

The grand return of the troops: Militarization of COVID-19 and shifting military–society relations in Visegrad

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to fill the geographical gap in the literature about the militarization of COVID-19 through a comparative exploration of how the pandemic was handled in militarized ways in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Drawing from official government and military statements, media articles, and expert interviews with defense intellectuals, we examine two interconnected areas – that of discourse and that of military domestic assistance. By viewing the developments through the lens of militarization and military-society relations scholarship, we argue that rather than serving as a ‘portal’ for civilian resilience, the pandemic constituted an unprecedented ‘return of the troops’ to Visegrad states and societies in terms of its size, scope, and duration, thus strengthening the pressure for re-militarization in the region that has been recorded in the last decade. The paper presents a number of analytical findings: first, it identifies the emerging gap between right-wing populist rhetoric that relied on warspeak and the human-centered communication of the armed forces; second, it reveals that military domestic assistance functioned as a military ‘band aid’ on systemic vulnerabilities, as well as incidentally converged with illiberal patterns of governance; third, it shows how the pandemic aided re-militarizing pressures, resulting in a significant boost to the defense sector, a positive public opinion about the armed forces, and military-society relations.

Keywords: COVID-19, militarization, military-society relations, Visegrad, illiberal politics

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed globally, critical military scholars and analysts observed the international trend towards the militarization of governments’ responses to the crisis, pointing to both the scale and nature of military involvement in civilian realms. As they noted, countries around the globe have turned to military personnel and resources to alleviate the pandemic; politicians often framed the cascading health crisis in militarized language; and military effectiveness partially overshadowed structural and civilian-based reforms and solutions to the crisis (Enloe, 2020a; Giroux & Filippakou, 2020; Kalkman, 2020). In more vulnerable contexts, the negative impacts of a militarized pandemic response were observed on civil rights and civilian control over the defense sector (Isacson, 2020). So far, in the international

analyses of the militarization of the pandemic, the perspective about and from Central Europa (CE) and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been missing, reflecting the general absence of critical military and security scholarship in the region. However, as this paper argues, the militarization of COVID-19 in CE has its own pressing significance and specificity.

In this region, the pandemic met states and societies in an 'interregnum' period marked by intensified external and internal pressure to increase their defense preparedness after decades of its deprioritization in line with post-Cold War trends of structural demilitarization. Although military domestic assistance is not unprecedented in the Visegrad region, the previous security challenges for which armies were engaged (e.g. Central European floods or international football championships) were not experienced by the entirety of society for a long period of time. Against this background, COVID-19 constituted a major, unprecedented crisis event for CE societies; one imbued with 'sufficient identity and coherence that the social collectivity recognizes [it] as discrete and important' (Berezin, 2012, p. 2). The pandemic also resulted in a 'militarization of everyday life' (Meyer & Visweswaran, 2016) that has not been recorded in the region since 1989 in this size, scope, and duration. In metaphorical terms, in pandemic-struck Visegrad, COVID-19 'became war, and the military became everything' (Brooks, 2016), with the health crisis being narrated in military terms, and the armed forces permeating the social realm in intensified ways, employed to 'fix' vulnerabilities generally addressed by civilian institutions.

The conceptual-theoretical background that undergirds this paper is the overlapping literature on military-society relations and militarization, understood as an increase in the 'penetration of social relations in general by military relations' (Shaw, 2013, p. 20). The aim of this paper is to fill in the regional gap in global literature on the militarization of COVID-19 through a comparative exploration of how the pandemic was handled in a militarized way in three Visegrad states: Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. By applying a broader comparative perspective, understood as providing 'individual, structural, and cultural explanations for observed political phenomena' (Landman, 2000, p. 284), we identify similarities and differences in the developments in these countries. In order to explore how the military realm permeated the social one during the pandemic, we examined developments and published materials from the time of the first-announced COVID-19 cases in each country (February/March) until the end of November 2020. The points of country comparison were: 'war' frames and metaphors in governmental and military discourse, as well as the scope and form of military deployment. Due to the scarcity of publicly available information, as well as the lack of scholarship on militarization in the region, the paper relies on a combination of secondary sources (official communication from state and military bodies, defense policy documents, and media coverage) and interviews with defense experts.¹

