

**National University of Public Service**  
**Doctoral School of Military Sciences**

**THESES**

Alex Etl:

**The mixed method of security perception analysis and the study of Hungarian  
security perception**

Ph.D. Dissertation

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## 1. Introduction and Research Problem

Whenever I approached various aspects of the international security studies literature, the notion of security perception has been a recurring element during these endeavors. All major theoretical schools and analytical frameworks of the field rely on this concept, albeit sometimes only implicitly. More often I met with the concept of security perception, the more obvious it has become that the literature utilizes it without a solid and coherent methodological foundation.

Although the notion of security perception has become widely popular during the last few years, there was no such research that would have analyzed the methodological pillars of the concept. The existing research dealing with security perception either focused on how psychological, social, and political factors influence perceptions, or analyzed the security perception of various actors without dealing with the theoretical and methodological aspects of concept.

Due to the lack of consistent research, my primary aim with this dissertation was to fill this gap by adopting and highlighting a clear methodological framework for the analysis of security perception.

I applied this framework by testing it on the empirical level with the analysis of Hungarian security perception. This approach had a twofold goal. On the one hand, I wanted to demonstrate the qualities of such a methodological framework on the empirical level. On the other hand, I sought to shed light on the main characteristics of Hungarian security perception, thus helping to understand the dynamics of Hungarian security and defense policy. Although there were several attempts during the last decades to highlight various aspects of Hungarian security perception, there was no research that would have analyze it in a coherent framework.<sup>1</sup>

To overcome this shortcoming, I started to work on this problem from 2018 at the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies (ISDS) in a wide-ranging research project. Therefore, various surveys and studies conducted within this project became an integrative part of this dissertation as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Baxter, Leslie Walaska – Kramer, Mark – Smoke, Richard (1994): Security for Europe: the Report of a Brown Project. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*. 1994 tavasz. 145-162. A magyar nyelvű kutatási jelentéshez lásd: Stratégiai és Védelmi Kutatóintézet (1994): Kutatási program az európai biztonságról. *Védelmi Tanulmányok*. No. 3. és Radványi, Lajos (2009): A magyar lakosság biztonságfelfogása és értékpreferenciái, 1999-2008. *Nemzet és Biztonság – Biztonságpolitikai Szemle*. 2. évf. 2. sz. 9-22. o. és Budai, Ádám (2020): The security perception and security policy of Hungary, 1989–2018. *Defense & Security Analysis*. Published online.

## 2. Research aims, questions and hypotheses

The research aims to:

- Synthesize the various theoretical and empirical studies with regards to security perception.
- Interpret the concept of security perception from a methodological perspective.
- Outline a methodological framework for the analysis of security perception.
- Apply the methodological framework for the analysis of Hungarian security perception.
- Analyze the security perception of Hungarian society.
- Analyze the security perception of Hungarian policymakers and practitioners.

Throughout the research I formulated two major research questions, each of them consisting three sub-questions:

- How can we analyze the security perception of the state?
  - On what levels can we analyze security perception?
  - With which methodological tools can we analyze security perception?
  - How can we integrate various levels and methodological tools for the analysis of security perception?
- What are the key characteristics of Hungarian security perception?
  - What are the key characteristics in the Hungarian society's security perception?
  - What are the key characteristics in the security perception of Hungarian policymakers and practitioners?
  - What kind of similarities and differences can be identified between the security perceptions of these two levels?

In a similar way, I formulated six hypotheses, which I test in the dissertation:

H1: The concept of security perception has a central importance in the realist, liberal and constructivist schools of international security and conflict studies.

H2: The analysis of the state's security perception requires the integration of various levels and methodological approaches.

H3: There can be a significant difference between the security perceptions of various levels.

H4: The state's security perception can be comprehensively analyzed through the convergent parallel design mixed method.

H5: In the security perception of the Hungarian society, throughout the analyzed period:

- the fear from illegal migration is dominant;
- direct military threat does not appear;
- there is a stable consensus concerning the alliance system of the country.

H6: In the security perception of Hungarian policymakers and practitioners throughout the analyzed period:

- the fear from illegal migration is dominant;
- there is a stable consensus concerning the alliance system of the country;
- intensifying European security policy cooperation has a key importance;
- there is a stable consensus concerning the strengthening of the country's defense capabilities.

