

By PhD Attila Demko

The 2014 and 2022 aggressions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine have permanently changed the European security landscape, and both Poland and Hungary had to reconsider their preparedness in civil protection in case of an armed conflict. What was deemed highly unlikely by the national security strategies of both countries before 2014, a major war in Europe at their doorstep, became a reality. Beyond that, climate change and mass migration also pose major challenges on their own -and the vulnerabilities of both countries can be used by malign external players in case of a hybrid conflict. However, there is a still a low awareness of the importance of civil protection against military and hybrid threats, especially in Hungary. The two countries have a different size and geopolitical position, but there are plenty of similarities and thus possible ways to cooperate and share good practices. The goal of this paper is to analyse the current situation and offer recommendations.

Introduction

The 2014 February aggression of Russia against Ukraine has changed the European security landscape, and that change became final with the 2022 February large-scale aggression of the Russian Federation. The largest conventional war since 1945 is being waged next or near to Polish and Hungarian borders, a war that can transform into an even larger war, with the possible use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including nuclear weapons. Polish, but even Hungarian airspace was already affected, in Poland civilian lives were lost. Both countries need to upgrade its civil protection system to meet the new realities of armed conflict. This paper will compare challenges facing the two countries regarding the issues mentioned above from a Hungarian perspective.

Civil protection in Hungary against military threats

Before we start with discussing civil protection against military threats, we must shortly discuss the history of civil-military relations (Civ-Mil or CMR) in Hungary as there is a marked difference between Poland and Hungary in that field. After the 1956 revolution and war for freedom, the Communist regime made a significant effort to distance the society from the military, as close relations were considered to be a security threat to the system. Military spending was generally significantly lower in Hungary than in Poland, and that had a negative impact on preparedness in

civil protection too. After 1962, it was no longer obligatory to build shelters in new housing, thus most of the building stock of Hungarian cities lack such facilities.^[1] As a positive, from the then three subway lines of Budapest, two (M2 and M3) was designed to shelter 220 000 people from the then 2.1 million of inhabitants of Budapest.^[2] Also during the Communist era at least some level of training and awareness in civil protection reached a large segment of the population

Civil protection training for the general population gradually ceased to exist after the fall of the Warsaw pact. Awareness became minimal among the wider population, despite the Yugoslav wars at Hungary's southern doorstep. The education system almost completely neglected the teaching of civil protection. There were some positive changes after Hungary joined NATO, with booklets distributed to students on civil protection. A new modification of the law on civil protection (Crisis Management Law 2011) was accepted by the Hungarian parliament in 2011, and in 2012 the establishment of a data base has started, who can be mobilized for civil protection duties. According to the Crisis Management Law civil protection is led by the different civil protection organizations which "performs the civil defense tasks specified in this law and to be carried out during an armed conflict through its voluntary and mandatory personnel." These organizations can be divided into central, regional, settlement and workplace civil defense organizations, but depending on the character of the crisis the central crisis management can decide the level of intervention.^[3]

The government has strengthened efforts to develop the civil protection system beyond new legislation with an increase in funding. In the last few years there is also a new drive to establish a system of ten military high schools, some of them are already functioning. Beyond teaching homeland defence, civil protection is part of the curriculum.

However more needs to be done as the awareness of the general public of civil protection duties, facility locations, emergency protocols are still very low. The 2014 and 2022 attack on Ukraine has only slowly changed public attitudes. That can be partially explained by the different geopolitical position of the country. While Poland has a common border with Russia, and already lost civilians due to the effects of the war ^[4] Hungary's exposure is much smaller. The neighbouring Ukrainian region of Subcarpathia (with a substantial Hungarian population and close relations with Hungary), was attacked only once by the Russian Federation, and Hungarian airspace was breached by a Ukrainian drone also only once.^[5]

Beyond raising awareness, more funding is needed to establish new, and upgrade old facilities. As already stated, the underinvestment in shelters and infrastructure goes back to the 1960s, but it became particularly acute after 1990, and that had a profound negative effect on preparedness in case of armed conflict. The fourth subway line (M4) built between 2006-2014, despite being sufficiently deep (unlike line M1), lacks the shelter facilities M2 and M3 have, and the tunnels were built without the needed reinforcing.

Civil protection against related threats

Beyond the direct effects of armed conflict, there are indirect effects too. There is a migration crisis on the borders of both countries. In Hungary, civilians were affected by violence connected to migration as far as Budapest and the western border with Austria. While in the case of Hungary no involvement of state players in mass migration is proven, in the case of Poland, the migration crisis is a clear case of Russian and Belarusian hybrid warfare.[\[6\]](#)

The 2015 (and ongoing) migration crisis in Hungary and 2021 (and ongoing) migration crisis in Poland focused attention on border security and civil protections tasks related to the mass movement of people. That is a positive effect, as both countries had prior experience before the full-scale war in Ukraine and the mass movement of people.

