Building Safer Societies:

Law Enforcement, Security and Psychology

Research, Practice and Interdisciplinary Dialogue

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Foreword

In recent years, questions of internal security, changing patterns of crime, and the institutional responses of law enforcement and justice systems have become increasingly difficult to separate from one another. Digitalisation, transnational dynamics, changing levels of social trust all remind us that the central problems of criminology and security studies can no longer be meaningfully understood within isolated disciplinary compartments.

This volume is grounded in that recognition. The studies collected here approach their subjects from different perspectives, yet they are united by a common set of questions. They ask how the concepts of crime and security are changing, what new challenges are emerging in the fields of prevention, detection, and regulation, and how professional responses may be developed in ways that combine scholarly rigour with practical awareness. The chapters therefore bring together theoretical, empirical, and applied approaches, reflecting the complexity of the field itself.

The present book also marks an important stage in an ongoing scholarly cooperation. It is a particular pleasure for us that this volume grew out of what was already the third conference in the series. Equally encouraging is the fact that papers published in earlier volumes have already been cited in subsequent scholarship. We see this as more than a welcome sign of academic visibility. It suggests that the discussions initiated within this framework do not end with the conference itself, but continue to inform wider professional and scholarly debates.

In this respect, Law Enforcement, Security and Psychology CEEPUS Network (HU-1803-03-2526) deserves special emphasis. As the network prepares to enter its fourth academic year in September, it is becoming increasingly clear that this cooperation has developed into more than a formal academic platform. It has become a durable space of interdisciplinary and international exchange, one in which scholars and practitioners can engage one another across institutional, national, and disciplinary boundaries. We consider this continuity one of the most important achievements of the initiative.

We are grateful to the authors, the reviewers, and all institutional and professional partners who supported the preparation of the manuscript and the publication of the volume. We hope that the studies published here will contribute to a more precise understanding of the points of connection between criminology and security studies, and that they will support more nuanced and better grounded responses to the challenges of the present. We also trust that this collection will become a useful reference point for future research, teaching, and professional discussion.

The editors

POSSIBILITIES OF UTILIZING SELECTED TYPES OF EYEWITNESS IDENTIFICATION IN POLICE PRACTICE IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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Introduction

The forensic significance of a lineup (identification) stems from its essence and objective, which is the identification of a previously perceived object—typically a person or an item, and in exceptional cases, an animal. Some theorists emphasize that it may also involve the exclusion of presented or shown objects that the identifying witness had not previously perceived. Identification is therefore a special form of forensic identification, the essence of which is recognition (METEŇKO, 2025). According to criminalistic theory, the core of identification as one of the forensic methods is the recognition of objects (persons, things, and occasionally animals) based on the psychological process of association. This process is triggered by the stimulus of observing a group of objects and comparing them to the memory trace stored in the consciousness of the identifying person, i.e., the subject of the identification. The forensic significance of identification thus arises from its nature, and the goal of this method is to identify a previously perceived object (METEŇKO et al., 2013). Němec defines identification as a separate method of criminalistic practical activity consisting of the identification of a specific person or thing previously perceived through one's own senses via recognition by the identifying person (the subject of the identification) (NĚMEC, 2004). Another possible definition is that identification is a forensic method of identifying objects through recognition based on a memory trace supported by association with the external characteristics and functional and dynamic properties of the examined objects (METEŇKO et al., 2013). According to another definition, identification is a method used in forensic practice to identify forensically significant objects, based on a human's ability to recognize a presented object using a memory trace. It can be concluded that although

definitions from various authors vary slightly, they agree that identification is a forensic method based on the recognition of the target object via a memory trace (KONRÁD et al., 2021). The basic elements of the structure of identification are the subject and the object:

The subject of identification is the recognizing (identifying) person. The subject must always be a human being – a natural person. Most commonly, this is the victim or another eyewitness, but it can also be the accused or a suspect who perceived the forensically relevant event. Thus, it is a person who has previously perceived the object to be recognized, primarily in connection with a forensically relevant event, and who has the essential characteristics of the object preserved in their memory traces (METEŇKO, 2012). However, the subject must also be capable of a secondary perception of this object during the identification process, comparing the memory trace from the primary perception with the mental image of the object created during the secondary perception at the lineup (LACA, 2024). The subject of identification – the recognizing person – can be:

- A person who knows, must know, or should know the object to be recognized; e.g., they recognize persons known or close to them, items that personally belonged to them or that they used and are familiar with, or a suspect/accused who recognizes items stolen by them.
- A person who does not know and should not know the object of identification; having perceived it only in connection with a specific forensically relevant event, e.g., during the commission of a crime – such as a victim or a witness (SAMEK, 2015).

The object of identification is shown, presented, or displayed during the process and must be tangible, specific and individually identifiable. The object can be a recognized person, an item, or an animal (SAMEK, 2015). Therefore, the object must possess identification characteristics that allow the identifying subject to perceive them both primarily and secondarily – they must be overt. These features enable the retrieval of the previously perceived object and the comparison of this mental image fixed in the memory trace with the reflection of the currently perceived object. The object is the single, original subject under investigation within a group of included objects of the same kind (positive definition of the identification object) (METEŇKO et al., 2013). Objects do not qualify as identification objects during the "profiling" or "screening" of an object using similar features (e.g., in a photo album of registered persons or a catalog of items). In such cases, the specific object of identification is not yet known (negative definition of the identification object). Furthermore, it is not expedient to identify via a lineup any object that is sufficiently identifiable by other means, such as a description of unique characteristics, an item identified by a unique serial number, or a person whom the identifying witness knows from everyday life.

Another element of the structure of identification consists of the included objects, which are not the target of identification (they are not the suspect, the accused, or the sought-after item) but are intentionally selected and placed alongside the object to be recognized. These can be divided into three categories (METEŇKO, 2012):

- Included persons (fillers): These are individuals of similar age, build, race, clothing, and overall physical appearance to the person who is to be recognized.
- Included items: These consist of objects of the same kind (e.g., weapons, clothing, vehicles, etc.), type, colour, and approximate age or degree of wear.
- Included animals: These are animals of the same species and breed as the one to be recognized in connection with a criminal offense (e.g., an animal that was stolen or involved in an act of cruelty) (METEŇKO, 2025).

The total number (the group) of presented objects represents the sum of the target object and the included objects. (For instance: 1 target object and 3 included objects in an *in natura* lineup represent a total of 4 presented objects, which also constitutes the legally required minimum number of objects for a lineup).

Tactical principles of eyewitness identification

Every execution of an identification procedure represents a specific situation in forensic investigation, shaped by the originality and type of the presented object, the method of execution, the psychological profile of the recognizing person, and other factors. The general principles applicable to every forensic identification include:

- Immediacy (Promptness): This reflects the need to implement forensic investigation methods without delay, as delayed execution could adversely affect forensic traces (in the case of identification, delay negatively impacts the memory trace) (DVOŘÁK, 2022).
- Non-repeatability: This principle dictates that if the identifying person (subject) has already attempted to identify the target object once, a new mental image of the included fillers is created alongside the existing memory trace. This could suggestively bias the recognition process during any repeated identification (METEŇKO, 2025).
- Irreplaceability of the Subject: Only a person who has perceived the presented object in the past can serve as the subject of the identification.
- Adherence to Logical Sequence: Maintaining the correct procedure during the execution of the identification is a crucial prerequisite for the objectivity of the method and for achieving credible results (LACA, 2024).

Preparation for eyewitness identification

Given the non-repeatability of identification—meaning that it is performed only once within a certain time interval—it requires great, even meticulous attention. Deficiencies not only in the preparation but also in the execution of the identification may result in the failure to achieve expected results, rendering the procedure itself futile. During the execution of the identification, it is necessary to realize that various factors influence the recognizing person (especially in the case of a witness) throughout the preparation and execution phases, affecting the process and the final statement—the witness's identification verdict. In the interest of clarity and the accuracy of the information obtained, it is therefore imperative that the person conducting the identification properly assesses the specific situation regarding these factors and takes steps toward their elimination (SAMEK, 2015).

Factors influencing the accuracy of the memory of the identification subject are divided into:

- Factors controllable by the criminalist: These include instructions given to the witness prior to the identification process, the selection of fillers, the total number of participants in the lineup, the possibility of conducting a blind/hidden identification, etc.
- Factors uncontrollable by the criminalist: These include the witness's stress levels, gender, age, occupation, the influence of alcohol or other narcotics, unusual features of the perpetrator, disguises, and the distance between the witness and the perpetrator during the primary perception (METEŇKO, 2012).

Criminalistic tactics have developed several recommendations, the observance of which is essential if the identification is to be successful. The most important of these are the analysis of the situation in which the recognizing person finds themselves and the selection of the appropriate moment for conducting the identification, while applying the principle of timeliness. The preparation for identification can be divided into:

- Substantive (content) preparation,
- Organizational and material preparation (SAMEK, 2015).

Substantive preparation for identification consists of a thorough analysis of the materials collected so far, which includes:

The description of the examined object (interrogation of the recognizing person), which is a mandatory requirement for conducting the identification. The interrogation should be aimed at identifying the characteristics by which the recognizing person (the subject) could recognize the object of identification, as

well as determining the conditions under which the person perceived the object (e.g., lighting, duration of perception, distance, etc.) (LACA, 2024). The person describes the characteristics of the object perceived through their senses. Most frequently, these involve visual and auditory characteristics, and in exceptional cases tactile or olfactory ones. The quality of the description of the examined object and the determination of the conditions under which it was perceived also serve to assess the expediency of the identification, as well as the method of its execution. Information obtained during the description can be divided into the following categories:

I. Information regarding the identifying person (the subject):

- Whether the identifying person usually wears glasses or contact lenses If the person perceived the object solely by voice, investigators should inquire about any hearing impairments).
- Whether the person suffers from physical or mental condition that could fundamentally impact their perception of the object, its retention in memory, and its subsequent recognition (METEŇKO, 2025).

II. Information about the circumstances relating to the scene and the identifying person at the time of perception:

- Which senses the person used to perceive the object (sight, hearing, etc.).
- The mental and physical state of the person at the time of perception (fatigue, stress, pain due to injury, etc.).
- Whether the identifying person was under the influence of alcohol, narcotics or psychotropic substances.
- Whether the identifying person was wearing prescription glasses, sunglasses, or contact lenses.
- The activity of the identifying person at the time of perception (e.g., whether the person was merely observing the event or was an active participant).
- The date, time, and specific location where the object was perceived.
- The duration and distance from which the identifying person perceived the object.
- Whether the identifying person saw the face of the target.
- Whether there were any other witnesses present at the scene (KONRÁD-PORADA- STRAUS-SUCHÁNEK, 2021).
- Other environmental conditions and circumstances of the perception (lighting conditions, noise, weather conditions, visibility, etc.).

III. Information regarding the person to be identified:

- Static (anatomical) characteristics: skin colour and potential ethnicity, height, build and estimated weight, presumed age, facial appearance and features (nose, eyebrows, eyes, mouth, etc.), teeth, hair, moustache, beard, etc.)
- Dynamic (functional) characteristics: gait, posture, movement, accent, dialect, etc.
- Specific characteristics: birthmarks/moles, cleft lip/palate, tattoos, piercings and implants, plastic and cosmetic procedures, etc.
- Personal accessories: clothing, glasses, bracelets, earrings, chains, etc. (STRAUS, 2008)

In the identification of animals, information regarding the description should include general characteristics such as: species, breed, sex, size, coat colour (feathers, skin, etc.) as well as specific characteristics such as pigmentation anomalies (albinism), heterochromia (different eye colours), malocclusion (overbite, underbite), etc. In the identification of objects, the description should cover general characteristics such as the type of object, model, colour, surface size, material composition, and whether it is mass-produced or custom-made (works of art, bespoke items). It should also note specific characteristics including special modifications, repairs, damage or wear and tear, etc. (METEŇKO, 2025)

The timeliness of conducting a lineup is derived from psychological findings on forgetting. As time passes, the memory trace fades, causing the mental image of the object to diminish. The sooner the identification is performed, the more accurate and reliable the memory trace of the witness will be. The timeliness of the identification is supported by the principle of immediacy, as there is a risk that objects or individuals may change over time – not only through natural means but also through intentional alterations to appearance (shaving, haircuts, etc.). However, the execution of a forensic identification should never be rushed or insufficiently prepared (SAMEK, 2015).

The selection of included objects depends on the type of objects presented for identification. The target object should be shown within a group of included objects of the same kind, which function as comparison objects. Based on past experience and legal requirements, the minimum number of included objects should not be less than three (a total of four including the target) (LACA, 2024). Criminalistics also draws on knowledge of human observational capabilities, which indicate a person should be able to observe the presented objects within a single field of vision. Consequently, it is recommended that the total number of presented objects should not exceed 7 to 8, allowing them to be perceived simultaneously. Included objects must be of the same kind. For included persons and animals, this primarily concerns anatomical, functional, or specific characteristics; in the identification of items, the focus is on general features that

are similar in kind and shape to the examined object. Included persons (fillers) should not be individuals who are generally well-known due to their function or profession (this applies especially in smaller towns or municipalities: mayors, postal carriers, shop assistants, police officers, actors, or singers, etc.).

Determining the type, method of presentation, and category of identification primarily consists of deciding whether it will involve a person, an animal, or an object. Another crucial element is determining the method of presentation, specifically: presenting the target object within a group of included fillers, presenting only a single identified object (a show-up), or presenting the target object and fillers individually and sequentially. Last but not least, it is necessary to specify the type of identification and the overall method of execution. Identification can be classified into the following types:

- Simultaneous Identification: A traditional type of identification where the subject is shown the target person or object together with fillers at once in a single line. This involves relative judgment (comparison) of persons or objects against each other to find the one that best matches the previously perceived object based on the memory trace. Simultaneous identification remains the preferred type in practice, although its execution is not explicitly defined in the Code of Criminal Procedure; rather, it stems from long-standing police practice (DVOŘÁK, 2022).
- Sequential Identification: This represents the main alternative to simultaneous identification, with its primary advantage being the elimination of relative judgment. Persons or objects are not shown all at once but progressively, one after another. The essence of this type is the principle of absolute judgment, comparing the stimulus directly to the memory trace. Sequential identification helps reduce the probability of misidentifying an innocent person simply because they most closely resemble the perpetrator. A key aspect that increases the credibility of this method as evidence is that the identifying person does not know the total number of objects to be shown (DVOŘÁK, 2022).
- Elimination Identification: This combines elements of both simultaneous and sequential identification. The subject is first shown the persons or objects all at once and is asked to select the one that looks most similar. In the second phase, all other objects are removed, and the subject focuses on only one object. The important psychological aspect here is the narrowed focus on a single target in the second stage.
- "Wildcard" Identification: Also known as the "wildcard" method, its essence lies in supplementing a simultaneous photo array with an additional card featuring a silhouette with a question mark. From a psychological standpoint, the subject is not pressured to choose one of the presented photos; if they are uncertain, they can select this "wildcard." (SHEAHAN-PICA-POZZULO-NASTASA, 2025). This type enhances

identification accuracy in lineups where the perpetrator may not be present, particularly when dealing with child witnesses, thereby increasing the rate of correct rejections (DVOŘÁK, 2022).

Organizational and logistical preparation involves the following activities directly aimed at executing the identification:

- Preparing the identifying person, the object (person, item, or animal) to be identified, and the included fillers: This consists of familiarizing the participants with the objective of the identification, the methodology, and the required conduct during the process, including formal instructions (SAMEK, 2015).
- Preventing contact between the identifying person and the subject of identification, as well as between the identifying person and the fillers, and ensuring no prior viewing of the items to be recognized: This is among the most critical preparatory measures, ensuring the objectivity of the identification result.
- Preparing technical equipment for documentation: The importance lies primarily in determining the method and utilizing technical means to document the course of the identification process (STRAUS, 2008).

Tactics of conducting eyewitness identification

The tactics of conducting a lineup consist of the correct application of established rules for the procedure:

1) Present the object to be identified in a group of at least three included fillers (with the exception of identifying a deceased person).
2) Ensure included objects (fillers) are of the same kind as the identified object and do not differ in general or specific characteristics (SAMEK, 2015).
3) Carry out as many separate identification procedures as there are objects, if multiple targets are to be identified in a single case (each object must have its own unique group of fillers).
4) Adhere to the logical sequence of identification established by criminalistic tactics (METEŇKO, 2012).

The most important condition for conducting the lineup is to ensure that the object and the subject do not meet before the procedure. It is necessary to first assemble the group of presented objects and subsequently bring the subject (the identifying person) to the place of execution. The presented objects are marked with ordinal numbers (KONRÁD et al., 2021).

After the group is assembled, the officer conducting the identification brings in the identifying person. The person is then prompted to carefully examine the

presented objects, and is allowed sufficient time to compare their memory trace with the appearance of the presented objects. If the identifying person identifies one of the objects, they are asked to state the specific characteristics by which they recognized it.

The same procedure is repeated with a new selection of numerical markings and a rearrangement of the presented objects. The described characteristics are then compared with the description of identification features obtained during the previous interrogation. The Code of Criminal Procedure mandates that independent persons (disinterested parties with no relation to the case) be present during the identification to confirm the manner in which it was conducted if necessary. This requirement remains mandatory even when the process is documented.

Potential risk factors influencing the execution of the identification include:

- A stressful environment or trauma.
- Human memory and concentration (the temporal nature of the memory trace).
- The weapon focus effect (focusing attention on the object used in the attack against the identifying person).
- Influence or suggestion during the identification process.

Specifics of preparation and tactics for selected types of eyewitness identification

"In Natura" eyewitness identification based on anatomical-morphological characteristics:

The most frequent object of a live identification is a suspect or an accused person; less commonly, and only exceptionally, it may be a victim or a witness (SAMEK, 2015). If the object of identification has intentionally altered their appearance (by shaving, cutting their hair, etc.) or has otherwise lost their original identifying features, identification by photograph should be considered (LACA- MASÁR KUPKOVÁ- CIKHART, 2025). To achieve the desired objective of the identification, it is most appropriate to present the object of identification *in natura*. An indispensable condition for conducting a live identification is to ensure that the object and the subject do not meet prior to the procedure. Before the identification, both the object (the person to be identified) and the subject must be instructed according to their procedural status and advised on their conduct during the execution of the identification. Subsequently, the person to be identified must always be given the opportunity to choose their own position among the fillers and a tag with an ordinal number. Ideally, the presented persons should hold their numbers visibly in front of themselves (STRAUS, 2008). Then,

the identifying person (the subject) states whether they recognize the sought-after person among the presented objects and, if so, identifies them. The fillers (included persons) are not suspects in the criminal offense and are known to be passive participants in the identification; therefore, the identification should not result in the recognition of any of them (METEŇKO, 2025).

Possible errors during the execution of a live identification ("in natura"):

- Absence of a prior interrogation regarding identification characteristics.
- Absence of proper legal instructions.
- Failure to adhere to the legally mandated minimum number of included fillers.
- Asking captious or suggestive questions (DVOŘÁK, 2022).
- Failure to provide the person to be identified (the target) with the opportunity to choose their number and position among the fillers where they will stand.
- Consciously or negligently showing the person to be identified (the target) to the identifying person (the subject) before the execution of the identification (FENYVESI, 2024).

Fig. 1 Simultaneous eyewitness identification ("In Natura") based on Anatomical-Morphological Characteristics (Source: Author)

Identification of objects based on photographs or other images, or using technical means:

If it is not possible to show the object to be recognized to the identifying person within a group of included objects, identification by model or photograph is utilized. The identifying person is shown photographs of the target within a group of photographs of included objects (METEŇKO, 2025). The photographs must be assigned numbers, have identical formatting, and share the same dimensions to ensure they do not differ in quality. The disadvantage of this type of identification is the inability to perform it based on functional and dynamic characteristics (SAMEK, 2015). When creating a photo album or preparing photographs for photographic identification, the following principles apply:

- All presented photographs should have the same format and dimensions.
- The photographs should all be in colour or all in black and white.
- The persons in the photographs should not differ significantly (not even in specific characteristics or accessories, e.g., glasses, etc.).
- If it is necessary to edit one photograph, all other presented photographs must be edited in the same manner(DVOŘÁK, 2022).

When conducting photographic identification, the method of presenting the photographs (presenting multiple photographs simultaneously on one page of a photo album or presenting one photograph per page) must always be considered according to the circumstances of the case (STRAUS, 2008). The identifying person should be allowed to view the photographs for an unlimited amount of time, according to their needs.

Another possible method of performing object identification based on a model is so-called "video identification." In this type of identification, short dynamic recordings of persons are shown to the identifying person, projected on a screen. The individual execution of video identification proceeds such that the video is approximately three minutes long in total and consists of a series of short, numbered recordings of the target object and included fillers shown to the identifying subject. Each person is presented in a 15-second video segment, where first the person's head and the upper part of the shoulders are shown. In the video, against a grey background, the person initially looks directly into the camera and subsequently turns their head slowly, first to the left and then to the right. The individual recordings of the target object and the included fillers alternate sequentially, meaning they are shown to the identifying person individually and in parts, which means that the sequential type of identification is utilized. In the identification of a person by voice and speech, it is possible to use an audio recording, which is played for the identifying person along with recordings of other persons (DVOŘÁK, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, forensic identification represents an irreplaceable method of investigation. Various types of identification provide opportunities for the effective acquisition of evidence; however, they also carry certain risks, particularly regarding errors caused by human factors, such as memory distortions or suggestibility. Therefore, it is crucial to apply precisely defined procedures in practice to minimize errors, thereby ensuring greater reliability and objectivity of the results. This article offers a comprehensive view of identification within the context of Slovak criminalistics and suggests direction for its development, with an emphasis on the implementation of new types of identification, such as video identification, and the optimization of existing procedures.

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SOCIAL POLICY OF THE STATE IN THE FIELD OF EMPLOYMENT

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Introduction

Social policy is a broad area of public policy focused on protecting the population, promoting social justice, and reducing inequalities. Its importance becomes most evident during changes in the economic, demographic, or social structure of society, or when regional disparities or socially disadvantaged groups arise. In modern societies, social policy goes beyond passive support such as social benefits and allowances; it also involves active measures to integrate citizens into the labour market, support employment, and enhance labour mobility. One of the most critical areas of social policy is employment policy, which enables governments to regulate the labour market and address unemployment. Unemployment is a complex issue with profound economic, social, and psychological impacts. Long-term job loss leads to lower living standards, social isolation, and a decline in work habits, while also harming the country's overall economic stability and performance. To manage the labour market effectively, the government must use a mix of passive and active social policy tools that are targeted, specific, and tailored to regional and demographic differences.

Definition of Social Policy in the Area of Employment

After 1989, social policy in Slovakia was oriented toward system reform and the transition to a market economy. New concepts of state social assistance, insurance, and social support were established. In 1993, the National Insurance Company was established, and it later separated social insurance from health insurance. Alongside the development of the non-profit sector, the principles of a pluralistic and participatory approach to social policy began to take shape, laying the foundations for its current form.

The State of Social Policy in Slovakia from 2002 to the Present

After November 2002, Slovakia introduced its first package of social legislation, marking a significant shift in social policy and becoming a major topic in public life. The new approach rejected the idea of socially dependent and unemployed

citizens as passive recipients of aid emphasizing instead the support of activity, motivation, and fair rewards. The main principle of the reform was that "work should pay," while promoting individual choice and the property rights of citizens, especially regarding pension security. Social policy established legislative conditions for local governments, civil society, and churches to participate in solving social problems, thereby building on the tradition of social participation and civic engagement.

The reform was built on three core pillars: motivation, activity, and reward. Motivation involved straightforward and transparent rules for system operations; activity provided tools to help citizens transition from the welfare benefit system into employment and allowed them to influence their dignified old age; and reward represented fair recognition of an individual's effort. Starting January 1, 2004, the structure of the state administration also changed—labour offices and social departments were combined into a single institution and placed under the newly created Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the Slovak Republic. This move aimed to simplify administration, enhance services for citizens, and boost the efficiency of social services.

Slovak social policy has also become linked to European Union policies that aim to promote employment, improve working and living conditions, and combat social exclusion. A key milestone was the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, and the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017, all of which set binding social goals like full employment, intergenerational solidarity, and access to adequate social protection. Slovakia has also joined the European Semester, which monitors the social and economic policies of EU member states, and it utilizes tools such as the FEAD funds and the Progress microfinance facility to support the most vulnerable citizens.

Overall, the reforms after 2002 transformed Slovak social policy from passive welfare assistance to an active, motivating, and participatory policy. At the same time, they ensured its compatibility with European goals of inclusive growth and high employment, thereby creating a foundation for the gradual improvement of living standards and social cohesion among the citizens of Slovakia (CINTULOVÁ, 2022).

According to Duková (2013), social policy instruments represent the means through which the state implements its social policy. These are the mechanisms by which a social subject influences other subjects and objects in society. These tools are diverse and have a wide scope, but their use must align with the basic principles of social policy while helping to achieve its goals and fulfil its functions. The main instruments include institutions, legal norms, financial means, as well as the provision of services, regulatory measures, and coercive interventions.

Opinions on unemployment and approaches to its solution can be divided into four basic groups that correspond to the main economic paradigms –Liberal, Keynesian, Monetarist, and Marxist (ROSIČ- KLAMÁR, 2015):

- Liberal approach: understands the labour market as a self-regulating mechanism in which unemployment is a natural consequence of a short-term imbalance between the supply of and demand for work. State interventions are considered ineffective and are seen as hindering the restoration of balance. The solution is sought on the side of labour supply, while the emphasis is on wage discipline and the limitation of the welfare state.
- Keynesian paradigm: explains unemployment as a consequence of technological progress and a lack of aggregate demand. A decrease in demand leads to a decrease in investment and, consequently, to an increase in unemployment. Keynes therefore advocates an active role for the state in stimulating consumption and investment through public spending.
- Monetarist approach: considers unemployment to be the result of wrong government policies that attempt to trade unemployment for inflation. According to this theory, it is necessary to focus on price stability, even at the cost of a temporary increase in unemployment, and to support the creation of productive jobs through investments with a guaranteed return.
- Marxist paradigm: links unemployment to the essence of the capitalist system, which is unstable and prone to recurring crises. Unemployment fulfils a structural function in this system, as it results from an imbalance between the growth of capital and the reproduction of the labour force, and therefore cannot be permanently eliminated under capitalism.

Through employment policy, the government can minimize the consequences of unemployment and influence the length of the job search period. In this context, a distinction is made between active and passive employment policies, which differ in their approach to solving this socio-economic problem.

Employment Policy

According to Hetteš (2013), Slovakia is among the countries that actively intervene in employment policy to reduce the unemployment rate. In doing so, the government utilizes various instruments, especially public spending on employment policy measures, as well as regulatory and legislative mechanisms.

Active Employment Policy

The state implements active measures to reduce unemployment and help individuals remain in the labour market. Active labour market policy aims to support the integration of individuals into the work process. It comprises a set of programs designed to improve the access of unemployed persons to job

opportunities~~,~~ while ensuring the efficient functioning of the labour market. This policy plays a significant role in the fight against unemployment - it helps the long-term unemployed return to working life, supports equal opportunities when entering the labour market, increases the level of vocational education, training and counselling, and at the same time contributes to the development of a qualified and flexible workforce as well as entrepreneurial skills (DUDOVÁ et al., 2018).

Among the main tools and target groups of active labour market policies are (Aktívne politiky trhu práce, 2017):

Counselling and assistance in finding a job can be considered the most effective ~~in~~ for short-term unemployment, though they are also crucial for providing an individualized approach to supporting job seekers. This approach includes a combination of career counselling, vocational training, motivational courses, and social support tailored to the individual needs of the unemployed.

Subsidies to employers represent financially demanding measures generally targeted at disadvantaged groups where other forms of support have not brought results. In addition to increasing employment, they help alter employers' attitudes toward the long-term unemployed by enabling them to verify the potential of workers at lower wage costs.

Programs of direct employment or job creation are mainly intended for the medium and long-term unemployed. Their goal is to prevent the negative impacts of short-term unemployment and to ensure a stable, longer-term form of support with an emphasis on the effective use of resources.

Professional Training has the most significant long-term positive impact on employability, although it is financially demanding. While general programs promote a better matching of skills upon entering the labour market, certified forms of training – especially workplace-based training or programs combined with formal education – are proving to be extremely effective in the transition from education to working life.

Active labour market policy is a vital tool for integrating job seekers into the workforce through a wide range of measures. These interventions implemented by relevant institutions, aim to achieve a balance between supply and demand for labour. Active measures are not aimed exclusively at persons who are unemployed or who are at immediate risk of unemployment, but also focus on supporting employers. These measures motivate individuals to engage in activities that increase their employability and improve their prospects in the labour market.

Passive Employment Policy

The primary instrument of passive labour market policy is the unemployment benefit, which is provided by the Social Insurance Company in Slovakia in order to ensure the financial stability of an individual after losing a job. Its main purpose is to alleviate the negative social consequences of unemployment through

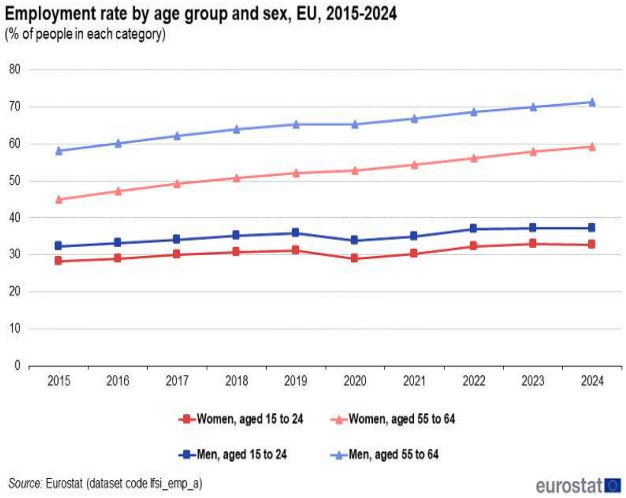
temporary compensation for the loss of income. This tool is a form of social security that is intended to help maintain ~~the~~ a basic standard of living for the job seekers while they actively pursue new employment. However, the right to unemployment benefits does not arise automatically. The job seeker must fulfil the conditions established by law, which usually relate to the length of previous unemployment insurance contributions and mandatory registration with the labour office, as well as failure to fulfil the reasons that would exclude the claim (e.g., termination of employment based on one's own initiative). Only after meeting these conditions can the unemployed person be granted the benefit, which serves as temporary financial support intended to bridge the period of unemployment (DUDOVÁ et al. 2018).

European Employment Strategy

The European Semester is a coordinating and pivotal instrument of the European Union's employment policy, operating as a cyclical mechanism for economic and budgetary supervision. This process ensures regular evaluation of measures in the field of employment and social policy across all member states. Every year in November, the European Commission publishes the Annual Growth Report, which provides a comprehensive overview of the economic situation within the Union and determines the priorities of economic and social policy for the coming period. Based on the results of surveys and recommendations published as part of the European Semester, member states prepare their national reform programs and stabilization or convergence programs, which they then submit to the European Commission for evaluation. In these documents, countries define the objectives of their employment policy and propose specific measures and reforms. The European Semester mechanism thus enables coordination and supervision of employment policy at the level of individual member states (EU Strategy, 2020).

In accordance with the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development and its goals, the European Union has set strategic goals for the period until 2030, which are intended to ensure not only economic growth, but also social cohesion and inclusive development. Among the key goals is the achievement of an employment rate of at least 78% of the population in the age group from 20 to 64 years. This indicator reflects the effort to maximize participation in the labour market and support full employment, thereby strengthening economic stability and the social inclusion of the population. Within the framework of the European Employment Strategy, this goal is linked to the systematic monitoring of employment rate trends, which is illustrated by a graph from Eurostat.

Figure 1 Employment rate by age group and gender in the EU (in %)



The graph shows the development of the employment rate across the European Union for persons aged 20-64 between 2015-2024. The data reveal a steady upward trend until 2019, which was disrupted in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following years, *there was a gradual revival of the labour market and a re-growth of the employment rate, with values approaching the level before the pandemic, which points to the stabilization of the labour market within the European Union.*

Another priority goal is to ensure that at least 60% of adults participate in formal or informal vocational training and lifelong learning programs every year. Such a participation rate supports the adaptability of the workforce in the context of digitalisation, globalization, and rapidly changing economic conditions, while enabling individuals to acquire new skills, thereby increasing their employability and competitiveness. The third strategic priority is to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million. This goal reflects the EU's commitment to strengthening social justice, reducing inequalities, and promoting equal access to basic social rights, including education, healthcare, and social protection. Achieving this goal is crucial not only for upholding individual dignity but also for the overall social and economic stability of the member states. (EU Strategy, 2020)

Analysis of the Development of Unemployment

Analysis of the development of unemployment and its structure in the Slovak Republic in the years 2019 – 2025 The development of the unemployment rate represents one of the basic indicators of the effectiveness of the state's social policy. In the analysed period, the Slovak

Republic experienced significant changes driven by the economic cycle, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic recovery. In the following table, we can observe the unemployment rate, the registered unemployment rate and the number of job seekers in the monitored period.

Table 3 Unemployment rate in the Slovak Republic in 2019-2025 (in %)

DATE	Number of Unemployment	Unemployment Rate	Registered Unemployment Rate
2019	165 455	6,01	4,92
2020	227 341	8,30	7,57
2021	200 225	7,40	6,76
2022	178 143	6,56	5,90
2023	169 933	6,10	5,08
2024	164 206	5,98	4,96
2025	172 707	6,21	5,31

Source: own processing according to Office of Social Affairs and Family data in 2019 - 2025

The trajectory of the unemployment rate from 2019-2025 clearly demonstrates the impact of the pandemic shock, subsequent economic recovery and later macroeconomic pressures. In 2019, unemployment was at low levels, but in 2020 it increased sharply due to the pandemic resulting in the highest number of job seekers in the entire period. From 2021 to 2022, there is a gradual decline in unemployment, which reflects the recovery of economic activity after the easing of restrictions. The lowest levels were recorded in 2023 and 2024, when the labour market benefited from increased labour demand and the stabilization of the economy. A slight deterioration appears in 2025, likely due to slowing economic growth and fading inflationary pressures.

Summary of Content

The final evaluation shows that while the social policy of the Slovak Republic successfully responded to extraordinary crises in the monitored period, but its overall effectiveness remained uneven. Passive labour market policies provided quick and necessary support to job seekers, but active policies lagged in scope and targeted support. Spending on active measures was not always adequate to the needs of the labour market, and their effectiveness was limited by the low involvement among the most vulnerable groups. Artificial intelligence (AI) can significantly change employment policy altering how the state deals with the labour market, unemployment, and retraining, such as Automation and the disappearance of some jobs (AI can replace routine activities - administration, production, customer support) and the emergence of new professions (AI creates new job opportunities).

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RUSSOPHILIA AS A RESONANT FRAMEWORK FOR HYBRID THREATS: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SLOVAK ONLINE SPACE AFTER 2022

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Introduction

The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine (on February 24, 2022) represented a turning point in the European security environment, not only in terms of military capabilities, energy dependence, and economic stability, but also in terms of how societies debate the meaning of the conflict, the identification of the aggressor, the legitimacy of sanctions, and the forms of support provided to the attacked state. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that modern conflicts also unfold in the cognitive and information domains: the goal is not only to physically weaken the opponent, but also to erode trust, divide society, and reduce the state's ability to maintain a consensus on decision-making.

At the level of European security policy, the information dimension of hybrid action is often conceptualized as FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference). The European External Action Service states in its materials that the Kremlin's strategic and coordinated use of FIMI was part of the preparation and execution of the war in 2022; describing the goal as weakening international resolve to condemn aggression, maintaining a permissive environment for relativizing responsibility, and undermining support for sanctions regimes and aid to Ukraine (EEAS, 2023).

After 2022, the Slovak online space did not develop according to the simple premise that open aggression automatically discredits pro-Russian or anti-Western interpretations. Content analyses (based on samples of pro-Russian disinformation websites) and monitoring reports (focusing on the most interactive content on social networks) show that pro-Russian or hybrid-compatible frameworks have not disappeared; rather, they have adapted. A typical example is the transition from open apologetics for Russia to linguistically "more acceptable" frameworks: an emphasis on immediate peace, sovereignty, the rejection of "dragging Slovakia into war," and the questioning of Euro-Atlantic anchoring through narratives about "Brussels' dictates" or "proxy wars." (TKÁČOVÁ, 2024)

At the same time, the domestic context suggests that hybrid narratives can find fertile ground in psychosocial factors: mistrust, frustration, feelings of threat, and conspiracy beliefs. Slovak academic research published in domestic periodicals points to the link between populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs; Similarly, analyses of political discourse in Slovakia show continuity in conspiracy frameworks between different crises such as COVID-19, the war, and various elections (VÁCLAVIKOVÁ & VITEKOVÁ, 2024; IVANČÍK, 2021; PAVLÍKOVÁ & HANZELKA 2019). This context is relevant because hybrid action increases its effectiveness precisely in polarized and "cognitively fatigued" societies.

This article therefore works on the assumption that the effectiveness of hybrid narratives lies not only in dissemination techniques (platforms and algorithms), but also in the cultural and identity compatibility of messages with domestic symbolic schemes. Russophilia is linked to this level: a historically sedimented set of ideas about Russia as the "protector of the Slavs," the "bearer of traditional values," or a "civilizational alternative" to the West. Literary-historical research explicitly describes how idealized notions of Russia as a pillar of Slavdom (Kollár, Štúr's generation) penetrated the Slovak environment, later coming into conflict with experience (KUZMÍKOVÁ, 2013).

The research question is: to what extent and in what way does Russophilia function in the Slovak online space after 2022 as a resonant framework for hybrid threats? We are testing the hypothesis that contemporary Russophilia has a stronger reactive "anti-Western" character (against the EU, NATO, and the liberal West) than a positive geopolitical orientation "for Russia." The aim is not to prove direct coordination with Russian state actors; rather, we analyse how meanings stabilize and why some frameworks possess high mobilization potential.

