptions. Energy security–environmental security and counterintelligence–intelligence cooperation are almost conventional pairs. The development of joint military capabilities remains a relatively neutral objective. Overall, there is no decisive public expectation regarding V4 cooperation. Differences between the objectives listed can almost entirely be explained by general preferences.



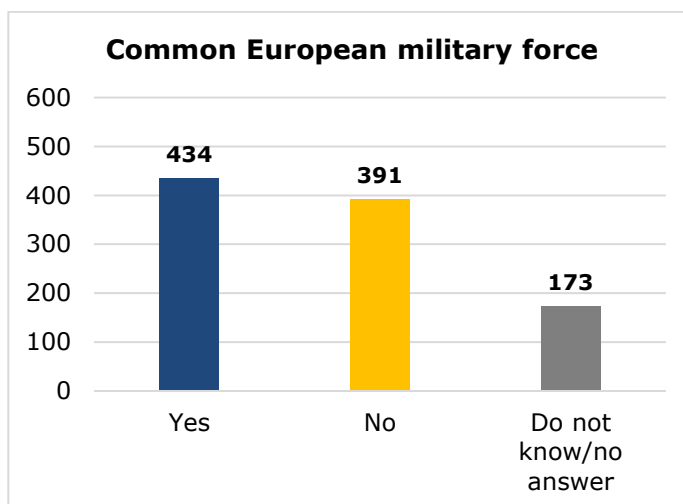
**Figure 13: In which of the following areas of security do the Visegrad countries need to cooperate?**

Respondents are rather satisfied with the various aspects of the Zrínyi Defense and Military Development Programme (Figure 14). Less than 20 percent of respondents gave a rating of 1 or 2 to some elements of the Programme, while around 40 percent of respondents gave a moderate (3) rating. A further 43-45% rated the Programme as more than moderately effective (ratings of 4 and 5). The data also demonstrate that there are no significant differences in the social perceptions concerning various aspects of the Programme, with attitudes being roughly the same with regard to the provision of personnel, the expansion of defense industrial capacities, the development of the institutional culture of the HDF, the increase of the defense budget and capability modernization. Since the distribution of responses on various aspects is almost identical, it can be assumed that the public does not have a sophisticated opinion on the different elements of the Programme.

Figures 15 and 16 show that almost half of respondents were in favour of strengthening common European capabilities (497), while a third of them were against it (348). The relatively high level of support only moderately changes when it comes to delegating governance competences to the European Union in order to establish a joint European Military Force (434 in favour to 391 against).



**Figure 15: Is it necessary to strengthen common European military capabilities, so that European states can act without US support if needed**



**Figure 16: Is it necessary to create a common European force if Hungary were to hand over government decision-making powers to the European Union?**

Support for a European Military Force goes hand in hand with confidence that Hungary will be a member of the European Union in 2030. These respondents usually also prefer more military education in schools and higher levels of military training for the population as a whole. Furthermore, those who perceive more geopolitical threats remain more supportive of European cooperation (e.g. fear of conflicts in the Middle East correlates with support for a European Military Force), while those who fear global risks are less united – a large proportion of those fearing climate change did not even answer this question. However, divisions around the public perception of European defense also suggest that neither the supporters, nor the opponents form homogenous groups. Hungarian citizens vote the same way for a number of different reasons. There is no significant correlation between orientation and support for European Military Force: the latter group does not trust French or German military support more than US military support. Scepticism concerning the future also creeps into the group opposing European defense cooperation: these people are much less confident in Hungarian membership of NATO in 2030 and in external assistance in the event of war.



# Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies

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