Through the analysis of collected data, the argument presented is of an analytical nature: as a major crisis event affecting societies as a whole, the pandemic has constituted an unprecedented 'return of the troops' to Visegrad states and societies in terms of its size, scope, and duration, and this militarization of COVID-19 has strengthened pre-existing pressure for remilitarization in the region. The paper is structured as follows: the first section contextualizes military developments during the pandemic by discussing military-society relations in post-1989 CE to the present. Section two compares the militarization of COVID-19 in the three Visegrad states on the discursive level, showing how governing politicians tended to rely on

1 A total of eight interviews were conducted between September and December 2020; the experts themselves asked for their anonymization.

warspeak, while the armed forces communicated in more professional and human-centered ways. Section three explores the nature of military domestic assistance in the three countries, showing how it functioned as a military ‘band aid’ for systemic vulnerabilities, and an incidental tool of illiberal ‘regime defense.’ The concluding section discusses the implications of COVID-19 for military-society relations in the region as liable to strengthen the regional trend to militarization.

1. Central Europe in flux: structural demilitarization and emerging remilitarization

From the perspective of military-society relations, the pandemic arrived in the three Visegrad states at a time of transition – a period of slowly progressing change in the armed forces, and their position in states and societies. This shift has been one from post-Cold War structural demilitarization towards limited and regionally diverse patterns of re-militarization. Military-society relations are broadly understood in this paper as the sphere of interactions between the military and the society from which it springs (Forster et al., 2003). Militarization, in turn, is conceptualized in a broad, analytical way, as a ‘step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria’ (Enloe, 2000, p. 281). This section zooms in on those broader, structural processes of demilitarization and re-militarization that provide the context in which the ‘return of the troops’ to CE during the pandemic should be understood.

1.1 Structural demilitarization after the Cold War

After 1989, scholars of militarism and military-society relations argued that a ‘silent revolution’ of demilitarization (Sheehan, 2008) had occurred in the region, with the waning of the classical militarism of the Cold-War era making way for a post-militarist model of military-society relations (Shaw, 1991; Forster et al., 2003). The post-militarist trend can be unpacked by identifying a number of common processes that occurred in post-1989 CE. First, the stable geopolitical environment after the fall of the Soviet Union, coupled with the accession of former Eastern bloc states to NATO and the EU, diminished the chance of a military conflict in Europe, yet raised novel global security risks to the forefront (Kuhlmann & Callaghan, 2000, p. 3). Second, this perception of weak military threats to national territory led to the de-prioritization of the military in favor of other areas of state reform and expenditure, especially in the context of the severe economic constraints of the early transition period. Consequently, armies in the region underwent cuts to their budgets, personnel, and bases. Third, CE armed forces embarked on a shift from a mass, conscript-based model towards the creation of smaller, flexible, expeditionary, and professional forces (Moskos et al., 2000). Fourth, following these reforms, CE societies became increasingly detached from their armies, with citizens’ active participation in and direct interactions with military institutions becoming the exception rather than the norm, and the notion of (male) citizenship no longer contingent on military service. Finally, the transformation pushed armies to search for new sources of salience and legitimacy to justify their financial and social demands to the public, yet these efforts were uneven and met with some resistance across the region. Nevertheless, the ‘old’ roles of regime defense, nation building, and territorial defense have been significantly substituted by ‘new’ roles of military domestic assistance and military diplomacy (Forster et al., 2003). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, this steady and multi-faceted process of the demilitarization of CE states and societies has been disrupted by novel processes of militarization.

1.2 Patterns of militarization

Analysts have explained the ongoing re-militarization in CE as a response to ‘objective’ geopolitical challenges (Dempsey, 2017), a correlate of democratic swerving (Bergmann & Cicarelli, 2020; Lopes da Silva, 2020), and a consequence of growing insecurities stemming from the crisis of globalized neoliberalism (Grzebalska, 2020b). No single explanation is sufficient, but rather it is a combination of these factors that translate into the current remilitarizing trend in the region.

Due to a number of novel security challenges in the region – the war in Donbas, mass migration, climate change, and resurgent terrorism – NATO’s strategy for its eastern flank shifted. NATO’s combat presence in the region increased, formal pledges by allied countries to raise defense spending to 2 percent of GDP and accelerate army modernization were made, along with a strong focus on increasing their own defense capabilities in line with Article 3 of the NATO treaty (Dempsey, 2017). After 2015, Global Militarization Index reports indicate an increase in militarization in CE – a significant rise in military spending, armaments programs, and military personnel (Mutschler, 2016; Mutschler & Bales, 2020). What are not captured by these reports are the revived efforts to bring societies closer to defense through programs promoting military skills, traditions, and careers. Rather than being purely a top-down process, regional militarization has also proceeded on the grassroots level, with a regional resurgence of paramilitary and vigilante activism (Kandrik, 2020).