Theoretical framework

The concept of hybrid warfare, developed by Hoffman, emphasizes that a modern adversary can synchronize conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal elements to exploit the vulnerabilities of both the state and society. The essence of hybridity does not lie in the "novelty" of individual tools, but rather in their combination and the exploitation of synergistic effects across domains (security, political, economic, and informational). This ensuring that the adversary's response is costly and often difficult to attribute (HOFFMAN, 2007).

In the Slovak context, the perspective of "active measures" and their historical continuity is also relevant. Slovak academic works show that contemporary disinformation campaigns can be analysed as a continuation of broader influence strategies that are not limited to individual false claims, but work with long-term frameworks, the delegitimization of institutions, and the cultivation of mistrust. From a discourse perspective, it is important to note that these strategies adapt to the new technological environment, while their basic logic – to weaken the decision-making coherence of the target society – remains stable (SLÁVIK, 2020).

Information operations cannot be reduced simply to the dissemination of "fake news." Giles points out that Russian information operations often pursue goals that may not be measurable in terms of "truthfulness": the essential thing is to create an environment of doubt, cynicism, and relativism in which it is more difficult to maintain social consensus and in which disputes about reality become a permanent state of affairs. Giles also highlights the Soviet roots of these principles and points out the misconception that ad hoc countermeasures such as debunking disinformation are systemically sufficient (GILES, 2016a).

A complementary explanation is provided by the "firehose of falsehood" model of propaganda, which emphasizes volume, speed, multi-channel delivery, and a weak commitment to consistency or truth. According to this approach, the effect is achieved not because the audience accepts a single coherent narrative, but because it is overwhelmed, discouraged from verification, and gradually becomes cynical, which in turn reinforces its susceptibility to emotion- and identity-based frames (PAUL & MATTHEWS, 2016).

In European political language, these mechanisms are captured by the concept of FIMI. A report by the European External Action Service notes that in 2022, FIMI was associated with the war in Ukraine as a "tool of war": this manipulation is intended to support the war at home, weaken the response abroad, and break the resolve of democratic societies to impose costs on the aggressor (EEAS 2023).

For the purposes of this article, it is crucial that hybrid and information operations are conveyed through strategic narratives. The strategic narratives approach views narratives as stories about order, actors, and values that actors project and through which audiences interpret complex reality (ROSELLE et al., 2014). In the context of war, this manifests as a competition of stories that determine who is the aggressor and who is the victim, what constitutes "peace" and what is deemed "provocation," and what forms of solidarity are considered "legitimate."

The bridge between narratives and the domestic cultural context is framing theory. Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow emphasize that the effectiveness of frames depends on resonance: on credibility and salience. Salience also includes "narrative fidelity," meaning the extent to which the frame corresponds to the cultural stories of the audience. This concept is useful for explaining why certain types of hybrid narratives "fit" existing myths and why they repeatedly stabilize even without factual consistency (BENFORD & SNOW, 2000).

In this article, we understand Russophilia as a resonant framework: as a predisposition to interpret geopolitical conflicts through the scheme of "the West as a source of oppression and chaos" versus "the East/Russia as a protector and alternative." This framework has a historical dimension (Panslavism, Slavic mutuality, and idealized images of Russia), but in the digital environment it is reactivated mainly as an anti-Western framing. Historical and literary studies on the image of Russia in Slovak culture provide empirical support for the claim that this is a long-standing symbolic repertoire that can be activated in modern crises.

Methodology and data

The empirical part consists of a qualitative discourse analysis of publicly available online material from 2022–2024, supplemented by triangulation with academic and monitoring studies on the Slovak information space. The primary goal is not to quantify the prevalence of narratives across the entire population, but to identify recurring semantic structures, frames, and their links to Russophile myths and "anti-Western" identities. This design makes it possible to capture discursive shifts (e.g., the transition to the language of "peace") and to analyse how meanings stabilize across various themes.

The corpus consists of a purposeful selection of text units (comments, articles, statuses, video transcripts and shared images) that address the topics of war, sanctions, the EU/NATO, sovereignty, and "peace." Regarding platforms, we focus on Facebook and YouTube as mass carriers of political communication and on Telegram as a less moderated alternative space. Research reports on the Slovak online space indicate that Telegram gained significance after the COVID-19 pandemic and especially after the escalation of the Russian war against Ukraine in 2022, when it became a hub for pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives and, at the same time, a risky environment for closing oneself off in one's own environment (HARDOŠ, 2025).

We operationalize alternative media sources as media projects that have been identified in monitoring and academic analyses over the long term, including Hlavné správy (hlavnespravy.sk), Zem a Vek (zemavek.sk), Info Vojna (infovojna.sk), and Slobodný vysielač (slobodnyvysielac.sk). For triangulation, we use (a) content analyses of pro-Kremlin websites (e.g., a study of a sample of 250 texts from the five most popular pro-Russian websites between February 2022 and March 2024), (b) monitoring reports on the most interactive posts and dominant trends, and (c) mappings and lists of influential pro-Russian sources in the Slovak environment.

The analytical procedure examines:

1. actor attributions (aggressor/victim),
2. causal attributions (who 'caused' the war, inflation, or the energy crisis),
3. normative definitions and their shifts ("peace", "sovereignty", "national interest"),
4. intertextual references (historical analogies, symbols, "Western elites" "fascism").

Our interpretation is based on the assumption that hybrid frameworks stabilize even without factual coherence: what matters is their social persuasiveness and mobilizing usefulness, which corresponds to the literature on information operations (GILES, 2016b).

The limitations of the research lie in the fact that discursive analysis does not prove the coordination or origin of narratives and that the purposeful corpus is not a representative sample of society as a whole. However, the aim is to explain the mechanism of resonance: why and how a certain type of frame finds an audience and why it stabilizes across different topics.

Results of the discursive analysis

The discourse after 2022 is not merely "pro-Russian" in the narrow sense, but predominantly reactive and anti-Western, having adapted to a formally calmer language. The mapping of pro-Russian sources shows that in the early days of the invasion, some actors openly defended it (e.g., through the language of "special operation" and "denazification"), but after being confronted with the reality of the attacks, they quickly switched to a "softened" strategy: relativizing guilt, employing whataboutism, and making systematic efforts to weaken Western support for Ukraine by claiming that aid only "prolongs the war."

In this context, a key pattern emerges: Russophilia works more effectively as a negative identity ("against the West") than as a positive integration project ("for Russia"). Both older and more recent analyses of pro-Kremlin campaigns in the Czech-Slovak space (SMOLENOVÁ, 2015; TKÁČOVÁ, 2024) have documented an emphasis on anti-Americanism, the delegitimization of democratic institutions, and the portrayal of the West as a decadent model, while Russia is framed as a moral authority and guarantor of stability. This pattern is compatible with the results of content analyses of Slovak disinformation websites (HARDOŠ, 2025), where the most frequent frames included the "dictates of global institutions" and anti-Americanism.

The dominant narratives can be organized into four interconnected blocks.

The first is "Russia as a victim": the invasion is framed as a response to alleged provocations by the West (NATO expansion, threats to Russians, and the "coup" in Kiev in 2014). In Slovak political discourse, this framework appeared in the form of codes compatible with Russian propaganda (e.g., "NATO threatens Russia"), which academic analysis identified among some Slovak MPs immediately after the invasion began (LINTNER et al., 2023). From the perspective of discursive logic, this represents a reversal of the moral hierarchy: aggression is explained as defence.

The second block is "Ukraine as a proxy": Ukraine is portrayed as a non-sovereign project controlled by the US/NATO, serving as a tool in a proxy war. Monitoring reports on the Slovak environment explicitly state that NATO is waging a proxy war against Russia and that Ukrainians are merely "strategic material" or "cannon fodder" (ŠEFČÍKOVÁ, 2023). This framework diminishes

Ukrainian claims and creates a basis for demanding "peace" without taking into account Ukrainian security interests and the security logic of deterrence.

The third block is "NATO/EU as aggressor or dictator": Euro-Atlantic institutions are interpreted as an instrument of American dominance and, at the same time, as a "bureaucratic dictator" restricting sovereignty. The significance of this framework is demonstrated by a content analysis of 250 texts from the five most popular pro-Russian disinformation websites (February 2022 – March 2024), where narratives of the "dictates of global institutions" were among the most prevalent (TKÁČOVÁ, 2024). This mainly involves portraying the EU as a dictatorial force and expressing skepticism towards NATO and other international structures.

The fourth block is "peace as capitulation": the language of peace is used selectively in such a way that peace implicitly means stopping military support for Ukraine and accepting Russia's territorial gains, often without naming the aggressor. Monitoring reports on the Slovak disinformation scene document that pro-Kremlin actors accused the West of prolonging the war and labelled supporters of aid to Ukraine as "warmongers," while refusing to blame Russia (DREVENA & IŽÁK, 2023). This framework is hybrids-wise effective because it uses the positively charged term "peace" to push through a political outcome favourable to the aggressor.

These blocks overlap with other motifs that increase emotional transferability and social credibility: sanctions as self-harm; aid to Ukraine as ignoring domestic social problems; "puppets of the West" as a personalization of betrayal; and Ukrainians as a morally discredited group. Reports on the most viral Russian disinformation of 2022 cite as dominant anti-Ukrainian frames the claims that Ukrainians are "Nazis," that they abuse or steal aid, and that they are "ungrateful" refugees (STRAKA, 2023). These frames are designed to reduce public willingness to support Ukraine and increase antagonism towards refugees.

Platform ecology explains why the same narratives appear repeatedly, but in different forms: Facebook (utilizing viral statuses and short videos), YouTube (focusing on long interviews and "alternative" discussion formats), and Telegram (providing a less moderated environment with high audience closure). Research reports indicate that after 2022, part of the disinformation scene shifted to Telegram, which became a space for pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives and, at the same time, an environment with a very low risk of mainstream "counter-contact"(HARDOŠ, 2025).

The relationship between online discourse and political elites plays a special role. An analysis of the discourse of Slovak MPs in the immediate aftermath of the invasion shows continuity between frameworks compatible with Russian propaganda and previous conspiracy themes, such as claims of government control by foreign actors (LINTNER et al., 2023). This continuity supports the argument that pro-Russian framing after 2022 is not an isolated geopolitical

position, but part of a broader illiberal discursive repertoire that is also activated in other crises.

The section on "multipolarity and civilizational alternatives" deserves special attention, as it shows the overlap between hybrid narratives and traditional Russophile myths. Historical and literary analyses describe how ideas about Russia as the protector of Slavic culture and a morally superior ally penetrated Slovak society as early as the 19th century (KUZMÍKOVÁ, 2013). This symbolic repertoire is being reactivated in modern discourse through frameworks about the end of US hegemony, the multipolar order, and Russia as the bearer of "traditional values" as opposed to the "decadent" West.

The year 2024 also illustrates that hybrid frames are intertwined with to domestic crises and transform them into anti-Western interpretations. After the assassination attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico in May 2024, pro-Kremlin conspiracy narratives linking the attack to Ukraine, NATO, and "liberal elites" spread across the European information space. Such narratives are documented in the EUvsDisinfo database and EDMO (the EU's largest interdisciplinary network to counter disinformation) overviews of false stories spread in Slovakia in connection with the assassination (e.g., claims of links to political actors, a "foreign trace," or the alleged Ukrainian detention of family members) (*The attack on Robert Fico:* 2024).

Discussion

The findings support the hypothesis that contemporary Russophilia in Slovakia is predominantly a reactive "anti-" framework. In the analysed discourse, Russia functions more as a symbolic counterweight to the West than as a realistic integration alternative. This pattern corresponds with the results of content analyses, where anti-EU and anti-Western frames ("dictates of global institutions") dominate among the most frequent narratives, and with monitoring reports that repeatedly record frames of a "proxy war" and the delegitimization of NATO.

The hybrid effect manifests itself through narratives fulfilling security functions even without overt propaganda. Instead of a direct call to "support Russia," they offer frameworks that weaken the social consensus on support for Ukraine, question the legitimacy of sanctions, normalize relativism ("there is no truth"), and polarize society. This effect is compatible with European analyses of FIMI (as a tool of war) (EEAS 2023) and with the literature on information operations, which emphasizes that the goal is often to undermine trust and coherence, rather than to convince people of a single "truth" (IVANČÍK, 2021).

The model of Russophilia as a resonant frame can be summarized into three mechanisms of resonance according to the theory developed by Benford and Snow (BENFORD & SNOW, 2000).

The first is narrative fidelity: hybrid narratives find support in domestic stories about Slavism, the need for a protector, and the scheme of "the West as a threat" versus "the East as protection." Framing theory explicitly works with the idea that a frame resonates if it is culturally compatible with existing myths; historical analyses of the reception of Russophilia explain why the language of protecting values and civilizational alternatives can be culturally credible even with a weak empirical basis.

The second is experiential commensurability: the frameworks connect to the audience's everyday experiences (energy, inflation, regional inequality), with sanctions or aid to Ukraine being offered as a simple explanation for social discomfort. The repeated narrative that "we are helping them instead of our own" alongside linking the war to domestic social problems, increases the mobilization potential of the frames even among people who may not have a stable geopolitical position.

The third is the salience of identity politics and anti-establishment sentiment: a reactive "anti-Western" framework (against liberalism, against "Brussels," against "Washington") can unite actors across the ideological spectrum because it provides a simple "us vs. them" scheme. Part of the population is sensitive to a Manichean view of conflict and there is continuity between pro-Russian frameworks and other conspiracy themes in political discourse. Russophilia thus serves as a "cultural glue" for hybrid narratives: it gives them historical legitimacy and emotional energy.

For security practice, this implies that resilience to hybrid threats cannot be built solely through fact-checking and platform moderation. Research on information operations points out that traditional debunking of falsehoods tends to be psychologically weak and delayed; effective countermeasures must be preventive, framework-based, and long-term. This reinforces the importance of strategic state communication and the strengthening of media literacy, which teaches people to recognize manipulation through framing (who is the aggressor, what is peace, what is sovereignty), rather than focusing solely on individual factual inaccuracies.

Conclusion

The article has shown that after 2022, Russophilia in the Slovak online space manifests itself primarily as a resonant framework for hybrid narratives. The dominant frames are Russia as a provoked victim, Ukraine as a proxy, NATO/EU as aggressive or "dictatorial" structures, and "peace" as a discursive cover for unilateral concessions. These frameworks regularly intersect with anti-Ukrainian motifs (discrediting refugees, "fascism," and corruption) and with the socio-economic framing of sanctions as the cause of domestic problems.

The tested hypothesis about the "anti-Western" character of Russophilia is confirmed by the fact that the most stable frames focus on delegitimizing the

West and its institutions. The concept of resonance explains why narratives work selectively: especially where there is distrust of elites, a sense of cultural threat, and a predisposition to conspiracy explanations. From a security perspective, this means that effective resilience strategies must combine the detection of harmful content with policies that strengthen social cohesion, trust in institutions, and the ability to deal with the complexity of conflict without simplistic, identity-driven frameworks.

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POSSIBILITIES OF ANALYZING BEHAVIOURAL, PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL AND COMMUNICATION MANIFESTATIONS IN CRIMINALISTICS INTERROGATION METHOD

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Introduction

Criminal interrogation is a significant communicative-tactical method used in the detection and clarification of criminal activity, with its effectiveness is determined not only by tactical procedures but also by the quality of interpersonal interaction between the interrogator and the interviewee. In this context, the importance of psychological contact comes to the forefront, as it is primarily formed during the initial stage of the interrogation and fundamentally influences its subsequent course.

Contemporary approaches in criminalistics and forensic psychology emphasize the need for a systematic and deliberately managed establishment of this contact prior to the commencement of substantive questioning. The initial phase of interrogation thus does not serve merely a formal function, but represents a space for reducing situational tension, stabilizing the communication framework, and obtaining preliminary insight into the natural behavioural and communicative manifestations of the interviewee (METEŇKO, and all., 2025).

Understanding of the so-called "behavioural baseline"—that is, the typical verbal and non-verbal expression of an individual in a neutral context—is crucial for the subsequent interpretation of changes in their behaviour during interrogation. Without such a reference point, any analysis of manifestations is significantly limited and may lead to incorrect conclusions. This aspect becomes particularly important in the context of non-verbal communication, the interpretation of which is highly dependent on the individual reference frame of a given person. Only on the basis of knowledge of their natural expressions is it possible to assess whether observed deviations constitute a meaningful indicator of a change in their psychological state or a reaction to a specific stimulus.

In addition to establishing psychological contact, systematic observation and documentation of the interviewee's behaviour also play an important role. The transition from intuitive assessment to structured recording of specific manifestations contributes to increased objectivity and enhances the usability of the obtained information in subsequent procedural stages. At the same time, this approach reflects the requirements of legality, ethical standards, and transparency in the conduct of interrogation as a procedural act.

The presented study focuses on the possibilities of analysing behavioural, psychophysiological, and communication manifestations in the context of criminalistic interrogation, with a specific emphasis on its initial stage. The aim is to highlight the importance of systematically establishing psychological contact and its impact on the quality of information obtained, as well as on the possibilities of a more objective assessment of the manifestations of the interviewee.

Methodology

The methodological framework of the presented study is based on the interdisciplinary nature of the examined issue, situated at the intersection of criminalistics, forensic psychology, and communication sciences (METEŇKO et al., 2025). In line with the epistemological foundations of security studies, it is necessary to emphasize that knowledge in this field is not uniform but is derived from multiple theoretical approaches and paradigmatic frameworks. The study of security phenomena develops in various directions, aiming not only to expand the theoretical base but also to ensure the practical applicability of acquired knowledge (IVANČÍK, 2021).

In terms of research design, the study is conceived as a theoretical-analytical work based on a qualitative approach. The dominant method applied is the analytical-synthetic method, through which relevant scientific and professional sources from the fields of criminalistics, interrogation theory, forensic psychology, and communication processes are systematically examined. Subsequently, a synthesis of the acquired knowledge is carried out, enabling its systematization and application within criminalistic practice.

An integral part of the methodological procedure is also the comparison of selected approaches to interrogation, particularly comparing traditional criminalistic-tactical methods with modern approaches based on the establishment of psychological contact and the use of cognitive techniques (LACA, 2022). This approach reflects the development of criminalistics as a scientific discipline that integrates knowledge from various fields and moves towards a higher degree of objectification of information obtained in the process of investigation (METEŇKO & METEŇKOVÁ, 2025).

An important component of the methodology is the descriptive approach aimed at identifying and categorizing behavioural, psychophysiological, and

communication manifestations of a person during interrogation. Emphasis is placed on their interpretation within the context of an individual reference framework, which is established during the initial stage of the interrogation (METEŇKO et al., 2025). Without this framework, it is not possible to reliably assess deviations in behaviour, particularly in the area of non-verbal communication, which is significantly influenced by individual and situational factors.

The methodological approach also reflects the need for systematic and objective recording of the course of interrogation and the behaviour of the interviewee. Such documentation represents an important prerequisite for the subsequent evaluation of obtained information and its use within the evidentiary process. An essential part of the methodology is also respecting the legal and ethical limits of criminal interrogation. The research approach is based on the principles of voluntariness, protection of the rights of the interviewee, and the prohibition of coercive measures, which is consistent with contemporary trends in criminalistic practice and forensic psychology (CHOVANEC, 2024).

The presented study has the character of a theoretical synthesis of knowledge and does not represent empirical field research. Its aim is to systematize existing scientific knowledge and confront it with the needs of criminalistic practice, particularly in the field of analysing behavioural, psychophysiological, and communication manifestations in the initial stage of interrogation.

Psychological Contact in Criminal Interrogation

Criminal interrogation may be understood as a method of criminalistic practice through which legally and criminalistically relevant information is obtained from the memory traces of an individual in the form of testimony (KONRÁD et al., 2021). Criminalistic methods represent an essential set of tools used in the process of detecting and clarifying criminal activity. These include not only interrogation, but also other criminalistics methods such as identification procedures in recognition, including confrontation, interrogation validation on crime scene, CSI, criminalistics experiment and reconstruction, among other procedures designed to verify and supplement information obtained during criminal proceedings (METEŇKO et al., 2025). The effective application of these methods requires a systematic and professional approach, as their outcomes significantly influence the evidentiary process (BARTA, 2022).

Criminalistic interrogation represents a specific form of social interaction in which purposeful communication takes place between the interrogator and the interviewee. Its course and outcome are determined not only by the application of criminalistic-tactical procedures but also by the quality of the established psychological contact (METEŇKO et al., 2025). This contact can be understood as a fundamental prerequisite for effective communication, enabling the development of trust, the reduction of psychological tension, and the creation of

conditions necessary for obtaining relevant information. The course of interrogation is not determined solely by legal and procedural frameworks, but also by the manner in which communication with the interviewee is conducted within these limits, which creates space for the application of psychological and communication-based approaches (LACA et al, 2025).

The importance of psychological contact is particularly evident in the initial stage of interrogation, which sets the framework for subsequent communication. At this stage, the process goes beyond formal procedural introduction and involves the gradual establishment of a working relationship between the participants. As noted in criminalistic theory (CHOVANEC & VAJZER, 2022), the quality of this initial contact influences the level of cooperation, the willingness of the interviewee to provide information, and the overall dynamics of the interrogation (LACA, 2022).

Psychological contact should be built on the principles of respect, neutrality, and professionalism. Contemporary approaches to interrogation emphasize non-authoritative and non-intrusive communication styles that reduce resistance and support spontaneous expression. This shift reflects broader developments in criminalistics, particularly the integration of insights from forensic psychology and the emphasis on the qualitative aspects of information gathering.

From a communication perspective, psychological contact also contributes to stabilizing the interaction and minimizing disruptive factors. The interviewee is often exposed to stress, uncertainty, or concern about potential consequences. Establishing an appropriate communicative environment is therefore essential for mitigating these influences and facilitating the acquisition of relevant information.

At the same time, psychological contact forms the basis for the subsequent analysis of verbal and non-verbal manifestations. Without its adequate establishment, it is not possible to reliably identify behavioural deviations that may be significant for evaluating the credibility of the statement. The initial stage of interrogation thus fulfils not only a communicative function but also a diagnostic one, as it enables the creation of a reference framework for further assessment of behaviour.

2. Non-verbal Communication and Behavioural Analysis in Interrogation

Non-verbal communication constitutes an integral part of interpersonal interaction and plays a significant role in the context of criminal interrogation. It encompasses a wide range of manifestations, including facial expressions, gestures, posture, eye contact, as well as paralinguistic features such as tone of voice, speech tempo, and pauses. These elements accompany verbal expression and often provide additional information that may not be explicitly articulated (CHOVANEC, 2024).

In the interrogation setting, non-verbal manifestations are frequently perceived as potential indicators of psychological states, such as stress,

uncertainty, or cognitive load. However, their interpretation requires a cautious and context-sensitive approach. Contemporary perspectives in criminalistics emphasize that non-verbal behaviour cannot be interpreted in isolation or based on generalized assumptions, as similar manifestations may have different meanings depending on the individual and the situation (LACA, 2022).

A fundamental prerequisite for meaningful interpretation of non-verbal behaviour is the establishment of an individual reference framework, often referred to as a behavioural baseline. This baseline is formed during the initial phase of interrogation through neutral and non-threatening communication, allowing the observer to identify the interviewee's typical patterns of behaviour. These may include habitual speech rate, standard eye contact, typical gestures, or posture.

Only in relation to such a baseline can deviations in behaviour be assessed with a certain degree of reliability. Without this reference point, there is a significant risk of misinterpretation, particularly when relying on stereotypical or so-called "universal" indicators of deception. In practice, changes in non-verbal behaviour should therefore be evaluated primarily as signals of change rather than direct indicators of deception or truthfulness. It is also necessary to consider that non-verbal manifestations are influenced by a variety of intervening variables. Factors such as fatigue, health condition, medication, emotional state, or situational stress may significantly affect the behaviour of the interviewee. Consequently, the presence of certain behavioural changes does not automatically imply deceptive intent but may reflect the individual's response to the overall interrogation context.

Behavioural analysis in interrogation should therefore be understood as a supportive, rather than decisive, component of the evaluation process. Its primary contribution lies in identifying moments that warrant further attention or clarification through appropriate questioning. In this sense, non-verbal communication serves as a complementary source of information that, when interpreted in context and in conjunction with verbal content, may enhance the overall understanding of the interviewee's responses.

A systematic approach to observing and recording non-verbal manifestations is essential for increasing the objectivity of such analysis. Linking specific behavioural changes to particular questions or moments during the interrogation allows for a more structured evaluation and reduces reliance on subjective impressions. This approach aligns with the broader tendency in criminalistics to move from intuitive assessment towards more standardized and documented procedures. It is essential to distinguish between behavioural manifestations associated with deception and those resulting from situational stress. Research shows that individuals exposed to interrogation may exhibit increased tension, avoidance behaviour, or controlled expressions regardless of the truthfulness of their statements. Misinterpretation of such manifestations represents one of the

most significant risks in behavioural analysis and may lead to incorrect conclusions if not assessed within a broader context.

3. Psychophysiological manifestations and their interpretation in interrogation

Psychophysiological manifestations represent physiological and autonomic responses that accompany an individual's psychological experience in stressful or evaluative situations. In the context of criminal interrogation, these responses include changes in breathing, muscle tension, perspiration, voice modulation, and overall motor activity. They reflect the activation of the autonomic nervous system and form the biological basis of many observable behavioural manifestations.

Interrogation itself represents a specific stress-inducing situation in which emotional tension and cognitive load are naturally increased. Importantly, such activation is not exclusive to deceptive individuals but is also present in persons providing truthful statements. Stress responses may therefore reflect situational pressure, fear of consequences, or uncertainty rather than intentional deception.

From a psychophysiological perspective, increased activation of the sympathetic nervous system may manifest as accelerated breathing, increased perspiration, muscle rigidity, and motor restlessness. At the same time, individuals may attempt to regulate or suppress these reactions, which can result in controlled or rigid behaviour. These manifestations are thus not direct indicators of deception, but rather non-specific responses to psychological load and social evaluation.

Empirical research indicates that individual physiological or behavioural indicators generally have low diagnostic value when assessed in isolation. Their interpretation must therefore be context-dependent and based on a comparison with the individual's typical pattern of responding. Without such a reference framework, there is a high risk of misinterpreting general stress reactions as indicators of deception (CHOVANEC, 2024).

This limitation is also evident in instrumental approaches such as polygraph examination, which relies on measuring autonomic responses. Even in this context, the interpretation is based on comparing reactions to relevant stimuli with baseline responses obtained under controlled conditions. This principle further highlights the importance of establishing an individual reference framework in non-instrumental interrogation settings.

Practical Application of Preliminary Conversation in Establishing Psychological Contact

From a tactical perspective, interrogation typically consists of several phases, including an introductory stage, a phase of uninterrupted narration, and a phase

of questioning (KONRÁD et al., 2021). The preliminary conversation represents an important tool of criminalistic tactics applied in the initial stage of interrogation with the aim of creating conditions for effective communication. Unlike the interrogation itself, which is focused on establishing specific facts, the preliminary conversation has primarily a stabilizing and diagnostic function.

In practice, this phase is based on neutral and non-threatening communication, utilizing topics such as biography or everyday topics. Such interaction places low cognitive demands on the interviewee and allows for natural responses without significant stress. At the same time, it creates space for observing spontaneous verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

A key benefit of the preliminary conversation is the establishment of an individual reference framework of behaviour, which is essential for interpreting changes during the interrogation. Through neutral interaction, it is possible to identify typical characteristics of the interviewee's behaviour, such as speech rate, response formulation, eye contact, and gestures. These observations subsequently serve as a basis for assessing deviations when transitioning to substantive questions.

The preliminary conversation also contributes to the stabilization of the communicative situation. The interviewee is often in a state of increased tension, which may affect their behaviour. Creating a predictable and controlled communication environment therefore increases the likelihood of more authentic responses. Establishing such an environment is essential for facilitating cooperation and supporting the provision of truthful information. Establishing psychological contact is considered a key factor influencing the effectiveness of interrogation, as it involves appropriate influence on the psychological state of the interviewee in order to facilitate a truthful and complete statement (KONRÁD et al., 2021).

From a practical perspective, it is important that the preliminary conversation is conducted purposefully. It is not an informal exchange without intent, but a managed process aimed at achieving specific objectives. The interrogator should maintain consistency in conduct, clarity in communication, and an appropriate level of empathy, while avoiding evaluative or confrontational elements.

In practice, the preliminary conversation may be initiated through brief, natural, and non-threatening remarks or questions related to the immediate situation or to everyday matters.

Typical examples include statements such as:
"I understand that this environment is not very pleasant,"
"I will try to keep this as short as necessary," or questions such as
"How did you get here?",
"I hope this did not disrupt your plans too much today," and
"What do you do in your free time?"

Such prompts do not aim to obtain evidentiary information, but rather to reduce initial tension, facilitate communication, and create space for observing the person's spontaneous communicative and behavioural style.

An integral part of this process is also the recording of relevant observations. Although this phase is not primarily focused on obtaining evidentiary information, insights into the interviewee's behaviour may be significant for the overall assessment of the interrogation. Linking specific behavioural manifestations to particular situations enables more accurate evaluation.

The preliminary conversation thus fulfils both communicative and diagnostic functions, and its effective use represents an important prerequisite for the subsequent course of interrogation.

5. System of Behavioural Assessment as a Tool for Supporting Analysis

In order to increase the level of systematicity and objectivity in the evaluation of behavioural manifestations during interrogation, it is possible to apply simple scaling tools that enable structured recording of observed behaviour. Based on a synthesis of theoretical knowledge and practical experience, an indicative model for assessing communicative, non-verbal, and emotional manifestations has been developed, as presented in Table 1 – Table 3.

Table 1 System for assessing communicative manifestations in interrogation Source: own elaboration

Communication Behaviour			
Parameter	1	2	3
Speech Rate	slow	moderate	fast
Speech Fluency	hesitant	moderate	fluent
Response Detail	brief	moderate	elaborate
Reaction Spontaneity	delayed	moderate	immediate

Table 2 System for assessing non-verbal manifestations in interrogation Source: own elaboration

Nonverbal Behaviour			
Parameter	1	2	3
Facial Expression	subdued	moderate	pronounced
Gestures	minimal	moderate	pronounced
Body Posture	closed	moderate	open
Eye Contact	low	moderate	high
Motor Activity	calm	moderate	restless

Table 3 System for assessing emotional manifestations in interrogation
Source: own elaboration

Emotional Behaviour			
Parameter	1	2	3
Emotional Expressivity	low	moderate	elevated
Tension	low	moderate	high

Overall Behavioural Style

☐ reserved

☐ appropriate

☐ expressive

Notes (typical manifestations)

_____

_____

Changes During the Interrogation (comparison)

☐ decreased fluency

☐ increased tension

☐ reduced eye contact

☐ rigidity

☐ increased self-control

☐ other: _____

In practical use, the assessment system may be filled in during the preliminary informal conversation, when the person is still responding in a relatively natural manner and is not consciously focused on structured evaluation of their behaviour. These observations may then be compared with the person's reactions during the interrogation itself in order to identify relevant changes in communicative, non-verbal, and emotional manifestations.

The model is based on the assumption that individual behavioural manifestations can be evaluated on a scale of intensity, where the middle value represents a natural, neutral expression, and the extreme values indicate deviations that may require increased attention. In the domain of verbal communication, this includes parameters such as speech rate, fluency, and level of detail in responses. In the non-verbal domain, observed features include facial expression, gestures, body posture, and eye contact. A separate category is formed by emotional manifestations, particularly expressivity and tension.

The purpose of this model is not to determine the veracity or deceptiveness of a statement, but to support the systematic observation of changes in behaviour. Identified deviations should be understood as signals that may indicate the need for follow-up questions or a more detailed examination of a specific part of the interrogation.

At the same time, it is essential to emphasize that the interpretation of these manifestations must always be based on the individual behavioural reference framework of the interviewee. Without its establishment, particularly during the initial phase of interrogation, there is a significant risk of misinterpretation. The proposed model should therefore be understood as a supportive tool aimed at increasing transparency and consistency in behavioural assessment, rather than as an independent evidentiary instrument.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Practice

The study highlights the importance of psychological contact in the initial stage of criminal interrogation as a key factor influencing the quality of communication and the reliability of obtained information. Establishing an individual behavioural reference framework enables more accurate interpretation of subsequent changes in verbal, non-verbal, and psychophysiological manifestations.

The findings confirm that individual indicators of behaviour have limited diagnostic value when assessed in isolation. Their interpretation must therefore be contextual and based on comparison with the individual's typical pattern of behaviour. Without such a reference framework, there is a significant risk of misinterpretation, particularly in situations involving increased stress.

From a practical perspective, the preliminary conversation represents an effective tool for both reducing psychological tension and obtaining an initial understanding of the interviewee's communication style. The proposed system of behavioural assessment may support structured observation; however, it should be understood as a complementary tool rather than a standalone method of evaluation. From the perspective of police practice, the effective application of such approaches also depends on the quality of professional preparation and continuing education of police officers. In this respect, attention should be paid not only to tactical skills, but also to ethical standards, professional self-regulation, and the development of objective evaluative approaches in police training (KAŠČÁK, 2023).

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THE IMPORTANCE OF POLICE MORALE FOR THE IMAGE OF THE POLICE

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Introduction

We are witnessing social upheaval and unrest in contemporary society. Instead of the 21st century being characterized solely by technological progress, improved living standards, and longer life expectancy due to advances in medicine, conflicts, military interventions, and destruction are becoming increasingly frequent. Scenes of police brutality, excessive use of force, and abuse of authority are being recorded all over the world, and such images have not bypassed the Balkan countries. Growing dissatisfaction with living standards and the general state of affairs in the country has driven people onto the streets and sparked a wave of protests. In these conditions, the police have the task of calming the situation, preserving public order and peace, and ensuring the safety of citizens.

The police represent one of the key institutions of every contemporary society. Their primary role is to protect the safety of citizens, maintain public order and peace, and enforce the law. In addition to legal powers and professional competencies, a significant factor in the functioning of the police service is the morale of police officers. Police morale encompasses a set of ethical values, attitudes, and professional standards that guide police officers in the performance of their official duties.

A high level of morale in a police organization contributes to building public trust, increases the efficiency of police work and strengthens its reputation in the public. Conversely, a lack of professional ethics can significantly damage the image of the police and lead to a loss of public trust, considering that this image largely depends on the way the public perceives the work of police officers, their professionalism, integrity and attitude towards citizens.

Police ethics and police morals

Police ethics is a young theoretical discipline that uses the knowledge and methods of other sciences, primarily general and applied ethics, the sociology and psychology of morality, , legal sciences, criminology, victimology, penology and others. It deals with the research of the police as a working environment and

profession characterized by a specific morality. Furthermore it examines the criteria for moral evaluation of the overall actions of police officers and general police activity, as well as the goals and meaning of moral will and actions within the police (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009; ANDRIĆ & TOMAŠEVIĆ, 2019; ANDRIĆ & IVANOVIĆ, 2023). Practical police ethics, on the other hand, is a set of principles, values and standards that police officers are guided by on a daily basis. The basic principles of practical police ethics are integrity, impartiality, fairness and justice, respect for human rights and freedoms, responsibility, professionalism, and operational transparency, etc. (LUKIĆ, 2011; ANDRIĆ, 2025).

There are several types of morality, specificially, each culture, society and social group has its own specific morality. Applied police ethics is a special type of work ethics. The basic determinants of police morality are general social, political, socio-spiritual and international factors. These include the type of civilization, the basic material conditions and development of society, the characteristics of the social system, the class-strata structure, the level and state of social equality, the general value system, and the level of democracy. They also encompass the general attitude of society towards the police profession and the relationship of the state towards the police, the form of the political system and political regime, the characteristics and level of state organization, political tradition, political culture, and the relationship between the legislative, executive and judicial branches. Finally, these determinants involve the state of the judiciary, the relationship of the state towards the police and the police towards the state, the development of general social culture, religion, science, philosophy, art, the value system, and the development of general normative consciousness, i.e., general social morality, law, customs, and traditions, as well as collective mentality and social-psychological characteristics. The content is further shaped by the activities of international institutions that directly regulate the field of police morale such as the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, the Helsinki Committees, as well as Amnesty International, Transparency International, etc. (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009).

The determinants of police morality are the assumptions underlying its emergence - that is, the factors that conditioned and led to the emergence of this specific type of morality - while inspirations and sources directly contribute to its content, effectively constituting the foundation of police morality. We divide these sources into primary and secondary. The primary, direct sources of police morality are the standards of universal morality, the standards of civilizational, epochal and societal morality, as well as the standards of general professional morality, relevant international deontological instruments and deontological documents of related professions (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009). Secondary, indirect sources of police morality include law, custom, tradition, and other sources and inspirations (JEVTOVIĆ 2009).

Furthermore, the deontological documents of related professions have transferred the moral norms of certain related professions into police morality. These primarily include the ethical standards of professional military personnel

and judges, such as the three old principles of legal morality known as the "Precepts of Law" – "Live honestly", "Do no harm to anyone" and "Give to each his due" (*Iuris praecepta sunt haec: Honeste vivere, alterum non laedere, suum cuique tribuere*). From the medical profession, with which the law enforcement shares a humanistic character, police morality adopts the principle "First of all, do no harm" (*Primum non nocere*) (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009).

Beyond these types, determinants and sources of morality, it is necessary to examine the protagonists, or rather, the bearers of police morality, which are the police institution, the police organizational unit, the police collective and police officers. The primary subject of police morality is the individual police officer, along with his moral attitudes and behaviour. They face the greatest risk of violating moral norms and being directly sanctioned, given that they are in direct contact with the beneficiaries of the effect of police morality.

Police officers have discretionary decision-making power, through which their moral attitudes and moral personality are expressed, and their actions are exposed to moral assessment and moral sanctions. Consequently, the overall moral status and image of the police depend on their actions and respect for the norms of general social and professional morality, while the police collective represents the core of professional morality because it is the bearer of professional culture (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009).