### **3. Research methodology**

The dissertation follows a deductive methodology, which aims to adapt an already existing methodological tool for the analysis of security perception. As a first step of this process, the research methodology begins with a comprehensive literature review to highlight key theoretical and empirical aspects of the concept. Throughout the literature review, I point out what we know about the theoretical importance of security perception within the broader field of international security studies. I also highlight, how and on which levels the already existing works approach the notion of security perception.

After the literature review, I integrate the identified levels and methodological tools of analysis. I build on mixed research for this task, which I adapt for the analysis of security perception. From the various types of mixed method research, I build my

analysis on the convergent parallel design, as described by John Creswell and Vicki Plano Clark.<sup>2</sup> First, I adapt the convergent parallel design mixed method for the level of analysis problem of social sciences and after that I turn towards operationalizing the methodology.

The convergent parallel design mixed method of security perception analysis aims to capture the security perception on two levels: on the level of the society and on the level of policymakers and practitioners. The method analyses the two levels separately and only after that turns to integrate results in order to draw conclusions and shed light on convergences and divergences. I summarized the main pillars of the method in Figure 3 of the dissertation.

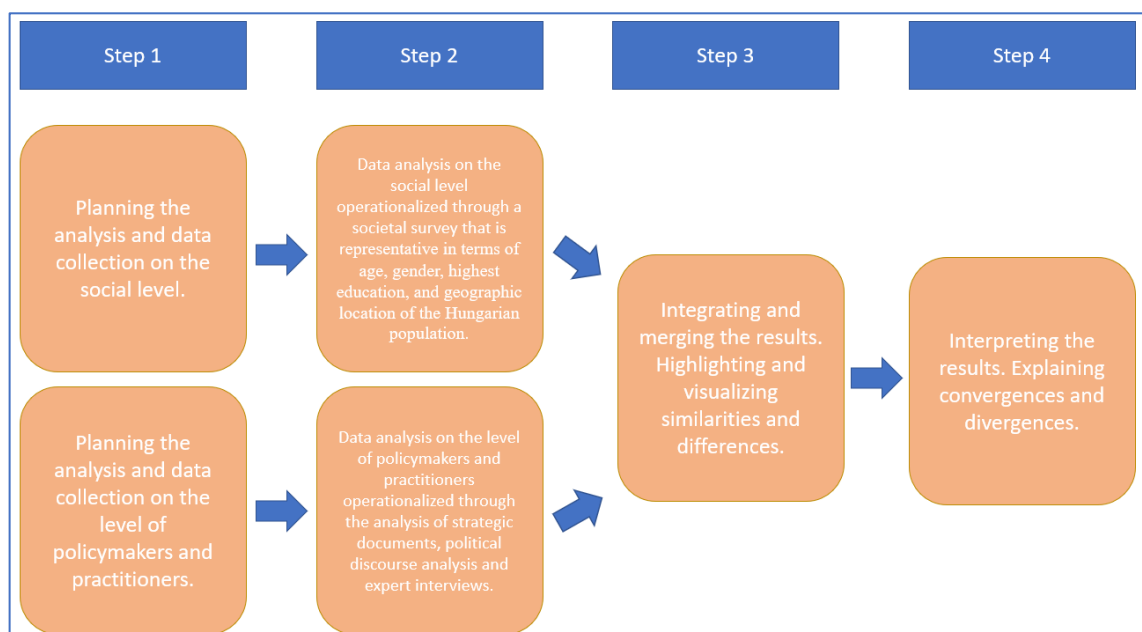


Figure 3: The convergent parallel design mixed method of security perception analysis with the operationalization of the two pillars.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis of the society's security perception is operationalized through a societal survey. The survey was conducted by IPSOS Zrt. in December 2019, and it used Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technique on a sample of 1000 participants. It is representative in terms of age, gender, highest education, and geographic location of the Hungarian population.<sup>4</sup> The questionnaire was based on the 2008 survey of Lajos Radványi, complemented by additional questions. Where it was

<sup>2</sup> Creswell, W. John – Plano Clark, Vicki L. (2018): Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research. Third Edition. Sage Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Figure made by the author.

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

possible, I also compared the 2019 results with the data gained from earlier matching surveys (from 1999 and 2008 respectively) thereby highlighting the changing patterns of security perception.