Poland has seen the most intense development of militarization among the countries under analysis. Following the war in Ukraine, public opinion polls showed an increased perception of military threat in society (CBOS, 2018, p. 8), while the government increased defense spending and military modernization, and also formed a new volunteer Territorial Defense Forces (TDF), ultimately set to amount to 53,000 soldiers. The Ministry of Defense (MOD) undertook efforts to boost recruitment and military preparedness through increasing the number of military-type classes in public schools, financing shooting ranges, and increased support for and cooperation with paramilitary civil society organizations (Grzebalska, 2020a). In 2020, all these efforts were centralized under a new MOD-led bureau. In Hungary, increased militarization efforts have been recorded following the *Zrínyi 2026 Program* that includes both army buildup and modernization, as well as the popularization of defense careers and national-military traditions in society. In recent years, the country has recorded ‘more emphasis on defense and military issues’ (Interview HU1), signified by developments such as the voluntary Defense Cadet program in public schools and defense summer camps for youth, the introduction of defense-based education classes in high schools, the financing of shooting ranges and National Defense Sports Centers across the country, as well as plans to build up to ten new military high schools by 2030. Slovakia has seen the lowest level of defense preparations due to the lack of political consensus about defense and security policy (Ulrich, 2003). After 2015, the country increased its military expenditure and inventory acquisition (Mutschler, 2016), and a new military program for preparing students for army careers was opened in 2019 in a vocational school in Bernolákovo. In 2020, the new government declared its plans to ‘create conditions to satisfy citizens’ interest in military issues’ (Government of the SR, 2020), and prepared a new defense strategy. Meanwhile, the country has seen the rise of Slovak Conscripts, an unregistered paramilitary organization with a far-right orientation. In this context, experts expect the Slovak Armed Forces (SAF) to engage more with schools and youth, and to organize more recruitment events and awareness-raising campaigns (Interview SK2).

Processes of militarization have been met by significant economic and societal barriers. In Hungary, militarizing efforts have been constrained by strong anti-militarist societal sentiment and a relatively low level of trust in the Hungarian Armed Forces (HAF) (52 per cent according to IRI, 2017) due to their ‘doubtful political reliability’ as an institution that ‘lost every war between 1487 and 1991’ (Dunay, 2003, p. 76). In Slovakia, the army enjoys a high and stable level of public trust (72 per cent, Hajdu & Klingová, 2020) as a potent symbol of independent statehood, yet societal ‘interest in [...] military or national security affairs is low’ and marked by significant political polarization concerning defense policy (Ulrich, 2003). In Poland, cultural militarism has remained strong due to historical legacies of independence struggles, yet widely shared trust in NATO and a professional army as the guarantor of security has aided structural demilitarization, while the internal employment of the army during state socialism created long-lasting suspicion of military assistance in internal security matters (Latawski, 2003).

With this background, it is perhaps surprising how integral, visible, and uncontested military permeation into society has been during the pandemic throughout the region. In the next two sections, we explore the militarization of the pandemic in Visegrad by zooming in on discourse and military employment.

2. Government in full armor, and an army with a caring face? Discursive aspects of militarization

The pandemic was discussed by politicians and media within different frames, among them solidarity, science, and particularly, ‘war’ (Ellerich-Groppe et al., 2020; Enloe, 2020b; Maďarová, et al., 2020). This warspeak served numerous goals: managing uncertainty, justifying radical restrictions, and mobilizing social solidarity and public support for statesmen in times of the pandemic (Laucht and Jackson, 2020; Peckham, 2020). In Visegrad, politicians turned to martial metaphors, and military institutions and personnel became newly visible in the discursive space after years of public disinterest and a low level of knowledge about the actual activities of the armed forces in the region (Forster et al., 2003). Moreover, the military started to build up a ‘human’ and ‘caring’ face, partially enabled by the war-like rhetoric of politicians who construed the pandemic as a battlefield.