But such a crisis can also negatively affect military forces, as police forces not only lack the necessary personnel, but similarly the equipment to deal with the crisis. In the case of Hungary, the Hungarian Defence Force (HDF) was tasked with building the fence system, and to man it, in cooperation with the police. That not only used up resources originally allocated for the military, but also disrupted training and maintenance cycles.

While even more indirectly related to the topic, a few words on how naturally occurring events can be used as a weapon by a malign foreign country. Fortunately, in terms of natural disasters, both countries are in a relatively good situation. Hungary has one of the lowest risks of natural disasters in the world (an aggregate score of 0.94). Poland's risk factors are somewhat higher (an aggregate score of 4.22) but in global comparison are also low.[\[7\]](#) Still, the increasing frequency of floods, wildfires and other natural disasters mainly due to human induced climate change is a challenge for Poland and Hungary - and it can be a man-made challenge.

Just one example: the increasing frequency of dry conditions make setting deliberate fires more feasible. 'Fire as a Weapon' (FAW) was used since the start of warfare, Hungary however experienced few such attacks due to its relatively humid climate. The situation is rapidly changing. Hungary nowadays is especially prone to heat waves, and the frequency of the events is a growing. While in a less severe form, Poland is facing a similar future. Preparations must be made in the civil protection system of both countries to counter such threats, as increasing vulnerabilities due to climate change can be used by malign external players in a possible hybrid war.

Conclusion

While the Hungarian government's rearmament and military industrialization programme is exemplary not only regionally, but on a European level, Hungary needs to do more in civil protection against military and hybrid threats. Increased shelter maintenance, raising of awareness and more frequent exercises are needed to ensure the safety of the civilian population. There should be more cooperation between Poland and Hungary, as the threats they are facing are similar despite the somewhat different geopolitical environment.

Recommendations

1. Sharing of lessons learned from the war in Ukraine – how to defend the civilian population against large scale drone-warfare, attacks on energy facilities, how to prepare for lack of water, electricity and heating.
2. Sharing of lessons learned – how to handle large scale population movements, migration, refugees, internal refugees.
3. Sharing of lessons learned – how to counter possible hybrid warfare or lower the effects of such attacks with investment in civil protection.

[1] E. Haiman, Még mindig szükség lehet bunkerekre, bár a legrégebbiek ma már múzeumként működnek,
<https://novekedes.hu/elemzesek/meg-mindig-szukseg-lehet-bunkerekre-bar-a-legre-gebbiek-ma-mar-muzeumkent-mukodnek>

[2] . The system was built to withstand a nuclear strike. It has its own water supply, and independent energy supply for 72 hours, a ventilation system and temperature

conditioning between 16-27 Celsius, depending on the season. See: A. Kasza, A fővárosi metró alkalmazási lehetőségei és korlátai a katasztrófák elleni védekezés területén,

<https://nkerepo.uni-nke.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/12360/ertekezes.pdf;jsessionid=504578F25BA92888660196032A2427D0?sequence=1>

[3] 2011. évi CXXVIII. törvény a katasztrófavédelemről és a hozzá kapcsolódó egyes törvények módosításáról. Forrás:

<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100128.tv> - Wolters Kluwer - Minden jog fenntartva! <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100128.tv>

[4] Polish experts confirm missile that hit grain facility was Ukrainian, Reuters, September 26, 2023,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/polish-experts-confirm-missile-that-hit-grain-facility-was-ukrainian-media-2023-09-26/>

[5] G. Delauney, Mystery drone from Ukraine war crashes in Croatia, BBC, 11 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60709952>

[6] M. Gros, Poland to bolster eastern borders to curb irregular migration from Belarus, May 11, 2024,

<https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-belarus-border-illegal-migration-donald-tusk/>

[7] See Natural Disaster Risk by Country 2024,

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/natural-disaster-risk-by-country>



Attila Demko (PhD) was born in 1976 in Budapest. He graduated in history and political theory from Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest in 2000. In 2008, he defended his doctoral thesis *summa cum laude* in the doctoral programme on modern and contemporary universal history at ELTE. He started his career as a security policy adviser in the State Secretariat for Security and Defence Policy of the Prime Minister's Office in 1999. From 2002 to 2010, he worked as a desk officer in the Defence Policy Department of the Ministry of Defence. From 2010 to 2012, he was Head of the Defence Planning Department of the Ministry of Defence. From 2012 to 2014 he was Head of the Defence Policy Section at the Permanent Representation of Hungary to NATO in Brussels.



The article was created as part of the project entitled “Dual voices of experts in international affairs: Poland and Hungary” implemented by the Sobieski Institute, grant no.: DOF-K/IF/RD12/15/2024. The grantee is the Waclaw Felczak Institute for Polish-Hungarian Cooperation.

The publication reflects only the views of the author(s) and cannot be associated with the official position of the Waclaw Felczak Polish-Hungarian Cooperation

Civil protection on the eastern flank of nato: the case of
Hungary and the possible cooperation with Poland

Institute.