Finally, this framework encompasses the beneficiaries of the effects and consequences of police morality. Police officers, adhering to general social and work ethics principles in their work, contribute to the preservation and protection of fundamental human freedoms and rights, as well as the dignity and integrity of individuals and groups.

Thus, while the protagonists of morality stand at one end of this spectrum and the beneficiaries of its effects stand at the other, the space between them is occupied by the highest human values and interests, the rights of citizens, and overall professional morality. We can divide the beneficiaries of the effects of police morality into external and internal. External beneficiaries in the broadest sense include the environment, humanity and the human race; complementary social institutions (such as the courts, prosecutor's office, legal profession, medical profession, and other security services); the social community and state organization (encompassing state order, sovereignty and territorial integrity); and individual members of the social community (regarding their fundamental freedoms and human rights) (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009). Logically, the most general and broadest addressee is humanity as a whole, while the direct addressee is the individual member of society. Conversely, the internal beneficiaries include the police institution and its organizational unit (through valid personnel policies and compliance with operational procedures); the police collective and profession; and the individual police officer (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009).

The structure of police morality

The structure of police morality, as with all other comprehensive moral systems, consists of the values, norms, attitudes and behaviours of police officers in the performance of their duties and police work. However, it is not merely a personal matter of the individual and or a collection of individual morals, attitudes and values, rather, it represents a collective consciousness that influences the way police officers make decisions and act in certain situations. The norms of police morality must be higher because of the very nature of the police profession, discretionary powers and the right to the legitimate use of force.

Police morality is based on the norms of general social morality, which is enhanced through the process of education and training. The components of general social morality include the moral norm, moral judgment and moral sanction. Based on an internalized system of norms of general morality, an individual evaluates his or her own and others' behaviour as good or bad and makes a decision on moral sanctions (such as moral contempt or moral disgust) (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009; LUKIĆ, 2011).

From the structure of police morality understood in the broadest sense, we can first distinguish the following elements: the specific consciousness of moral subjects, which consists of general moral attitudes, as well as values, principles and norms; awareness of morally relevant situations during police activities and service; moral reflection and moral attitudes that are expressed through moral behaviours (actions); and finally the process of moral sanctioning itself, which constitutes a core component of police morality (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009).

We distinguish four basic structural components of police morality:
1) A complex of specific values and norms, attitudes and reflections, shaped into a complex of consciousness,
2) A corpus of work ethics that regulates the work process of the police service, which is expressed through respect for the basic principles and values and standards of the police profession – such as zeal, diligence, agility, etc.,
3) A specific work spirit that is necessary in performing police work (due to the very nature of the police profession) – encompassing readiness and sacrifice, courage, collegiality and solidarity, high moral values, etc.,
4) The formal-aesthetic dimension of the actions of members of the police profession (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009).

Finally, we will look at the state of police morality, which is inseparable from general social morality and general professional morality. Indeed, modern society is *de facto* in a moral crisis, or rather, undergoing decadence on a global level. Despite increasing normative and legal regulation, guaranteed fundamental freedoms and rights of man and citizen are increasingly threatened. In recent years, police morality and police conduct have been under increasing scrutiny and (moral) judgment by the public (ANDRIĆ, 2026). Due to the specific nature of the

work they perform and their direct contact with other subjects and bearers of general social morality, police officers are expected to have a higher level of moral awareness, and sanctions for violators of the principles of police morality are increasingly severe (FATIĆ, 2014). Consequently, it is citizens who express the greatest interest in the state of police morale, followed by political actors, civil servants and members of other professions that share the humanistic character of the police profession (JEVTOVIĆ, 2009).

Due to the availability of open sources, the Rudolf Archibald Reiss Police Association conducted a survey among Serbian citizens regarding trust in the police force of the Republic of Serbia. The data are more than devastating. Over 70% of respondents have little or no trust in the police, while 41.7% believe that the police mainly serve the interests of political parties, and only 6.1% of respondents trust the police. Over 72% of them believe that politicians have complete control over the work of the police in Serbia. Furthermore 37.8% of respondents think that the police primarily protect the interests of the Government, 9.4% believe that the police protect only the interests of the highest-ranking officials, while 55.6% of respondents answered that police officers are professional only occasionally (ANDRIĆ, 2026).

The function and image of the police

The police are a state service responsible for maintaining public order and peace Law enforcement operations and duties are regulated by the Law on the Police of the Republic of Serbia (Law on Police Nos. 6/2016, 24/2018, 87/2018: Arts: 3-31). In performing these tasks, police officers must adhere to internationally accepted standards of conduct and the Code of Police Ethics.

The Code of Police Ethics prescribes and establishes the rules of ethical conduct for police officers in the performance of their duties, namely the application of measures and actions, that align with international instruments and the European Code of Police Ethics. The Code emphasizes respect for human and minority rights and freedoms, respect for the Constitution and the law, the suppression of illegality and the obligation to refuse unconstitutional and unlawful orders, proportionality in the use of powers and means of coercion, and the prohibition of discrimination, torture and inhuman treatment or punishment, while maintaining professionalism and integrity (Code of Police Ethics No. 85/2023: Arts. 5-17).

From the emergence of the first security guards to the modern police force, the view has been maintained that a police officer must possess certain qualities and character traits. An officer should exhibit integrity, represent the highest moral standards within society, and remain calm, composed, sober and dispassionate. Furthermore, they are expected to be a family man with a strong sense of responsibility, enjoy a good reputation in society, act humanely and respect the dignity and integrity of every person. Finally, they must refrain from

committing misdemeanors or criminal acts, remain incorruptible, and above all, serve as a role model (FATIĆ, 2014). Policing is not just a job, but a calling based on a sense of duty (KESIĆ & ZEKAVICA, 2013). Sir Robert Peel, wrote twelve rules of conduct for police officers, which require the police service to:

1. Maintain stability, efficiency, and an organization structured according to a military model,
2. Operate under the control of the Government,
3. Achieve a decline in crime as evidence of efficiency,
4. Provide information on significant crime trends,
5. Distribute forces across time and space,
6. Exhibit perfect calm,
7. Maintain a decent appearance that inspires respect,
8. Secure reliable and trained/qualified personnel as the foundation of efficiency,
9. Assign a number to each officer,
10. Implement centralized police management for accessibility,
11. Hire officers on a probationary basis, and
12. Keep reports for better planning of police forces. (MILAŠINOVIĆ & JEVTOVIĆ, 2014, 343-344).

In contemporary society, four basic functions of the police are distinguished: the administrative function (performing tasks in the field of state administration, such as processing citizenship, residence, personal documents and travel documents, etc.), the criminal function (preventing and suppressing crime), the misdemeanor function (preventing and detecting minor offenses), and the normative function (executing police operations and enforcing regulations) (MILAŠINOVIĆ & JEVTOVIĆ, 2014, 345). In addition to these basic functions, four core activities of police officers are also distinguished – law enforcement, maintaining order, collecting data, and service duties (MILAŠINOVIĆ & JEVTOVIĆ, 2014, 345).

Police officers are responsible for protecting the democratic order and the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and laws. In their work they interact with citizens, whether through service activities security enforcement or the fight against crime (MILAŠINOVIĆ & JEVTOVIĆ, 2014, 347). This interaction serves as the foundation for building citizens' trust and shaping the public image of law enforcement.. In this relationship with the public, police activities can be prophylactic and preventive, aimed at preventing crimes and misdemeanors, and repressive – aimed at suppressing offenses and apprehending ~~the~~ perpetrators. Furthermore, depending on whether these activities are initiated by citizens or police officers, they can be classified as reactive (initiated by citizens), or proactive (initiated by the police officers themselves) (MILAŠINOVIĆ & JEVTOVIĆ, 2014).

The relationship between police officers and citizens is important for the success of the police in maintaining public order and peace, protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens and combating crime, as well as for shaping the public image of law enforcement. The cooperation and trust of the public in the police depend on the way in which police officers carry out their duties and adhere to standards of ethical conduct. "Practice shows that the sins of one police officer are paid for by the vast majority of members of that profession, because the image and behaviour created in the public are reflected on the police community in general" (MILAŠINOVIĆ & JEVTOVIĆ, 2014, p. 354). If there is frequent abuse of position and an excess of authority, distrust and resistance arise in society. The image of the police largely depends on the reputation created in the community over a longer period of time, which is built through clearly defined and addressed messages, taking responsibility for the measures, activities and procedures taken, transparency in work, and proactive and ethical actions (MILAŠINOVIĆ & JEVTOVIĆ, 2014, pp. 349-350).

When citizens perceive the police as a professional, responsible and fair institution, they are more likely to respect the law, report crimes and cooperate with police officers in maintaining public order and safety. On the other hand, a negative/bad image of the police can lead to distrust, reduced cooperation from citizens and a weakening of the legitimacy of the police service. The formation of this image is influenced by numerous factors, among which the professionalism and behaviour of police officers, the level of transparency in their work, respect for human rights, as well as the way the police communicate with the public stand out. The everyday actions of police officers in direct contact with citizens are of particular importance, because it is through these interactions that citizens most often form their opinion of the police.

Conclusion

The image of the police is of utmost importance in contemporary society, because the success of its work depends on public trust, especially within the concept of community policing, which involves the joint work of police officers with citizens and local governments to solve security problems at the local level. This cooperation is particularly important in crime prevention (partnership in crime prevention), as well as forecasting crime development, analyzing community preparedness and developing prevention programs (VUKOVIĆ, 2020).

A positive public image of the police is achieved by respecting and protecting human rights and freedoms, avoiding discrimination on any grounds, refraining from exceeding authority, avoiding the use of excessive force, exercising discretionary powers fairly, fighting corruption, and ensuring transparency. Furthermore it requires actively opposing any form of corruption, combating all forms of crime (e.g., white-collar and blue-collar crime) and adhering to the rules of the Code of Police Ethics. A police officer who abuses authority and uses

excessive force (exceeding authority and excessive use of force) not only acquires the epithet of a "dirty cop" but also tarnishes the reputation of the entire police profession. This sends a message to the public that those who should protect human rights and freedoms and fight crime are also those who deny these rights.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that building and maintaining a positive image of the police is a long-term process that requires a high level of professionalism, respect and adherence to the norms of police ethics and accountability in work. In this context, the morale of police officers is one of the key factors that contributes to creating public trust and strengthening the reputation of the police in society.

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THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMBATING MONEY LAUNDERING IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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Introduction

The legal provisions of Act No. 300/2005 Coll., the Criminal Code, as amended (hereinafter referred to as the "Criminal Code"), underwent a significant change in 2021. This change took effect on January 1, 2021, when the offense of receiving stolen property was abolished and the offense of money laundering was amended. Prior to January 1, 2021, money laundering was legislatively regulated as follows.

„*Section 233*
(1) Any person who performs any of the following with regard to income or other property obtained by crime with the intention to conceal such income or thing, disguise their criminal origin, conceal their intended or actual use for committing a criminal offence, frustrate their seizure for the purposes of criminal proceedings or forfeiture or confiscation:
a) transfers to himself or another, lends, borrows, transfers in a bank or a subsidiary of a foreign bank, imports, transits, delivers, transfers, leases or otherwise procures for himself or another, or
b) holds, hides, conceals, uses, consumes, destroys, alters or damages,
shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of two to five years.
(2) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of three to eight years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1
a) by reason of specific motivation, or
b) and obtains larger benefit for himself or another through its commission.
(3) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of seven to twelve years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1
a) as a public figure,
b) and obtains substantial benefit for himself through its commission, or
c) acting in a more serious manner.
(4) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of twelve to twenty years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1,
a) and obtains large-scale benefit for himself or another through its commission,
b) with respect to things originated from the trafficking in narcotics, psychotropic, nuclear or high-risk chemical substances, weapons and human beings or from another particularly serious felony, or
c) as a member of a dangerous grouping.
Section 234
(1) Any person who fails to inform or report
a) the facts indicating that other person has committed the criminal offence of laundering the proceeds of crime pursuant to Section 233, or
b) an unusual business transaction,

although he has such obligation by virtue of his employment, profession, position or function, shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of two to eight years.
(2) The act referred in paragraph 1 shall not give rise to criminal liability if the offender cannot make the information or report without the risk of criminal prosecution against himself or a close person.[1]"

Under the Criminal Code in force and effective until January 1, 2021, the crime of Sharing was defined as follows.
„*Section 231*
(1) Any person who conceals, transfers to himself or another, leases or accepts as a deposit
a) a thing obtained through a criminal offence committed by another person, or
b) anything procured in exchange for such a thing,
shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of up to three years.
(2) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of three to eight years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1,
a) and obtains larger benefit for himself or another through its commission,
b) by reason of specific motivation, or
c) uses such thing for his own business purposes.
(3) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of seven to twelve years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1,
a) and obtains substantial benefit for himself or another through its commission, or
b) acting in a more serious manner.
(4) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of twelve to twenty years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1,
a) and obtains large-scale benefit for himself or another through its commission, or
b) as a member of a dangerous grouping.
Section 232
(1) Any person who, by negligence, conceals or transfers to himself or another a thing of considerable value obtained through a criminal offence committed by another person, shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of up to one year.
(2) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of between six months and three years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1, and enables another to disguise the origin or disclosure of a thing obtained through a criminal offence committed in the territory of the Slovak Republic or abroad.
(3) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of one to five years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1,
a) and obtains substantial benefit for himself or another,
b) acting in a more serious manner, or
c) with respect to things originated from the trafficking in narcotics, psychotropic, nuclear or high risk chemical substances, or from another particularly serious felony.
(4) The offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of three to eight years if he commits the offence referred to in paragraph 1, and obtains large-scale benefit for himself of another through its commission.[2]"

As mentioned above, the following criminal offenses were amended as of January 1, 2021. The amendment resulted from the adoption of Act No. 312/2020 Coll. on the Enforcement of Decisions on the Seizure of Property and the Administration of Seized Property, and on Amendments to Certain Acts. The

[1] Sections 233 and 234 Act No. 300/2005 Coll., the Criminal Code in force and effective until January 1, 2021.
[2] Sections 231 and 232 Act No. 300/2005 Coll., the Criminal Code in force and effective until January 1, 2021.

explanatory memorandum to this Act indicates, among other things, that legally binding acts of the European Union have been transposed and implemented.
In this case, these included Directive 2014/42/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 on the freezing and confiscation of instrumentalities and proceeds of crime in the European Union, Directive (EU) 2018/1673 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2018 on the fight against money laundering by criminal law, Directive (EU) 2019/713 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on combating fraud involving non-cash means of payment and their counterfeiting and alteration, replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/413/JHA, the implementation of Council Regulation (EU) 2018/1805 on the mutual recognition of freezing orders and confiscation orders, Council Regulation (EU) 2017/ 1939 of October 12, 2017, implementing enhanced cooperation for the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor's Office, and Regulation (EU) 2018/1805 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the mutual recognition of freezing orders and confiscation orders[3].

Currently, the legal elements of the legalization of proceeds of crime are as follows.
"*§ 233*
(1) Any person who acquires, possesses, or uses property that constitutes the proceeds of a criminal offense committed by another person within the territory of the Slovak Republic or abroad shall be punished by imprisonment for up to four years.
(2) A person shall be punished in the same manner as in paragraph 1 if they
a) conceal or transfer to themselves or another person an item that is the proceeds of a criminal offense committed by another act within the territory of the Slovak Republic or abroad,
b) alters the nature of an item that is the proceeds of a criminal offense committed by another person within the territory of the Slovak Republic or abroad, conceals it, or otherwise disposes of it with the intent to enable themselves or another person to evade criminal prosecution, punishment, or a protective measure, or the enforcement thereof or
c) conceals the existence of property that is the proceeds of a criminal offense committed by another act within the territory of the Slovak Republic or abroad, in particular by concealing its criminal origin, its location, or the ownership or other rights thereto.
(3) The offender shall be punished by imprisonment for one to five years if he or she commits an act referred to in paragraph 1 or 2
a) for a specific motive, or
b) on a larger scale.
(4) The offender shall be punished by imprisonment for two to eight years if he commits the act referred to in paragraph 1 or 2
a) as a public official,
b) on a significant scale, or
c) in a more serious manner.

[3] Explanatory Memorandum to Act No. 321/2020 Coll. on the Enforcement of Decisions on the Seizure of Property and the Administration of Seized Property, and on Amendments to Certain Acts. https://www.epi.sk/dovodova-sprava/dovodova-sprava-k-zakonu-c-312-2020-z-z.htm

(5) The offender shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of three to ten years if he or she commits the act referred to in paragraph 1 or 2
a) on a large scale,
b) in relation to property derived from a particularly serious crime, or
c) as a member of a dangerous group.
§ 233a
(1) Whoever, through negligence, conceals, transfers to himself or another, possesses, or uses an item of significant value that is the proceeds of a criminal offense committed by another person within the territory of the Slovak Republic or abroad shall be punished by imprisonment for up to two years.
(2) A person who, through negligence, enables another person to conceal the origin or the discovery of the origin of an item of significant value that is the proceeds of a criminal offense committed by another person within the territory of the Slovak Republic or abroad shall be punished in the same manner as provided in paragraph 1.
(3) The offender shall be punished by imprisonment for six months to three years if he commits the act referred to in paragraph 1 or 2
a) in relation to an item of significant value, or
b) in a more serious manner.
(4) The offender shall be punished by imprisonment for one to five years if he commits the act referred to in paragraph 1 or 2 in relation to property
a) of great value, or
b) derived from a particularly serious crime.
Common Provision Regarding Section 233 and Section 233a
In determining the type and extent of punishment for the crimes of laundering proceeds of crime under § 233 or § 233a, the court shall also take into account the penalty prescribed for the crime from which the proceeds of crime originate, if this Act prescribes a more lenient penalty for that crime.
§ 234
(1) Whoever fails to report or notify, despite such an obligation arising from his employment, profession, position, or function,
a) facts indicating that another person has committed the offense of laundering proceeds of crime under § 233 or § 233a or the offense of financing terrorism under § 419c, or
b) an unusual business transaction,
shall be punished by imprisonment for one to five years.
(2) The act referred to in paragraph 1 is not a criminal offense if the perpetrator could not have made the notification or report without exposing himself or a close relative to the risk of criminal prosecution.[4]*"*

Due to the amendment of this criminal offense a response from law enforcement authorities was also necessary. With regard to the author´s focus, we will now examine the changes that have taken place within the Police Force of the Slovak Republic regarding the investigation of criminal offenses related to the money laundering of proceeds from criminal activity. Given the changes in national legislation, legally binding European regulations, and other documents at the European (e.g., MONEYVAL) and supranational levels (FATF recommendations), as well as the high level of sophistication and new trends in money laundering, the substantive jurisdiction of units within the Police Force units for conducting investigations into the legalization of proceeds from criminal activity has been adjusted. On January 1, 2022, the National Centre for Specific Type of Crimes was established within the Police Force Presidium, under which

[4] Sections 233–234 Act No. 300/2005 Coll., the Criminal Code as amended.

the Financial Investigation Department was created. This department maintains jurisdiction over the investigation of this criminal offense. Other units with jurisdiction over this matter include the National Criminal Agency of the Police Force Presidium (currently the Office for Combating Organized Crime of the Police Force Presidium), the Border and Foreign Police of the Police Force Presidium and the Inspection Service of the Ministry of the Interior.

Methodology for Investigating the Laundering of Proceeds from Criminal Activity

When investigating the money laundering of proceeds from criminal activity, it is necessary to follow the structure of the methodology for investigating criminal offenses, specifically its individual components, which are outlined below:

1. Methods of commission and concealment.
2. Referrals for investigation.
3. Actions and measures in the initial stage of the investigation.
4. The subject and scope of evidence gathering and investigation.
5. The formulation and verification of investigative hypotheses, as well as planning and organization of the investigation.
6. Actions and measures in the subsequent stage of the investigation.
7. Cooperation and collaboration.

Due to the strict word limit of this paper, the author will focus primarily on requests for investigation submitted by the Financial Intelligence Unit of the Police Force Presidium and on interrogations as part of the actions and measures conducted in the subsequent stage of the investigation.

Referrals from the Financial Intelligence Unit of the Police Force Presidium (FIU) for investigation

The FIU refers matters pursuant to Section 26(2)(b) of Act No. 297/2008 Coll. on the on the Protection against the Legalization of Proceeds of Crime and on Protection against the Financing of Terrorism and on Amendments to Certain Acts (hereinafter referred to as the "Anti-Money Laundering Act") to law enforcement authorities if the facts indicate that a criminal offense has been committed. Furthermore pursuant to Section 26(3), it is stated that "*The Financial Intelligence Unit shall provide information and materials obtained under this Act to state authorities performing tasks in the field of protecting the constitutional order, internal order, and national security, if necessary for the fulfilment of their legally mandated tasks in the fight against*

terrorism and organized crime. The information provided shall not contain data regarding its originator[5]".
These reports may include information on unusual business transactions as well as other forms of reports treated as referrals.

Interrogation as a Procedure in the Subsequent Stage of the Investigation

From a theoretical perspective, we understand interrogation as a method of criminal investigation tactics, the aim of which is to "*obtain complete, unambiguous, truthful information from memory traces stored in people's minds regarding the factual circumstances of the event under investigation, which subsequently provides the opportunity to uncover the truth that forms the basis for clarifying the entire event under investigation*" (LACA, 2024, 88). To obtain relevant information during an investigation, it is necessary to follow certain tactical interrogation procedures, which include establishing psychological rapport, analysing what the person says during the interrogation, providing assistance in overcoming obstacles (e.g., maintaining the chronological sequence of the statement, allowing sufficient time to speak, etc.) and managing an interviewee who is giving false testimony (for example by pointing out that the current statement contradicts logic) (LACA, 2024, 98).

Currently, it is important for the investigator to also observe the non-verbal cues of the person being questioned during the interrogation. Above all, it is necessary to observe whether verbal statements align with non-verbal cues. It is also necessary to observe micro-signals that could indicate, for example, nervousness, stress and so on. Crucially, non-verbal cues must be evaluated as a whole and in their mutual context, encompassing involuntary gestures, eye movements, facial expressions, body language, and micro-expressions (LACA, 2025, 293).

During the interrogation in an investigation into the criminal offense of money laundering, it is necessary to focus on the specific method of laundering and on the proceeds themselves. It is also necessary to focus on the circumstances prior to the commission of the offense, the circumstances that existed during the commission of the offense as well as the circumstances that arose after the commission of the offense (VIKTORYOVÁ & STRAUS, 2015, 524).

Act on Protection Against Money Laundering

Act No. 297/2008 Coll. on Protection against the Legalization of Proceeds of Crime and on Protection against the Financing of Terrorism and on Amendments to Certain Acts regulates the rights and obligations of legal entities and natural

[5] Section 26(3) of Act No. 297/2008 Coll. on the Protection against the Legalization of Proceeds of Crime and on Protection against the Financing of Terrorism and on Amendments to Certain Acts.

persons in the prevention and detection of money laundering and the financing of terrorism[6].

This Act establishes core definitions, such as money laundering, terrorist financing, and suspicious business transactions, thereby providing a uniform terminological framework for its practical application. Furthermore it outlines the scope of obligated entities, which include, in particular, banks, financial institutions, and non-financial institutions, as well as selected professions such as attorneys and notaries. It imposes on them the obligation to adopt and implement appropriate control and preventive measures to prevent the laundering of proceeds from criminal activity or the financing of terrorism.

These entities are required to thoroughly identify and verify their clients, continuously monitor business relationships and individual transactions, and immediately report any unusual or suspicious circumstances.

The law also addresses politically exposed persons for whom it establishes a stricter control regime to prevent the risk of abuse of their position. Supervision of compliance with the obligations arising from the law is carried out by the relevant public authorities, with the Financial Intelligence Unit playing a key role.

The main objective of this Act is therefore to prevent the misuse of the financial system for the purposes of money laundering and terrorist financing while preventing the entry of proceeds of crime into the legal economy, thereby protecting the global economic system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the issue of the legalization of proceeds from criminal activity or money laundering currently represents a complex and rapidly evolving field that requires constant adaptation of both legislation and enforcement practices. Significant legislative changes particularly the amendment of the Criminal Code and the implementation of legally binding acts of the European Union reflect the need to respond more effectively and swiftly to new forms and increasingly sophisticated methods of committing this crime.

The issue of money laundering is addressed not only under criminal law but also through specific legislation focused primarily on its prevention and detection. The criminal law provisions in the Criminal Code define the elements of the offense and establish penalties for such conduct, thereby creating the basic framework for punitive measures in the Slovak Republic. The fight against money laundering is supplemented by preventive mechanisms and a system for the timely detection of unusual business transactions, which are regulated by the Act on Protection against the Legalization of Proceeds of Crime

[6] Section 1 Act No. 297/2008 Coll., on the Protection against the Legalization of Proceeds of Crime and on Protection against the Financing of Terrorism and on Amendments to Certain Acts

Given these factors, an effective fight against money laundering requires the interconnection of punitive and preventive tools, and close cooperation between law enforcement agencies, the FIU and other obligated entities. It is precisely this comprehensive approach that makes it possible not only to prosecute offenders but above all to prevent the infiltration of illicit funds into the legal economy, thereby helping to protect the stability of the global economic system.

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LIMITS OF HARMONIZATION: NAVIGATING THE LEGAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN SUSPECTS AND THE ACCUSED IN THE SLOVAK CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

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Introduction - Harmonization of the Criminal Procedural Code in relation to the accused and the suspect

In recent years, Slovak criminal law has undergone a series of significant transformations. Numerous amendments to the Criminal Code (Act No. 300/2005 Coll.) and the Criminal Procedural Code (CPC) (Act No. 301/2005 Coll.), were adopted to reflect and incorporate legislative changes aimed at aligning Slovak regulations with European Union legislation. One of the primary areas affected by this harmonization was the legal standing and rights of suspected and accused persons. The objective of strengthening the procedural rights of suspected or accused persons in criminal proceedings was formally expressed in the Resolution of the Council of the European Union of 30 November 2009, which introduced the Procedural Rights Roadmap. This roadmap serves as the foundational strategic document for strengthening the procedural standing of individuals within criminal proceedings. The core of this harmonization effort is defined by a series of key legislative instruments that dictate the minimum standards of protection for both suspects and the accused, which are subsequently regulated primarily, but not limited to, by:

- Directive 2012/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 May 2012 on the right to information in criminal proceedings, establishing the obligation to promptly inform individuals of their procedural rights.
- Directive 2013/48/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2013 on the right of access to a lawyer in criminal proceedings and in European arrest warrant proceedings, and on the right to have a third party informed upon deprivation of liberty.
- Directive 2016/800/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects

or accused persons in criminal proceedings, reflecting the need for specialized protection for vulnerable groups.

- Directive 2016/1919/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on legal aid for suspects and accused persons in criminal proceedings and for requested persons in European arrest warrant proceedings.

Most of these directives were implemented into the Slovak legal order continuously and without major complications. Directive 2012/13/EU was primarily implemented in Slovakia via Act No. 174/2015 Coll., which amended the CPC. It is important to note that while Slovak legislation already contained general provisions on the right to information, this amendment was crucial for formalizing and detailing these requirements, such as introducing the written Letter of Rights. Directive 2013/48/EU was implemented via Act No. 316/2016 Coll. into Section 34(4) of the CPC. However, the European Commission called on Slovakia to correctly transpose this Directive into national law. In the Infringement Package of June 2023, the European Commission stated that Slovakia "failed to correctly transpose the right to have a third person informed of the deprivation of liberty... Slovak law transposes incorrectly the requirements related to a possible waiver of the right of access to a lawyer" (European Commission, 2023) Directive 2016/1919/EU was also implemented via Act No. 316/2016 Coll. It can be stated that the provisions required by this Directive had already been appropriately incorporated into the CPC, with the notable exception of the definition of a "suspect". The legislature sought to rectify these transposition deficiencies in 2024 through Act No. 40/2024 Coll., which, among many other reforms, introduced the legal definition of a "suspect" and aimed to identify their specific rights within criminal proceedings.

The accused and the suspect prior to the 2024 amendment

Historically, the Slovak criminal justice system operated on a binary logic: an individual was categorized either as a witness or as the accused. The status of the accused has long served as the fundamental benchmark for procedural safeguards within Slovak criminal law. Under the pre-2024 framework of Section 33 of the CPC (Act No. 301/2005)[7] the transition to this status was strictly formalistic. A person could only be treated as the accused, and thus become entitled to the full catalogue of related rights, following the issuance of a formal resolution to commence prosecution by the competent Law Enforcement Authorities. In contrast, the category of the suspect represented a significant doctrinal

[7] "*A person suspected of committing a criminal offense may be considered an accused and subjected to the measures provided for by this Act against an accused person only once a resolution on the commencement of prosecution has been issued against them.*"

inconsistency. Prior to the 2024 reform, the CPC notably lacked a comprehensive legal definition of a "suspect", yet the term was utilized extensively throughout the CPC. This created a phase in the preliminary stages of investigation, where the state exercised its coercive power, but where the person of interest lacked a formalized procedural status. Evidence of this terminological presence, despite the lack of statutory definition, can be found in several provisions; for example:

- Section 2(20) CPC guaranteed the right to an interpreter if a suspect declared they did not speak the language of the proceedings.
- Section 85 (1) CPC allowed for the apprehension of a person suspected of committing an offence, even in the absence of a formal accusation, particularly when caught committing a crime.
- Section 99 (1) CPC authorized house and personal searches if there was a reasonable belief that a suspect was hiding within the premises.
- Section 155 (3) CPC where a suspect was obliged to submit to a body search and similar procedures.

Consequently, the state could employ its most invasive powers, such as deprivation of liberty, searches, or the enforced collection of biological samples, against individuals whose rights and legal standing were not explicitly regulated by any statutory provision. In essence, the suspect's status was defined more by the state's repressive actions than by protective legislation or a clear statutory framework. While Section 85(4) of the CPC provided a purported safeguard by requiring authorities to inform detainees of their rights and apply the rights of the accused "*proportionately*", this solution was inherently flawed. The term "*proportionately*" is characterized by extreme vagueness, effectively shifting the mandate of defining procedural protection from the legislature to the subjective discretion of individual police officers. As a result, suspects were burdened by the obligations inherent to criminal proceedings while being deprived of stable and predictable safeguards.

The accused and the suspect after the 2024 amendment

Act No. 40/2024 Coll., among a multitude of other changes, introduced a significant reform by providing a legal definition of the suspect and granting this person specific procedural rights. While the status of the accused remains unchanged, the 2024 amendment preserves the high standard of safeguards traditionally afforded to the accused.

The suspect was defined under Section 10(25) of the CPC as follows: "*A person suspected of committing a crime, or a suspect, is a person who is not the accused, but is caught in the act of committing a criminal offence, detained while committing a criminal offence or immediately thereafter, or caught in pursuit, or is suspected of a criminal offence based on a criminal complaint, other notification, or established facts. A suspect also includes a cooperating*

suspect under subsection 23." The definition itself is quite broad. The primary element to highlight is the negative definition, as it is noteworthy that the law begins with the phrase: "*A suspect is a person who is NOT the accused*." This represents a deliberate move by the Slovak legislator to maintain a strict differentiation between the pre-charge and post-charge phases. The EU legislative trend manifests in the legal shorthand "suspect and/or accused person" utilized across numerous Directives, including all those previously referenced in this text. This shorthand seeks to consolidate these procedural roles under the assumption that they inherently warrant identical safeguards, a convergence that the Slovak legal framework deliberately resists.

From the perspective of the Slovak criminal procedure, such a merger is undesirable because the status of the accused entails an extensive catalogue of rights designed to function within a strictly structured proceeding. It is imperative to recognize that the investigative phase is confined primarily to the preliminary proceedings. In the trial phase, where the judge assumes the role of an impartial arbiter, it is procedurally impossible for the court to remedy the investigative failures of the pre-trial stage. The judge cannot independently conduct investigations, nor is it the court's role to introduce new evidence that was not proposed by the parties or executed by law enforcement authorities during the preliminary investigation. Consequently, granting the suspect identical rights to the accused without the formal trigger of a charge would disrupt the functional balance between these two distinct phases of the criminal process.

Beyond merely establishing a legal definition of the suspect, the 2024 amendment formally codified a specific catalogue of procedural rights within the newly introduced Section 33b of the CPC. In stipulating the rights to be afforded to the suspect, the legislator opted for a comparative legislative technique rather than providing an exhaustive, independent list: "*A suspect shall have the rights and obligations of the accused, as well as the right to a defence in the full scope provided under this Act, unless this Act provides otherwise or unless the nature of the matter implies otherwise; this is without prejudice to the procedural rights granted to a suspect by an international treaty or a directly applicable, legally binding act of the European Union. A suspect has, in particular, the right to an adequate explanation of the circumstances establishing the suspicion against them; a description of these circumstances shall be provided no later than in the record of their interrogation, including the legal qualification of the act of which they are suspected. The suspect also has the right to be provided with a copy of the record of their interrogation*."

This new catalogue of rights directly reflects European Union requirements, specifically the right to information and the privilege against self-incrimination, representing a shift that aims to transform the suspect from a passive object of the proceeding into an active subject. However, a significant dogmatic problem arises from the legislative formulation because while the law suggests that suspects should enjoy the rights of the accused in their full scope, this principle is immediately undermined by a broad exception. The struggle to refine this status became further evident with the rapid adoption of amendment No. 248/2024

Coll., which revised the original "nature of the matter" clause due to its inherent lack of clarity in application. The amendment now specifies that certain rights are granted "*unless they constitute rights and obligations that, by their nature, can only be granted to the accused*".

However, it cannot be said that this new formulation has provided an absolute clarification regarding the specific rights to be afforded to a suspect. In effect, the legislator has replaced one legal uncertainty with another, leaving law enforcement authorities without clear guidelines to define which rights remain exclusive to the accused. This lack of clarity forces police officers to make subjective legal assessments on the spot. To address these ambiguities, Section 33b (3) of the CPC provides a corrective mechanism whereby, in cases of doubt regarding the scope of such rights and obligations, the prosecutor shall decide by issuing a resolution upon the motion of a police officer, against which a complaint is admissible (TAKÁČOVÁ, 2024).

Nevertheless, such a mechanism inherently risks legal instability, as a suspect's procedural protection may vary depending on the individual district or the investigator's personal interpretation. Given the numerous areas where inconsistent procedures and varying applications of suspects' rights occurred, the Prosecutor General's Office of the Slovak Republic issued a unifying document titled "Opinion of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Slovak Republic on the Procedural Status of the Suspect." This opinion was intended to clarify the prevailing uncertainties and harmonize the application of the law across the prosecutorial and investigative branches.

4. Practical obstacles to the effective exercise of suspects' rights

The precise moment an individual acquires suspect status remains a contentious issue in Slovak criminal procedure. While Section 33b (2) of the CPC mandates notification at the latest by the commencement of interrogation, this often creates a zone of legal ambiguity in earlier investigative phases. Although suspects are typically notified during direct measures such as detention, cases without an immediate arrest require a balance between the timing of the notice and the public interest in an effective investigation. This grants law enforcement a degree of procedural discretion to perform necessary investigative steps without immediate interference. However, such delays are legitimate only as long as investigative interests outweigh the suspect's right to notice, particularly during covert monitoring.

Regarding this tension, the Court of Justice of the European Union emphasizes that "national authorities must enjoy a certain degree of discretion in choosing the moment to inform the person that they are suspected or accused" (GENERÁLNA PROKURATÚRA SLOVENSKEJ REPUBLIKY, 2024, May 26). This discretion must not be used for tactical delays aimed at frustrating the right to a defence. Instead, investigating officers must evaluate the necessity of delays

during the planning phase, considering the crime's nature and modus operandi to find a tactical optimum. Ultimately, the notification must occur in time to ensure the real and effective exercise of defence rights, remaining strictly within the boundaries of a fair trial and legal certainty.

Another problematic area concerns the right of access to information. The struggle for transparency is evident in the limitations placed on the right ~~of~~ to access to the case file. Under Section 69 of the CPC, a suspect theoretically holds the right to inspect the file to prepare a defence; yet, a substantial limitation persists. While there is an absolute right to access and obtain a copy of the record of one's own interrogation, access to the broader case file remains at the sole discretion of the investigator. Access may be restricted or denied entirely if it is deemed to pose a "risk of compromising the investigation". Consequently, defence counsel is often forced to operate without access to the evidentiary foundation of the case, unable to assess the full weight of the evidence because an officer decided that transparency would jeopardize the proceedings. This creates an inherent inequality of arms, as the defence is deprived of the opportunity to effectively challenge the legality of the grounds for suspicion at the earliest possible stage.

The procedural status of a suspect in Slovak criminal justice is further complicated by the restrictive application of mandatory defence, which Section 37(1) of the CPC explicitly reserves for the post-charge stage (ŠAMKO, 2024). While the legislator's intent was to exclude suspects from the general regime of mandatory legal representation, this framework must be interpreted through a procedural lens compliant with Directives 2016/800/EU and 2016/1919/EU. These instruments mandate intensified protection for vulnerable persons, particularly minors, whose limited capacity to comprehend proceedings necessitates state-guaranteed legal aid regardless of a formal charge. In the Slovak system, this mandatory representation remains effectively restricted to these specific categories, leaving the vast majority of suspects in a precarious position. For such individuals, the right to a lawyer remains a choice they must navigate without the state-funded legal aid that is automatically afforded once a person is formally accused. This creates a critical disparity, as suspects who do not meet the vulnerability criteria are deprived of essential legal safeguards during the high-risk stages of the investigation.

Furthermore, case law from the European Court of Human Rights emphasizes that the absence of counsel during initial police contact can irreparably damage the fairness of the proceedings as a whole. Consequently, current regulations fail to provide a uniform guarantee of the equality of arms, as mandatory defence is treated as an exception rather than a foundational right for all suspects facing coercive measures. Ultimately, the state's failure to provide mandatory legal aid to all suspects during the preliminary phase creates an inherent procedural disadvantage compared to those who already hold the status of the accused.