2.1 ‘Let’s go to battle’: Government communication during the pandemic

The militarization of government communication could be traced on two levels – in the process of communication, and in metaphors and framing. In Poland and Hungary, government centralization of crisis communication came at the expense of transparency and pluralism. While in some European states politicians relied on expert virologists and non-government institutions to help inform the public about the situation, in Poland, crisis communication was almost exclusively undertaken by government officials (Interview PL1). An advisory Medical Committee to the PM was created only at the end of October, but was accompanied by medical staff employed by the Ministry of Health being the subject of an official ban on public statements (Nowosielska, 2020). In Hungary, the provision of information on the pandemic was restricted to the so-called Operational Group, and a report found that alternative sources of public information were often scrutinized as ‘fake news’ (Keller-Alant, 2020). In these two cases, the COVID-19 crisis became the opportunity for governments to strengthen previous illiberal interventions into media systems (Surowiec et al., 2019; Bátorfy & Urbán, 2019) and

to exercise control over the media and the process of communication, whereby ruling parties decide what the public should know.

In all countries, we observed the militarization of political rhetoric in the form of military metaphors, the celebration of ‘frontline heroes,’ and enemy-making. ‘Let’s go to battle,’ proclaimed Slovak PM Igor Matovič, who took office amidst the pandemic (Mrva, 2020). Meanwhile, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán justified lockdowns by professing that the country is ‘at war and (...) operating on a military plan’ (Kovács, 2020), while Polish Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski compared his role to ‘that of commander-in-chief during war’ (Nycz, 2020). The framing of the pandemic as ‘war’ was used by governing politicians to justify the severity of the measures to the public, and to implicitly construct government officials as strong and capable leaders; the main ‘protagonists’ of the defense against the virus (Molnár et al., 2020). This was particularly important in the case of Poland and Slovakia, where government communication was criticized as chaotic and inconclusive, marked by internal contradictions and confusing explanations of restrictions (Libura, 2020; TASR, 2020a). While government officials were the protagonists of the ‘fight’ against the virus, essential workers were often framed as heroic fighters on the coronavirus ‘home front.’ With the governments’ reluctance to implement systemic reforms of underfunded and feminized healthcare systems as part of their anti-pandemic measures, warlike metaphors served to underline the need for the sacrifice of underpaid workers for the ‘common good.’

Enemy-making was another marker of the militarization of political discourse during the pandemic, employed liberally to the virus, political opposition, and different social groups. Slovak PM Matovič constructed the ‘enemy’ not only of the virus, but also of commuters, people coming from abroad, and marginalized Roma communities (Mađarová et al., 2020). In Poland, PM Mateusz Morawiecki professed that ‘the fight continues, the enemy is dangerous,’ and described the ‘enemy’ as both an external one – the virus – and an internal one, represented by the opposition and its media who ‘have thrown a spanner into the works’ rather than ‘offering composure and help’ (PAP, 2020). The Hungarian PM continued his rhetoric of a ‘struggle for spiritual sovereignty’ that has made the term ‘fight’ an integral element of political discourse in the last decade (Interview HU2): ‘All we can count on from [the Left] is backstabbing and backbiting, the undermining of national strength and solidarity, sniping at political leaders and experts leading the country’s defense operation, snitching and betrayal in Brussels, sabotage and trickery’ (Orbán, 2020).

Rather than being triggered by the pandemic, enemy-making and warspeak in political communication extended the broader nationalist-populist discourses of the ruling politicians who construct ‘the people’ as a referent object threatened by internal and external ‘enemies’ (Wojczewski, 2019). War-related metaphors provide a salient knowledge structure involving a fight between opposing and differentiated sides: the good ‘us’ and the evil ‘them’ (Flusberg et al., 2018). This militarized structure overlaps with the populist discursive practice developed in the countries under analysis associated with migration (Kazharski, 2018), gender and LGBT issues (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018), and even corruption (Pirro, 2015), being narrated in absolutist terms.

2.2 ‘Always ready, always close.’ Military communication during the pandemic

Amidst the governments’ discursive battles against the coronavirus and internal ‘threats,’ it was the armed forces that brought clarity and calmness to public discourse. In all three Visegrad countries, the pandemic strengthened communication channels between the military and

society, with the armed forces using both social and traditional media to share information about COVID-19, educate people about everyday security, and report on their engagement. In Slovakia, bridges between the army and the society post-1989 have been few (Ulrich, 2003, p. 62) and communication about COVID-19 resulted in a significant increase in the reach of the armed forces' social media (Interview SK1). Meanwhile, the Visegrad armed forces have also seen these reopened communication channels as a recruitment opportunity. Polish TDF used social media to appeal to potential recruits, sharing personal stories of individual soldiers and promoting a new online recruitment tool. In both Hungary and Poland, recruitment procedures were simplified and the armed forces reported an increase in applications (Dellanna, 2020; Kozubal, 2020).