The security perception analysis of policymakers and practitioners is operationalized through three steps: analysis of strategic documents, political discourse analysis and expert interviews. First, I highlight the security perception based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the strategic documents (the 2020 and the 2012 National Security Strategies). Second, I turn towards political discourse analysis and highlight the security perception based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Prime Minister's public speeches from 2019. Third, I analyze the perceptions based on the expert interviews that I conducted at the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Institute for Foreign Affairs, and Trade and the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies.

Most of the empirical research, including the societal survey and the political discourse analysis as well as half of the expert interviews are from the year 2019. This provides room for maneuver when it comes to mitigating the distortive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the analysis. Therefore, when I conducted the second round of expert interviews in 2020, I aimed to control the coronavirus-effect on my research agenda in order to preserve methodological coherence. I followed a similar path during the analysis of strategic documents. Although the new National Security Strategy of Hungary was published in April 2020, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic is only marginal in the document since it rather focuses on long term tendencies.

Each of the empirical chapters discusses the empirical research frameworks in more details. The empirical analysis of the two levels (society as well as policymakers and practitioners) is conducted separately, and only after this will I integrate the results of them, in order to shed light on similarities and differences.

#### **4. Summary of the Analytical Chapters**

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. The first one introduces the research, highlights the research aims, objectives, questions, and hypotheses. It also summarizes the research methodology and the structure of the dissertation.

The second chapter highlights how the notion of security perception appears in the literature of international security and conflict studies, with a special focus on the most important works of the realist, liberal and constructivist schools of the field. Following that, I analyze and delimit the concept of security perception. I also present an overview of the various methodological and empirical endeavors in the literature concerning the analysis of security perception. Based on this work, I highlight which levels of analysis and which methodological approaches should be acknowledged with regards to security perception analysis.

After the literature review, the third chapter focuses on adapting a mixed method for security perception analysis. First, I discuss the major characteristics and typology of mixed method research. Second, I draw attention to the level of analysis problem that dominates the field of social sciences, including international security studies. I point out that the convergent parallel design mixed method can well adapt to this problem: the levels of analysis can be approached as the two pillars of the convergent parallel design in security perception analysis. Third, I operationalize the convergent parallel design mixed method of security perception analysis.

The fourth and the fifth chapters apply the convergent parallel design mixed method of security perception analysis for the analysis of Hungarian security perception. The fourth chapter focuses on the society, whereas the fifth chapter analyzes the policymaker and practitioner level. Both chapters discuss the particular methodological pillars of the empirical research. The fourth chapter outlines the already existing empirical studies with regards to the Hungarian society's security perception. Following that, it introduces the main findings of the social survey conducted within the framework of the ISDS' research project. The fifth chapter focuses on elite level perceptions through the analysis of strategic documents, political discourse analysis and expert interviews. It also integrates the results of these three methods and draws conclusions on the elite level security perception.

The sixth chapter compares the results of the societal and the elite level analysis. It points out similarities and differences between the two levels, and it also integrates results in order to draw broader conclusions on Hungarian security perception. The chapter also interprets the results and the convergences, divergences of the empirical research project. Based on the empirical results, I finish by drawing conclusions to the theoretical level.



The final chapter summarizes the research project as a whole. It tests the established six hypotheses, summarizes new scientific results, and provides suggestions on their practical application. The chapter concludes with identifying areas for further research.

## **5. Results of the Research**

The primary aim of the research was to interpret the concept of security perception from a methodological perspective. I conducted a comprehensive literature review in the field of international security and conflict studies, in which I highlighted the major specificities around the notion of security perception. I overviewed the most important works of realist, liberal and constructivist schools and highlighted how security perception appears within these theoretical frameworks. The research pointed out that security perception has a central importance with regards to all three theoretical schools (through the security dilemma in the realist school; through the democratic peace theory in the liberal school; and as a defining factor with regards to the identity and behavior of actors in the constructivist school.)

I also analyzed and delimited the conceptual framework of security perception. For this dissertation, I utilized a broad, Copenhagen interpretation of security and security perception. I also analyzed several endeavors, which aimed to capture security perception on the empirical level. This effort highlighted the levels (society as well as policymakers and practitioners), in which security perception can be approached, and the various methodological tools, which can help to analyze the concept in practice. I demonstrated that there are three major methodological approaches – public surveys, focus group interviews and discourse analysis – dealing with societal perceptions, and four major approaches – including political discourse analysis, the analysis of strategic documents, elite surveys, and expert interviews – dealing with the perception of policymakers and practitioners.