Conclusion

The formal introduction of the suspect status in 2024 represents a significant milestone in Slovak criminal procedure. However, this analysis demonstrates that the current legal framework remains an incomplete regulatory product. It is necessary to acknowledge that this legislation is relatively recent and its implementation is in an early stage. While several issues remain outside the scope of this paper, the current shortcomings are part of a transitional period inherent to major legislative reforms. These initial implementation challenges do not signal a failed project but rather a requirement for gradual refinement through consistent judicial and investigative practice. By employing inherently vague formulations, the legislator has created a situation where the primary concern is that the effective guarantee of these newly codified rights now rests upon the subjective discretion of individual law enforcement officers rather than on clear statutory mandates.

This shift transforms procedural safeguards into discretionary privileges. Furthermore, the fundamental tension between the Slovak pre-trial stage and the European Union harmonization efforts remains unresolved. The Slovak investigative phase remains largely inquisitorial in nature and prioritizes secrecy and investigative efficiency over full adversarial transparency at the earliest stages. Therefore, granting identical rights to both suspects and the accused is not merely a practical challenge. Within the current dogmatic framework, such a measure is arguably undesirable for the functional integrity of the proceedings. Until the legislator provides a more precise demarcation of rights or until the courts establish a unifying interpretation, the suspect will remain in a state of legal uncertainty where they are no longer a non-existent entity but not yet a fully protected subject of the criminal process.

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ANTI-AMERICANISM AND PRO-RUSSIAN NARRATIVES AS HYBRID WEAPONS: STRATEGIC INFLUENCE AND DEMOCRATIC VULNERABILITY IN SLOVAKIA (2022–2024)

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 transformed the security environment of Central Europe and altered the tone of political debate in Slovakia. Questions that had earlier been framed as matters of foreign policy became matters of identity, loyalty, and institutional trust. Public controversy no longer concerned only how to respond to a distant war. It increasingly touched the meaning of sovereignty, the legitimacy of allied commitments, and the credibility of domestic institutions that defended Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic orientation. In that environment, anti-American and pro-Russian narratives acquired a sharper strategic relevance.

This paper argues that anti-Americanism and pro-Russian narratives may be understood as hybrid weapons insofar as they weaken the democratic capacity of the state without relying on direct coercion. Their importance lies less in a simple defence of Russian interests than in their ability to reframe political conflict in ways that deepen distrust, normalize cynicism, and reduce confidence in democratic institutions, mainstream media, and allied commitments.

The theoretical starting point of the paper is the literature on anti-Americanism, strategic narratives, propaganda, and democratic erosion. Katzenstein and Keohane show that anti-Americanism should not be treated as a single ideology, but rather as a flexible repertoire of positions that may be social, sovereignist, cultural, or nationalist in form (KATZENSTEIN & KEOHANE, 2007). This conceptual openness is particularly useful in the Slovak case, because anti-American frames do not appear only as criticism of concrete US foreign policy decisions. They also emerge as symbolic shorthand for opposition to liberal globalism, progressive values, transnational elites, or the perceived moral disorder of the West.

A second conceptual anchor is the theory of strategic narratives. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle define strategic narratives as instruments through which political actors construct shared meaning about the international order, the

identity of political communities, and the legitimacy of political action (MISKIMMON et al., 2013). Such narratives matter because they do not merely describe events. They organize causality, assign responsibility, and suggest what kinds of action appear prudent, moral, or inevitable.

The paper therefore asks: how did anti-American and pro-Russian narratives work in Slovakia between 2022 and 2024 as instruments of strategic influence, and how did they interact with the democratic vulnerabilities of the country? The main claim is that their influence was strongest where they linked geopolitical messaging with domestic moral polarization. In other words, the political force of these narratives did not stem from foreign policy alone. It stemmed from their capacity to translate geopolitical resentment into a broader critique of democratic institutions, media authority, and liberal constitutionalism.

Methodologically, the paper proceeds as a theoretically informed interpretive case study. It does not claim to measure the total volume of hostile communication in Slovakia. Its purpose is more modest and, in political-science terms, more appropriate: to identify recurring frames through which anti-American and pro-Russian messages acquired domestic meaning and to relate those frames to structural features of democratic vulnerability visible in publicly available European and international reporting. throughout the period studied.

Anti-Americanism as a Strategic Repertoire

In the scholarly literature, anti-Americanism is a multidimensional phenomenon. It may denote resentment toward US power, moral critique of American capitalism, opposition to military interventions, civilizational aversion to perceived cultural liberalism, or sovereignist resistance to international leadership by Washington (KATZENSTEIN & KEOHANE, 2007). This matters because anti-Americanism is politically adaptable. It can be mobilized from the left against capitalism and imperialism, from the right against liberal cosmopolitanism, and from populist positions against allegedly corrupted domestic elites aligned with the West.

For Central and Eastern Europe, anti-Americanism also has a post-transformational dimension. The United States may be seen not only as a military ally, but as a symbol of the wider post-1989 order. Where disappointment with transformation, inequality, or elite corruption is strong, negative attitudes toward that order may be redirected toward America as its emblematic centre. In such contexts, the United States becomes less a concrete foreign actor than a signifier of a broader political and cultural settlement. This symbolic function makes anti-Americanism especially useful within hybrid influence operations, because it can join otherwise diverse grievances into one affective frame.

In the Slovak setting, anti-American motifs have tended to appear in connection with sovereignty, foreign military presence, sanctions, and the interpretation of war. Yet they also overlap with moralized narratives about

traditional values, "foreign agents", and the idea that domestic institutions no longer represent the nation but external interests. Here anti-Americanism ceases to be an ordinary foreign-policy attitude and becomes a delegitimizing discourse directed inward. Once domestic opponents are portrayed as instruments of Washington rather than as legitimate democratic competitors, the grammar of pluralism itself is weakened (LEVITSKY & ZIBLATT, 2018).

Strategic Narratives, Propaganda, and Hybrid Influence

The concept of hybrid influence is useful precisely because it captures the blurred line between external pressure and internal political conflict. It points to the combination of informational, psychological, diplomatic, economic, and political means designed to shape the target society without relying primarily on open conventional force. In such an environment, narratives are not secondary decoration. They are one of the central instruments through which political identities and threat perceptions are organized.

The literature on propaganda helps clarify the mechanism. Jowett and O'Donnell define propaganda as a deliberate and systematic effort to shape perceptions and direct behaviour in ways favourable to the propagandist (JOWETT & O'DONNELL, 2019). In current information environments, however, persuasion rarely depends on a single coherent doctrine. It often works through repetition, emotional activation, selective framing, and the erosion of trust in the institutions that would otherwise verify public claims.

Pomerantsev's account of contemporary information manipulation points in a similar direction. The central effect of disinformation is not always to make citizens believe one stable falsehood, but to make them doubt the possibility of reliable knowledge itself (POMERANTSEV, 2019). Paul and Matthews similarly describe the Russian "firehose of falsehood" model as a style of communication built on volume, speed, and repetition rather than consistency or truthfulness (PAUL & MATTHEWS, 2016). Rid's historical study of active measures adds that the long-term aim of such operations is often not conversion but disorientation and the corrosion of trust (RID, 2020).

Slovakia 2022–2024: Domestic Context and Democratic Vulnerability

The Slovak case is analytically significant because it combines firm formal anchoring in the European Union and NATO with recurrent social ambivalence towards the West, comparatively high receptivity to conspiratorial frames, and a political class willing to use geopolitical language for domestic mobilization. The external shock of the war in Ukraine therefore entered an already strained democratic environment.

A first relevant aspect is institutional fragility in the broader sense of public trust and perceived integrity of democratic authority. The European

Commission's Rule of Law reports on Slovakia noted persistent tensions related to the quality of public governance, legal predictability, and the stability of the institutional environment (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2023; 2024). Such reports do not by themselves prove susceptibility to foreign influence, but they identify the sort of structural uncertainty in which manipulative narratives travel more easily.

A second aspect concerns the media and information environment. Reporters Without Borders has observed that the Slovak media sphere combines pluralism with enduring vulnerabilities, including hostility toward journalists, politicized attacks on media credibility, and uneven public trust (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). In such a setting, anti-system and conspiratorial messaging gains traction because it can present itself not as an alternative interpretation within a common public sphere, but as an alleged escape from a public sphere that has already been branded corrupt or captured.

A third factor is the wider democratic mood in the region. The V-Dem Institute's democracy reports have documented pressures affecting liberal-democratic standards across parts of Europe, including polarization, attacks on independent scrutiny, and declining confidence in institutions of accountability (V-Dem Institute, 2024). Slovakia is not reducible to any regional pattern, yet the broader context matters because it shows that narrative susceptibility is rarely the product of one election cycle alone. It grows where democratic fatigue, political antagonism, and institutional distrust reinforce one another.

From the viewpoint of security studies, hybrid influence is strongest where foreign messages are domesticated by local actors. External narratives become politically effective only when they are translated into local languages of grievance, sovereignty, identity, and moral injury. The Slovak case is therefore best read not as a simple story of external penetration, but as an interaction between foreign narrative supply and domestic political demand.

Slovak Empirical Patterns: Public Debate, Sovereignty, and the War

A cautious empirical reading of the Slovak case between 2022 and 2024 suggests at least four recurring discursive patterns.

First, support for Ukraine was often reframed not as solidarity with a state under attack, but as participation in a foreign agenda. Within that frame, military or political assistance could be portrayed as evidence that Slovakia had surrendered autonomous judgement to stronger allies, especially the United States. The point of such rhetoric was not merely to criticize a specific policy; it was to redefine alliance commitments as proof of dependence rather than instruments of collective security. This turned a strategic debate into a question of symbolic subordination and made anti-Americanism politically useful as a language of wounded sovereignty.

Second, the language of peace was frequently used asymmetrically. Calls for restraint, negotiation, or de-escalation are, in themselves, legitimate parts of democratic debate. Yet in the Slovak discussion they were at times deployed in ways that blurred the distinction between aggression and response. The moral burden of escalation was shifted toward those supporting Ukraine, while Russian violence was relativized as a regrettable but understandable consequence of Western policy. Such framing did not need openly to praise Russia. It was enough to reclassify deterrence as warmongering and accommodation as prudence.

Third, anti-Americanism merged with culture-war themes. The United States was not discussed merely as a security actor, but as shorthand for a broader civilizational model allegedly linked to liberal moral change, progressive social agendas, and the weakening of traditional identities. In this context, geopolitical suspicion was fused with cultural anxiety. The result was analytically important because it widened the audience for anti-American narratives: one did not need to care deeply about foreign policy to accept a discourse in which resistance to the West appeared as defence of social normality and national continuity.

Fourth, and most consequentially, the credibility of institutional knowledge was repeatedly challenged. Mainstream media, expert communities, academic voices, and state institutions were often presented as untrustworthy or politically manipulated. Once this suspicion became routine, narrative competition no longer took place within a shared factual arena. It became a struggle between rival communities of belief, each claiming hidden access to what official actors supposedly concealed. This is the point at which disinformation becomes especially damaging to democracy, because it corrodes the procedures through which democratic societies distinguish error from evidence (BENNETT & LIVINGSTON, 2018).

These patterns do not prove that Slovak society was uniformly anti-American or pro-Russian. Such a claim would be unsustainable. What they do suggest is that specific narrative motifs became politically salient and repeatedly available for mobilization. Their force lay in the way they connected foreign policy, cultural grievance, institutional distrust, and electoral competition within a single interpretive package.

Why These Narratives Worked

The effectiveness of anti-American and pro-Russian narratives in Slovakia should not be explained by content alone. Three enabling conditions were especially important.

The first was distrust. Where public trust in institutions is low, counter-disinformation efforts face a structural handicap. Official corrections may be interpreted not as clarification but as further proof of manipulation. This is why democratic resilience cannot be reduced to fact-checking alone. It depends also

on the perceived integrity and legitimacy of institutions themselves (European Commission, 2023; 2024).

The second condition was polarization. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that democracy weakens when political opponents cease to regard one another as legitimate competitors and begin to see one another as existential threats (LEVITSKY & ZIBLATT, 2018). In such a climate, anti-American and pro-Russian narratives become more than arguments about foreign policy. They become markers of political belonging and instruments for discrediting rivals as servants of hostile interests rather than fellow citizens with different preferences.

The third condition was emotional utility. Hybrid narratives survive not only because they explain events, but because they provide morally satisfying roles. They offer a vocabulary of betrayal, humiliation, and awakening that resonates with citizens who feel neglected or deceived. Applebaum has shown that democratic disaffection often creates an appetite for explanations that restore moral clarity by dividing the world into authentic patriots and corrupt elites (APPLEBAUM, 2020). In this sense, the appeal of such narratives was affective as much as cognitive.

Taken together, these conditions help explain why such narratives may function as hybrid weapons. Their objective need not be the mass conversion of society to a coherent pro-Russian worldview. It is enough if they corrode common standards of legitimacy, weaken support for alliances, and entrench a climate in which democratic governance appears alien, manipulated, or morally void.

Conclusion

The Slovak case between 2022 and 2024 illustrates a wider point about contemporary hybrid influence. Anti-Americanism and pro-Russian narratives matter not simply because they recommend a different foreign-policy orientation, but because they may weaken the democratic infrastructure through which foreign-policy choices are judged. Their strategic effect lies in the erosion of trust, the blurring of moral responsibility, and the conversion of political disagreement into suspicion toward the very institutions that sustain constitutional democracy.

For that reason, responses limited to technical debunking will remain insufficient. A democratic state must of course counter falsehoods with accurate information, but it must also restore confidence in the institutions that produce and verify public knowledge. That requires steadier public communication, stronger protection of media pluralism, higher standards of political responsibility, and a persuasive democratic account of why alliance commitments and national sovereignty need not stand in opposition.

The broader lesson is sober but important: democratic vulnerability begins before any external attack becomes spectacularly visible. It develops gradually where distrust, polarization, and narrative opportunism converge. Slovakia's

experience in 2022–2024 therefore deserves attention not because it is unique, but because it demonstrates how easily strategic influence can take root when domestic democratic confidence is already under strain.

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AN INCONCLUSIVE POLYGRAPH OUTCOME AS A PROTECTIVE MECHANISM FOR TRUTHFUL EXAMINEES

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Introduction

Polygraph testing has been employed as an auxiliary instrument in police investigations for several decades. Polygraph testing results do not constitute admissible evidence in judicial proceedings, yet, they provide support for the collection of operational intelligence and for the assessment of the credibility of examinees' statements. Consequently, through its outcomes, polygraph examination exerts an influence on the course of criminal investigations and contributes to operational decision-making processes regarding the securing of evidence. In this regard, polygraph testing is most commonly utilized as a tool for guiding investigations, verifying obtained information, and eliminating suspicion regarding particular individuals.

Nevertheless, in practice, polygraph examination results are frequently interpreted in an oversimplified manner through a binary classification of "positive" or "negative,"– meaning the examinee is deemed either truthful or deceptive – which may give rise to erroneous conclusions and professional liabilities.

A particularly complex and often insufficiently elucidated aspect of polygraph examination is the inconclusive polygraph finding. In police practice, such a finding is commonly misconstrued as a failure of the test or as an indicator that the examinee is withholding information. This interpretation disregards the complexity of psychological, physiological, and procedural factors that may affect the outcome of the examination, as well as the fact that inconclusive findings occur more frequently among examinees providing truthful statements.

An inconclusive polygraph finding, when considered from a broader professional and ethical perspective, can perform a significant protective function within police proceedings. An inconclusive finding signals the necessity for further verification, serves as a cautionary indicator, and encourages restraint from making premature conclusions, thereby mitigating the risk of misclassifying examinees as truthful or deceptive and safeguarding their rights.

Understanding polygraph examination as an auxiliary rather than decisive instrument constitutes the foundation for its appropriate role in police

procedures. Such an approach enables the responsible utilization of polygraph testing results, which is of particular importance when considering the implications of inconclusive findings and their role in the subsequent course of investigative proceedings.

The objective of this study is to analyse the concept and determinants of inconclusive polygraph findings, as well as to underscore their significance as a mechanism for protecting truthful examinees and upholding the legality and professional standards of police practice.

Polygraph Testing and the Issuing of Findings in Police Practice

The essence of polygraph testing is based on the recording and analysis of an examinee's physiological responses to a specific stimulus. It is important to emphasize that the polygraph does not detect deception per se, but rather measures changes in physiological parameters that may be associated with the examinee's emotional and psychological responses. In a police context, changes in physiological responses are elicited by questions related to a criminal offense. The assumption underlying the use of the polygraph method in policing is that examinees attempting to deceive during polygraph testing will exhibit distinctive physiological responses resulting from the experience of stress or fear due to the threat of potential consequences arising from dishonesty or involvement in the preparation, commission, or concealment of a criminal act (NAKIĆ, 2024).

In police practice, polygraph testing is conducted exclusively with the examinee's consent, in accordance with applicable professional and ethical standards. Voluntary consent represents one of the key conditions for the legitimate application of the polygraph during an examination, as it contributes to the protection of the examinee's rights and the preservation of procedural integrity. Simultaneously, proper preparation of the examinee and a clear explanation of the purpose and procedure of the testing significantly influence the quality and reliability of the results obtained. In practice, a challenge may arise in encouraging an examinee to undergo polygraph testing when presented with the option to refuse testing without facing any legal consequences. The reason examinees nevertheless accept polygraph testing is the desire to confirm their truthfulness. Specifically, the objective of this type of examination is to identify individuals involved in the commission of a criminal offense, but primarily to eliminate falsely suspected persons (NAKIĆ, 2024, 27).

Polygraph testing results are provided upon completion of all phases of the examination, which include the introductory interview with the examinee, the polygraph examination itself, and the post-test interview. Additionally, thorough preparation regarding the examinee and the relevant criminal offense is mandatory prior to the examination. For these reasons, polygraph test results must always be interpreted within a broader context, taking into account the

individual characteristics of the examinee and the specific circumstances of the case.

The polygraph examiner issues the result of the polygraph examination—either an indication or an elimination. An inconclusive finding may be issued when, for any reason, the examiner is unable to reach a decision regarding the examinee's truthfulness or involvement in the commission of a criminal offense (BUDAHÁZI, 2012, 171). An elimination is provided for an examinee who, during polygraph testing on questions relevant to the criminal offense under investigation, does not manifest psychophysiological responses characteristic of deception. An indication is issued for an examinee who, during polygraph testing on questions relevant to the commission of a criminal offense, manifests symptomatic behaviour typical of an offender and psychophysiological responses characteristic of deception.

An inconclusive finding may be issued in the following cases (NAKIĆ, 2024):

- when precise conclusions regarding involvement in the criminal offense under investigation cannot be drawn due to extremely low manifestation of psychophysiological reactivity (non-responsive examinee);
- when precise conclusions regarding involvement in the criminal offense cannot be drawn due to extremely high manifestations of psychophysiological reactivity, rendering polygraph recordings unreadable;
- when, due to symptomatic behaviour characteristic of a manipulative individual combined with low psychophysiological reactivity (absence of responses across all questions and tests), the examinee cannot be eliminated as a possible perpetrator of the criminal offense under investigation.

In the converse situation, when the examiner faces an examinee who displays symptomatic patterns and behaviour characteristic of a truthful individual, yet psychophysiological responses typical of a manipulative person are recorded during testing, an indication is nevertheless issued as the result of the examination.

Inconclusive Polygraph Finding – Concept and Causes

An inconclusive polygraph finding represents an outcome of polygraph testing in which, based on recorded physiological responses and applied evaluation methods, it is not possible to reach a reliable conclusion regarding the credibility of the examinee's statements, that is, the examinee cannot be classified as either truthful or deceptive. Unlike findings that indicate the consistency or inconsistency of responses, an inconclusive finding highlights the limitations of polygraph testing under specific circumstances.

In contemporary polygraph literature, such a result is most commonly referred to as an *inconclusive result*, which denotes a situation in which the recorded physiological responses do not allow for a reliable differentiation between responses indicative of truthfulness and those indicative of deception (National Research Council, 2003). As Ginton (2022) emphasizes, the existence of this category of results constitutes an integral part of the evaluation methodology within the Comparison Question Test (CQT), as it reflects the statistical and interpretative limits of polygraph testing.

According to research on the statistical assessment of polygraphs, a certain percentage of results cannot be reliably classified as indicative of deception or truthfulness precisely due to the variability of physiological responses and methodological limitations (NELSON – KRAPOHL & HANDLER 2008). In this sense, an inconclusive finding represents a methodologically anticipated category of results, rather than a deviation from the proper conduct of polygraph testing.

Blikhar et al. (2022) emphasize that inconclusive results in polygraph examinations often serve as a protective mechanism for truthful examinees, as physiological responses do not always provide clear indicators of deception. Psychological and legal factors, including stress, individual characteristics of the examinee, and the testing context, significantly influence the interpretation of results, underscoring the need for cautious and standardized analytical procedures.

The causes of inconclusive polygraph findings, in both theory and practice, are most commonly categorized into three main groups: technical, psychological, and procedural (American Polygraph Association [APA], 2022).

Technical causes refer to factors that may affect the quality of physiological response recording, including improper sensor placement, equipment interference, as well as individual physiological characteristics of the examinee that complicate stable and reliable measurement. Consequently, technical causes of inconclusive polygraph results may originate from the polygraph device itself, the examinee, or the examiner. Although modern polygraph systems significantly enhance measurement precision and reliability, technical limitations cannot be completely eliminated under real police working conditions (KIRCHER & RASKIN, 2002).

Psychological factors represent one of the most frequent and complex causes of inconclusive polygraph findings, particularly among examinees providing truthful statements. Contemporary research also indicates that intense emotional responses, especially in individuals who have been unjustly associated with a criminal offense, can produce physiological reactions similar to those associated with deception. In such situations, differentiating between stress responses and responses related to information concealment may be challenging, thereby increasing the likelihood of an inconclusive polygraph finding (HONTS et al., 2021).

For certain examinees, the mere fact of being involved in a police procedure and being subjected to a credibility assessment can lead to heightened emotional and physiological reactivity. Under these circumstances, the physiological response does not reflect an attempt to conceal information, but rather a subjective experience of a stressful situation.

Anxiety particularly arises in examinees who perceive the polygraph test as an assessment of their personal integrity or professional credibility. Fear of the misinterpretation of the results may further amplify physiological reactivity in the examinee, without any intent to conceal information. Lykken (1998) identifies these examinees as a particularly sensitive group for whom an inconclusive finding may represent the most professionally responsible outcome of testing.

Honts, Kircher, and Raskin (1996) confirm that physiological responses recorded during polygraph testing can be strongly influenced by the examinee's emotional engagement, the intensity of stress, and individual differences in autonomic reactivity. Such responses do not necessarily reflect deception, but rather the subjective experience of stress and the context of the police procedure.

The expertise of the polygraph examiner becomes crucial in such situations, as it is the examiner's responsibility to clearly distinguish general agitation and the presence of anxiety in the examinee from reactivity associated with the fear of disclosure and punishment.

Procedural factors pertain to inadequate preparation of the examinee, an insufficiently clear explanation of the procedure, imprecise formulation of questions, or a failure to adapt the methodology to the individual characteristics of the examinee, all of which may negatively affect testing validity (APA, 2022). In addition, the examiner's communication style, degree of professional neutrality, and the quality of the working relationship established with the examinee represent important elements that may influence physiological responses during testing. In situations where procedural conditions are suboptimal, an inconclusive finding may indicate that the test results do not allow for a reliable and professionally responsible conclusion.

The Protective Function of an Inconclusive Polygraph Finding in Police Procedure

Contrary to the simplified understanding in which polygraph results are interpreted through a binary division into truthful and untruthful, an inconclusive finding highlights the limitations of testing and the necessity for professional restraint in drawing conclusions. It is precisely in this aspect that its key value lies as a mechanism that prevents premature and potentially erroneous labelling of examinees.

One of the fundamental protective functions of an inconclusive finding is reflected in the preservation of examinees' rights, particularly those of individuals who provide truthful statements but, due to psychological or situational factors,

do not exhibit clearly differentiated physiological responses. Research conducted under real police conditions at the Polygraph Laboratory of the Police Directorate for the City of Belgrade between 2020 and 2021 showed that, of 101 examinees, 17 inconclusive findings were issued. It was subsequently established that of these 17 examinees, 15 were truthful and two were untruthful (NAKIĆ, 2024, 117). Thus, the majority of inconclusive findings were issued for examinees who were actually truthful.

An inconclusive finding represents a signal that the obtained data does not provide a sufficient basis for drawing conclusions regarding the credibility of statements, thereby mitigating the risk of violating the presumption of innocence and other fundamental procedural rights. Simultaneously, it reduces the professional risk for police officers and polygraph examiners, as it signals the need to consult additional sources of information and employ other criminal investigative methods.

Moreover, the proper interpretation of an inconclusive finding contributes to the preservation of ethical principles in police work. As a procedure capable of exerting significant psychological pressure on the examinee, polygraph testing demands a high degree of professional sensitivity and responsibility. In this regard, an inconclusive finding functions as a corrective mechanism that limits the potential misuse of results and inappropriate pressure on examinees to "demonstrate" their truthfulness. As noted by relevant authors, the absence of a clear finding requires restraint in drawing conclusions and respect for the methodological limits of reliability (LYKKEN, 1998).

Discussion

The analysis of the inconclusive polygraph finding, considered through theoretical frameworks and practical aspects of police work, highlights its complex nature. The findings presented in this paper confirm that an inconclusive polygraph outcome should not be regarded as a weakness of the polygraph method, rather, it serves as an indicator of its objective limitations and the necessity for a professionally responsible interpretation of results. It is particularly significant that, in practice, inconclusive findings frequently arise in situations characterized by intense psychological and situational factors, especially among examinees providing truthful statements.

The misinterpretation of an inconclusive finding may lead to professional and ethical risks, including the unjustified prolongation of suspicion of the examinee and excessive reliance on the results of a single auxiliary instrument. In this context, the considerations presented in this paper corroborate the positions expressed in professional literature, indicating that polygraph examination does not allow for absolute conclusions, but instead requires interpretation within the broader context of the criminal investigation and other available information. Contemporary professional literature similarly emphasizes that polygraph test

results must be interpreted with due regard for the methodological limitations of the method and the existence of the inconclusive category as an integral component of the polygraph evaluation system (National Research Council, 2003; HONTS et al., 2021; GINTON, 2022).

An inconclusive finding, precisely because of its indeterminate nature, represents an important corrective mechanism that directs police officers toward additional verification and critical reflection.

The particular significance of this discussion lies in linking the inconclusive finding with the protection of examinees' rights and the preservation of professional standards in police practice. As emphasized in this paper, proper interpretation of this finding contributes to preventing the erroneous labelling of examinees and mitigating the risk of undermining the presumption of innocence. At the same time, an inconclusive finding reduces the professional risk for polygraph examiners, as it encourages restraint in drawing conclusions that exceed the methodological capabilities of the polygraph.

In this regard, the discussion confirms the central thesis of the paper: that an inconclusive polygraph finding serves a significant protective function within the police procedure. Its correct understanding and application contribute to the legality, ethical integrity, and credibility of police practice, as well as to strengthening a professional culture in which the limitations of the method are recognized and consistently respected. Such an approach allows the polygraph method to be employed as a useful auxiliary instrument without compromising examinees' rights or the integrity of the investigative process.

Conclusion

An inconclusive polygraph finding represents a specific and often misunderstood outcome of polygraph testing within police procedures. Rather than being regarded as a deficiency or failure of the polygraph method, this finding should be understood as a professionally responsible result that reflects the limitations of the polygraph and the complexity of human behaviour and responses. The analysis presented in this paper confirms that inconclusive findings most often arise as a consequence of a combination of technical, psychological, and procedural factors, with stress and the examinee's emotional engagement playing a particularly significant role.

This paper demonstrates that the proper interpretation of an inconclusive polygraph finding serves an important protective function, both with regard to the rights of examinees and in terms of maintaining professional and ethical standards in police practice. An inconclusive finding prevents premature conclusions, reduces the risk of incorrectly classifying examinees as truthful or deceptive, and encourages critical reflection and the use of additional investigative methods. In this way, it contributes to the legality and credibility of police work.

In this context, polygraph testing should be regarded simply as one of the instruments of criminal investigation, whose value derives from its correct application and interpretation within the broader system of evidence evaluation.

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PRISON REHABILITATION IN MOTION

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Introduction: Rehabilitation: Historical and Conceptual Evolution

The concept of rehabilitation has evolved significantly over time. The ideal of rehabilitation is closely linked to the history of the prison system and is believed to have emerged in the medieval era alongside church prisons, which at the time served to "save the souls of the unrighteous" (SCHNEIDER, 1979, 713). A growing aversion to the futility of the death penalty and the social instability perceived as stemming from poverty led to the adoption of both imprisonment and rehabilitation, which were primarily applied to younger offenders (RAYNOR & ROBINSON, 2009; SCHNEIDER, 1979).

Until the advent of the Renaissance, the primary means of rehabilitating criminals relied on punitive measures and their deterrent effect on future crimes. This shift along with the subsequent emergence of liberal ideals, helped lay the groundwork for rehabilitation. For example, the debate centered on the social contract, which sought to establish the state's responsibility to safeguard citizens and prevent social disorder. In contrast to the Classical School of criminology, where the emphasis was placed on the criminal act as a rational choice independent of context, the Positivist School viewed crime as a phenomenon external to the individual and beyond their control, focusing instead on biological and environmental characteristics (JEFFERY, 1959).

The Prison System: 1940-1970

United States of America

After World War II, there was a general trend towards rehabilitation driven by international optimism regarding the reconstruction and prosperity of the 1950s. The relatively low crime rates observed during this decade underpinned the optimism surrounding the possibility of rehabilitation. Additionally, there was an increase in professionals with backgrounds in the behavioural sciences within the prison system. The underlying assumption was that the offender was psychologically disturbed and required individualized treatment to address the emotional problems viewed as the root of criminal behaviour (ALLEN, 1981; MORRIS & ROTHMAN, 1995). Consequently, prisons adopting this new treatment-focused approach differed fundamentally from traditional "Big Houses", as they sought to house fewer inmates in separate dormitories and aimed to rehabilitate them, particularly through medical and psychiatric treatment (RUBIN, 2018).

The therapeutic orientation of the rehabilitation landscape brought benefits, such as guiding administrative decisions within prisons; however, the staff was generally less qualified than necessary, leading to a constant ideological and professional conflict between prison guards and medical personnel (MORRIS & ROTHMAN, 1995). The first post-war prison was also built with the primary goal of rehabilitating inmates. This prison differed in its atmosphere and internal structure, which were tailored to group living.

The cells had windows, and the prison was equipped with a library, a gym, and educational areas, offering vocational and group training programs (MORRIS & ROTHMAN, 1995; ROTHMAN, 1983). Furthermore, rehabilitation strategies centered on social learning were reinstated after it became clear in the early 1960s that previous prison models had detrimental effects—as highlighted by Erving Goffman, who described how "total institutions" harmed inmates and stripped them of their identity (GOFFMAN, 1961).

Europe

Across Europe, the horror caused by World War II, the Holocaust, and the extermination of millions of people was deeply felt. Based on the lessons of this period, penal reforms focused on the legal rights of prisoners, a development that was unprecedented (MORRIS & ROTHMAN, 1995). Thus began the challenge of ensuring fair and humane punishment as well as reforming the institutions that administered it (MORRIS & ROTHMAN, 1995).

Around 1945, a new form of penal institution centered on community-based sentences was introduced, in which punishment extended beyond the prison walls. Some European countries, such as Denmark and Switzerland, developed "open prisons" on farms, in the open air, for "trustworthy" or low-risk offenders (MORRIS & ROTHMAN, 1995). In this sense, several European countries recognized that allowing greater freedom of movement and choice would foster more frequent contact with the outside world, and that this would serve as the most effective way to reintegrate offenders into society as ~~a~~ productive members. Similar to the U.S., these prisons focused on therapeutic and behavioural models. At the same time, there was a shift towards individualized sentencing, reducing imprisonment and similar sanctions in favour of more common penalties such as fines or suspended sentences, with a focus on individual treatment rather than mass incarceration (ANCEL, 1998; MORRIS & ROTHMAN, 1995).

The 1950s and 1960s were also dominated by the concept of treating the inmate, since society, according to reformers of the "Social Defense" movement, would be better off than if it insisted on the individual's moral responsibility before the law. Treatment ranged from psychiatric care to vocational training. This movement persisted, despite criticism and opposition, as a hallmark of the post-war emphasis on individual treatment and social protection (ANCEL, 1998; MORRIS- ROTHMAN, 1995). By the early 1970s, the periods during which inmates could enjoy freedom had expanded to include summer vacations with immediate family members, always under supervision.

Nothing Works

During the years when prisoner rehabilitation was given greater consideration and subjected to empirical testing – both in the United States and across Europe and Japan – the well-known "golden age" of economic growth was also underway (VONYÓ, 2008). Between 1950 and the mid-1970s, there was a prolonged expansion of production and international trade without any large-scale recessions (VONYÓ, 2008), marking a time of unprecedented economic reconstruction and expansion (GLYN et al., 1988). By the mid-1970s, however, signs of the erosion of this "golden age" became apparent. These included a slowdown in productivity, a 25% decrease in profits in net value added; a one-third decrease in the profit rate, and the internationalization of trade in goods,

which negatively affected the capacity of countries to regulate their macroeconomies. Additionally, inflation rates, which were driven by the decline in productivity growth and the rise in costs of imported goods, surged (GLYN et al., 1988).

It was precisely at this time, in 1974, that Robert Martinson published his work "What Works? – Questions and Answers About Prison Reform," in which he analysed 231 studies focused on prisoner rehabilitation conducted between 1945 and 1967 (MARTINSON, 1974). He sought to understand which programs worked, whether rehabilitation led to a reduction in recidivism – and, by extension, the successful reintegration of offenders – due to the paucity of data and knowledge on the subject at the time. The synthesis of this material offered one critical benefit: it allowed legislators, prison administrators, and other stakeholders to reach scientifically grounded conclusions regarding the success or failure of rehabilitation programs (PRATT et al., 2011).

Throughout his study, Martinson (1974) addresses seven questions related to the topic "what works?" and the effectiveness of offender rehabilitation (PRATT et al., 2011), focusing on issues such as education and vocational training, medical treatment, the effects of punishment, and the improvement of prison security (MARTINSON, 1974; PRATT et al., 2011). The author (MARTINSON, 1974) begins his analysis with the effectiveness of education and vocational training. Only one study demonstrated a reduction in the risk of recidivism from prison rehabilitation programs focused on education and vocational training; however, he attributes this outcome to biases in the study's experimental group (MARTINSON, 1974; PRATT et al., 2011). He then focuses on the effects of individual and group counseling, as well as various forms of psychotherapy. Similar to education and vocational training, the author (MARTINSON, 1974) reports that only a few studies present positive findings, while most show no effects or yield ambiguous results (PRATT et al., 2011). The placement of offenders in maximum-security prisons, which allows for greater control over inmates over long periods of time, was also disregarded in Robert Martinson's work (1974) due to a lack of evidence. In sum, the empirical evidence indicated the general ineffectiveness of offender rehabilitation. However, the most difficult part was understanding why rehabilitation was failing and why there were so few positive outcomes reported in the literature (MARTINSON, 1974; PRATT et al., 2011).

The findings of Martinson's (1974) study have been corroborated over the years by various authors in different countries and criminological domains (WEISBURD et al., 2017). However, he also proposed an alternative hypothesis: that the strategies he had reviewed were fundamentally insufficient to overcome or reduce an offender's tendency to continue engaging in crime (MARTINSON, 1974; PRATT et al., 2011). Thus, several factors amplified the impact of the study in question, ranging from its systematic nature to the reinforcement by various authors of the conclusions it drew, ultimately leading to the destabilization of the

rehabilitative ideal that had been constructed and developed up to that point (CULLEN, 2013; WEISBURD et al., 2017).

Martinson's work shifted the focus of the debate on treatment from the failure of the correctional system to the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation interventions. With regard to crime control, many criminologists began to devote themselves primarily to the destruction of knowledge demonstrating "what does not work"—rather than to its construction seeking to establish "what works" (CULLEN, 2013). A small group of scholars and researchers - namely Francis T. Cullen, Edward Latessa, and Patricia Van Voorhis - by refusing to abandon the rehabilitative ideal, helped sustain the principle that the state has an obligation to improve the lives of incarcerated individuals, rather than merely punishing them (CULLEN, 2013). The contributions of other researchers were likewise key to restoring the legitimacy of rehabilitation and demonstrating its effectiveness (CULLEN, 2013).

What Works?

Meta-analyses

One of the most common criticisms of articles aiming to demonstrate the positive effects of offender rehabilitation centered on their reliance on qualitative methodologies, such as narrative literature reviews, given the potential for subjective bias (CULLEN, 2013). One way to counterbalance this view is through the use of meta-analyses, as they allow for the verification of the average effect size across various studies regarding their impact on reducing crime or recidivism.

With the integration of meta-analyses in the field of criminology and the development of the principles conceptualized by the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, it was found that programs utilizing these principles, in addition to being considered "appropriate," consistently exhibited positive average effect sizes, indicating a decrease in recidivism rates. In contrast, interventions without a rehabilitative component commonly showed a slight increase in recidivism rates (ANDREWS et al., 1990; CULLEN, 2013). As the model was replicated, criticism quickly arose (LOGAN & GAES, 1993) regarding the potential misuse of meta-analyses and the arbitrary definition of the term "appropriate" to classify programs, which might have been dependent on the observed positive treatment outcomes (CULLEN, 2013). This suspicion made Mark Lipsey's subsequent meta-analyses (LIPSEY, 1992, 1995, 1999, 2009; LIPSEY & WILSON, 1993, 1998; LIPSEY et al., 2001; LIPSEY & CULLEN, 2007) particularly important, leading to three key findings.