Our analysis revealed the armed forces' communication as fact-based, story-based, and professional. While military slogans and terms such as 'fighting' or 'front' were used, the armed forces restrained from calling the pandemic a 'war,' talking instead about a pandemic crisis. As confirmed by a defense expert from Slovakia, in the context of a global health crisis, 'no military officer would use the terms that politicians have used' (Interview SK2). In Poland, official communication from TDF often deescalated the intensified rhetoric of the government, with military officials clarifying the nature and legal basis for military engagement that had caused controversy due to political statements. In Hungary, HAF materials largely 'omitted militant elements, striving for simplicity and clarity' (Interview HU2).

In all three countries, official military rhetoric was also considerably civilianized, underscoring the human, 'caring face' of the army and presenting the military as first responders who support society. A case in point is the official slogan of the Polish TDF ('always ready, always close') which underscores its dual nature as a group of citizen-soldiers who combine military and civil defense functions. TDF used the pandemic to showcase their civilianized character: 'Empathy is most important! All our activities we fill with care about ill individuals. We do everything so that their stress is as low as possible!' (TDF, 2020b). Similarly, official communication by the Slovak Armed Forces focused on the image of soldiers as model citizens representing our 'collective best selves' (Enloe, 2020a): 'We keep a human face – that is what our soldiers are doing daily in hospitals, at borders, and at home in civilian clothes. #weare-people' (AF SR, 2020).

3. Army to the rescue: Patterns of military deployment in Visegrad

The military deployment during COVID-19 in the Visegrad region has been similar to the broader European tendencies, with soldiers providing assistance in spheres such as transport and logistics, the repatriation of citizens, border control, food and water distribution, public space disinfection, lockdown enforcement, and medical support (Lařici, 2020). Differences were recorded with regard to the use of the military in internal security tasks (Pepe & Lapo, 2020). Despite these international areas of convergence, military domestic assistance in Visegrad has its specificities. First, the scope and character of military deployment *vis-à-vis* the overall lower resilience of healthcare and care systems in the region suggests that, rather than merely complementing civilian institutions, the military has often served as a prosthesis of the latter. Second, the patterns of military deployment in Hungary and Poland in particular also revealed some areas of convergence between militarization and illiberal governance.

3.1 Military assistance or a military 'band aid'?

Publicly available data on the nature and scale of military involvement in the pandemic has been limited due to both military-operational reasons, and the broader non-transparency of governance. Complementing scarce information given in official communication with expert interviews, this section argues that, in all three countries, the armed forces were employed in anti-crisis operations early on after the outbreak of the pandemic, and as the crisis stretched the capabilities of civilian institutions, military engagement gradually increased both in terms of the number and hours of military personnel, as well as the scope and weight of tasks allocated to the military. What began as military assistance for complementing civilian institutions developed into a military 'band aid' – the continuous military presence in, or even military control over, key institutions and operations. As argued by one Hungarian expert, 'the military became a tool for the government to cover up the insufficiencies of the healthcare system' (Interview HU3).

In Hungary, the overall number of HAF personnel engaged in pandemic-related activities was not shared with the public, with only fragmentary data communicated by HAF (Interview HU2). As of November 2020, HAF Command announced that 1100 soldiers were supporting health care institutions, 60 were still participating in the hospital command system, 500 were patrolling the streets with the police, 2600 soldiers had participated in border protection since the beginning of the pandemic, and 2000 soldiers had undertaken disinfection-related tasks during the first wave of the pandemic alone, and more than a hundred of them had disinfected educational institutions during the fall break (MTI, 2020c). If these numbers are exhaustive, and the personnel employed in different tasks not overlapping, this amounts to 21 per cent of HAF personnel (6260 out of 29,700). By the end of November 2020, the MOD announced that 'twice as many soldiers' were engaged in pandemic-related efforts in the second wave than the first (Twice as many..., 2020). HAF also mobilized around 200 volunteer reservists in April alone to support disinfection-related tasks (MH HFKP, 2020). As the pandemic progressed, military involvement grew into a stable military presence in public spaces, and even the military command of some institutions. Following Government Decree 72/2020 of 28 March, military and police leaders were appointed to manage and control 51 out of 108 hospitals in the country, along with over a hundred 'vital' Hungarian companies, and their appointments continued beyond the state of emergency which ended in June 2020 (MTI, 2020b).