The literature review demonstrated that the analysis of security perception can rely on various methodological approaches and it can be conducted on various levels. Based on that, I concluded that a comprehensive approach towards security perception requires the integration of these various elements. Therefore, I started to build on mixed method research in order to integrate these levels, as well as the qualitative and

quantitative methods. I summarized the typology of mixed method research and pointed out that the convergent parallel design mixed method can be effective for security perception analysis, since it analyses the various levels separately and integrates the results in order to shed light on convergences and divergences.

I analyzed the Hungarian security perception systematically to demonstrate the value of this methodological tool. The society's perception was analyzed through a societal survey, whereas the perception of policymakers and practitioners was analyzed through three methodological approaches. I integrated the results of the three methods used for studying perceptions of policymakers and practitioners and identified consensuses and differences. After this, I integrated and compared the societal and elite level results, in which I pointed out similarities and differences, to draw broader conclusions with regards to Hungarian security perception.

I demonstrated that the perceptions on the two levels show several similarities, for example concerning illegal migration. On the other hand, climate change – for example – appears more significantly on the societal level. In general, the society conceptualizes security in financial and existential security issues, while people rather associate to abstract concepts when it comes to the conceptualization of threats. In contrast to this, terrorism and energy policy challenges are more significant in the perceptions of policymakers and practitioners. The empirical research pointed out that there is a stable consensus on both levels with regards to the alliance system of the country, in which Germany, the United States and the Visegrad Group have a key importance. I demonstrated that the society does not associate to countries when it conceptualizes threats, and it does not perceive a direct military threat. Policymakers and practitioners perceive more, non-military security threats from non-allied countries (e.g. Russia, Ukraine, China), and it is also more committed towards increasing the defense expenditure. Both levels are committed towards the strengthening of European defense cooperation. Nonetheless, the policymakers and practitioners are more skeptical concerning the establishment of a joint European military force and perceptions are more fragmented concerning the future of European defense cooperation. I also demonstrated that the Visegrad Group is a well-known, positive brand on the societal level, whereas the policymakers and practitioners are more skeptical concerning the practical aspects of the cooperation. The empirical research results are summarized in Table 22 of the dissertation.

	<b>Threats and Challenges</b>	<b>Most important allies</b>	<b>Allied solidarity</b>	<b>Non-allied countries</b>	<b>Defense expenditures</b>
<b>Social level perception</b>	The society perceives climate change and illegal migration as key challenges for the security of Hungary. These are followed by the challenges of natural gas dependency, international terrorism, economic vulnerability and the conflicts of the Middle East.	V4 Germany USA	Strong commitments towards the Western alliance system. Stable allied solidarity – even with military tools in case of an armed aggression.	The society does not perceive any non-allied countries as a threat. People do not perceive any direct military threat. Russia's and the PRC's activity is only perceived by a small segment of the population as a direct threat for the security of the country.	The last few years' increase in defense expenditures is accepted by the society. The majority would keep defense expenditures at their current level instead of increasing them further.
<b>Perception of policymakers and practitioners</b>	Policymakers and practitioners perceive an eroding security environment, with economic challenges, illegal migration, international terrorism and energy policy as key challenges. To a lesser extent, but cyber threats, demographic challenges, hybrid threats and climate change also appear in their perceptions.	Germany USA V4 To a lesser extent: Italy, France and Turkey	The NATO and EU memberships are perceived as cornerstones of the security of Hungary. Strong solidarity with allies – even with military tools in case of an armed aggression.	Hungary does not have an enemy and policymakers and practitioners do not perceive any non-allied country as a military threat. Some challenges are linked to Russia in the perceptions, including hybrid activities and the military threats posed to allied countries. China appears in the perceptions as a rival of the United States. Serbia appears in perceptions as a key partner among non-allied countries. Ukraine is linked to the challenges of ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine.	Stable consensus concerning the further increase of defense expenditures and the modernization of the Hungarian Defense Forces.