First, that the narrative put forward by Robert Martinson was incomplete. Mark Lipsey and David Wilson (1998) observed a reduction in recidivism rates in their analysis of various studies involving different programs. Thus, the second finding relates to the heterogeneity of the effects of prison interventions, with some programs being more effective in reducing recidivism, specifically those focused on offender rehabilitation (CULLEN, 2013; LIPSEY & WILSON, 1998;

LIPSEY et al, 2000). The third contribution focused on exposing ineffective prison interventions, particularly deterrence programs (LIPSEY & WILSON, 1998). Thus, prison intervention programs with a punitive focus do not appear to have a significant deterrent effect (CULLEN, 2013). In this regard, with a few exceptions, punitive prison programs report no effect - and even negative effects - on reducing recidivism (CULLEN, 2013).

Contributions of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model

Successive meta-analyses and their results since the mid-1970s have yielded a wealth of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of offender rehabilitation. Furthermore, they have demonstrated that rehabilitation has positive effects on the offender, whereas punishment has minimal, nonexistent, or even criminogenic effects. In this regard, the focus shifted to operationalizing how to rehabilitate the offender, a task achieved by psychologists Donald Andrews, James Bonta, and Paul Gendreau through the development of the now-dominant "RNR Model" built on three core principles: risk (R), need (N), and responsivity (R) (ANDREWS et al., 1990; CULLEN & JONSON, 2011; CULLEN & SMITH, 2011). Their background as psychologists and their knowledge that intervention can alter behaviour—as observed in everyday psychological treatments—led them to believe, as well, that rehabilitation could improve the offender's life (CULLEN, 2013).

The main contribution of the RNR model in combating the "nothing works" paradigm lies in the principles on which it is based and their interconnectedness. Crucially, interventions must target high-risk offenders, address strong, malleable predictors of recidivism (criminogenic needs), and utilize treatment modalities capable of altering these dynamic risk factors (CULLEN, 2013).

Evidence-based practices

Rehabilitation received a further boost with the introduction of evidence-based practice into the prison system. Since the 1980s, there has been a growing movement to use evidence as the basis for decision-making in many fields, including medicine and education (TIMMERMANS & BERG, 2003; CULLEN et al, 2009). Additionally, calls have been made for criminal justice policies and practices, including the prison system, to be evidence-based (CULLEN & GENDREAU, 2000; CULLEN et al., 2009). Naturally, if the aim was to advance knowledge regarding effective ways to rehabilitate offenders, an evidence-based approach to decision-making became imperative (MACKENZIE, 2000). This development supported rehabilitation, as it gained traction in the correctional community precisely when published studies began to show the effectiveness of treatment and the ineffectiveness of deterrence programs and severe criminal sanctions (CULLEN, 2005).

The wealth of empirical evidence from meta-analyses regarding which programs are effective and which risk factors are dynamic, the development of a model based on fundamental principles for effective offender rehabilitation, and, finally, the integration into the prison system of the principle that decisions and programs must be based on scientific evidence marked the end of the "nothing works" era. It is now impossible to claim that "nothing works" (CULEN, 2013).

Current Programs

Rehabilitation involves interventions aimed at eliminating the propensity or desire to commit crimes. However, this concept also has a symbolic dimension, as it implies a return to a previous status: that of a law-abiding citizen, accepted by others, and enjoying the same rights as other members of the community. In other words, the rehabilitation of the offender may entail not only a behavioural change but also a symbolic process through which the individual sheds the negative label of "offender" and is reintegrated into the community after a period of exclusion, namely the sentence (POUDEL, 2023). There are unimodal rehabilitation programs, focused on altering a single risk factor (such as substance abuse); multimodal programs, which seek to alter multiple risk factors simultaneously (GILL & WILSON, 2016), or programs that aim to empower the inmate with socially acceptable internal and external resources to achieve their goals, all of which are tailored to the individual and their specific needs and circumstances.

Risk-Need-Responsivity Model

Today, the RNR model is the dominant model for offender rehabilitation (CULLEN, 2013), and its core principles are widely recognized.

First, the risk principle states that the rate of criminal recidivism can be reduced if the level and frequency of treatment are proportional to the inmate's risk of reoffending (BONTA & ANDREWS, 2007). In other words, the intensity of the intervention should be proportional to the risk of recidivism (ANDREWS & BONTA, 2010). Altough this appears logical, it may not always happen in practice, since an inmate with a low risk of recidivism tends to be more responsive and cooperative, which may lead to an inappropriate allocation of resources toward lower-risk individuals (BONTA & ANDREWS, 2007). The second principle, the need principle, states that rehabilitation should focus on criminogenic needs rather than non-criminogenic ones, with the aim of reducing the likelihood of recidivism. Criminogenic needs, or dynamic risk factors, are those directly related to criminal behaviour; therefore, altering them will directly influence the probability of criminal conduct (BONTA & ANDREWS, 2007; ANDREWS & BONTA, 2006; ANDREWS et al., 2006). Static risk factors are those that are immutable, meaning that rehabilitation will be unable to alter them. Criminogenic needs are divided into two categories within the primary predictors of criminal behaviour,

the "central eight," which comprise the "big four"—factors with the strongest statistical association with future criminal activity—and the "moderate four," with a weaker ssstatistatistical association. The final principle is the principle of responsiveness, which is divided into general responsiveness and specific responsiveness. General responsiveness refers to the fact that cognitive social learning interventions are generally more effective in teaching new behaviours, regardless of the specific nature of the behaviour (BONTA & ANDREWS, 2007). In other words, there are certain methods, such as social cognitive learning, that are generally useful and applicable to inmates (ANDREWS & BONTA, 2006). As for specific responsiveness, the intervention is now tailored to the offender's personal characteristics, taking into account personal, social, biological, and personality factors. Thus, rehabilitation takes on a character that must be tailored to each individual and their factors, as these can facilitate or hinder rehabilitation (BONTA & ANDREWS, 2007). The essence of this principle is that treatment can be enhanced if the intervention considers personal factors that facilitate the learning of prosocial behaviours.
statistical association.

The final principle is the responsivity principle, which is divided into general and specific responsivity. General responsivity refers to the fact that cognitive social learning interventions are generally more effective in teaching new behaviours, regardless of the specific nature of the behaviour (BONTA & ANDREWS, 2007). In other words, there are certain methods, such as social cognitive-behavioural learning, that are generally useful and applicable to inmates (ANDREWS & BONTA, 2006). As for specific responsivity, the intervention must be tailored to the offender's personal characteristics, taking into account personal, social, biological, and personality factors. Thus, rehabilitation takes on a character that must be tailored to each individual and their unique circumstances, as these can facilitate or hinder reintegration (BONTA & ANDREWS, 2007). The essence of this principle is that treatment can be enhanced if the intervention considers personal factors that facilitate the learning of prosocial behaviours.

Good Lives Model

Another model—albeit less dominant—in the field of offender rehabilitation, but one that has been gaining increasing support, is the "Good Lives Model." This model takes a strengths-based approach, aiming to "build on strengths," in contrast to the more traditional RNR model, where the focus is solely on changing criminogenic needs, or "addressing weaknesses" (PURVIS et al., 2011). It focuses on promoting each inmate's important personal goals, remaining responsive to their interests, abilities, and aspirations (PURVIS et al., 2011), while simultaneously reducing and managing the risk of recidivism (WHITEHEAD et al., 2007).

The Good Lives Model thus consists of two stages: the first stage in which the weight assigned to each primary good by the inmate is conceptualized

(referred to as "Good Lives Plan Flaws"), and the second stage in which the secondary goods that are preferable for obtaining the selected primary goods in a socially acceptable manner are established ("Good Lives Treatment/Intervention Plan").

Primary goods, as mentioned earlier, are the prisoner's goals values that individuals universally strive for or desire. These include: life (functional and healthy), knowledge, excellence in pleasure (seeking things one enjoys), excellence in work (e.g., recognition), excellence in life management (freedom to decide one's actions), peace (tranquility), relationships (including intimate, romantic, and family), community (the need to associate with others, such as attending various clubs), spirituality (meaning in life; introspection; religion), happiness, and creativity (PURVIS et al., 2011; SIEGERT et al., 2007).

Secondary goods, on the other hand, provide concrete ways to obtain primary goods and the means to that end (PURVIS et al., 2011). Roles, practices, and actions are secondary human goods, which are instrumental to the pursuit of primary goods, in essence. In this sense, our practices and the way we organize our lives are ~~a~~ more or less successful means of obtaining primary goods. For example, if a delinquent is overly focused on sexually pleasurable activities, this can result in maladjustment to society; therefore, it is necessary to better balance their primary goods by reducing pleasure-seeking to an acceptable level and further enhancing other primary goods.

The authors argue that the Good Lives Model posits that the well-being of offenders will lead to a reduction in criminogenic needs; therefore, the establishment of internal conditions (i.e., skills, values, beliefs) and external conditions (i.e., resources, social support, opportunities) that enable the attainment of primary goods in a socially acceptable manner is likely to reduce or eliminate the set of criminogenic needs of each individual (WHITEHEAD et al., 2007).

Conclusions

The evolution of prison rehabilitation reflects a shift from punitive approaches toward evidence-based, individualized interventions aimed at reducing recidivism and promoting reintegration. Although the "nothing works" era cast doubt on the effectiveness of rehabilitation, subsequent research demonstrated that well-designed programs can produce meaningful positive outcomes.

Models such as the Risk-Need-Responsivity framework have shown that targeting criminogenic needs, aligning interventions with offender risk levels, and adapting treatment to individual characteristics are key to success. At the same time, strengths-based approaches like the Good Lives Model highlight the importance of personal development, well-being, and the pursuit of meaningful life goals.

Overall, contemporary evidence makes it clear that rehabilitation, when grounded in scientific principles and implemented effectively, plays a crucial role in reducing reoffending and supporting offenders' reintegration into society. Rather than asking whether rehabilitation works, the focus must now be on how to apply it most effectively within modern correctional systems.

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THE TERM WARFARE IN SECURITY STUDIES

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Introduction

New geopolitical tensions have brought new security challenges to the European Union. These challenges have increased and are accentuated by the hybrid nature of many threats. Asymmetric and hybrid threats represent the present and future of global warfare. These threats have an irregular nature that allows them to adapt to opposing forces in conflict - making them particularly effective on the international stage. Hybrid wars are taking on a new dimension with the emergence of modern technology and the digital world, where cyberspace could be manipulated by spreading propaganda and cyber-hacking. Hybrid warfare, by merging conventional military techniques and unconventional technologies with traditional methods, has become the leading generation of tools facing the world today (HERTA, 2017, 135). Today, nation-states compete to accumulate weapons and deter conventional attacks, while less capable actors will continue to resort to asymmetric means to achieve their political aspirations.

The global security sphere should constantly monitor innovations in technology and the information sphere. Hybrid war as an armed conflict is conducted in a combined manner - utilizing both military and non-military means. The main role in achieving the goals of such a war involves the use of non-military means, such as psychological and propaganda operations, economic sanctions, embargoes, criminal activities, terrorist activities and other subversive activities of a similar nature. Otherwise, as states develop the capacity to defend themselves against current methods of cyberattacks or terrorism, other means of warfare will emerge to take their place. This paper offers an interdisciplinary and critical analysis of warfare, conventional warfare, hybrid warfare, and insurgencies, which have an impact on global, regional, and individual security.

Within the framework of developing the content of this paper, the author uses the following methods for security research: the descriptive method, the analytical-synthetic method, the comparative method, and the content analysis method as a separate scientific method.

- The Descriptive Method: a general method that allows for a deeper insight and study of the nature of the phenomenon under investigation; (this method contributes to the development of

science). The subjects of research include warfare, conventional warfare, insurgency, and the use of unconventional means in hybrid warfare, etc.

- The Analytical-Synthetic Method: a method that will analyse and synthesize the entire collected material that is necessary for the complete processing of the subject of this scientific research;
- The Comparative method: the author analyses the term "warfare" through historical development (evolution) and comparative analysis. Representatives from various academic disciplines are leading major debates over the definition of war; types of warfare; and why wars occur.
- The Content Analysis Method: As the foundational methodological procedure or technique for data collection, the author uses content analysis of domestic and international references, research papers, publications, reports, conference materials, website content analysis, strategy analysis, international documents, etc.

THE TERM WARFARE IN THE SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE ON SECURITY

The term "warfare" has long been subject to "evolutionary" forces, and its existence has been defined according to various historical and current perspectives. War is generally defined as an armed conflict between two or more governments or states. Carl von Clausewitz (1984) defined war as "an act of violence by which we seek to compel our adversary to do our will."

Military historian John Keegan proposed a critique of the political-rationalist theory of war, noting that "warfare is assumed to be an orderly affair involving states, with declared beginnings and ends, easily identifiable combatants, and a high level of obedience from subordinates" (MOSELY, 2020).

According to Keegan, this theory poorly addresses non-state and unconventional tactics, the application of which is a fundamental characteristic of hybrid warfare.

Rationalist theory finds support across academic literature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Genevan philosopher and Enlightenment thinker, argued that warfare is "... a relationship, not between man and man, but between state and state" (BERTRAM, 2017). Even Webster's Dictionary, often cited as a definitive source for word usage, defines war as "a state... of conflict between states or nations".

Conventional warfare fits into these classifications: global security has historically evolved around the conflicts of nation-states and their militaristic endeavours. At the beginning of the 21st century, conventional warfare was loosely defined as the confrontation of two or more countries to defeat the other

through the use of armed forces (KURU, 2018). More specifically, conventional warfare can be examined as military action supported by economic pressure, information operations, and state diplomacy. Through conventional political channels, the government directs operations, the population provides productive assets, and the military uses them in conflict (BRZICA, 2018).

According to Milica Čurčič, warfare is a sui generis a socio-historical phenomenon with a pronounced technological component. The definition of war changes with changing social circumstances and due to technological progress. In the last two decades, this definition has expanded to include non-state actors, cyber warfare, and the use of non-military means. The mixing of all means used to wage war is what distinguishes hybrid warfare from other historical forms. The mind is becoming the main battlefield of the 21st century, which puts the focus on the information and psychological means of warfare (ČURČIČ, 2018).

The transition of warfare – driven by the extreme differences in the military capabilities of actors – has prompted the use of the terms "asymmetric threats" and "hybrid threats". In other words, there is an inequality between actors with the capacity to accumulate large armies and those without. This has created an environment where less powerful actors must employ hybrid tactics to eradicate this inequality (KURU, 2018, 14). Certain nation-states dominate military spending (and global conflicts in general).

A notable example is the United States, whose national defence budget accounts for almost 40% of global military spending, while its allies account for (approximately) another third (MILLER, & O'HANLON, 2019). This accumulation of force can prove counterproductive to deterrence efforts. According to the Serbian Quadrennial Defense Review Report, published in May 1997, US dominance in the conventional military arena may encourage adversaries to resort toasymmetric means. Thus, the concept of asymmetric threats was introduced, as a strategy for avoiding direct military confrontation with the United States or for disrupting American command, control and communication systems, as well as its alliances (ČURČIČ, 2018).

Thus, the concept of asymmetric threats was introduced, proposed as a strategy for avoiding direct military confrontation with the United States or for disrupting American commands, controls, communications systems, and alliances. "Weaker" nation states - which encompass the vast majority of global actors by comparison – attempt to circumvent the impossibility of competing through conventional channels with the West.

Thus, the historical paradigm of wars pitting two nations directly against each other on the battlefield has largely been altered. The disparity in military capability is not the only transformative force: the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) represents an evolutionary defence policy based on the logic that the United States, as well as its adversaries, will not launch a nuclear war because the other will retaliate massively, with nuclear weapons capable of destroying the entire world (PARRINGTON, 1997). This doctrine applies narrowly to nations with

nuclear capabilities, but serves as an additional means of deterring conventional war.

In sum, post-Cold War security environment has forced non-state and nation-state actors to pursue irregular warfare tactics to combat the escalating arms race between opposing ideological blocs. These conditions are directly responsible for the shift from conventional to unconventional warfare, and their continuation on a global scale will only further encourage the use of asymmetric threats and hybrid tactics. Although conventional warfare has declined in modern conflicts, it is still deployed by global powers against weaker nations and vice versa. The trends outlined above indicate that purely conventional engagements are becoming cumbersome, outdated, and ineffective. However, especially in conjunction with hybrid tactics, conventional warfare can still provide a strategic advantage. The late 20th century, and especially the Cold War, saw a dramatic shift in the landscape of conflict. The emergence of more powerful nation-states with increasingly advanced armies and arsenals of weapons led to the loss of pure conventional warfare as a viable independent means of achieving political goals.

In sum, warfare is thus forced to adapt to the forces that participate in it. Yet warfare is more than the involvement of individuals or weapons: it is a theatre in which opposing values clash, and in modern society, it has become a path around the impasse between powerful national armies.

Fourth generation warfare deviates significantly from previous paradigms and encompasses asymmetric and hybrid methods unique to modern conflict. A 1989 article in the Marine Corps Gazette (a professional magazine for U.S. Marines that disseminates military art and science)-(According to "Marine Corps Gazette" - https://smallwarsjournal.com/author/marine-corps-gazette), introduced the concept of "fourth generation warfare" as an expansive, fluid form of conflict characterized by a blurring distinction between war and peace, a non-linear structure lacking defined fronts and the loss of the distinction between "civilians" and "soldiers" (HERTA, 2017, 137).

This focuses on the ability of weaker forces to combine conventional and irregular tactics to pose a legitimate threat to the political will of the adversary. As such, fourth generation warfare, which encapsulates hybrid models, seeks to win not by defeating the enemy's military forces, but through hybrid tactics aimed directly at the enemy's political will (HERTA, 2017, p. 137).

INSURGENCY AS A FORM OF THREAT TO SECURITY

The next concept analysed in this paper is insurgency. As old as war itself, insurgency and its tactics have evolved significantly over time. Insurgency is essentially an armed struggle against government by one or more groups that cannot achieve their political goals through conventional methods. Insurgencies represent long-term forms of unconventional warfare waged through irregular military forces and illegal political organizations (METZ & MILLEN, 2004, 2).

Because insurgent forces possess weaker military power than state government security entities, insurgencies are characterized by the use of asymmetric warfare as a central tool for undermining and overthrowing government authority.

According to Nikola Brzica, insurgency, (a primary form of asymmetric conflict), is defined as an organized political and military revolt aimed at weakening or overthrowing a government or other political authority, with the complementary aim of increasing one's own control over a population (BLACK, 2016). In contrast, counterinsurgency is defined as the combined political, economic, social, and security measures taken to prevent and/or defeat armed violence, as well as to establish stable political, economic, social and security structures, and to address the fundamental causes of the insurgency, with the ultimate objective of establishing and defending stability in a given area (HAMPSEY, 2010).

Insurgents employ various instruments of violence such as guerrilla operations, terrorism, sabotage, political actions, psychological operations, and even intelligence activities. Insurgencies are a struggle for power and legitimacy, their objective is to destroy the power and legitimacy of the government while consolidating their own control. Although armed attacks on government institutions are key to the insurgency, the decisive battle takes place in the long-term effort to win the "hearts and minds" of the population, which serves as the key factor for victory and transformation of society (BELL, 2009; TANESKI, 2013). Traditionally, insurgencies have been classified as internal conflicts aimed at changing power within the borders of a nation. However, their operations can also spill over into the territories of neighbouring states, where they often receive greater external support than within their own territory. The goal of these uprisings is to change the power structure, overthrow governments, change the social order, etc.

Ideology is crucial to the survival of an insurgency, providing the inspiration for carrying out insurgent actions and mobilizing resources. The rebels organize indirect, unconventional and attritional attacks with the aim of undermining the legitimacy of the government, reducing its support and forcing it onto the defensive. The rebels blend into the local population, skilfully conceal themselves in safe places, preparing and leading a long-term, stage-by-stage campaign that works to their advantage. There are numerous definitions of insurgency in the scientific literature. Within NATO, insurgency is defined as "the set of activities of an organized, often ideologically motivated group or movement. That group or movement aims to cause or prevent political change by the ruling authorities, focusing on persuading or intimidating ~~of~~ the population – (using violence or subversion)" (NATO, Allied Joint Doctrine for Counterinsurgency (COIN) AJP-3-4.4, February 2011, 1).

Distinct definitions of insurgency exist across the United States, Germany, France, Great Britain, and other nations. The United States defines insurgency as: an organized, long-term military-political struggle designed to weaken the control

and legitimacy of an established government, occupying force, or other political authority with the goal of increasing insurgent control. The following definition is used in the German army: insurgency is a process of destabilization caused by political, economic, or social dissatisfaction, which affects the effectiveness and legitimacy of the government system. An insurgent is a person who carries out or supports asymmetric activities as part of an insurgency (see: German army office, Preliminary basics for the role of land forces in counterinsurgency, Cologne, 2010, 1). The term "counterinsurgency" (COIN) is an emotive subject in Germany. It is generally accepted within military circles that COIN is an interagency, long-term strategy to stabilized a crisis region. In this context fighting against insurgents is just a small part of the holistic approach of COIN. Being aware that COIN cannot be achieved successfully by military means alone, it is a fundamental requirement to find a common understanding and shared usage of terms with all civil actors involved. Germany has resolved this challenge in two steps. First, in national discussions, the term COIN was replaced by the paraphrase "establishing security and state order in crisis areas" (Herstellung von Sicherheit und staatlicher Ordnung in Krisengebieten). Secondly, Germany has redefined the term insurgency as the "process of destabilization caused by political, economic and/or social grievances, which affects both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the governmental system; this process is exacerbated by insurgent activity". This definition – in contrast to understanding insurgency merely as a group or movement or as an activity – focuses on the real challenge in COIN-missions and leads automatically to a much clearer understanding of COIN. A primary objective must be to enable civilian co-actors in theatre to accept the COIN approach as a foundation for fruitful cooperation.

Another definition that gives us the most essential elements of an insurgency is: an insurgency is a long-term political-military struggle aimed at undermining or displacing the legitimacy of a government or a constituted occupying force, seeking full or partial control of the resources of a certain territory through the use of asymmetric forces and illegal political organizations. A common denominator for most rebel groups is their goal of gaining control over a population or a specific territory, including its resources (JANEV, 2021).

According to Bard O'Neill, insurgency is probably the most widespread type of armed conflict since the emergence of organized political communities. He defines insurgency as a general overarching concept that refers to a conflict between a government and a group or opponent that uses both political resources and violence to change, reformulate, or maintain the legitimacy of one or more of four key aspects of politics (YOUNG & GRAY, 2011). These four key aspects are:

The integrity of the borders and composition of the nation-state;
The political system;
The organs of government;
The policies that determine who gets what in society.

Causes of insurgency - The Causes that lead to the emergence of an insurgency are most often a combination of the following factors: poverty, unemployment, low levels of education, ethnic, social, political or religious prejudices, conflicts or extremist tendencies, as well as inter-governmental tensions and irregularities, or interstate wars (JANEV, 2021).

Characteristics of insurgency – Insurgents typically operate with the intention of destabilizing state structures or preventing their consolidation. Their motives may be of a material, ethnic, religious, political, national-separatist, or spiritual nature, and may be used as a pretext to justify violence, legitimize the insurgent organization and its leaders, and mobilize supporters (JANEV, 2021).

Thus, social, economic, and political discontent among a segment of the population can lead citizens to believe that the government lacks the capability or legitimacy to establish or maintain state order, or provide basic products and services. As a result, the government risks losing its effectiveness and legitimacy in enforcing laws – when the government loses its effectiveness and legitimacy in enforcing the laws, the state will fall into chaos and anarchy.

Rebels can also be infiltrated or influenced from abroad, often driven by devergent external objectives that do not align with the internal situation of the country. Insurgents are exceptionally difficult to identify, especially when they blend into the local population. Furthermore, they frequently disregard national laws and international humanitarian law, engaging in illegal actions that constitute ~~a~~ violations of international law and human rights.

Insurgent Strategies and Tactics - Insurgents use both violent and non-violent tactics to achieve their goals. Non-violent tactics are used to achieve political goals without the use of force. Violent tactics are usually used in combination with nonviolent tactics. Using a combination of these two tactics and supported by propaganda helps in recruiting new fighters as well as gaining support from the population (JANEV, 2021, 71).

Insurgency is inherently an asymmetric threat. Asymmetric warfare is a conflict in which a weaker adversary uses unusual, surprise tactics to attack the weak points of a stronger adversary, incorporating tactics such as terrorism, guerrilla warfare, criminal activities, subversion, or propaganda. According to military doctrine, the violent tactics of an insurgency include terrorism, guerrilla warfare, sabotage, or conventional operations, whereas subversion and propaganda represent the two most common forms of non-violent struggle. Violent tactics of insurgency include: terrorism, guerrilla warfare, sabotage, or conventional operations. Subversion and propaganda are the two most common forms of nonviolent struggle (According to FM 3-24.2, Tactics in Counterinsurgency, Headquarters Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 2009, 2-20).

The primary strengths of insurgents include their comprehensive, localized knowledge of the operational area. Because rebels typically operate within their own country and ethnic group, identifying insurgents or their active associates within the community is extremely challenging. The insurgents know all details about the zone of operations, including the characteristics of the local population and their culture, daily schedules, accents, local dialects that allow them to blend in with the local population, which improves their ability for clandestine operations. They typically wear similar clothing, exhibit the same posture, mannerisms, hand gestures, body movements, walking speed, cultural greetings-– including norms regarding eye contact – as the local population. They also adhere to local social customs regarding food, drink, and sleeping patterns. Insurgents are generally unburdened by the institutional obligation to maintain regular government services for the population. Rebels may execute certain administrative functions or establish a shadow government, but they are rarely expected to provide government services to the population. This usually means that rebels spend few resources on government functions, allowing more resources to sustain the insurgency (JANEV, 2021, 72).

The primary weaknesses of insurgents center on their limited personnel and resources. Long periods without resupply, alongside with the loss of key personnel, can negatively affect the insurgency's sustainability. Rebel movements are sensitive to information operations - operations where information is used to portray the danger, the futility, their numerical inferiority to government forces. These operations can instill the fear of criminal prosecution for the fighters and their families, frequently causing high rates of desertion. The decentralized nature of networked insurgencies, which ensures the security of operations, can also constitute a weakness due to the slow communication flows and fragmented resource distribution. The inability to call for reinforcements can make insurgents feel isolated, alone, and confused.

Conclusion

Today, the definition of the term warfare is anchored in technological advances and the use of unconventional means and tactics. Technology, including web-based technologies, has enabled the rise of globally connected actors, capable of acting quickly and efficiently anywhere in the world. Today, the global security sphere must constantly monitor innovations in technology and the information sphere. Hybrid war as an armed conflict is conducted in a combined manner – integrating military and non-military means. The main role in achieving the goals of such a conflict is occupied by non-military instruments, such as psychological and propaganda operations, economic sanctions, embargoes, criminal activities, terrorist activities and other subversive activities of a similar nature.

Modern security challenges and threats are characterized by surprise and dynamic complexity: they are difficult to predict, and even more difficult to

manage with an immediate, appropriate and comprehensive response. Each type of an asymmetric attack requires a tailored, individualized response - the national system must be organized to categorize reactions into defensive protection versus proactive threat management. These efforts should be coordinated with allied nations and national partners to standardize responses globally. Each nation-state must continuously review and revise its own threat response mechanisms. Because contemporary threats often assume a transnational capacity that exposes domestic weaknesses, existing institutions and approaches used to achieve defence must be constantly adapted to new emerging threats. The coordination of efforts and the application of existing strategies remain imperative for constructing a successful defence system. (ANING, 2016).

It can be concluded that globalization has greatly facilitated the convergence and intersection of terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime, creating a serious, complex security threat. Insurgency represents a resilient contemporary threat. The ultimate goal of an insurgency is to challenge the existing government, to establish control over all or part of its territory, or to force the authorities to make political concessions regarding the distribution of state power. Rebels seek the active or tacit support of a segment of the population involved in the conflict. External support, recognition, or approval from other countries or political entities may be beneficial to rebels.

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LEGAL RESTRICTIONS ON MEMBERS OF SECURITY SERVICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

The service relationship of members of security corps is a specific public-law relationship in which enhanced duties, institutional discipline, and legal restrictions on selected fundamental rights are justified by the nature of state security tasks. In the Czech Republic, these restrictions concern political activity in particular, certain forms of economic activity, public expression conflicting with service interests, and duties of loyalty, confidentiality, and availability. In legal theory, such restrictions are defended on the grounds of neutrality, reliability, public trust, and operational integrity. (ALEXY, 2002; FILIP, 1999; WAGNEROVÁ et al., 2012; BLAŽKOVÁ, 2025)

This conference paper focuses primarily on the practical meaning of the problem. It draws on data collected as part of the first author's ongoing doctoral research on legal restrictions on the rights of members of security corps in the Czech Republic and selected European countries. At the time of submission, the doctoral dissertation had not yet been submitted or made publicly available. This paper presents selected findings from that broader research project. (BLAŽKOVÁ, 2025).

The central argument is balanced rather than polemical. The empirical material does not support a simple conclusion that legal restrictions are either excessive by definition or harmless by nature. The decisive issue is the relationship between the formal rule and the institutional environment in which it is interpreted and enforced. Restrictions tend to be accepted when they are explained, applied consistently, and visibly linked to legitimate service aims. Conversely, they are perceived more negatively when they are unclear, selectively enforced, or embedded in weak communication and low trust (WRIGHT& PANDEY, 2008; JOHNSON, 2015).

Research Basis and Methodological Framing

The paper draws on a mixed-method research design developed as part of the first author's ongoing doctoral research. The empirical part combines a questionnaire survey (capturing responses from 200 out of 300 contacted respondents), semi-structured interviews (conducted with 10 respondents), and an analysis of open-ended responses. Quantitative data identifies recurring patterns, while qualitative material explains how respondents interpret the rules in practice and which organisational contexts intensify or soften their effects (JOHNSON & ONWUEGBUZIE, 2004; CRESWELL, 2014; CHARMAZ, 2006; DISMAN, 2011).

Analytical indicators are also used that link legal awareness to the organizational context, including knowledge and communication, participation, proportionality and legitimacy, the resulting impact on motivation and performance, and trust in institutional procedures. These tools do not replace legal analysis; rather, they connect it to the organisational effects of restrictions. The broader research project and its full empirical and legal analysis will form part of the first author's doctoral dissertation.

The research design also matters for interpretation. The empirical material was gathered neither to prove that restrictions are illegitimate nor to defend the status quo. Its purpose was to examine how formal legal restrictions interact with motivation, job satisfaction, organisational loyalty, and perceived fairness. In security corps, compliance is shaped not only by legal obligation but also by internal culture, leadership style, and trust in the institution (MEYER & ALLEN, 1991; PERRY, 1997; WRIGHT & PANDEY, 2008; JOHNSON, 2015).

Main Empirical Findings

The first major finding is that awareness of core legal restrictions is relatively high, but formal awareness does not automatically produce interpretive certainty. Respondents usually recognised key limitations connected with political activity, strike action, secondary gainful activity, public conduct, and service discipline. At the same time, practical uncertainty persists where the boundary between lawful private autonomy and service-related limitation is less obvious, especially in questions linked to online conduct, secondary activities, and behaviour outside direct service performance. Knowledge of the rule is therefore not identical to confidence in its day-to-day interpretation.

The second major finding concerns legitimacy. Respondents generally accept restrictions when they can connect them to recognisable service values such as political neutrality, discipline, institutional credibility, and the continuity of operations. Restrictions are not rejected simply because they limit individual

freedom, but rather where respondents perceive a weak justification, poor explanation, or a disproportionate intrusion into personal life. Acceptance is linked less to the abstract severity of a restriction than to its intelligibility, consistency, and visible connection to the institution's mission (ALEXY, 2002; BLAŽKOVÁ, 2025).

The third finding concerns the lived effects of legal restrictions. Restrictions are experienced not only as legal rules but also as everyday organisational conditions. Part of the respondent group associated them with stress, reduced autonomy, frustration, and tension between public duty and private life. This was especially relevant where several burdens accumulated, for example legal limits combined with demanding working conditions, administrative overload, weak recognition, or insufficient communication from superiors. Conversely, supportive leadership, a predictable interpretation of rules, and a meaningful sense of service made restrictions more likely to be seen as a professional condition rather than an arbitrary burden (BRUNETTO et al., 2012; ARMSTRONG & TAYLOR, 2014).

The fourth finding is that organisational communication has a decisive mediating role. Rules are not evaluated in a vacuum. Where legal restrictions were explained clearly, justified in relation to service values, and applied consistently across comparable cases, they were more often accepted as legitimate. Where communication was formalistic, delayed, inconsistent, or absent, dissatisfaction increased and respondents were more likely to perceive the same rules as unfair or excessive. This shifts part of the policy debate away from legislation alone, because even without legal change, organisations can influence whether restrictions are understood as proportionate and meaningful (JOHNSON, 2015).

The fifth finding concerns retention and institutional commitment. The empirical material does not support the claim that legal restrictions alone are the main direct cause of intentions to leave the service. The problem is cumulative. Restrictions contribute to dissatisfaction mainly when they interact with broader organisational deficits, especially low trust, weak participation, poor communication, insufficient appreciation, and a gap between formal expectations and institutional support. A narrowly legal correction without corresponding managerial and cultural change would address only part of the problem (MEYER & ALLEN, 1991; BRUNETTO et al., 2012).

The sixth finding concerns the comparative and reform perspective. The Czech model appears comparatively strict in some areas, but the empirical and comparative findings of the ongoing doctoral research do not support a simple call for radical deregulation. The more convincing conclusion is that the problem lies not merely in the existence of restrictions but in their precision, predictability, and institutional handling. A functioning system may maintain demanding rules if it also provides clear boundaries, coherent justification, fair application, and compensatory personnel policies (BLAŽKOVÁ, 2025).

Discussion: Proportionality in Practice

The theoretical framework adopted in this study treats proportionality as the key constitutional standard for assessing limitations on fundamental rights. The empirical findings add a practical layer to that standard. In institutional life, proportionality is perceived not only through the courts or doctrine, but through everyday administrative experience. Members of security corps evaluate proportionality by asking whether a restriction is understandable, serves a credible purpose, treats similar cases similarly, and is applied by an institution consistently with the sacrifices it requires (ALEXY, 2002; FILIP, 1999; WAGNEROVÁ et al., 2012).

This point is especially important for public employers in hierarchical environments. If an organisation expects loyalty, discipline, and the acceptance of legal constraints, it must also maintain procedural fairness and internal legitimacy. When this balance is missing, even legally defensible restrictions may produce resentment, lower morale, and weaker identification with the institution. By contrast, where rules are embedded in credible leadership and fair communication, respondents are more willing to tolerate demanding limits. The constitutional proportionality of a rule and the social legitimacy of its everyday application are distinct but practically interconnected (MEYER & ALLEN, 1991; JOHNSON, 2015; WRIGHT& PANDEY, 2008).

The findings also show that the debate should not be framed as a choice between unrestricted individual autonomy and rigid institutional control. Security corps necessarily operate under a regime of increased duties. The practical challenge is to ensure that the necessary restrictions remain normatively justified and organisationally sustainable. That requires attention not only to statutes but also to implementation, leadership practice, feedback mechanisms, and institutional trust (PERRY & WISE, 1990; PERRY, 1997; ARMSTRONG & TAYLOR, 2014).

Practical Implications and Reform Options

The results have several practical implications. The first is legislative clarification. Areas generating recurrent uncertainty should be defined more precisely so that members of security corps can better distinguish between legitimate private autonomy and service-related restraint. This applies particularly to borderline situations where legal and ethical expectations overlap, such as secondary gainful activity, public self-presentation, or conduct on social media. Uncertainty has organisational costs because unclear rules enlarge discretion, weaken predictability, and increase the perception of unequal treatment (BLAŽKOVÁ, 2025).

The second implication concerns internal communication. Legal restrictions should not be communicated only as commands or sanctions. They should be

explained as part of a coherent professional framework connected with the mission of security corps. Regular explanation of the purpose of restrictions, illustrative internal guidance, and more consistent managerial communication can reduce interpretive insecurity and support perceived fairness. In practical terms, the research points toward better onboarding, repeated training, and clearer supervisory responsibility for communicating the rationale of sensitive rules (JOHNSON, 2015; ARMSTRONG & TAYLOR, 2014).

The third implication concerns participation and trust. The findings presented in this study indicate that the acceptance of restrictions improves where respondents feel that they can articulate concerns, ask for clarification, and receive a reasoned institutional response. This does not mean that service rules should be negotiated away. It means that participation and voice have a stabilising effect even in hierarchical systems. Mechanisms for structured feedback, consultation, and satisfaction monitoring may therefore strengthen adherence without weakening discipline (WRIGHT & PANDEY, 2008; PERRY, 1997).

The fourth implication concerns personnel policy and human resource management. Restrictions are experienced more negatively when they are not balanced by recognition, fair treatment, and tangible institutional support. If the organisation requires sacrifices linked to political neutrality, limitations on expression, or restrictions on secondary activity, then compensatory mechanisms matter. They include transparent evaluation, professional development, supervisory support, and concern for working conditions and work-life balance. Legal restrictions cannot be assessed separately from personnel policy (ARMSTRONG & TAYLOR, 2014; MEYER & ALLEN, 1991; BRUNETTO et al., 2012).

The fifth implication concerns implementation risks. A reform agenda focusing solely on formal legal amendments would remain incomplete. If legislation is revised without improving internal communication and organisational practice, the everyday experience of arbitrariness may remain. Conversely, managerial improvement without at least some clarification of ambiguous areas may leave the same interpretive uncertainty in place. The most plausible reform path is therefore combined: a more precise legal framing, more coherent internal guidance, more consistent supervisory practice, and stronger institutional feedback loops (ALEXY, 2002; ARMSTRONG & TAYLOR, 2014).

From Theory to Practice: Translating Legal Restrictions into Organizational Reality

Legal restrictions affecting members of security services in the Czech Republic cannot be evaluated adequately at the level of abstract doctrine alone. Their practical meaning depends on how they are explained, implemented, and connected to the organisational environment in which service is performed. Legal restrictions may be constitutionally justifiable and institutionally necessary, yet

their real effects differ according to whether members experience them as intelligible, proportionate, and fairly administered (ALEXY, 2002; FILIP, 1999).