In Poland, the main military formation employed during the pandemic has been TDF. In the first month of their *Resilient Spring* operation, 50 per cent (12,000) of TDF personnel were deployed, rising to 70 per cent during the first wave of the pandemic (Zamorowska, 2020). During the *Continued Resilience* operation of the second wave, all TDF soldiers were summoned to appear at their local military enlistment agencies, and the formation switched to high intensity mode. As of October 2020, the MOD announced that at least 20,000 soldiers would engage in anti-pandemic activities, together with fourteen military hospitals and five military preventive medicine centers (MON, 2020a). TDF offered support in a number of areas: hospitals and medical services, social and psychological help for combatants and the elderly, local governments, the National Stockpiles Agency, law enforcement, border patrols, and airport control (Pietrzak, 2020a). As the pandemic turned critical, the formation progressed into a military 'fix' for the vulnerable public sector, substituting staff at nursing homes, hospitals, and orphanages, donating blood, delivering food to social welfare clients, and running a psychological helpline for the elderly. A case in point is the online app introduced by TDF to simplify the process through which local governments, public institutions, and charitable

organizations can apply for military assistance, thereby circumventing the usual bureaucratic channels. By October 2020, 11500 forms had been filed through the app by 2385 institutions (Pietrzak, 2020b).

In Slovakia, data indicate a clear pattern of increased military engagement. In March 2020, the MOD announced that up to 500 military personnel were ready to support border guards and the police during the state of emergency. During the Easter holidays, 1500 soldiers were deployed to support law enforcement during lockdown. As of October 2020, slightly over 50 per cent of SAF personnel were deployed for the countrywide testing of the population (out of 13,300 in total) and the government announced another round of countrywide testing which will utilize up to 8000 soldiers (TASR, 2020b; Zemanovič, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, military personnel helped enforce state quarantines, ensured the repatriation of Slovak citizens, provided assistance at hospitals, supported tracking of COVID-19 patients' contacts, transported medical supplies, and prepared a field hospital for patients in isolation. The army's pandemic engagement began with assisting civilian institutions and culminated in the military overseeing and conducting a countrywide operation dubbed *Joint Responsibility* that tested all citizens for COVID-19. The rationale behind entrusting the army with this task was the belief that the understaffed and underfunded public administration would not be able to do it. 'The Armed Forces are the only institution capable of handling such a demanding operation as testing the entire population,' summarized journalist Andrej Bán (2020).

The scope and depth of military engagement in the pandemic-struck Visegrad region must be understood in the context of its lower overall level of civilian resilience to health crises *vis-à-vis* Western Europe. In post-1989 CE, weak investment into healthcare and the public sector converged with efforts of Western governments to alleviate their own 'care gap' by attracting workforce from new EU Member States (Zacharenko, 2020). The three Visegrad countries are ranked low with regard to healthcare spending (6.2 per cent – PL, 6.4 per cent – HU, 6.9 per cent of GDP for HU; compare with the 8.8 per cent average for OECD; OECD, 2020). According to Human Rights Watch, low investment in healthcare in Hungary 'may have contributed to the spread of COVID-19, with about 25 per cent of total cases confirmed until mid-July contracted in hospitals' (HRW, 2020). The largest outflow of medical professionals among EU countries stems from the Visegrad region (Mara, 2020, p. 12). As a result, Poland has the lowest number of doctors per 1000 inhabitants in the EU (2.4), and Hungary and Slovakia have the EU average (3.4). In the face of these long-term medical personnel shortages, Slovak media informed that intensified pressure on the healthcare system could lead to its collapse (Katuška, 2021). These structural factors partially explain why the Visegrad states relied on extensive military assistance during the pandemic, seeing it as the only available 'band aid' for structural voids and vulnerabilities.

In a context of dire deficiencies, it is perhaps unsurprising that society viewed military assistance as necessary and beneficial. In a survey commissioned by the Polish MOD in April 2020, the majority of those polled had a positive view of military engagement during the pandemic, and 91 per cent declared that soldiers should help those in need (MON, 2020b). Likewise, in a survey published by the Slovak MOD 70 per cent of respondents claimed to appreciate soldiers' activities during the pandemic, and 81 per cent stated that Slovak Armed Forces are needed (MOSR, 2020). At the same time, some activities of the armed forces went beyond domestic military assistance, with potential illiberal patterns of military use being recorded in Poland and Hungary.