	<b>Strengthening European military capabilities</b>	<b>Joint European military force</b>	<b>V4 cooperation</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Social level perception</b>	Stable commitment towards strengthening joint European military capabilities to allow European states to act without the support of the United States.	The majority perceives a need for establishing a joint European military force even if Hungary has to delegate governance competences to the European Union.	Perceived as a well-known and positive brand. The society would strengthen soft security policy cooperation within the group, particularly in the field of counter terrorism, border protection, disaster management, energy security, environment security.	The majority of society perceives security as financial and existential security. The notion of threats is usually conceptualized in abstract terms. The society's support towards governmental decision-making on the field of security has been increasing since 1999.
<b>Perception of policymakers and practitioners</b>	Stable commitment towards the strengthening of joint European military capabilities.	Skepticism concerning a joint European military force. Concerns with sovereignty transfer.	Policymakers and practitioners perceive the political importance of the group. No consensus with regards to the practical aspects and obstacles of the group.	The situation of ethnic Hungarians living in the neighboring countries and the integration of the Western-Balkans weighs substantially in their perceptions. The latter issue is linked to the problem of illegal migration too. Africa and the Middle East appear as structurally weak regions.

22. sz. táblázat: The summary of social level perception and the perception of policymakers and practitioners.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Table made by the author.

## **New Scientific Results**

1. I demonstrated that the concept of security perception is either implicitly or explicitly present in all three major theoretical schools of international security and conflict studies. The concept of security perception emerges within the theoretical framework through the security dilemma in the realist school; through the democratic peace theory in the liberal school; and as a defining factor with regards to the identity and behavior of actors in the constructivist school.
2. I proved that the mixed method research is adaptable for the analysis of security perception. As a result of this, I outlined the convergent parallel design mixed method of security perception analysis. I have pointed out that when operationalizing this method, the analysis of the different levels happens separately through the integration of qualitative and quantitative tools.
3. Building on the convergent parallel design mixed method of security perception analysis, I have proven that there can be significant differences between the society's perception and the perception of policymakers and practitioners. I have proven that during the analyzed period, the Hungarian society conceptualized the notion of security mostly through financial and existential security and that the society's security perception is dominated by the fear from climate change and illegal migration. In contrast to this, the security perception of policymakers and practitioners was dominated by economic challenges, illegal migration, terrorism, energy policy, whereas protecting the rights of ethnic Hungarians living in the neighboring countries and the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans are also embedded in their perception.
4. I have proven that there is a strong and unequivocal consensus with regards to the alliance system both in the broader society's and in the perceptions of policymakers and practitioners. I demonstrated that Germany, the United States and the Visegrad Group appear on both levels as the most important allies.
5. I have proven that Hungarian society does not relate its security perception to specific countries, it does not recognize non-allied countries as threatening and it does not perceive any military threats. I have proven that Russia, Ukraine,

and China appear in the perception of policymakers and practitioners as non-allied countries, which can pose non-military threats to Hungary.

6. I have proven that the Hungarian society's perception shows a stable commitment towards the strengthening of European defense capabilities, and that the society perceives the need of establishing a joint military force in the medium term, even if Hungary would have to delegate governance competences to the European Union. I have proven that there is a strong consensus among policymakers and practitioners with regards to the need for strengthening European defense capabilities, but there is a high uncertainty concerning the implementation of this process, as well as skepticism concerning the creation of a joint European military force.

### **Recommendations for the Practical Use of the Research Results**

The research project has pointed out several factors that have practical and policy level relevance and which can affect Hungarian security and defense policy dynamics too. First, the results of the research and the outlined convergent parallel design mixed method of security perception analysis can be used for educational purposes, either at the National University of Public Service or at other universities dealing with security studies, international relations or conflict studies. This can help policymakers and practitioners in obtaining a more comprehensive view on the importance of security perception within their field as well as on the particularities of Hungarian security perception.

The research has shown that the security perception of the society and the perception of policymakers and practitioners can differ significantly. The analysis highlighted several issues, which appear differently in the societal and elite perceptions. The issue of climate change emerges as an example for that, which appears more significantly on the societal level. Similar to climate change, perceptions about European defense cooperation and defense expenditures show differences. Therefore, it has a key importance that policymakers and practitioners monitor security perception of the society. This does not necessarily mean that the society's (often changing) perception should define every policy issues. Nevertheless, policymakers and practitioners should reflect on the societal perception in order to strengthen its cohesion. As a take-away from the Hungarian case study, policymakers and

practitioners should focus more on the issue of climate change in order to reflect on the fears of the society more effectively on the policy level.