The strongest practical message of the research is that restrictions are accepted most readily when members understand their purpose, perceive them as proportionate, and encounter them in an environment marked by procedural fairness, consistent managerial practice, and credible communication. Conversely, where an unclear interpretation, administrative overload, uneven treatment, or a weak supervisory explanation are present, the same legal framework can generate distrust, frustration, and a weakened organisational commitment. For that reason, the question is not simply whether rights should be restricted, but how such restrictions are translated into personnel practice (MEYER & ALLEN, 1991; JOHNSON, 2015; BRUNETTO et al., 2012).

This conclusion creates a direct bridge to the personnel management perspective developed in the following section of the joint contribution. In the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, the issue of legal restrictions must be linked to HR challenges, including recruitment difficulties, workforce aging, turnover, shortages of qualified employees and officers, and the psychological strain of a highly specific institutional environment. From this perspective, the legitimacy and clarity of legal restrictions are not only questions of constitutional and service law, but also factors shaping organisational attractiveness, staff stability, and the long-term sustainability of performance (ARMSTRONG & TAYLOR, 2014; BLAŽKOVÁ, 2025).

Personnel Challenges: Concluding Remarks

To conclude this article, we would like to mention some specific aspects of the Prison Service that differ from other sectors primarily due to the social climate prevailing in its facilities and the restrictions associated with the enforcement of pre-trial detention, sentences, and secure detention (see Act No. 555/1992 Coll., on the Prison Service and Judicial Internships of the Czech Republic). Prison Service staff perform their work and duties in an environment that is inherently unstimulating and where they must adhere to a number of additional restrictions and prohibitions (e.g., the prohibition on carrying a personal mobile phone). Working conditions in this sector have specific characteristics that must be taken into account when planning recruitment and workforce management.

The staffing situation in the Prison Service of the Czech Republic is a long-standing problem that fundamentally affects both the internal operation of prisons and their ability to fulfil security and rehabilitation functions. A shortage of qualified staff, high turnover among personnel, and inadequate financial compensation lead to the destabilization of the work environment and reduce the effectiveness of the service (RASZKOVÁ et al., 2025a; MACHKOVÁ, 2025).

Staff shortages, particularly in direct work with inmates (e.g., educators, psychologists, social workers, and guards), lead to the overburdening of existing

staff, a limited capacity for individualized care, and a reduced ability to respond to crisis situations. This can result in increased stress and burnout, limited availability of rehabilitation programs or specialized programs for inmates, and disrupted communication between staff and inmates. This worsens the social climate in the prison, leading to increased conflicts among inmates themselves, between inmates and staff, and even among staff members (LIEBLING & ARNOLD, 2004; SEEL et al., 2024). The sense of security is disrupted, particularly in situations where adequate supervision, monitoring, or assistance is not provided. Participation in rehabilitation activities is also declining, which negatively affects inmates' motivation (RASZKOVÁ et al., 2025a; RASZKOVÁ et al., 2025b; RASZKOVÁ & ZHŘÍVALOVÁ, 2026).

Failure to improve the recruitment of new staff from younger age groups will ensure that the trend of an aging workforce in the prison service continues (RASZKOVÁ et al., 2025a; Statistical Yearbooks of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, 2026). This is clearly an unfavourable development that brings with it a number of specific challenges (physical fitness, flexibility, willingness to innovate, etc.).

Several factors may contribute to this situation, such as financial compensation, the overall attractiveness of the work, its demanding nature (stress, specific requirements for individual positions, various risks, and the influence of the environment and its negative effects on personality), and various restrictions (prohibition on carrying personal cell phones, limited internet access, security checks upon entering and leaving the workplace, and rules regarding attire and appearance). It is further exacerbated by low social prestige, the departure of experienced guards due to retirement or organizational and interpersonal issues (workplace relationships, relationships with superiors, management style, shift work, temporary assignments to other prisons, and excessive overtime) (RASZKOVÁ et al., 2025a).

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IN2PREV PROJECT - START AND FINALIZATION

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Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021), approximately 12 million people in Europe were considered to be 'of concern' at the end of 2020. Of these, 56% are refugees or persons in refugee-like situations, which represents the highest rate out of the seven regions under the scope of the UNHCR3. The refugee crisis has significantly affected Europe since 2015, when over 1 million refugees reached European shores (UNHCR, 2016). Thousands of asylum seekers have been reaching European coasts ever since, coming from countries torn apart by wars and persecution, primarily Syria and Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2021). In 2021, and despite heightened difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, crossings increased, mainly from Afghanistan due to the resurgence of the Taliban and a global landscape embroiled in conflicts (UNHCR, 2021). In the first six months of 2021 alone, over 85,000 people fled their homes and made perilous journey to reach European borders, facing several obstacles, some of which were reported for their human rights violations (UNHCR, 2021). In the same year, there were over 114,000 sea arrivals, especially through Mediterranean countries such as Italy (UNHCR, 2021).

On top of this, 2022 posed new (and serious) challenges to Europe in light of the Russian-Ukraine conflict. In the words of Filippo Grandi (2022), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, we are currently living the "fastest-growing refugee crisis in Europe since World War II". According to the UNHCR (2022), over 2.5

million individuals have fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries (e.g., Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Moldova) as of March 11, 2022, with estimates suggesting that this number would reach 4 million people. However, it remained to be seen whether these countries would function as transit jurisdictions, temporary settlements, or resettlement countries (LIBERADO & SAMPAIO, 2022).

The Slovak Republic fully supports all activities aimed at creating a common asylum system within the European Union, with an emphasis on using the experience of individual member countries (ŠKRINÁR, 2025). However, this system simultaneously respects the right of each member country to decide on the conditions for granting international protection to foreigners independently. The migration policy of the Slovak Republic respects the traditional pillars of asylum policy while supporting new forms of providing protection in response to the new challenges of the international community. When examining the overview of applications, granted asylum statuses, supplementary protection and the granting of citizenship, we note that relatively strict criteria already apply in Slovakia. In the years 1993-2021, (i.e. before the crisis), the number of asylum applications ranged from 96 to 12,300, while granted asylum statuses ranged from 8 to 187, other applications were either rejected or suspended. Exceptionally, supplementary protection was provided in 0 to 560 cases, while the granted citizenship concerned between 0 and 68 cases per year. The integration of foreigners is a lengthy and demanding process that requires the active participation and cooperation of several entities: the state, organizations, municipalities, individuals and the foreigners themselves. Successful integration plays an important role in the development of the Slovak Republic, making the existence of a strategic document outlining the principles of integration policy highly appropriate. Integration is related to migration, and this controlled process – the integration policy – is based on the Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic. The protection of basic rights and freedoms is the primary task of the state, and migrants represent a vulnerable group that requires specific guarantees of their rights and freedoms through effective legal regulation. The rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are the subject of international regulation, while the status of foreigners is regulated primarily by national law represented by specific laws. The so-called Foreigners' law mainly consists of the Act on the Residence of Foreigners and the Act on Asylum. (MARCZYOVÁ, 2018).

The massive inflows of refugees, especially in 2015, coincided with several terrorist attacks on European soil, deepening a mediatised fear that Islamist terrorists were hiding within refugee streams (ELEFHERIADOU, 2018). As a result, refugees were labelled as existential threats, securitising attitudes on forced migration (KAUNERT et al., 2020). Even though until four years ago, the consensus was that "there [was] little evidence to suggest incoming 'migrants' have taken part in organised [terrorist] cells" and that there is no concrete evidence that terrorist travellers systematically use flows of refugees to enter Europe unnoticed, such events have occurred. This was manifested not only in

the case of the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015, but also throughout the years, including more recently. As Europol (2021) states in its latest EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report, terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by refugees', violent extremists and terrorist offenders[1], including some who had been in Europe for several years prior to the attacks 0[2]. In addition, there were also cases of refugees who were "charged on suspicion of having been military commanders in a terrorist organisation".

Even though research (SCHMID, 2016) demonstrates that the "short-term likelihood that recent refugees arriving in Western Europe become radicalised is very low", refugees' vulnerability to engaging in radical/extremist viewpoints and/or activities can increase. In fact, "if [refugees] are not fully integrated in host societies, they might develop resentment and with some that anger might become so strong that they – or more likely, their children – turn against the host society. That has been one of the reasons why so many of the foreign fighters from Europe were the sons of immigrants" (SCHMID, 2016).

Hence, while the number of recent refugees involved in radical or violent extremist activities remains very limited, the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2020) – in a tailored policy brief on preventing the risk of radicalisation of asylum seekers and refugees –argues that these individuals can be affected by certain risk factors inherent to radicalisation processes. This potentially puts them at risk of ~~a~~ adopting radical viewpoints or, ultimately committing violent extremist acts. According to the RAN, this stems from three concerns:

- the specific experiences and needs in their countries of origin;
- the challenges faced while travelling to Europe (incl. their experience in transit countries); and
- the expectations they had versus the difficulties they encountered in their (final) host countries. To this extent, refugees and asylum seekers should be among the target groups in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) activities aiming at building resilience and reducing vulnerabilities. As the RAN notes, they "might be affected by known risk factors at stake in radicalisation processes; their legal and social status as asylum seekers or refugees and their personal experiences of displacement and diaspora potentially add to vulnerabilities to violent extremist ideologies and scenes."

[1] A 33-year-old Sudanese male refugee stabbed and killed two people and injured five others in Romans-sur-Isère.

[2] Abdoullakh Anzorov, the individual who murdered Samuel Paty, a French school teacher, had entered the EU as a young boy with his parents, who were granted refugee status. On 20 June, an attack in a park in Reading (England, UK) caused three deaths and left a number of people seriously injured. The perpetrator was a male refugee, who had arrived in the UK from Libya in 2012. He had reportedly been involved with militias fighting the regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi.

The problem in host countries

In their large majority, refugees and asylum seekers reaching Europe since 2015 intend to establish their permanent home in European countries, often requiring complex routes (see section The problem in transit countries) until reaching their destination/resettlement society (METENKO & KŘÍHA, 2024). According to the UNHCR (2022), Western and Central Europe had been the preferred destination for refugee resettlement until early 2022 (although Germany, Sweden, and France were the favoured countries, Spain, Portugal, and Romania were also in Europe's top 10). However, due to the current Ukrainian refugee crisis, one could argue that data from February 2022 are outdated and, therefore, a coherent analysis will be jeopardised by neglecting (large amounts of) data that are currently being updated daily.

Nonetheless, a twofold demand can be easily highlighted across various European jurisdictions:

- Ensuring that the assistance given to refugees surpasses the fulfilment of short-term and immediate needs, thereby guaranteeing that those who enter Europe have the opportunity to develop meaningful and positive futures; and
- countering widespread misinformation, fear, and suspicion relating to refugees, mostly those with Muslim religious backgrounds, which hampers integration efforts.

However, according to the RAN (2020), once refugees and asylum seekers reach their final destination country and aim to establish themselves in a welcoming environment, they often face several challenges hindering an effortless resettlement process (independently of the destination country). To this extent, the RAN (2020) states five vulnerability factors in host countries that might contribute to an increased risk of radicalization among refugees and asylum seekers.

1. Insecure residence statuses: Following their arrival, a stressful and anxious period of uncertain future perspectives hampers the individuals' and families' efforts to develop long-term plans thereby deterring their successful social integration. Hence, returning to their country of origin is a possibility that, although unwanted, remains on the horizon. Thus, "a lack of perspectives (…) due to a pending threat of deportation might encourage a retreat to violent extremist ideologies [which] potentially serve as exit strategies from a dead-end, offering relief for emotions such as desperation, anger and a quest for revenge" (RAN, 2020);
2. Delayed (re)settlement: continued inadequate or restricted/reduced access to housing, labour, culture, education, and communal life has a

twofold negative impact: it impacts the individuals' (and their families) living conditions while contributing to social marginalisation. Consequently, by impeding the creation of social bonds and the establishment of community ties, such delays exacerbate inherent frustrations related to safeguarding social fitting and personal (incl. professional) success. As research shows that experiences of social exclusion can enhance grievances towards the State and further promote the retreat of these individuals and their families from society (i.e., fostering social marginalisation), it is argued that such negative experiences could potentialize the search for alternative opportunities. The search to fulfil the 'need to belong' is a consensual risk factor (e.g., SJØEN & MATTSSON, 2020), which could be exploited by radical or violent extremist organisations;

3. Public discrimination and hostility: Even if subtle ~~way~~, discriminatory practices do occur against refugees and asylum seekers in daily life activities or environments. Such is exacerbated by the continuous use of narratives against refugees, asylum seekers, and immigration (in its broader sense) by the far-right transversally in all European countries. Consequently, it increases polarisation and impacts social interactions in schools, while searching for a job, or when needing assistance from police forces or other criminal justice practitioners. Related to the latter, far-right radicalisation among law enforcement agents (e.g., perpetrating attacks, circulating extremist content) represents a growing topic in P/CVE, which may further emphasise such hostility. In addition, during the current Ukrainian refugee crisis, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, acknowledged that non-European individuals, mostly African and South Asian students and workers, faced discrimination by law enforcement officials while trying to flee to safety at Ukrainian borders;
4. Identity crisis: An individual deployment to a different country, usually with their family members, is imperatively connected to the need to swiftly adapt to the new social norms and contextual environments. This process is even more exacerbated in the context of forced migration (e.g., sudden refugee crisis), raising questions of identity and belonging, which can be suppressed by the opportunism of radical and extremist organisations, offering prospects to fill such void;
5. The burden presented by the past as trigger for mental health issues:. Refugees and asylum seekers inherently go through traumatic and even life-threatening experiences (e.g., persecution, violence, sexual abuse, and rights violation) when fleeing to Europe, which poses potentially harmful consequences for their mental health (RAN, 2019d). If these are left unattended and untreated, they can further promote social exclusion and

economic insecurity, which have the potential of becoming risk factors for radicalisation and/or violent behaviour (RAN, 2019e).

Although knowing the risk factors is crucial to implement safeguarding strategies for these individuals, it is central to remain aware of the risk of stigmatisation that these might entail. As such, while creating these strategies and interventions, a critical step is to reflect on the harmful and unintended effects that these might have on the target community, as they may fuel grievances and social isolation.

The problem in transit countries

As briefly stated above, before reaching their final destination country, refugees and asylum seekers require transit through different countries, especially on the Mediterranean and Eastern sides (METENKO & KŘÍHA, 2023; BUCAR, 2017). In this particular point, the Balkan route must be highlighted, as in 2021, most refugees transited through Western Balkan countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNICEF, 2021). In fact, before the present Ukrainian refugee crisis, it is quite unsurprising that the main entry points and transit routes for refugees in Europe were Mediterranean countries, with Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina represented in Europe's top 5. Similarly to host countries, transit countries receive individuals who may be more susceptible to radicalisation due to their vulnerability. For instance, Syrian refugees in Turkey (which has been both a host and a transit country for Syrian refugees since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011) are highly vulnerable to radicalisation due to being potentially traumatised, exposed to violence and still living under harsh conditions". Thus, as frontline actors, the role played by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and law enforcement agencies (LEAs) in radicalisation prevention in migration transit countries is highly relevant. As Lester (LESTER, 2005) states, "it is almost impossible to quantify or indeed to articulate in general terms the contribution that NGOs make" in refugee protection. NGOs and LEAs in transit countries work very closely with refugees and asylum-seekers, as they provide aid and assistance, conduct monitoring, reporting and analysis of these individuals, while also addressing the human rights abuses they face. Not only this, but as the first professional point of contact for vulnerable individuals and as a relevant source of information, NGOs and LEAs play a significantly important preventive role in combating radicalisation. According to Sude (2015), over half of refugees are not in camps but rather "are housed either among host country populations near the countries they fled from or in third countries, where many transit through asylum reception facilities before beginning to rebuild their lives". Asylum reception centres in transit countries present radicalisation risks, including poor living conditions with limited access to information, recruiters' access to refugees, a lack of security, and a lack of opportunities (SUDE, 2015).

However, many of these risks can be diminished through the implementation of inclusive policies by different stakeholders, including NGOs and LEAs, proving that tighter security is a viable solution to preventing radicalisation among refugees (SUDE, 2015). Furthermore, according to the RAN (RAN, 2021), transit countries can "play a role in primary prevention and reducing the breeding ground for radicalisation, by providing asylum seekers the possibility to enter the asylum procedure, providing basic services like housing and treating them decently and with respect". Thus, it is critical to raise awareness and provide training to transit countries' NGOs regarding the potential risks of radicalisation in asylum reception facilities and refugee camps.

However, it should be highlighted that NGOs and LEAs practitioners might possess certain assumptions or prejudices regarding refugees that can impact the identification of those vulnerable to or at risk of radicalisation. For example, NGOs' interventions "tend to follow predominant gender stereotypes" and "typically view men as more capable of coping with hardship" (KUSÁK & METENKO, 2025). Consequently, refugee men are less likely to be registered with NGOs and, thus, are "less able to access humanitarian services", face a "greater risk of arrest and deportation", and experience limited access to material resources and services provided by NGOs (VIDAL, 2019). These factors can, in turn, make it more likely for refugee men to be radicalised due to the increased vulnerabilities they may face. Additional information emphasised how crucial is to train frontline practitioners (e.g., NGOs, LEAs) by highlighting that "frontline practitioners do not always have the necessary knowledge and understanding to judge the level of vulnerability of an individual. [reflecting their] inability to identify early risk signs and adapt their behaviour accordingly or raise concerns, [ending up] increase[ing] the feeling of stigmatisation and mistrust and prompt escalation through improper responses and discriminatory profiling" (METENKO, et al., 2025).

Refugee integration as an international priority

Refugee integration in the receiving society is high on the international agenda, following UN's SDGs #109 and #16, promoting peaceful, inclusive and more equal societies. It entails a complex reality, referring to the integration of these individuals into the economic, educational, health, social and cultural contexts of the receiving country, depending on how resourceful the displaced individual is and how open the receiving society remains (UNHCR, 2013). Hence, refugees' 9 UN's SDGs #10 stands for reduced inequalities and #16 stands for peace, justice and strong institutions.

Integration requires the engagement of migrants and, first and foremost, the receiving society whose openness towards cultural and religious diversity (i.e. respecting different cultural backgrounds) should be the standard social feature. To this extent, inclusiveness must be fostered to ensure refugees' fulfilment of

transverse social needs, such as housing, healthcare, education, training, employment, cultural adjustment, and social connectedness.

However, such cannot be achieved in a short-term period. Integration requires refugees to perceive their receiving countries as their place of belonging, where opportunities to build a dignified and active life are provided, thus diminishing existential anxieties, and allowing for self-stabilisation. Therefore, sustainable integration requires actions for refugees' adjustment on institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, allowing the individual to become economically self-sufficient, socially embedded and healthy in the long term. Doing so, structural problems and inequalities, as well as their consequences, could be better mitigated. By lessening the chances of discrimination and social exclusion, refugees can be given a future of equal opportunities, enabling personal and societal development, whilst raising awareness of forced migration (YILMAZ, 2021). Thus, a holistic approach is required to promote sustained integration and lessen social prejudice, focusing on rehabilitation, social inclusion, care, education, support, therapeutic needs, and encouraging balanced societies, where equality and inclusion are present goals (MELZAK, 2009). Therefore, coordinating efforts within civil society is essential (YILMAZ, 2021).

To address the identified critical needs of practitioners working in the frontline (i.e., LEAs, NGOs) in host and transit countries, the IN2PREV project will foster their cooperation through a Frontline Practitioners Network, establish the Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (FEVR-SES) tool to evaluate and assess refugees' vulnerability to radicalisation, create a Mentoring Approach for Refugees and Asylum Seekers Successful Inclusion, and provide a cross-sectoral multi-goal oriented training approach for the prevention and identification of vulnerability risk factors to radicalisation facilitating refugees and asylum seekers' integration through mentoring.

Project IN2PREV – represents a law enforcement and community cooperation and training approach to preventing radicalization while ensuring refugees' successful inclusion. Based on the Programme: Erasmus+, for Area: Key Action 2 Cooperation Partnerships in the field of Adult Education, with, Call deadline: March 23th, 2022. start in November 2022, with Duration: 36 Months. (METENKO et al., 2023).

IN2PREV Goals and Priorities

The IN2PREV project represents a systematic and evidence-based response to the growing complexity of migration-related security challenges in Europe.By integrating multidisciplinary knowledge from law, criminology, political science, psychology, and the social sciences, the project establishes a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding radicalisation risks. Its innovative character lies in bridging operational law enforcement practice with community-based prevention strategies. Such cooperation enhances mutual trust between

institutions and civil society actors, which is a prerequisite for sustainable prevention mechanisms. The structured evaluation approach embedded in the FEVR-SES tool enables the early identification of vulnerability factors without stigmatising individuals.

The IN2PREV "Law enforcement and community cooperation and training approach to prevent radicalisation while ensuring refugees' successful inclusion" project addresses two priorities presented in the Partnerships for Cooperation, specifically by promoting "inclusion and diversity in all fields of education, training, youth and sport" and fostering "common values, civic engagement and participation". Additionally, IN2PREV responds to two specific priorities in the field of adult education, namely through "improving the availability of high quality, flexible learning opportunities for adults" and enhancing "the competences of educators and other adult education staff" (METENKO et al., 2023, 45-58).

Considering these priorities, IN2PREV will comprehensively enhance LEAs' and NGOs' competencies and knowledge regarding working with refugees and asylum seekers, thus boosting their fundamental involvement in the integration of these populations and the prevention of radicalisation. Following this broader objective, IN2PREV will:

- Create an EU-wide network of LEAs and NGOs, aiming to foster and facilitate relevant knowledge and experience exchanges among these actors and its members (linked to WP2);
- Develop the Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (FEVR-SES) tool to be implemented by LEAs' and NGOs' staff to assess refugees' vulnerability to radicalisation (linked to WP23);
- Create a Mentoring Approach for Refugees and Asylum Seekers Successful Inclusion (linked to WP4);
- Produce an innovative b-Learning training programme to prevent and identify vulnerability risk factors to radicalisation among refugees and asylum seekers (linked to WP5);
- Develop a b-Learning training course to facilitate the integration of refugees and asylum seekers through mentoring (linked to WP5);
- Create an innovative e-learning Train of Trainers course to enhance LEAs' and NGOs' professionals' skills in providing training to other professionals in the field (linked to WP5).

Work Packages and Tasks

WP1. Management & communication

Project management activities include all the necessary administrative steps to ensure quality, coherence, and accountability with respect to programme

regulations, contractual obligations, project goals, and the fulfillment of milestones and deadlines (including reporting to the programme agency), as described in greater detail in the project application (METENKO, et al., 2023).

WP2. IN2PREV's Frontline Practitioners Network

WP Leader: Polish Platform for Homeland Security

T2.1. Frontline practitioners' EU-wide mapping and database set-up

Task leader: Polish Platform for Homeland Security

This task entails the identification of frontline practitioners (e.g., LEAs, NGOs) working with refugees or those working on the theme of refugee inclusion/integration in its broader sense, such as policymakers or researchers. The identification under this activity's scope should include the (soon-to-be) network member's name, occupation, organisation, country, and contact details (these data will be collected and shared upon agreement – in accordance with EU Regulation 2016/689 on GDPR). Aiming to broaden the comprehensiveness of the database and further the project's outreach, practitioners from countries beyond the IN2PREV's partnership must be included (encompassing at least 200 practitioners from 25 European countries).

T2.2. Establish IN2PREV's Advisory Expert Committee

Task leader: Polish Platform for Homeland Security

As the Consortium understands the IN2PREV's complexity, overall quality control will be carried out with the support of an Advisory Expert Committee (AEC). After a thorough analysis of the practitioners' (mapped within A3.1) competencies and experience by the Consortium, critical experts will be invited to take on the role of AEC Members (facilitated through the signing of non-binding agreements). The structure of IN2PREV's AEC will be twofold, reflecting each expert's field of knowledge. Thus, the AEC will consist of 10 independent experts (5 experts on radicalisation screening; 5 experts on mentoring) who will advise the project on:

i) the Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (FEVR-SES) tool (developed as part of WP3);
ii) The Mentoring Approach for Refugees and Asylum Seekers Successful Inclusion (i.e., the M4-Rinc Integration Assurance Programme).

AEC Members will assess the sensitivity and potential for misuse of the FEVR-SES and M4-Rinc prior to publication, thereby guaranteeing an external, unbiased perspective that will assist the Consortium in successfully ensuring the project's overall success.

T2.3. Creation of a digital platform to host IN2PREV's Frontline Practitioners Network

Task leader: Qualify Just (IPS_Innovative Prison Systems)

Drawing from the data collected on T3.1, this task aims to build an online platform to host IN2PREV's Frontline Practitioners Network working with refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, professionals who work on the topic of refugee and asylum seeker inclusion and integration in its broader sense (such as policymakers or researchers) and those who, due to the nature of their professional activity, might work with this target group in the near future, will also be invited to join the network. Hence, the main goal will be to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and know-how among these stakeholders (e.g., through the periodical organisation of debates, and roundtables), the identification of common issues/needs, and and the formulation of joint solutions.

WP3. Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (FEVR-SES)

This preventive logic reflects contemporary European security policy trends that prioritise resilience over repression. Particular attention is devoted to ethical safeguards, data protection standards, and gender-sensitive perspectives. These elements are crucial to maintaining legitimacy and public confidence in preventive security initiatives. The calibration and piloting stages further validate the adaptability of the instruments to different socio-legal environments. Attention to false positives and false negatives further strengthens methodological reliability.

WP Leader: BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior

T3.1. Online mapping of current procedures to assess refugees' vulnerability to radicalisation

Task leader: Center for Security Studies

A survey will be created via EU Survey[3] to gather key quantitative and qualitative data related to mapping the current procedures utilised by frontline practitioners, such as LEAs (incl. border control agencies) and NGOs, to screen refugees' vulnerability to engage in a radical or extremist viewpoint. This task will be carried out using EUSurvey, which allows the Consortium to easily translate the survey script into each partners' language due to its automatic translation feature. However, to guarantee its proper use and dissemination, each Consortium partner will proofread the survey in its native language. Hence, the survey will be disseminated to all members of IN2PREV's Frontline Practitioners Network (i.e., members from countries outside the Consortium will be invited to complete the

[3]https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/home/welcome

survey in English or in any other Consortium language of their preference). Afterwards, the data will be analysed, and the results will be compiled in a report. The information collected and analysed through the survey will be complemented by desk research. To this extent, all complementary literature will be thoroughly reviewed and, where relevant, utilised to complement the T3.1's report.

T3.2. Develop a framework to evaluate current interventions

Task leader: FUNDEA – Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies

The framework will be developed considering existing literature on evaluation methods, appropriateness, relevance, and suitability. The framework will comprise evaluation attributes (i.e., dimensions and indicators being evaluated) and the reasoning for their inclusion, taking into consideration the role played by gender in each of them.

Then, within the practices mapped as part of T3.1, semi-structured interviews will be carried out with frontline practitioners who have implemented such procedures to assess the challenges they faced and the lessons learned, therefore understanding 'what works' versus 'what does not work'. The Consortium will carry out 2 interviews per country, and – depending on the number of procedures mapped in T3.1 – each partner will be responsible for carrying out at least 2 interviews in an additional European country (therefore reaching the total goal of 14 countries evaluated).

T3.3. Develop the Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (FEVR-SES) tool

Task leader: BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior

T3.3.1. FEVR-SES Methodological Framework & tool creation

Subtask leader: BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior, Co-leaders: Qualify JUST (IPS) & FUNDEA – Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies

This task aims to develop a vulnerability risk screening tool based on the common indicators that "actually work" in (similar) instruments or procedures previously developed and implemented building upon the findings on T3.2. The goal will be to adapt these indicators into a brand-new tool (developed within IN2PREV) to assess at-risk vulnerability factors among refugees and asylum seekers. This tool will be called the Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (i.e., the FEVR-SES instrument). To this end, the interviews carried out with representatives (and/or stakeholders responsible for implementing these instruments and procedures will be conducted in T3.2. Once the data are collected and meticulously analysed, common indicators of "what works" will emerge for each radical or extremist typology. As

understanding different ideological risk factors is paramount for our FEVR-SES' success, IN2PREV will build upon the findings of the MIRAD[4] and R2COM[5] projects (synergies will be established), which are adapting the Radicalisation Risk Assessment Instrument (IRS)[6] and Radicalisation Risk Screening Tool (FBOG)[7] according to the type of ideology and gender, respectively. Both the IRS and FBOG are part of the R2PRIS[8] RRAP Toolset[9], which, according to the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network, is one of the 14 best practices[10] in Europe (out of 226 evaluated initiatives) in the field of radicalisation prevention.

Ultimately, the FEVR-SES' goal is not to deny an individual's entry into a country or Member State, but instead to signal any vulnerabilities as early as possible, and to report such initial assessments to appropriate institutions such as NGOs. These organisations, functioning in a 'second-stage' framework and knowing an individual's propensity to engage in a radical viewpoint, will focus on mitigating such needs (which place them at risk of radicalisation) by implementing the inclusion programme developed as part of WP4. Moreover, the FEVR-SES tool will help frontline practitioners' decision-making, therefore avoiding misleading, deceptive, and biased assumptions/suppositions during screening. Attention will be paid to avoiding and detecting false positives and false negatives.

T3.3.2. Ethical review and guidelines' production

Subtask leader: FUNDEA – Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies

This task entails an internal review of the tool developed within T3.3.1. Bearing in mind the sensitive nature of the screening process (and dimensions and indicators under analysis), as well as the possible pitfalls and deviations potentially occurring from the use of the instrument, ethical considerations must be appropriately addressed. To that extent, and aiming to avoid superficial (and sometimes biased/partial) collection and analysis of data, the Consortium will invest in the development of ethical guidelines to be linked with the instrument's usage. This product will focus on the following points:

- Protection of individual data (e.g., ensuring the compliance with GDPR);

[4] For more information: https://mirad-project.eu/.

[5] For more Information: https://prisonsystems.eu/r2com/.

[6] For more information: http://www.r2pris.org/individual-radicalisation-screening.html.

[7] For more information: http://www.r2pris.org/fbog-frontline-behavioural-observation-guidelines.html.

[8] For more information: http://www.r2pris.org/.

[9] For more information: http://www.r2pris.org/rrap-radicalisation-risk-assessment-in-prisons-toolset.html.

[10] For more information: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/page/ran-collection-expert-review_en.

- Safeguarding individual rights (i.e., avoiding labelling, prejudice and discrimination);
- Special attentiveness to gender mainstreaming concerns.

As such, the guidelines will ensure that the partnership delivers human-rights compliant, transparent analysis, with a strong focus on ethical concerns. It will, therefore, align with the concerns and guidelines drawn by the UN Human Rights Council, among others.

T3.3.3. Organise online joint transnational, cross-sectoral FEVR-SES review panel
Subtask leader: Polish Platform for Homeland Security

This subtask regards the organisation of an international, cross-sectoral joint review panel (online). The panel will include 2 key practitioners per country (one from an LEA, one from a frontline NGO), alongside the members of IN2PREV's Advisory Expert Committee (assembled in T2.2) to guarantee an external, unbiased vision. This will assist the Consortium in successfully ensuring that final version of the FEVR-SES tool is aligned with its initial objective and effectively screens what it was intended to. All event attendees will receive the FEVR-SES' tool (as developed in T3.3.1) at least 30 days prior to the panel, and will be asked to provide their inputs at least 7 days in advance. The panel will then jointly discuss the practitioners' and experts' inputs, allowing for the initial fine-tuning of the FEVR-SES tool by the T3.3.1's leader (namely, BSAFE LAB / University of Beira Interior). The second finetuning will occur at the end of T3.3.5.

T3.3.4 Organise FEVR-SES national calibration workshops
Subtask leader: BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior
This subtask regards the organisation of national calibration workshops with 10 frontline practitioners per country (5 LEA representatives, 5 NGO representatives). The goal will be to align, if needed, the fine-tuned FEVR-SES tool (completed at the final stage of T3.3.3) with each country's social and contextual needs and challenges. Therefore, national FEVR-SES tool subsets will be created for each partner country.

T3.3.5 FEVR-SES piloting, validation and final fine-tuning
Subtask leader: BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior, Co-leaders: Qualify JUST (IPS) & FUNDEA – Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies

This subtask regards the piloting of the FEVR-SES' tool at the national level. As such, the Consortium will determine whether the tool works as expected, adequately screening the attributes (dimensions and indicators) determined in T3.3.1 (following the evaluation in T3.2) and reviewed in T3.3.3. This final

subtask 3.3.5 will only occur once practitioners are duly trained in the tool's usage; hence, it will take into consideration the WP5's timeline. To this extent, only duly trained professionals (see T5.1) will be able to pilot the tool with participants (with a sample size of 20 per country), who will be properly invited to take part in this study, and duly informed of the ethical guidelines. A consent form will be requested (cf. T3.3.2).

WP4. Mentoring Approach for Refugees and Asylum Seekers Successful Inclusion (M4-Rinc Integration Assurance Programme)
WP Leader: EaSI – European Association for Social Innovation

T4.1. Conceptualise and create M4-Rinc Integration Assurance Programme
Task leader: EaSI – European Association for Social Innovation
IN2PREV's Consortium will develop a thorough mentoring scheme to work towards refugee and asylum seekers' (and their families) sustained integration. The scheme, entitled "Mentoring Approach for Refugees and Asylum Seekers Successful Inclusion" (the M4-Rinc Integration Assurance Programme), will aim to address the wide range of challenges and continuous needs that hinder the integration process. It will thereby provide social support and opportunities to improve refugees and asylum seekers' community connectedness, consequently fostering the development of trust-based relationships with the receiving host society. The M4-Rinc's Integration Assurance Programme goal lies in establishing a close working relationship between the mentor and the mentee, providing the latter with the social resources to tackle everyday situations, problems, and conflicts. In addition, the M4-Rinc's Integration Assurance Programme aims to connect members of the established business community with refugees and asylum seekers entrepreneurs, thus emphasising the scheme's comprehensiveness as ensuring sustained financial support is paramount.

T4.2. Selection of M4-Rinc's mentors
Task leader: EaSI – European Association for Social Innovation
This task encompasses the selection of mentors (10 per country) who will be piloting M4-Rinc's Integration Assurance Programme in T4.3. The mentors' selection will follow a twofold approach:

i) utilizing a country-based existing pool of mentors in partner countries where such pools exists, considering the mentors' suitability and appropriateness for working with vulnerable groups; and
ii) mobilizing those who were mapped as mentors in T2.1 (and are a part of IN2PREV's Frontline Practitioners Network developed during T2.3).

T4.3. Organise M4-Rinc national calibration workshops

Task leader: EaSI – European Association for Social Innovation

The five mentors selected in T4.2 will then be invited to a national calibration workshop delving into each country's specificities (which could also enhance refugees' vulnerability risk factors for radicalisation). The goal will be to align, if needed, the M4-Rinc Integration Assurance Programme with each country's social and contextual needs and challenges. Each country will, therefore, have its own User Manual and Technical Guidelines on how to implement M4-Rinc's Integration Assurance Programme.

T4.4. Piloting, validation and final fine-tuning

Task leader: EaSI – European Association for Social Innovation

This subtask regards the piloting of the M4-Rinc Integration Assurance Programme at the national level for a six-month period. As such, the Consortium will determine whether the mentoring scheme works as initially expected. For this purpose, an evaluation framework will be created to assess the programme's effectiveness, incorporating feedback from both mentors and mentees. It is worth noting that T4.4 will only occur once mentors are duly trained in the M4-Rinc's implementation; hence, it will take into consideration the WP5's timeline). To this extent, only duly trained professionals (see T5.2) will be able to pilot the mentoring scheme with participants (n = 10 per country – i.e., with a sample size of 10 per country – namely 1 per mentor), who will be properly invited to take part in this programme and duly informed of the ethical guidelines. A consent form will be requested (cf. T3.3.2).

WP5. IN2PREV's cross-sectoral & multi-goal training approach

Capacity-building activities under WP5 significantly contribute to professionalisation among frontline practitioners. The blended learning format ensures both accessibility and methodological consistency across jurisdictions. Importantly, the Training of Trainers model guarantees sustainability beyond the formal duration of the project. Such structured training reduces institutional fragmentation and promotes unified operational standards across Europe. Continuous evaluation mechanisms embedded in the training modules enhance long-term effectiveness.

WP Leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)

T5.1. Develop a b-Learning training course on preventing and identifying vulnerability risk factors to radicalisation on refugees and asylum seekers

Task leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)

T5.1.1. Outlining the training course's content and multimedia design
Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS), Co-leader: BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior

Aiming to enhance LEAs' and/or frontline NGO practitioners' knowledge on preventing and identifying vulnerability risk factors for radicalisation among refugees and asylum seekers, the Consortium will develop a b-learning training course. The Consortium will develop the training programme content, which will majorly focus on the following modules:

1) Understanding radicalisation, violent extremism, and their underlying processes (incl. cognitive mechanisms);
2) Working with vulnerable groups and maintaining attentiveness to vulnerability risk factors (incl. ethical concerns and bias demystification);
3) Implementing the Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (FEVR-SES) tool to assess at-risk vulnerability factors ~~on~~ among refugees and asylum seekers (developed in T3.3);
4) Fostering collaboration and communication with national and international stakeholders (post-screening stage).

Based on these four modules, the chapters and subchapters will be produced by IN2PREV's R&D partners (incl. the task leader). These materials will be mapped out to serve as a basis for the outline and development of the e-learning contents, which will be validated within the Consortium. This training course will include the development of storyboards, articulate software slides, narrations, practical exercises, training manuals, and the compilation of relevant resources. All the multimedia content will be prepared and designed as the content is created to optimise time management.

T5.1.2. Piloting the training course in each partner country
Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)
After the development of the training course contents and subsequent validation by the Consortium, the e-learning platform will be piloted by LEAs and/or frontline NGO practitioners who either form part of IN2PREV's Frontline Practitioners database created in T2.1 or are part of the partners' and stakeholders' contact networks. Each partner country will be responsible for allocating ~~of~~ 20 participants to pilot the training course, totalling 140 participants (representing the 7 countries in the Consortium). The classroom-based sessions will be held during the project's three Staff Training Events (with 5 participants per organisation in each event).