3.2 Illiberal patterns of military deployment

Prolific academic literature exists about the processes of democratic swerving in post-1989 CE (Polyakova et al., 2019), as well as the illiberal shift in post-2010 Hungary and post-2015 Poland as a transformation reliant on patronal politics, party state capture, and exclusionary identity politics (Sata & Karolewski, 2019, Enyedi, 2020). So far, the armed forces have been largely left out of these scholarly analyses, although several experts have raised attention to purges in the Polish military under PiS (Hooper, 2019), and the non-transparency of military procurement processes in Hungary (Inotai, 2020). This section zooms in on some controversial instances of military use during the pandemic in the Visegrad countries in the form of symbolic shows of government power and tools of government control in order to shed light on emergent illiberal patterns of militarization that vary in their form and scope.

In the three Visegrad states, military domestic assistance during COVID-19 has been enabled through constitutional law or newly adopted legislation. Military assistance was enacted in Hungary and Slovakia due to the constitutional state of emergency laws declared early on in the pandemic. In Poland, where the state of emergency was controversially not invoked, army deployment was enabled by The Crisis Management Act of 26 April 2007 and the COVID Act of 2 March 2020. No instances of military violence or repression were recorded in the three countries that were studied. Nevertheless, there were incidents of military use as symbolic shows of government power.

In Slovakia, questions about the symbolic nature of military deployment were raised during the quarantine of Roma settlements in the first weeks of the pandemic. Roma people living in overcrowded housing with a lack of infrastructure were repeatedly presented in public discourse as a threat to the majority population (Maďarová et al., 2020). Their previous experience with racism and violence from uniformed services contributed to their fear when soldiers, military vehicles, and helicopters appeared with no clear explanation from the authorities (CKO, 2020). A settlement in Gelnica was quarantined despite proof of only a single positive coronavirus case. Some settlements were locked down overnight, with quarantine announced in the evening, and the police and the military securing the areas in the morning. The media and politicians informed the public that soldiers were treating the Roma professionally and with respect. Nevertheless, the military presence was interpreted by many as a show of power, whereby Roma people became an object to be controlled and locked down, and the majority population reassured that the state is using all possible means to protect them (Maďarová et al., 2020).

In Poland, the second wave of the pandemic coincided with a government crisis and serious societal unrest. In October 2020, mass spontaneous protests against the abortion ban erupted, some of which initially targeted Catholic churches, before a decision was made to switch to political institutions. Leaked reports revealed that PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński wanted to use force against the protesters, but the chief of police declined (Kostrzewski, 2020). However, hundreds of military police were deployed around select churches during the largest protest in Warsaw, despite the MOD stating that soldiers would merely support pandemic operations. It was then that 200 retired generals and admirals from the armed forces and other uniformed services issued an open letter calling for the government to deescalate the crisis by dropping the ban, and reminding active-duty personnel that their role was to serve society and remain apolitical (List generałów, 2020). In pandemic-struck Hungary, civic protests were held over perceived threats to the autonomy of higher education after the University of Theatre and Film Arts was put under the management of a new board of directors. Following the

blockade of the university, a military colonel and former MOD chief of staff Gábor Szarka was appointed chancellor of the university.

In both Hungary and Poland, the pandemic also saw controversial military appointments to civilian institutions. In Hungary, military commanders with no medical or management experience were sent to hospitals and 'vital' private companies during the state of emergency – a decision criticized as another instance of an ongoing power grab (Inotai, 2020). A Hungarian former medical chief argued that 'hospital directors were not trusted, and thus soldiers and police officers were assigned to them' (Karáth, 2020). As argued by one expert, 'one of the tasks of hospital commanders is to control the information flow' (Interview HU3). In Poland, concern was raised over the appointment of a TDF chief of training, as well as a former paramilitary activist, to the Government Centre for Security responsible for crisis management. Given that military officials replaced a former officer of the Fire Service, the decision was seen by some experts as an instance of the militarization of civilian crisis management, as well as the further centralization of power by the government, which trusts TDF more than other institutions (Podolski, 2020).