The research also pinpointed the issues of illegal migration, international terrorism, the dependence on natural gas and economic vulnerability as important elements in the society's security perception. This demonstrates the list of those topics, in which the society expects visible and meaningful steps from policymakers and practitioners. Reflecting on these issues can further strengthen the cohesion of the society.

It is an important conclusion that the society is rather satisfied with the EU/NATO-based alliance system of the country, and it is committed towards its maintenance. There is a perceptual consensus with regards to the key roles of Germany, the Visegrad Group and the United States within this system. This also means that deepening relations with these allies has broad public support.

Although policymakers and practitioners support further increasing the defense expenditures, the society would rather keep them on the current level. In case the policy level would aim to strengthen the societal legitimacy of increasing defense expenditures, policymakers and practitioners and the Hungarian Defense Forces should improve their communication of this aim. The issue of defense should be more transparent, more visible, and more tangible for the broader public.

The society perceives the Visegrad Group as a well-known and positive brand. Enhancing its security policy cooperation (concerning border protection, counter terrorism, disaster management) has significant public support. Integrating these perceptions into the policy level could further enhance the security policy cooperation of the V4, particularly with regards to those soft challenges, in which the interests of the four countries are converging. Moreover, it can help make the V4 cooperation more meaningful, thus overcoming those practical shortcomings, which were emphasized during the expert interviews.

It is also important to enhance the dialogue between the society and the policy level concerning the future of European defense cooperation to approximate societal and policy level perceptions. Such enhanced dialogue would be particularly important since the society is more open for enhanced cooperation even if this would lead to the delegation of governance competences, whereas policymakers and practitioners are more divided over this issue.

Another important conclusion for decision-makers is that the society's perception is strongly related to the issue of financial and existential security. This shows us that the economic hardships of the past decades did not disappear completely from the perceptions and they are embedded into the public thinking. Policymakers and practitioners need to reflect on this issue to strengthen the financial and existential security of the society.

To conclude, analyzing security perception has a significant relevance on the practical level as well. Therefore, integrating such analysis into the mainstream security policy research agendas has an utmost importance for the broader field as well.



### **List of the Author's Related Publications**

Alex Etl (2020): The perception of security in Hungary. ISDS Analysis. 2020/3.

Alex – Péter Tálás (2020): The transformation of Hungarian security perception between 1999 and 2019. ISDS Analysis. 2020/4.

Alex Etl (2020): The perception of the Hungarian security community. ISDS Analysis. 2020/27.

Alex Etl (2020): Liminal Populism—The Transformation of the Hungarian Migration Discourse. Journal of Borderlands Studies. Published online: 04.03.2020.

Etl Alex (2020): A nemzetközi kapcsolatok elméleti iskoláinak konfliktusértelmezése. In: Dr. Tálás Péter – Kovács Katalin: A konfliktuselemzés módszertani iskoláiról. Dialóg Campus Kiadó. Budapest

Etl Alex – Tálás Péter (2020): A magyar biztonságpercepció átalakulása 1999-2019 között. Nemzet és Biztonság Nemzet és Biztonság – Biztonságpolitikai Szemle. 2020/2.

Etl Alex (2020): A magyar biztonságpercepció elemzése. Nemzet és Biztonság – Biztonságpolitikai Szemle. 2020/2.

Etl Alex (2020): A magyar biztonságpercepció elemzése 2. Nemzet és Biztonság – Biztonságpolitikai Szemle. 2020/3.

## **Short Academic Biography of the Author**

Alex Etl was born in 1993, in Győr. He graduated at the National University of Public Service', where he studied security and defense policy. Throughout his BA program, he received the Scholarship of the Republic of Hungary in 2014 and spent half a year at the National Defense University in Warsaw, where he studied regional security. He earned his Master's Degree in international relations at the Central European University.

He started his doctoral studies in military sciences at the National University of Public Service in 2016. As part of the doctoral program, he spent three months at the Institute for International Relations in Prague as an intern. He received the scholarship of the New National Excellence Program in 2019.

Alex Etl works at the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies since 2015, where his primary areas of research are Hungarian security perception, German security and defense policy and European security policy.

He speaks English and German fluently.

Alex Etl is the author of 40 Hungarian and 8 English publications which are listed in the Database of Hungarian Scholarly Works (MTMT).