T5.1.3. Trainees' feedback & evaluation (periodical collection and analysis)
Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)

Throughout the piloting of the e-learning training course and Staff Training Events (STEs), participants will provide mandatory feedback regarding each module, chapter, contents, and platform interactivity (for the e-learning component), as well as the trainers' & session's suitability (for the in-person STEs). Afterwards, participants will be encouraged to share any additional remarks (via email or directly on the platform), which will assist in assessing ~~if~~ whether the objectives of the course were attained and ensuring their utmost potential.

T5.1.4. Fine-tuning the training course
Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS) | Co-leader: BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior
This final task entails the fine-tuning of the e-learning training course and the whole training programme, based on the feedback collected from the participants in T5.1.3. Such fine-tuning will also contribute to ensuring the project's sustainability beyond its lifespan, maximizing its outreach and transferability to other settings and/or countries.

T5.2. Develop a b-Learning training course to facilitate refugees and asylum seekers integration through mentoring
Task leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)

T5.2.1. Outlining the training course's content and multimedia design
Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS) | Co-lead: EaSI – European Association for Social Innovation
Aiming to enhance NGOs practitioners' and mentors' knowledge on enhancing refugees' and asylum seekers' integration, the Consortium will develop a b-learning training course. The Consortium will develop the training programme content, which will majorly focus on the following modules:

1) Understanding radicalisation, violent extremism, and their underlying processes (incl. cognitive mechanisms);
2) Working with vulnerable groups and maintaining attentiveness to vulnerability risk factors (incl. ethical concerns; and bias demystification);
3) Implementing the Mentoring Approach for Refugees and Asylum Seekers Successful Inclusion (M4-Rinc Integration Assurance Programme) to evaluate at-risk vulnerability factors among refugees and asylum seekers (developed in WP4);
4) Integrating the Frontline Extremism Vulnerability Risk – Structured Evaluation Screening (FEVR-SES) tool to assess, where deemed relevant by the professional, at-risk vulnerability factors among refugees and asylum seekers (developed in T3.3);

5) Fostering collaboration and communication with national and international stakeholders (post-screening stage), including law enforcement depending on each specific case.

This training aims to strengthen the mentors' competencies regarding various dialogue techniques, coaching, and conflict management skills. Once the course is completed, mentors will possess the necessary insight and tools for planning and tailoring a mentorship that considers the fact that the mentee is a refugee or an asylum seeker. The training also focuses on how the mentee's family and network can be actively involved in the mentorship process, while – as stated in T4.1 – aiming to connect members of the established business community with refugee and asylum seeker entrepreneurs, thus emphasising the M4-Rinc's comprehensiveness. Based on the aforementioned five modules, the chapters and subchapters will be produced by IN2PREV's R&D partners (incl. the task leader). These materials will be mapped out to serve as a basis for the outline and development of the e-learning contents, which will be validated within the Consortium. This training course will include the development of storyboards, articulate software slides, narrations, practical exercises, training manuals, and the compilation of relevant resources. All the multimedia content will be prepared and designed as the content is created to optimise time management.

T5.2.2. Piloting the training course in each partner country
Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)
After the development of the training course's contents and subsequent validation by the Consortium, the e-learning platform will be piloted by NGO practitioners and mentors who either form part of IN2PREV's Frontline Practitioners database created in T2.1 or are part of the partners' and stakeholders' contact networks. Each partner country will be responsible for allocating ~~of~~ 10 participants to pilot the training course, totalling 70 participants (representing the 7 countries in the Consortium). The classroom-based sessions will be held during the project's three Staff Training Events (with 5 participants per organisation in each event).

T5.2.3. Trainees' feedback & evaluation (periodical collection and analysis)
Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)
Throughout the piloting of the e-learning training course and Staff Training Events (STEs), participants will provide mandatory feedback regarding each module, chapter, contents, and platform interactivity (for the e-learning component), as well as the trainers' & session's suitability (for the in-person STEs). Afterwards, participants will be encouraged to share any additional remarks (via email or directly on the platform), which will assist in assessing ~~if~~ whether the objectives of the course were attained and ensuring their utmost potential.

T5.2.4. Fine-tuning the training course

Subtask leader: Qualify JUST (IPS), Co-lead: EaSI – European Association for Social Innovation

This final task entails the fine-tuning of the e-learning training course and the whole training programme, based on the feedback collected from the participants in T5.2.3. Such fine-tuning will also contribute to ensuring the project's sustainability beyond its lifespan, while maximizing its outreach and transferability to other settings and/or countries.

T5.3. Adaptation and deployment of an e-Learning Training of Trainers' course for frontline practitioners

Task leader: Qualify JUST (IPS)

To equip frontline practitioners (e.g., LEAs, NGOs) with the skills and knowledge necessary to provide training to others within their organisation, this task will adapt and deploy a Training of Trainers (ToT) course. This course will ensure the replication of the project's training initiatives outlined in T5.1 and T5.2 thereby securing the longevity of the project and its outcomes. It will also facilitate the training and capacity-building of a wider group of frontline practitioners (e.g., LEAs, NGOs) in the project's topic.

To this extent, IN2PREV's ToT will adapt (to its specific target group) other EU-funded projects' ToTs in the area of radicalisation prevention to its specific target group, such as the INTEGRA (Erasmus+) and the R4JUST (DG JUST) models – both of which included IN2PREV's Consortium partners in their partnerships. Therefore, only a small number of days will be allocated as part of T5.2's budget, as it pertains only the adjustments for the IN2PREV target group, establishing a new course brand image (incl. multimedia design), and managing trainee engagement. At least 15 out of the 30 trainees per country piloting the courses in T5.1 and T5.2 will be involved in IN2PREV's ToT. A pre and post-test evaluation of the ToT course will be carried out to assess, whether and to what extent, trainers have acquired the desired knowledge and skills to train others on the course contents of T5.1 or T5.2 (depending on each practitioners' role). The information collected will be utilized as an opportunity to enhance and assure the quality, potential, and sustainability of IN2PREV beyond the project's lifespan.

The success of the project depends on the extensive experience of the initial authors of the project proposal - Pedro Liberado and Vânia Sampaio from the Portuguese organization IPS_Innovative Prison Systems. Of course, the future coordinators from BSAFE LAB – Law Enforcement, Justice and Public Safety Research and Technology Transfer Laboratory of the University of Beira Interior, Portugal, participated significantly in its creation and subsequent implementation. The individual phases and stages of the project are distributed among its partners, who have significantly influenced the design of the project and its tasks to date,

steering it towards its successful completion in the second half of 2025. In addition to the project management (BSAFE LAB), the partnership consists of:

1. Polish Platform for Homeland Security, Poland.
2. FUNDEA, Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies, Spain.
3. Qualify JUST (IPS Innovative Prison Systems), Portugal.
4. European Association for Social Innovation (EaSI), Romania.
5. Academy of the Police Force, Slovakia.
6. Center for Security Studies, Bosnia & Herzegovina.
7. General Police Inspectorate, Moldova.

Conclusion

The project also acknowledges the socio-psychological dimensions of displacement and integration processes. Addressing trauma, identity crises, and social exclusion is essential in preventing secondary marginalisation. By embedding these considerations into operational tools, IN2PREV promotes a holistic understanding of vulnerability. The partnership structure reflects a well-balanced representation of academic institutions, law enforcement bodies, and civil society organisations. Such diversity increases the methodological robustness and practical applicability of project outputs.

Preliminary findings from the implementation phases indicate strong engagement among stakeholders and positive reception of the developed tools. Future evaluations will focus on measurable indicators of integration success and reduced vulnerability exposure. Overall, IN2PREV contributes to strengthening democratic resilience, social cohesion, and coordinated European responses to radicalisation risks.

The authors aimed to analyse in this study the theoretical knowledge and practical frameworks ~~base in~~ utilized during the preparation and creation of the foundational components for the project IN2PREV. The authors draw extensively on insights from social, legal, security and police sciences incorporating empirical and scientific outputs derived from real-world socio-political developments across Europe.

The importance of the project is certainly already reflected in Slovakia through recent shifts and integration efforts supporting this vulnerable population. The primary outcomes of the project will be applied systematically following its successful completion projecting its tools and outputs through their implementation within the European security, social and economic space. (METENKO et al., 2026, 108-300)

Extensive research conducted during the preparation, and since the beginning of the project implementation, ongoing research activities have confirmed – we are in the progress task 4.3., confirm our expectation to help processes of integration as a basis of project. This study is a partial output of "Law enforcement and community cooperation and training approach to preventing

radicalisation, while ensuring refugees' successful inclusion" project – IN2PREV, co-financed by the EC European Union, Number: KA220-ADU-EC004C7E.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY: BALANCING PREDICTIVE CAPABILITIES WITH RULE OF LAW REQUIREMENTS

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence technologies has fundamentally transformed the operational landscape for law enforcement and national security agencies across democratic societies. While AI-powered tools offer unprecedented capabilities in threat detection, predictive analysis, and intelligence processing, their deployment raises significant questions regarding the protection of fundamental rights and the maintenance of democratic oversight mechanisms (ZAVRSNIK, 2021). This transformation occurs within a broader context where both state actors and criminal organisations increasingly rely on sophisticated technological capabilities, creating what scholars have termed the emerging cyber-fare state paradigm (KELEMEN, 2022).

The present study examines the legal and institutional frameworks governing the use of AI in security operations, with particular attention to the balance between operational effectiveness and rule of law requirements. The research addresses three interconnected dimensions that collectively shape the contemporary security environment. First, it analyses the evolving threat landscape where AI has enabled new forms of criminal activity, including the proliferation of "crime as a service" models that democratise access to sophisticated attack methods. Second, it examines how security agencies are integrating AI-based predictive tools into their operations, focusing on the associated risks of algorithmic bias and opacity. Third, it evaluates the legal safeguards necessary to ensure that such deployments remain compatible with fundamental rights, particularly privacy protection, the presumption of innocence, and safeguards against discriminatory profiling.

The methodology combines doctrinal legal analysis of European regulatory approaches with comparative institutional assessment. Drawing on provisions of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act (hereinafter referred to as the AI Act) concerning high-risk AI systems in law enforcement contexts, the study identifies critical gaps between technological capabilities and existing legal frameworks. The analysis contributes to the broader theoretical framework of the cyber-welfare

state by examining how democratic systems can harness AI capabilities while maintaining institutional safeguards that distinguish them from authoritarian surveillance models.

The Evolving Threat Landscape: Crime as a Service and AI-Enabled Criminality

The contemporary security environment is characterised by a fundamental transformation in the nature and accessibility of criminal capabilities. The emergence of Crime as a Service (hereinafter referred to as CaaS) models represents a paradigm shift whereby sophisticated cyberattack tools and methodologies are commodified and distributed through underground marketplaces, effectively democratising access to capabilities that previously required substantial technical expertise (MANKY, 2013). This phenomenon has created what Lusthaus (2018) describes as market-based criminal ecosystems where specialised providers offer discrete services ranging from ransomware deployment kits to botnet rental services and targeted phishing infrastructure.
Criminal enterprises now operate with the efficiency of legitimate businesses, offering customer support and service level guarantees for their illicit products. This commodification has lowered barriers to entry to the extent that individuals with minimal technical knowledge can execute sophisticated attacks which previously required specialised training. The Ransomware-as-a-Service (RaaS) model exemplifies this transformation, enabling affiliates to deploy devastating attacks while core developers maintain operational security (EUROPOL, 2024).

Artificial intelligence has further accelerated this democratisation of criminal capabilities. Generative AI tools enable the automated creation of sophisticated phishing content that bypasses traditional detection mechanisms, while machine learning algorithms can identify system vulnerabilities at a scale and speed impossible for human analysts. The convergence of CaaS business models with AI-enhanced tools creates what Caldwell et al. (2020) term "AI-enabled future crime", where the technical sophistication of attacks increases even as the expertise required to execute them decreases.
The organisational structure of contemporary cybercrime reflects this service-oriented transformation. Rather than hierarchical criminal enterprises, the landscape increasingly features polycentric networks where specialised actors provide discrete services within broader criminal ecosystems (DUPONT, 2017). This creates attribution challenges for law enforcement and renders traditional investigative approaches less effective. The evolving threat environment thus creates a fundamental tension that animates the present analysis: the operational imperative to deploy advanced AI capabilities must be balanced against the requirement that such deployments respect fundamental rights and maintain democratic accountability mechanisms (HUTCHINGS & HOLT, 2015).

Predictive Capabilities in Security Operations: Promises and Perils

The integration of artificial intelligence into law enforcement and national security operations represents a significant technological transformation. Predictive policing systems, risk assessment algorithms, and automated surveillance technologies promise enhanced operational efficiency through pattern identification invisible to human analysts. However, these capabilities introduce substantial risks requiring careful legal management (BERK, 2021). This deployment must be understood within what the OECD (2025) terms the "algorithmic turn in governance", where computational systems increasingly mediate citizen-state relations.

Predictive policing encompasses a range of applications with distinct operational characteristics and risk profiles. Place-based prediction systems analyse historical crime data alongside environmental factors to identify geographic hotspots where criminal activity is statistically more likely to occur. Person-based systems, by contrast, assess individual risk factors to generate predictions about specific persons' likelihood of involvement in criminal activity (US Department of Justice 2024). The theoretical foundations of these approaches draw on routine activity theory and environmental criminology, but their practical implementation raises fundamental questions about data quality, algorithmic transparency, and the potential for discriminatory outcomes.

The quality of predictive outputs is fundamentally constrained by input data quality, and criminal justice data carries the accumulated weight of historical enforcement patterns that may reflect discriminatory practices. Where past policing has disproportionately targeted particular communities, this disparity becomes encoded into training datasets and reproduced in algorithmic recommendations (HUNG & YEN, 2023). The EU Fundamental Rights Agency documented how such feedback loops can entrench and amplify existing disparities (FRA, 2022).

The opacity of machine learning systems compounds these concerns. Contemporary predictive tools often employ complex neural network architectures whose decision-making processes resist straightforward explanation, even to their developers. This "black box" problem creates accountability deficits where neither affected individuals nor oversight bodies can meaningfully evaluate the basis for algorithmic recommendations (ERSOZ et al., 2025). Risk assessment tools used in bail decisions, sentencing recommendations, and parole determinations exemplify these tensions, as they directly affect individual liberty while operating through mechanisms that may be fundamentally opaque.

The deployment of biometric identification technologies, particularly facial recognition systems, illustrates the convergence of predictive capabilities with fundamental rights concerns. These systems promise rapid identification of suspects and missing persons, but their accuracy varies significantly across demographic groups, with documented higher error rates for women and

individuals with darker skin tones (GENTZEL, 2021). The integration of such systems into real-time surveillance infrastructure raises profound questions about the presumption of innocence and the scope of state monitoring in democratic societies (OECD, 2025).

Rule of Law Requirements: Legal Safeguards for AI Deployment

The deployment of AI systems in law enforcement and national security contexts engages fundamental rights protections that lie at the core of democratic constitutional orders (STRZĘPEK, 2024). The right to privacy and data protection, the presumption of innocence, protection against discriminatory treatment, and the right to effective remedy collectively establish a normative framework within which security-oriented AI applications must operate. Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 on Artificial Intelligence (hereinafter: AI Act) represents the most comprehensive legislative attempt to translate these abstract principles into concrete, enforceable requirements applicable to AI systems across risk categories (European Commission 2025).

The AI Act establishes a risk-based regulatory architecture that subjects law enforcement AI applications to particularly stringent compliance obligations. Systems used for biometric identification, risk assessment of natural persons, and predictive policing are classified as high-risk under Annex III, triggering mandatory requirements regarding data governance, transparency, human oversight, and conformity assessment procedures (European Parliament 2024). The regulation prohibits outright certain applications deemed fundamentally incompatible with EU values, including AI systems that assess the risk of natural persons committing criminal offences based solely on profiling or personality traits, as well as the untargeted scraping of facial images to build recognition databases (KAMINSKI, 2023).

The prohibition on real-time remote biometric identification in publicly accessible spaces represents a significant constraint on security applications, though narrow exceptions exist subject to stringent procedural safeguards. Where such systems are deployed, they require prior judicial authorisation and fundamental rights impact assessments (European Commission 2025). These requirements reflect recognition that biometric surveillance fundamentally alters the relationship between citizens and the state.

Algorithmic transparency constitutes a foundational requirement for maintaining rule of law standards in AI-mediated security operations. The principle that individuals affected by state action should be able to understand the basis for decisions affecting them translates imperfectly to algorithmic contexts where decision-making processes may be inherently opaque. The AI Act addresses this through mandatory documentation requirements, but scholars have questioned whether such technical transparency meaningfully enables affected persons to challenge algorithmic determinations (SELBST & POWLES, 2017).

Human oversight requirements reflect the normative commitment that consequential decisions affecting fundamental rights must ultimately rest with accountable human actors rather than automated systems. Article 14 of the AI Act mandates that high-risk AI systems be designed and developed to allow effective oversight by natural persons, including the capacity to understand system capabilities and limitations, properly interpret outputs, and override or reverse system decisions. However, research on automation bias suggests that human operators may defer to algorithmic recommendations even where they have formal authority to override them, raising questions about whether procedural safeguards translate into meaningful substantive protection (OECD, 2025).

The Cyberfare State Framework: Democratic versus Authoritarian Models

The proliferation of AI-powered security capabilities across state actors has given rise to what may be conceptualised as the "cyber-fare state", a governance paradigm in which digital surveillance, predictive analytics, and automated enforcement constitute core instruments of state power alongside traditional military and police capabilities. The critical question for democratic theory concerns whether these capabilities can be harnessed to enhance security while preserving the institutional safeguards that distinguish democratic governance from authoritarian control. The answer to this question will shape the character of state-citizen relations for decades to come (BAREZ, 2025).

Authoritarian applications of AI in security contexts provide a cautionary baseline. Research documents how authoritarian regimes deploy AI-powered systems to monitor dissent and target activists through algorithmic surveillance (CEVALLOS, 2025). China's Safe City surveillance packages have spread globally, offering turnkey surveillance infrastructure enabling comprehensive monitoring of public spaces and financial transactions. The export of these capabilities raises concerns about diffusion of authoritarian surveillance practices (Freedom House 2025).

The structural characteristics of AI-enabled security technology create inherent risks of authoritarian drift even within democratic systems. Unlike traditional surveillance requiring substantial human resources, AI-powered systems can monitor entire populations at a minimal cost (TOKSON, 2025). Automated systems lack the discretionary restraint human officers might exercise. The accumulation of data creates comprehensive profiles that could be exploited by future governments with less commitment to democratic norms.

Democratic governance models must develop institutional architectures that harness AI capabilities while maintaining meaningful constraints. Distinguishing features of democratic AI deployment include robust transparency mechanisms, independent oversight bodies with genuine authority, meaningful judicial review, and effective remedies for individuals harmed by algorithmic decisions. The

OECD's 2024 framework articulates this through its call for trustworthy technology development guided by democratic principles (OECD, 2024). The AI Act represents an attempt to institutionalise these principles through binding legal requirements.

Conclusions

This study has examined the intersection of artificial intelligence deployment in law enforcement and national security with democratic governance requirements. Contemporary security agencies face genuine operational imperatives necessitating advanced technological capabilities. The evolving threat landscape characterised by the "Crime as a Service" models and sophisticated cyber-enabled attacks demands that agencies maintain technological parity with adversaries. Abandoning AI-powered tools would compromise security operations' effectiveness and undermine the citizen protection that constitutes the primary justification for state coercive power.

The central challenge, therefore, is not whether to deploy AI in security contexts, but how to do so in a manner that preserves the rule of law safeguards distinguishing democratic states from authoritarian regimes. The research findings indicate that this balance requires simultaneous attention to three interconnected dimensions: operational effectiveness, fundamental rights protection, and democratic accountability. These objectives, while sometimes in tension, are not fundamentally irreconcilable. Security operations that violate constitutional constraints ultimately undermine their own legitimacy and erode the public trust upon which effective policing depends.

The European Union's regulatory framework, anchored in the AI Act, offers a promising model for proportionate governance. Its risk-based approach recognises that not all AI applications present equivalent concerns, enabling calibrated responses that impose stringent requirements on high-risk systems while permitting innovation in lower-risk contexts. Several practical recommendations emerge from this analysis:

Legal frameworks governing security AI must be sufficiently specific to provide meaningful guidance while remaining adaptable to technological evolution.

Independent oversight mechanisms must possess genuine authority and technical capacity to evaluate algorithmic systems.

Affected individuals must have access to meaningful remedies when algorithmic decisions adversely impact their rights.

Democratic societies must resist treating security imperatives as automatically overriding all other considerations. The cyber-fare state framework illuminates the fact that AI capabilities can serve democratic or authoritarian ends depending on the institutional contexts. The task is to construct governance architectures that harness these capabilities while maintaining transparency, accountability, and

respect for individual rights — thereby demonstrating that the rule of law and operational effectiveness are not antagonistic but mutually reinforcing goals.

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LABOUR EXPLOITATION. CHALLENGES, ISSUES FOR THE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

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> *"Every human being, man, woman, boy and girl, is made in God's image. God is the love and freedom that is given in interpersonal relationships, and every human being is a free person destined to live for the good of others in equality and fraternity. Every person, and all people, are equal and must be accorded the same freedom and the same dignity. Any discriminatory relationship that does not respect the fundamental conviction that others are equal is a crime, and frequently an aberrant crime. Therefore, we declare on each and every one of our creeds that modern slavery, in terms of human trafficking, forced labor and prostitution, and organ trafficking, is a crime against humanity. Its victims are from all walks of life but are most frequently among the poorest and most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. On behalf of all of them, our communities of faith are called to reject, without exception, any systematic deprivation of individual freedom for the purposes of personal or commercial exploitation; in their name, we make this declaration."*
> Pope Francis, Declaration on International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, Dec. 2, 2014

Introduction

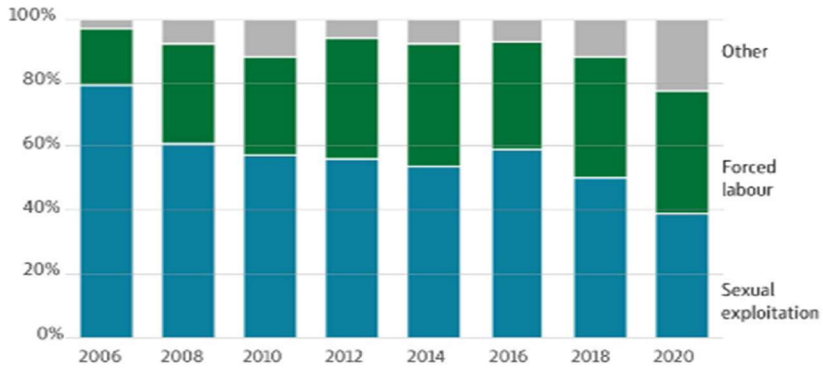
Trafficking in human beings is a fast-growing criminal area that affects millions of people around the world. According to the National Association of Securities Dealers Automatic Quotation System (hereinafter referred to as "Nasdaq") 2024 Global Financial Crime Report, among the most prevalent crimes that fueled trillions of dollars in illicit flows and money laundering activity were a range of destructive crimes, including an estimated: $782.9 billion in drug trafficking activity, $346.7 billion in human trafficking, and $11.5 billion in terrorist financing. Transnational organized crime takes in between 3% to 7% of World Gross Domestic Product (hereinafter referred to as "GDP") annually ($109.53 trillion 2024 estimate); taking 5% as an average, that would be $5.8 trillion per year. According to Millenium project "Global Challenges:12" data, the transnational organized crime takes between 3% to 7% of World's GDP annually ($109.53 trillion 2024 estimate); taking 5% as an average, that would be $5.8 trillion per year.

As this data demonstrates, trafficking in human beings is one of the most lucrative illegal income sources for organized crime, despite being strictly prohibited. It exceeds the GDP of many countries, including the most

industrialized powers in the World. For example, World Economics estimates Germany's 2025 GDP at $5.758 trillion, France's 2025 GDP at $4.448 trillion, Hungary's 2025 GDP at $503.93 billion and Lithuania's 2025 GDP at $168. 61 billion PPP terms (Purchasing Power Parity). The above-mentioned statistical data shows that income from human trafficking constitutes one of the primary illegal incomes for organized crime groups (BUCIUNAS, 2024). Trafficking in human beings occurs in a variety of ways and across many different sectors of society.

According to Europol human trafficking can take various forms involving sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery, servitude, exploitation for forced criminal activities such as pickpocketing, shoplifting, and drug trafficking. According to data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (hereinafter referred to as "UNODC") data, the latest global figures show that trafficking for forced labour has become equally prevalent as sexual exploitation. UNODC data show that forced labour and sexual exploitation were each detected in just under 40 % of cases in 2020 (Table 1.). This ratio results from a recent decrease in reported cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation and a steady rise in the registered number of cases of trafficking for labour exploitation.

Table 1. Reported cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation and for labour exploitation (Source: UNODOC, 2022).



Many countries protect the rights and freedoms of human beings through various legal instruments. One of these instruments is criminal law, which protects the highest values of society by criminalizing attacks on these values. According to Part 1 of Article 1 of the Criminal Code (hereinafter referred to as "CC") of the Republic of Lithuania, the purpose of the criminal code is to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals and citizens, as well as the interests of society and the state, from criminal acts by means of criminal law. The same provision is established in the criminal codes or criminal laws of other countries around the world. The Criminal Code defines socially dangerous acts or omissions, classifying them as criminal offenses while establishing the heaviest type of legal liability:

criminal liability. In many countries around the world, trafficking in human beings is criminalized, with harsh punishments for such activity established by national legislation. However, the following question arises in this context: how many criminal cases involving trafficking in human beings are actually registered?

For example, according to official data published on the website of the Information Technology and Communications Department' under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, 45.181 criminal offenses were registered in 2023, 47.216 in 2024 and 42.961 in 2025. Although only 7 criminal cases of trafficking in human beings were registered in 2023 (under article 147 of the CC of the Republic of Lithuania), a mere 3 in 2024 and 8 in 2025. This raises the critical question of whether statistical data on human trafficking reflects the real situation, leading to a broader discussion regarding the reliability of statistical data. While this constitutes a separate topic of academic research, that will not be analysed in depth within this paper. However, an indirect answer will be formulated throughout the analysis. Few people who are not actually practitioners of a mature science realize how much mop-up work this sort of paradigm leaves to be done or how fascinating such work can prove in its execution. these foundational points must be understood (KUHN, 1970, 24). The author chooses the paradigm of researching ~~on~~ social phenomena – specifically human trafficking – from the perspective of individuals who have encountered one of its primary variants: forced labour exploitation.

That approach may be described as a "glance from another side". At the same time, this paper represents a novel approach. The author's review of the literature on human trafficking revealed no other studies conducted in this manner within the Baltic States. The main research method used to gather information about forced labour exploitation in this study was the survey, specifically targeting citizens of Ukraine who have encountered this social phenomena.

Research part

The liberalisation of the labour market brings a lot of challenges for practitioners around the world. Nowadays, law enforcement officials and state institutions face a dilemma: does a given situation constitute a criminal offence or is it merely a breach of labour or administrative law within employment relations? Furthermore, questions arise regarding whether labour exploitation and forced labour are identical concepts. If they are not, it becomes necessary to establish the distinction between them, and whether every instance of labour exploitation can be classified as forced labour.

Article 3 of Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime adopted 15 November 2000 states that: *(a) Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction,*

of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs; (b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.

While the similarities and differences between these concepts constitute distinct research topics, the author of this paper utilizes the broader concept of labour exploitation. The information ~~about~~ concerning the subtle and sensitive details of push factors, pre-employment and employment procedures, and the initiation and termination of employment relations was gathered from people who directly experienced negative emotions, and who went through work problems with long-lasting negative psychological effects. Within this study these working difficulties are specified under the term "labour exploitation."

Most of the respondents didn't apply to law enforcement agencies – either in their host countries or their native country – for instance, due to different reasons, ranging from a distrust of the police and other state institutions, to a fear of retaliation from the employer. Instead, the respondents applied to non-governmental organizations, specifically the Roman Catholic charitable organization "Caritas" for ~~a piece of~~ advice on how to act in case of labour exploitation. Some of the respondents encountered labour exploitation before full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, while others experienced it after the invasion commenced on 24 February 2022.

The author acknowledges the fact that certain violations of labour law don't fall under the regulation of criminal law, which functions as the last resort for the protection of legal interests. This forces practitioners to select the applicable laws: labour, administrative, civil or criminal and at the same time raises several questions related to the topic and aim of this paper: What instruments do law enforcement~~,~~ and other state institutions in charge of implementing employment policies, regulating labour relations, and supervising workplace health and safety have at their disposal? What milestones can be used to identify the appropriate type of legal liability? Criminal liability serves as the last resort (ultima ratio) to protect the core values safeguarded by national legislation. In other words, the *ultima ratio* principle represents the repressive nature of the criminal justice system, positioning it as the final option for the legislators addressing infringements upon human dignity, health, and life. Also, other instruments are at the disposal of the law enforcement agencies and state institutions, such as holding an offender to the civilly or administratively liable. The author of this paper focuses attention on the criteria that help identify the correct type of legal liability and guide judicial decision-making within the complex and dynamic domain of pre-employment and employment relations. The most prominent axiom of the ultima ratio

framework is that conduct should only be criminalized as a last resort. What is most relevant here is the principle of necessity or subsidiarity, according to which a measure may only be employed if the goal cannot be achieved through less intrusive means. Positively formulated: if there is a need to apply restrictive measures, amongst these measures the least intrusive instrument capable of achieving the desired result must be applied (PIET HEIN VAN KEMPEN, 2019, p. 8).

This places a heavy burden on law enforcement agencies ~~on~~ regarding the identification of the exact type of legal liability to be applied in real-world situations. This leads to the following question what criteria should a police investigator or a prosecutor have at disposal to make the final decision to open a criminal case or refuse to do it? The gathered, collated and analysed data help to identify some important initial indicators of labour exploitation. It was one of the objectives of this paper, which also led to the question: how does the author of the paper plan to perform the task to achieve the aim of this research?

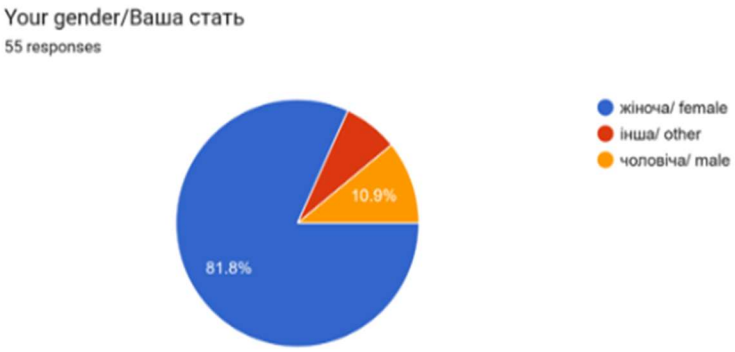
To achieve the research objectives the author prepared a questionnaire covering different aspects of labour exploitation including forced labour. This survey begins with demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, and push factors driving individuals to search for a new job abroad, job seeking methodologies, forms of communication with potential employers, a contract signing procedure, working conditions and finally the termination of employment relations. The target audience of this survey consisted of Ukrainian citizens who directly encountered or, in other words, directly experienced labour exploitation both within Ukraine and abroad. The author maintained anonymity throughout the survey ensuring that no data could directly or indirectly identify any individual participant.

The survey was conducted in accordance with the strict requirements for safeguarding personal data established by international and national laws on personal data protection. The questionnaire was created in compliance with ethical and data protection standards prescribed by laws. While some respondents experienced labour exploitation inside the country (Ukraine), others encountered it abroad. All respondents received comprehensive information regarding the objective of the survey, and the safeguards ensuring their anonymity and only after that if a respondent agreed to take part, the link to the Google form to fill up the questionnaire was shared with them. Most of the respondents (more than 80 % of respondents) are female (Table 2.).

This aligns with the findings made as a result of a collaborative effort between the International Labor Organization (hereinafter referred to as "ILO") and the Walk Free Foundation in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (hereinafter referred to as "IOM"). According to the above-mentioned findings, women and girls are disproportionately affected by modern slavery, accounting for 28.7 million, or 71 % of the overall total in 2016. So, it leads to

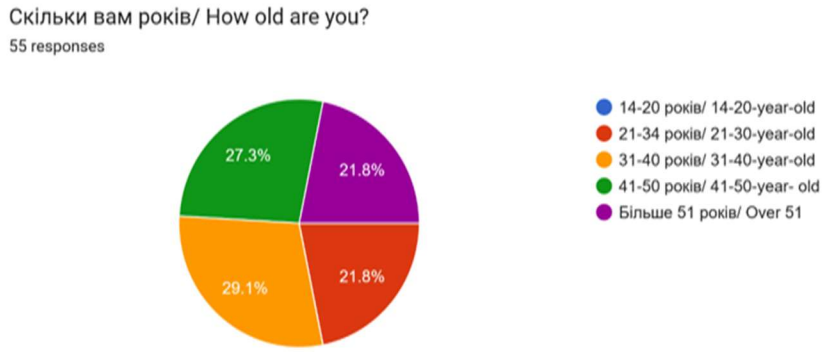
conclusion that more women than men are affected by different types of trafficking in human beings, including forced labor exploitation.

Table 2. Gender of respondents



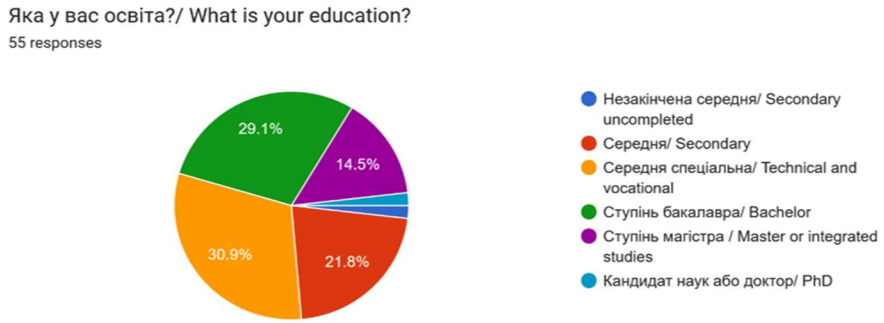
One of the questions of the survey was related to the age of respondents. As the survey results show in Table 3, the biggest share of the population (citizens of Ukraine) who encountered labor exploitation are 31-50 years old.

Table 3. Age of respondents



The third question examined an acquired socio-demographic characteristic of the respondents: their level of education. According to the 1997 International Standard Classification of Education (hereinafter referred to as "ISCED") the most prevalent education levels among the respondents were levels 3, 4, 5, and 6: secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary education, the first stage of tertiary education, and bachelor's degree.

Table 4. Level of education of respondents

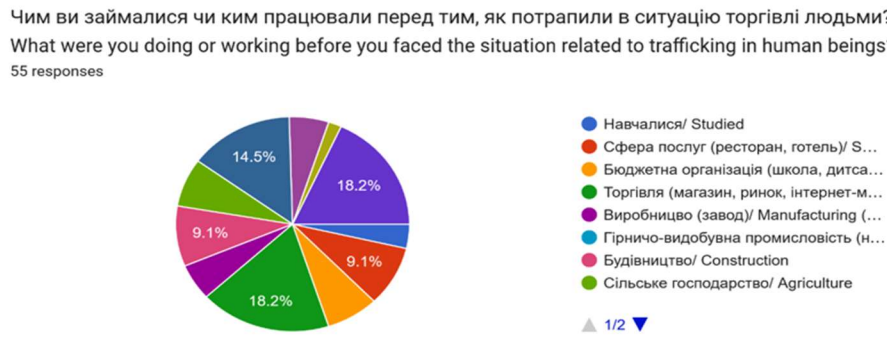


The author of this academic paper excluded questions irrelevant to the topic of this research. The fifth question addressed the marital status of the respondents when they first encountered labour exploitation. The answers were as follows:

- Married without children: 9.1 %
- Married and having children: 34.5 %
- Unmarried without children: 25.5%
- Unmarried and having children: 12.7 %
- Divorced without the obligation to care for children: 5.5 %
- Divorced and having children: 12.7 %
- Serving as the custodian of a disabled child or other family members, relatives: 5.5 %.

So, it led to the conclusion that 60% of respondents who encountered labour exploitation had children. The question about the occupation of respondents before encountering labour exploitation yielded the answers presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Information on occupation of respondents



Another question investigated the respondents' satisfaction with their income: "Were you satisfied with the level of your income before you encountered labour exploitation?" 47.3 % of respondents replied that they weren't satisfied with the level of income, 30.9% - income wasn't sufficient for them, 10.9 % - income was more likely sufficient for them, 9.1% don't have any income. Only one respondent (1.8 %) replied that for him/her the income was fully sufficient.
The ninth question aims to identify push factors within their living area that motivate respondents to to migrate to another location in searching for jobs either domestically or abroad. The following question in the survey asked: "What reasons made you look for a new or additional job?" A total of 55 respondents answered. The factors pushing human beings into searching for jobs inside the country and abroad are linked to different by essence of the push factors. The author of this paper identifies all the factors influencing the respondents' final decision to migrate or remain based on their answers. Based on the essence of push factors that affect respondents' behaviour, all factors can be split into two groups: socio-economic and political (BUCIUNAS, 2025).

Socio-economic:

- A high unemployment rate in their living area;
- A low income or insufficient amount of income to survive;
- Not enough income for children's well-being, including their education;
- Insolvency or necessity to repay loan, credit;
- The search for seasonal jobs to improve the well-being of the family;
- Attractive working conditions in other areas both inside and outside the country;
- Health issues among family members, relatives requiring additional income for treatment;
- The loss of a spouse,
- A poor organizational culture at the business entity;
- The expectation to have stability in the near future,

Political factors:

- The occupation of the area where the respondents used to live and work by Russian military forces.
- Ongoing military actions in the proximity their domicile.