After the Cold War, military sociologists observed the waning of (communist) regime defense, one of the major roles of the armed forces during state socialism, and the overall smooth transition of the Visegrad armed forces into the new political system, whereby governments restrained from using the military for controversial internal functions, and the armed forces themselves built legitimacy through new roles and an ethos of professionalism and apoliticism (Michta, 1997; Forster et al., 2003). During the pandemic, this image of the armed forces was accompanied by several controversial cases of military presence in the civilian realm, varying from the army being used as a symbolic show of state power during the quarantining of Roma settlements in Slovakia, through the military police being cast in the role of a symbolic defender of the government's illiberal reforms against protesters in Poland, to the use of the military as a tool of government control over civilian institutions in Hungary. In the latter two countries, the convergence between militarization and illiberal governance may serve as an early warning sign of the potential future pressures on the armed forces to symbolize and protect the illiberal ruling parties' political projects. However, the defense experts in Hungary and Poland that were interviewed argued that while ruling parties see the defense sector as a tool for strengthening their vision of statehood, 'this is not what military officials necessarily want' (Interview HU1).

The troops are here to stay: Conclusions

As a major crisis event affecting societies as a whole, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a pertinent case study from which to deduce the path of the politico-economic transformations of the near future. Here, some have framed the pandemic as a 'portal' – a gateway to a new world, nudging societies to leave behind the present model of politico-economic organization (Roy, 2020), while others have warned about the coronavirus crisis serving as a trigger for a new 'shock doctrine,' with controversial political solutions introduced amidst general confusion (Klein, 2020). This conundrum has also informed discussions on the future of the armed forces and their place in post-pandemic societies, with analyses both recording early signs of a military 'shock doctrine' (Lazare, 2020), and seeing a chance for political realignment away from militarization and towards civilian resilience (Sitaraman, 2020).

Entering these discussions from the context of the Visegrad region, this article contributes to filling a geographical gap in the literature. The paper has argued that rather than serving

as a 'portal' to a more civilianized society, this major health crisis has seen an unprecedented 'return of the troops,' and the militarization of COVID-19 has strengthened prior external and domestic pressures for militarization that have been observed in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia in the last decade. The omnipresence of war frames in political discourse normalized the military permeation of civilian realms, and the wide deployment of soldiers in domestic assistance functions aided the forging of closer ties and interactions between society and the military. This newly strengthened position of the military in society was reflected in the reopening of communication channels through social and traditional media, support for military engagement in public opinion surveys, and the rise in army recruitment.

Amidst the pandemic, both Polish and Hungarian governments significantly increased their future defense budgets, referring to both prior modernization commitments and the post-pandemic recession (Palowski, 2020; MTI, 2020d), as well as simplifying army recruitment procedures. Hungarian officials used the pandemic to form new volunteer reserve forces. Set to reach 3000 personnel in 2020, the scheme was promoted by the government as a tool for creating jobs for those who had lost theirs during the pandemic (MTI, 2020a). In Slovakia, interest in the SAF has been at the highest level in a decade following the army's effective engagement in COVID-19 management (MOSR, 2021). At the same time, the trajectory of the region towards militarization stems from what has *not* been done. In none of the countries has the pandemic prompted systemic reforms of public services such as health care, or attempts to revive civilian-based formations of first responders such as civil defense. In fact, the concept and practice of civilian resilience is still gravely missing from discourse and policy in the region.

While the contribution of this paper is predominantly of an analytical nature, the findings suggest three theoretical arguments for further development in future scholarship. The first one relates to the neoliberal fuel for militarization, with the paper highlighting how cuts to the public sector in the region have created conditions of vulnerability that make militarist answers and solutions more appealing. The second one concerns some areas of convergence between militarization and illiberal governance in Hungary and Poland, with the article suggesting that the thus far understudied developments in the defense sector should be included in scholarly analyses of the illiberal transformation. The final argument relates to the dual nature of the process of militarization during COVID-19, with the paper observing how military permeation into the social realm has been accompanied by the civilianization of the armed forces themselves, both in terms of their discourse and roles.

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QUOTED INTERVIEWS

- Interview SK1: defense expert, Slovakia, October 16, 2020.
- Interview SK2: defense expert, Slovakia, November 25, 2020.
- Interview HU1: defense expert, Hungary, September 16, 2020.
- Interview HU2: defense expert, Hungary, November 15, 2020.
- Interview HU3: former civil servant, Hungary, December 9, 2020.
- Interview PL1: defense journalist, Poland, October 20, 2020.