Socio-economic and political factors create an atmosphere of fear and instability and serve as the primary driving force pushing individuals to migrate to another part of the country or abroad in search of a new job. Trafficking in human beings, namely labour exploitation, is the result of several push factors. The most important aspect in this regard is the fact that the people who fall victim are often

characterized by a difficult socio-economic situation and a lack of prospects for the future. At the same time, the author connects push factors as the main precondition for developing the volition of a human being to take active steps and make decisions in the near future. According to the American Psychological Association (hereinafter referred to as "APA") dictionary of psychology "volition" is the faculty by which an individual decides upon and commits to a particular course of action, especially when this occurs without direct external influence. The term encompasses a crucial set of activities involving the self, including choice and decision, self-control, intentional action, and an active rather than passive response to events. Socio-economic and political factors create starting points for human beings to think about the future, especially about personal security and other essential needs.

At the same time, the above-mentioned socio-economic and political factors serve as an internal motivational force. The first and most essential need of each human being in dangerous situation threatening their life or health is to survive. This fundamentally shapes the behaviour of human beings and launches intensive cognitive processing regarding what to do and how to act within the individual's mind. One direction may involve making changes to their routine life, seeking solutions for each situation. Based on calculations, and an assessment of the situation, the individual proceeds to actions, for example, searching for a new job. According to Abraham Maslow, any motivated behaviour must be understood to be a channel through which many basic needs may be simultaneously expressed or satisfied (Maslow. 1943). Officials from law enforcement agencies and other state institutions must start their investigations into instances of labour exploitation by identifying these socio-economic and political factors, as drivers for the formation of volition within the human mind.

The tenth question of the survey was about the duration of jobs outside Ukraine. A total of 22 respondents used to work abroad, and their answers regarding the duration of a job were as follows: 40.9 % engaged in a seasonal job, while 13.6 % performed assigned tasks (mainly in the construction industry). So, this leads to the conclusion that at least 54.5 % of the respondents had a short-term job with a clearly defined condition for the end of their employment. Short-term employment mainly prevails in the construction industry or in the agricultural sector just to meet seasonal demand from the workforce. Only 13.6 % of respondents had permanent employment.

The eleventh question of the survey was about the source of information about the possibility of working abroad. The respondents pointed out three main sources: the Internet, acquaintances and newspapers. Only one respondent mentioned a state institution. It leads us to conclude that the main source of information about jobs abroad for citizens of Ukraine ~~is~~ consists of mass media outlets.

The next question of the survey was the following: "In what form did you receive a job offer and information about working conditions abroad?" A total of 25 respondents replied, and their answers were as follows: only two respondents received a permanent job offer, 6 respondents received a job offer with a probationary period, and 14 respondents were informed that a job would be offered to them if they agree to work unofficially, meaning without signing any contract. Two respondents mentioned that their personal documents (passports) were taken by an owner/employer.

The following question of the survey was related to the amount of salary dedicated to respondents who had worked abroad, asking whether a contract in written form had been presented for them as job seekers, whether the salary was specified in a draft of a contract or proposal, and at what level was it mentioned? The answers were as follows regarding the amount of salary:

- The minimum wage for the given country was mentioned: 16.7 %
- The average salary for the given country:8.3 %
- A salary higher than the average in the country: 16.7 %
- I don't know the minimum wage and average salary in the country of a potential employee: 33.3 %
- I trusted the employer and agreed with the proposed salary by them: 29.2 %.

As we can see from the answers, one third of all respondents who had worked abroad did not have any information about the legally mandated minimum wage in the country of their employer, or the average salary in the industry for some job positions in the country of the employer (BUCIUNAS, 2025).

Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 is designed to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms. Articles 4 and 5 of the above-mentioned directive states that:

> Member States shall take the necessary measures to ensure that employers have pay structures ensuring equal pay for equal work or work of equal value. Article 5. 1. Applicants for employment shall have the right to receive, from the prospective employer, information about: (a) the initial pay or its range, based on objective, gender-neutral criteria, to be attributed for the position concerned; and (b) where applicable, the relevant provisions of the collective agreement applied by the employer in relation to the position. Such information shall be provided in a manner such as to ensure an informed and transparent negotiation on pay, such as in a published job vacancy notice, prior to the job interview or otherwise.

Article 5. 2. An employer shall not ask applicants about their pay history during their current or previous employment relationships.

The following questions of the survey are related to the signing procedure of a contract, as well as the working and living conditions either in Ukraine or abroad. The corresponding data are presented in Tables 6-16.

Table 6. On preliminary labour contract

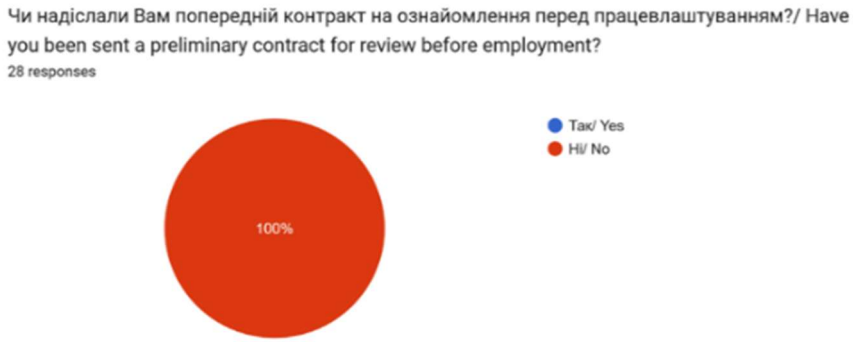


Table 7. Language of labour contract

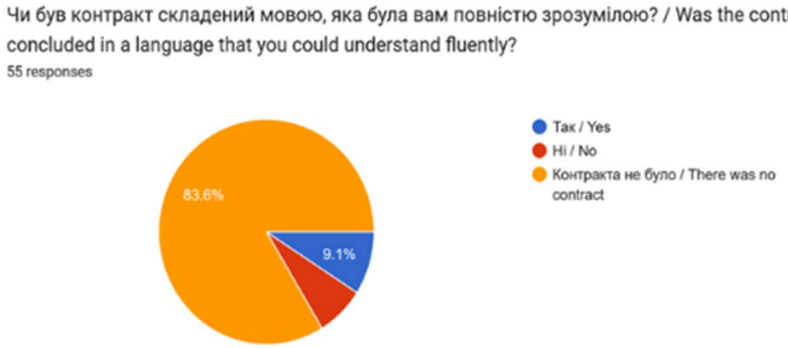


Table 8. Preparation of employment documents

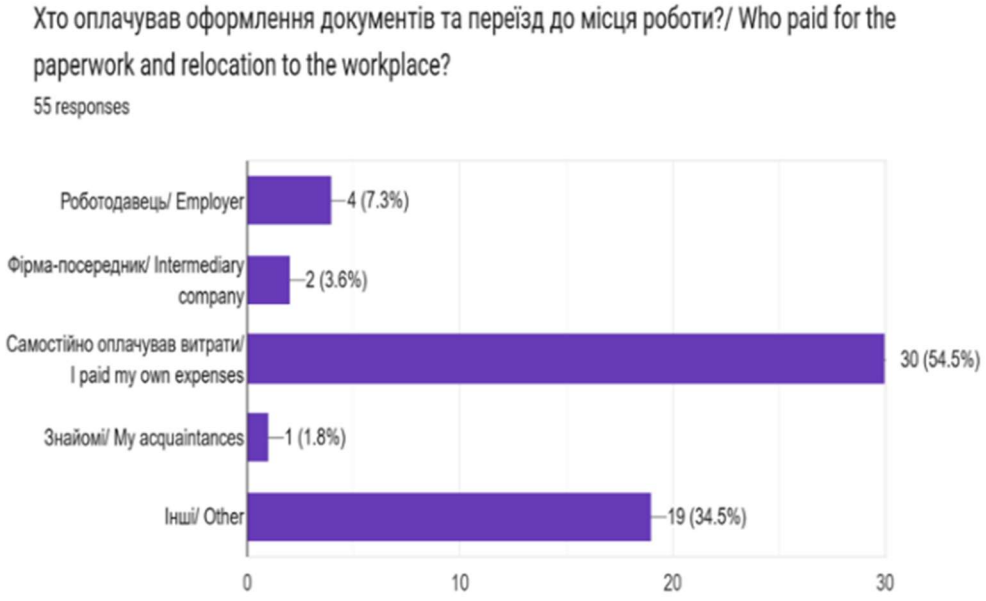


Table 9. Payment for accommodation, food, work clothes and relocation

Table 10.
Conditions of accommodation (replied to respondents who used to work abroad).

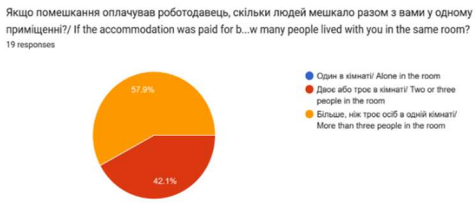


Table 11.
The work safety rules

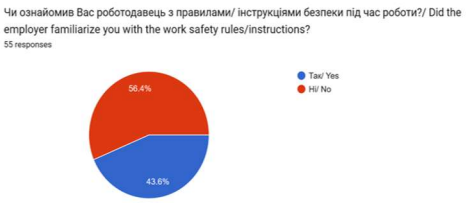


Table 12.
Protective equipment

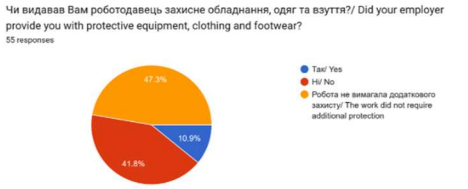


Table 13.
Living place

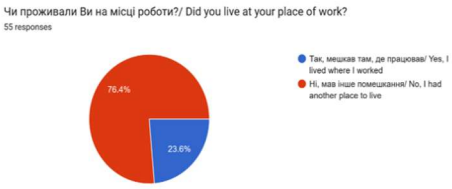


Table 14.
Workday duration

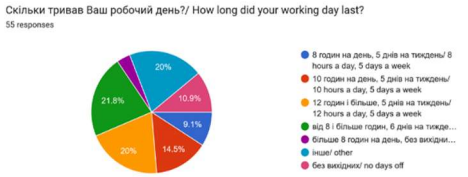


Table 15.
Paid leaves

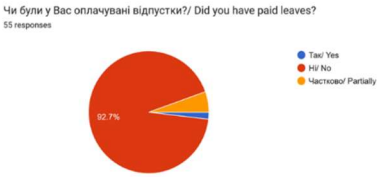
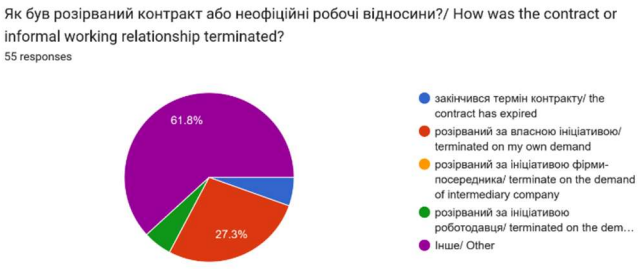


Table 16.
Termination of labor relations



The following question in the survey pertained to actions taken in response to the employer's dishonest behaviour: "What suspicions and doubts did you have during the employment process about your employer?" Most of the respondents

answering this question below drew attention to the following prevailing facts in their answers:

- Employers were aware of the employees' financial distress,
- Employers didn't specify the amount of salary and the period of payment.

The next question of the survey aimed to identify whether any violent behaviour took place during employment from the employers' side. "Did the employer commit violent acts during work?" A total of 55 respondents provided information about the types of violence used by employers and the means used to suppress the resilience of the workers. The answers were as follows regarding the type of violence:

- One-third of respondents experienced psychological violence,
- One-eighth experienced physical violence.

The most prevailing instruments to control employees and used by employers are the following:

- The imposition of financial fines,
- Restrictions on interaction with family members and relatives,
- The deprivation of personal identification documents (mainly passports).

Another question of the survey was dedicated to the employer's behaviour and actions after the contract (written or unwritten) was terminated without indicating the initiator for the termination of the labour relations. The answers from the 55 respondents demonstrate that the final payment wasn't paid on time for almost one-third of respondents, and final payment wasn't paid at all for more than one-third of employees (respondents).

The survey results were analysed, collated, and valuable data were extracted regarding the features of labour exploitation. The objective of the survey was to investigate latent social phenomena such as labour exploitation from the point of view of those who suffer from it (BUCIUNAS, 2025).

The Preamble of the Constitution of the International Labour Organization states that whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice; And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required; as, for example, by the regulation of the hours of work, including the establishment of a maximum working day and week, the regulation of the labour supply, the prevention of unemployment, the provision of an adequate living wage, the protection of the worker against sickness, disease and injury arising out of his employment, the protection of children, young persons and women, provision for old age and injury, protection of the interests of workers when employed in countries other

than their own, recognition of the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value, recognition of the principle of freedom of association, the organization of vocational and technical education and other measures.

The results of the survey provided an overview of the labour exploitation process from the human being's perspective who directly experienced it. It allows the author of this academic paper to design the sketches of the paradigm on essential features indicating/alarming on a high probability of exploitation in the labour market. It is in line with the idea set up in ILO Declaration of Philadelphia which states that "labour is not a commodity" but a platform for the pursuit of "material well-being and spiritual development" with the objective being to ensure "the employment of workers in the occupations in which they can have the satisfaction of giving the fullest measure of their skill and attainments and make their greatest contribution to the common well-being. At the same time, it can be used as an algorithm within investigations into forced labour exploitation thereby facilitating the decision-making process regarding the application of the relevant laws. Unsolved conflicts at work, wrong decisions on the application of laws may lead to injustice, resulting in a loss of trust in the rule of law. In such cases, it becomes critical to determine whether the provision of labour la or criminal law should be applicable. Due to the subtle nature of the free market, and the liberalization of labour relations, some breaches of working conditions of employees may fall into infringement of labour laws or even into the area of criminal liability for the damage caused to the fundamental values (BUCIUNAS & BRYCH, 2024).

Article 2 of the Labor Code of the Republic of Lithuania concerning the principles of legal regulation of labour relations states that labour relations shall be regulated in accordance with the principles of legal certainty, the protection of legitimate expectations and the comprehensive protection of labour rights, the creation of safe and healthy working conditions, the stability of labour relations, the freedom to choose work, fair remuneration for work, and the equality of subjects of labour law regardless of their gender, race, nationality, citizenship, language, origin, social status, religion, beliefs or views, age, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion, health status, intention to have a child (children), adopt a child (children), take a child (children) into care, or take a child (children) into foster care (hereinafter referred to as a child), marital and family status, membership of political parties, trade unions and associations, circumstances unrelated to the professional qualities of employees, freedom of association, free collective bargaining and the right to take collective action. Article 1 of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Republic of Lithuania states that the purpose of criminal proceedings is to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals and citizens, as well as the interests of society and the state, by swiftly and thoroughly investigating criminal offenses, and properly applying the law so that the person who committed the criminal offense is punished fairly and no innocent person is convicted.

Consequently, an analysis of the answers allows the author of this academic paper to present the sketch of a conceptual paradigm for identifying the features of potential labour exploitation. This paradigm comprises the following elements:

1. Push factors driving the search for a new job: socio-economic and political factors which are closely interconnected. Firstly, political factors such as war, the occupation of territory by aggressive military forces, unrest, and political turmoil, create favourable conditions for a domino effect where one event triggers a chain of related events. For example, war leads to massive migration to other parts of the country or outside in search of a safe haven and a employment. The complexity of socio-economic and political factors facilitates and encourages migration. Within the migration literature, several factors have been identified as to why migrants decide to leave their homelands and move to other countries (EFENDIC, 2016; QIN et al., 2018).
2. Social vulnerability of jobseekers: factors including race, nationality, citizenship, knowledge of foreign languages, origin, social status, religion, beliefs or views, age, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion, health status, social status, skills and education, marital status, the presence of dependents with or without disabilities.
3. Sources of information on employment: the Internet, state institutions, private companies/recruitment agencies, family members, relatives, acquaintances, and the diaspora.
4. Channels of communication with potential employers: directly, through mediators.
5. Collection of information about potential employers, their reputation, country, and regional location.
6. Knowledge of the labour law provisions within the country of potential employment.
7. Information about the social protection system existing in the country before and during employment, such as sickness benefits, average regional salary, minimum hourly wages.
8. Pre-employment screening: familiarization with a draft contract, the language of the labour contract, and the mandatory contractual elements required by law.
9. The signing procedure for an official contract or the establishment of informal labour relations.
10. Working conditions.
11. Safety rules and the provision of protective equipment at the workplace.
12. Organizational culture within the business entity.
13. Living conditions and employer's role in creating (un)favourable living conditions for employees.
14. Employers/owners, and other managers' behaviour toward employees. For example, including the use of psychological violence, or the presence of an institutional conflict resolution mechanism.

15. Mechanisms used to control employees, such as the deprivation of personal documents, limitations or/and restrictions to interact with family members, relatives and friends.
16. The termination phase of the labour relations and the presence of negative consequences for the employees.

It is a non-exhaustive list of elements of the components of the paradigm designed to differentiate between labour exploitation and mere breaches of labour law requirements. Officials investigating labour exploitation must pay attention to the presence of deceptive elements throughout all pre-employment and employment stages. According to APA dictionary of psychology deception is any distortion of or withholding of fact with the purpose of misleading others. For example, a researcher who has not disclosed the true purpose of an experiment to a participant has engaged in deception.

The degree of deception deployed pre-employment and employment cycles may vary depending on many factors, ranging from the vulnerability of the potential victim to be manipulated to the level of satisfaction with the achieved results from the deceiver's perspective. This may raise questions regarding potential negligence on the part of victim, which could constitute a separate topic for research. In the author's opinion, each human being is a unique bio-social entity and each situation is different. We must not utilize a mechanical approach when assessing the negligence of a potential victim in pre-employment and employment contexts. The failure to act as a reasonably prudent person depends on the individual characteristics of the human psyche, resilience to stress, the possibility to respond to the risks or upcoming threats to one's life or health, the level of self-discipline, responsibility for others, etc. This analysis could also form a separate academic study. The primary objective of the deceiver is to obtain control over potential victims and secure their consent to establish an exploitative employment relations.

Conclusions

I. The liberalization of the labour market creates a dilemma for practitioners regarding how to distinguish between a criminal offence and an infringement of labour or civil law provisions.
II. The conceptual paradigm for identifying the features of potential labour exploitation derived from the survey results comprises the following elements: 1. push factors driving the search for a new job: socio-economic and political factors; 2. the social vulnerability of job seekers; 3. the sources employment information; 4. channels of communication with on the potential employers; 5. the pre-employment collection of background information potential employer, his/her reputation; 6. Knowledge of national labour law provisions of potential employment; 7. Information about the social

protection system existing in the country; 8. Pre-employment screening; 9. The presence of signing procedures versus informal arrangements; 10. Working conditions; 11. Safety rules and protective equipment at the workplace; 12. Organizational culture within the business entity; 13. Living conditions and the employer's role in creating (un) favourable living conditions for employees; 14. Employers/owners, and other managers' behaviour toward employees; 15. Employer control instruments; 16. The characteristics of the termination stage.

III. The exploitation of the vulnerability of employees within employment relations allows employers to impact human volition.
IV. The presence of deception during the pre-employment and active employment stages serves as one of the primary criteria for distinguishing criminal liability from other types of legal liabilities.
V. Volition and deception constitute the starting points to identifying the fact of labour exploitation.

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FROM EVIDENCE TO IMPACT: EVALUATING INTERVENTIONS IN SENSITIVE AND VULNERABLE CONTEXTS

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Introduction

Impact has become a central principle in present research and policy frameworks, particularly within European funding schemes that require demonstrable societal relevance. Across contexts ranging from Horizon Europe to Erasmus+ and national funding bodies, researchers are systematically asked to articulate not only the scientific quality of their work but also its capacity to generate meaningful change in the real world. However, the operationalisation of impact remains conceptually underdeveloped and methodologically inconsistent, particularly when research takes place in sensitive contexts such as victim support, criminal justice intervention, and work with vulnerable populations (CARIDADE, 2017).

In these contexts, the evaluation of impact presents heightened challenges. The effects most sought after (e.g., perceived safety, dignity, empowerment, or restored agency) are not easily captured through quantitative indicators. At the same time, the populations involved are frequently exposed to significant and different types of vulnerabilities, which means that poorly designed evaluation processes can constitute a form of harm. The tension between the imperative to

demonstrate impact and the ethical obligation to protect participants defines a central dilemma in applied forensic and victimological research (CARIDADE, 2017).

This paper examines conceptual and methodological pathways for assessing impact in sensitive and vulnerable contexts, arguing that robust evaluation is not mainly about proving effectiveness but about improving intervention logic, ensuring coherence, and strengthening the ethical validity of the research and intervention process itself. Drawing on international evaluation frameworks, including those of the European Commission (2024) (Horizon Europe and Erasmus +), the World Bank, the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG (2016), and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Evaluation Manual (2023), the paper clarifies key distinctions within the results chain, compares methodological designs, and critically reflects on the conditions under which impact can be credibly claimed.

Conceptual Framework: Defining Impact Beyond Outputs

The concept of impact is frequently referred but rarely defined with sufficient precision in research and policy documents (SAMSHA, 2014). In common and it serves as a broad term involving any positive consequence of a given activity. In evaluation science, however, impact carries a more specific and demanding meaning: it refers to the long-term, structural, and durable changes attributable, at least in part, to a given intervention or body of research. Understanding this distinction is the necessary starting point for any credible evaluation effort.

The results chain, widely adopted in development evaluation and increasingly referenced in European research funding frameworks, provides a useful analytical framework. Within this model, inputs correspond to the resources invested (human, financial, and infrastructural); activities are the concrete actions undertaken (such as training sessions, interviews, awareness campaigns, or intervention programmes); outputs are the immediate and concrete products of those activities (e.g., the number of sessions delivered, participants reached, or reports produced); outcomes represent the short- to medium-term effects on people, institutions, or practices that result from exposure to the intervention; and impact, positioned at the end of this chain, designates the broader and more durable changes that occur as a consequence of the sustained deployment of outcomes over time (GERTLER et al., 2018).

A serious failure in many evaluations and in many research proposals lies in the confusion of outputs with impact. Delivering a programme, publishing a report, or conducting training constitutes a form of production, not transformation; therefore, it is outputs and not impact. (European Commission, 2024) The distinction matters both scientifically and ethically: scientifically, because claims of impact unsupported by evidence of actual change are methodologically weak; and ethically, because overstated impact claims in

contexts of vulnerability risk point in the wrong direction resources and undermining trust in research and intervention systems. This goes along with findings from theory-based evaluation studies, including those targeting domestic violence and gender-based violence, which demonstrate the importance of making the causal pathway from activities to impact explicit and testable (DARUWALLA et al., 2019; SAPKOTA et al., 2019).

A vital point to the passage from outputs to impact is the theory of change, an explicit and testable account of how a given intervention is expected to produce specific effects, through what mechanisms, and under what contextual conditions (PAWSON & TILLEY, 1997). A theory of change is not merely a visual diagram or a narrative summary; it is a causal hypothesis subject to empirical scrutiny, one that specifies the assumptions that must hold for the intervention to achieve its projected outcomes and identifies potential moderating variables that may enhance or attenuate the expected effects. Reviews of school-based interventions addressing dating and gender-based violence have demonstrated that making these theories explicit and empirically testable is a condition, not a supplement, for evaluability (COCKERILL et al., 2022; ZARLING et al. 2025).

Without this coherence the evaluation becomes a justification in retrospective rather than potential learning. The World Bank has been explicit in this regard: the purpose of impact evaluation is not to prove that an intervention works, but to improve, explain and understand of how, for whom, and under what conditions it produces effects (GERTLER et al., 2018). This conceptualisation reorients evaluation from a responsibility exercise to a knowledge-generation process, a reorientation with significant implications for how impact is conceptualised and evaluated in sensitive contexts.

Also, considering evaluability we must understand that not all interventions are ready or appropriate for impact evaluation at a given point in time. Before committing to an impact assessment, it is necessary to ask whether the objectives are sufficiently well-defined, whether the observation time frame is adequate to capture change, whether the required data are accessible and reliable, and whether the methods that are being considered are ethically viable for the target population (PLANAPP, 2024). Proceeding with an evaluation in the absence of these conditions does not produce knowledge; it produces noise and potentially harm in vulnerable populations.

The European Commission's evaluation framework introduces three additional concepts that we must consider relevant for this article. Within Horizon Europe, the results chain is extended to encompass expected outcomes (medium-term effects anticipated during or shortly after the project), expected impacts (broader and more durable effects aligned with the programme's and /or project strategic targets), and impact areas (overarching domains of societal, scientific, and economic transformation targeted by the programme's and or projects strategic plan).

Therefore, we need to assess not only the credibility of the claimed effects but also the coherence of the pathways that connect the project activities to the wider areas of transformations, in order for the evaluation of the research proposal to be focused on the impact criterion (European Commission, 2024).

Methodological Pathways for Impact Evaluation

The evaluation impact draws on a range of methodological approaches whose applicability varies considerably depending on the research context, the nature of the intervention, and the ethical constraints in operation. The World Bank systematises these approaches into three broad families: experimental designs, quasi-experimental designs, and theory-based approaches (GERTLER et al., 2018). Each has distinct strengths and limitations, and the choice among them should be guided by the evaluative question, the available data, and, critically, in sensitive contexts, the ethical parameters of the research situation.

Experimental designs, and in particular the Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT), are conventionally regarded as the methodological gold standard for causal inference in impact evaluation. In an RCT, participants are assigned randomly to treatment and control conditions, permitting the researcher to attribute observed differences in outcomes to the intervention itself rather than to pre-existing differences between groups. Through this randomisation, the counterfactual logic of what would have happened in the absence of the intervention is more clearly operationalised (SHADISH et al., 2002). Current experimental evidence in the field of batterer intervention programmes illustrates both the potential and the limitations of this approach: Zarling et al. (2025) found differential effects according to participant profile, reinforcing the need to examine not merely whether an intervention works but for whom and through what mechanisms.

However, the applicability of experimental designs in contexts of victimisation, criminal justice, or psychological intervention is severely constrained by both practical and ethical considerations. The random assignment of vulnerable individuals to conditions where some receive support and others do not raise fundamental questions of justice and professional responsibility. In forensic and victimological research, the study populations are frequently in situations of acute need, and withholding an intervention for experimental purposes may cause harm or contravene professional codes of conduct. The RCT should be considered an option of last resort in these contexts.

Quasi-experimental designs offer methodologically rigorous alternatives when randomisation is not feasible. Among the most commonly used are Difference-in-Differences (DiD), which compares changes over time between groups that did and did not receive an intervention; Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD), which exploits a threshold of eligibility to approximate the counterfactual; and Propensity Score Matching (PSM), which constructs a comparison group by matching treated and untreated individuals on the observed

characteristics. Each of these methods makes specific assumptions about the data-generating process, and the validity of causal inference depends critically on whether those assumptions are met (GERTLER et al., 2018). In sensitive contexts, the availability of longitudinal data, the reliability of administrative records, and the comparability of matched groups are frequent sources of concern that require transparency.

Theory-based approaches constitute a third methodological pathway, particularly relevant for complex, multi-component interventions in sensitive contexts, as they proceed from the premise that causal mechanisms are context-dependent: an intervention produces its effects not in a vacuum but through the activation of particular mechanisms in particular contexts (PAWSON & TILLEY, 1997). The evaluative question is, for that reason, not whether an intervention works but what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and through what mechanisms. Contribution Analysis, proposed by Mayne (2012), pursues a similar logic, seeking to construct a credible narrative of contribution rather than a definitive proof of causation.

Both approaches are well-suited to settings where counterfactuals are difficult to construct, where outcomes are heterogeneous across subgroups, and where the intervention involves a complex configuration of activities and actors. Systematic reviews of violence prevention interventions have converged on these approaches as particularly well suited to low- and middle-income contexts and to multi-component programmes where linear causal models are inadequate (SAPKOTA et al., 2019).

The choice of method should also be guided by the principle of proportionality, adjusting the methodological investment to the evaluative question and the resources available. The UNEG and the UNRWA Evaluation Manual both emphasise that the credibility of an evaluation resides not in the sophistication of the design but in the rigour with which the chosen methods are applied and the transparency with which their limitations are acknowledged (UNEG, 2016; UNRWA, 2023). Following their ideas, they also claim that a well-executed mixed-methods design that combines quantitative indicators with qualitative narrative data will often yield more robust and contextually meaningful findings than an ill-specified experimental design applied under unfavourable conditions.

Another point to consider is triangulation, that is, the systematic integration of multiple data sources, methods, and analytical perspectives, which serves both a scientific and an ethical function in sensitive contexts, enhancing the validity of impact claims by reducing the risk that findings are artefacts of a single measurement approach. Ethically, the triangulation distributes the burden of evidence production across multiple sources, reducing the pressure placed on any single group of participants. The combination of quantitative outcome data, qualitative testimony, and observational evidence from institutional contexts represents a particularly appropriate configuration for research on victimisation,

violence, or criminal justice intervention (UNEG, 2016; UNESCO, 2010; UNRWA, 2023).

Ethical Imperatives in Sensitive Contexts

The evaluation of interventions in sensitive and vulnerable contexts is not merely a methodological challenge; it is, primarily, an ethical one. The populations involved, whether survivors of violence, individuals within criminal justice systems, victims of human trafficking, or other groups characterised by heightened vulnerability, occupy positions of relative powerlessness in relation to researchers and evaluators. This power differential imposes specific obligations that go beyond the standard requirements of research ethics and demand active consideration at every stage of the evaluation process (CARIDADE, 2017).

The ethical principle of *Do No Harm* (UNRWA, 2023), has been increasingly applied to research and evaluation involving vulnerable populations. It requires that the evaluation process itself, not only the intervention being evaluated, to be designed so as to avoid causing physical, psychological, social, or institutional harm to participants. In practice, this means ensuring that data collection procedures do not reactivate trauma, that participation is genuinely voluntary and not coerced by institutional relationships, that confidentiality is rigorously protected, and that the findings are used in ways that serve the interests of the communities involved rather than undermining them (SAMSHA, 2014). As Caridade (2017) demonstrates, these requirements are not peripheral concerns but integral to the scientific quality of victimological research: procedurally compromised studies not only risk causing harm but produce findings of limited validity and transferability, precisely because the conditions of data collection shape the quality of the data collected.

A recurrent and significant error in research practice is the confusion of ethical declaration with ethical operationalisation. Stating that a study adheres to *Do No Harm* in a protocol or funding application is not equivalent to specifying the concrete methods through which that commitment is discharged (European Commission, 2024). We need to ask several questions about the type of study, but mainly, we can ask ourselves: Who provides psychological support during or after data collection? How is digital safety guaranteed for participants who engage with online platforms? What mechanisms are in place to detect and respond to distress? These are not supplementary concerns to be addressed after the research design is fixed; they need to be explained, in great detail, when doing the research design itself.

Another aspect that is sometimes considered and dismissed is the participatory evaluation. The participatory evaluation represents a methodological approach that is simultaneously ethically grounded and epistemologically productive. Drawing on traditions in community-based participatory research and the UNESCO guidance on community-based monitoring and evaluation

(UNESCO, 2010), participatory evaluation involves the communities concerned not merely as subjects of measurement but as active contributors to the formulation of evaluative questions, the interpretation of data, and the drawing of conclusions.

This orientation is not without its difficulties, as questions of representation, capacity, and the management of conflicting perspectives require careful navigation, but it addresses a fundamental limitation of externally driven evaluation: the tendency to measure what is technically manageable rather than what is substantively meaningful to the people affected. Research on gender-stereotype interventions has consistently identified co-design and community participation as determinants of programme effectiveness, suggesting that evaluative validity and participatory legitimacy are mutually reinforcing rather than competing considerations (STEWART et al., 2021).

The UNRWA Evaluation Manual (2023) identifies several specific principles for evaluation in sensitive and vulnerable contexts: cultural awareness, requiring that evaluators understand and respect the normative frameworks and relational dynamics of the communities involved; protection of confidentiality, encompassing not only data anonymisation but also the limitation of access to sensitive information; minimisation of distress, meaning that data collection instruments and procedures should be designed to avoid unnecessary emotional burden; and attention to the particular vulnerabilities of specific subgroups, including children, survivors of gender-based violence, and individuals with mental health needs. These requirements are directly consistent with the recommendations systematised by Caridade (2017) for victimological research.

The principle of informed consent requires particular attention in contexts of institutional power, where individuals may feel implicitly coerced into participation by virtue of their relationship to a service provider, a justice institution, or a research team (SAMSHA, 2014). Informed consent in these contexts is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that must be revisited as the research proceeds and as participants' circumstances change. The capacity to withdraw without negative consequences must be genuine, not merely formal.

Finally, the question of reciprocity, what participants receive in return for their contribution to the evaluation, deserves more systematic attention than it typically receives in research practice. The extraction of data from vulnerable populations without meaningful return, whether in the form of feedback, resource, or influence over how the findings are used, represents an ethical deficit that undermines the relational basis of research and erodes trust in evaluation processes over time (CARIDADE, 2017).

Discussion: From Coherence to Credibility

The analysis presented in the previous sections converges on a central argument: the credibility of impact claims in sensitive and vulnerable contexts depends less

on the sophistication of the methodological design than on the coherence between the conceptual framework, the methodological choices, and the ethical commitments that support the evaluation. An intervention evaluated through a methodologically robust design but without a coherent theory of change will produce findings that are statistically reliable but empty. An intervention that is well-theorised but evaluated through methods that are ethically inappropriate or contextually mismatched will generate data that are neither trustworthy nor useful.

A recurring pattern in the evaluation of European-funded projects in the areas of victimisation and forensic psychology illustrates this point. Proposals and reports frequently articulate broad aspirations (e.g., to improve resilience, increase trust, promote empowerment) without operationalising these constructs in ways that render them measurable or verifiable. The evaluative challenge is not the absence of ambition but the absence of specificity: the translation of intentions into indicators that are simultaneously SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) and contextually sensitive to the population and settings. Evidence from systematic reviews of violence prevention interventions confirms that interventions with clearly specified, coherent theories of change and operationalised outcome indicators consistently demonstrate more credible impact than those with diffuse or implicit evaluative frameworks (SAPKOTA et al., 2019; COCKERILL et al., 2022). How, then, do we account for the persistence of this gap between what evaluation frameworks require and what practitioners actually deliver?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that, in sensitive contexts, the selection of indicators is itself a political and ethical act. Measuring impact through rates of re-victimisation positions survivors as statistical units rather than as agents of their own recovery, we remove the empowerment of the equation (SAMSHA, 2014). Choosing to measure it through self-reported empowerment requires a theory of empowerment, a valid measurement instrument, and a recognition of the heterogeneity of what empowerment means across different cultural and institutional contexts (SAMSHA, 2014). None of the choices made are neutral, and both require justification that goes beyond methodological convenience.

The principle of methodological coherence has implications for the design of research proposals as well as for the conduct of the evaluations. Within the Horizon Europe framework, the evaluation criterion of Impact is assessed not only on the basis of the credibility of the claimed effects but also on the coherence of the pathway connecting project activities to those effects, the appropriateness of the indicators proposed, and the quality of the dissemination and exploitation strategy (European Commission, 2024). Proposals that promise wide impact without demonstrating how specific outputs will generate specific outcomes, through what mechanisms, and with what evidence of plausibility, are systematically penalised by reviewers, a pattern that reflects not merely a procedural requirement but a substantive evaluative standard.

A further dimension of coherence concerns the relationship between the intervention and its institutional context. Impact does not occur in a vacuum; it is mediated by the organisational, cultural, and relational conditions within which an intervention is embedded. Evaluations that ignore these contextual factors, treating impact as a direct and unmediated consequence of programme activities, will systematically underestimate the complexity of causal pathways and overestimate the generalisability of findings (European Comission, 2024). Theory-based approaches, as discussed previously, are specifically designed to address this complexity, but their application requires a level of contextual knowledge and analytical investment that is not always prioritised in resource-constrained evaluation environments. Evidence from interventions targeting gender-based violence in low- and middle-income contexts confirms that successful impact evaluation in these settings depends critically on contextual adaptation of both the intervention logic and the evaluative framework (DARUWALLA et al., 2019).

The concept of evaluability, also addressed previously, deserves repeated emphasis at this point. Not all interventions are appropriate for impact evaluation, and not all contexts permit the application of the methods required for credible causal inference (GERTLER et al., 2018). Recognising the limits of evaluability is not an admission of methodological failure; it is an expression of intellectual honesty and a prerequisite for producing knowledge that is genuinely useful. In contexts where impact evaluation is not feasible or appropriate, process evaluation, needs assessment, and developmental evaluation represent valuable alternatives that can contribute meaningfully to the improvement of intervention logic without generating spurious claims of causal effect (European Comission, 2024; GERTLER et al., 2018).

Finally, the credibility of impact in sensitive contexts is a relational achievement, emerging from sustained engagement with the communities involved, from transparency about the limitations of the evidence, and from a genuine commitment to using findings in ways that serve the interests of those most affected. As Buchanan-Smith (2024, cited in European Commission, 2024) has observed, impact is the consequence of engagement, not only of evidence, a formulation that shows with particular force the relational and ethical dimensions of evaluation in sensitive and vulnerable contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the evaluation of impact in sensitive and vulnerable contexts requires the integration of conceptual clarity, methodological rigour, and ethical integrity. These three dimensions are not independent variables to be optimised separately; they establish an interdependent triad in which weakness in any one element undermines the credibility of the whole.

The conceptual contribution of this paper lies in the articulation of impact as distinct from outputs and outcomes, and in the insistence that a coherent theory of change is a prerequisite to credible evaluation. Methodologically, we argued for theory-based approaches where experimental designs are not feasible or ethically appropriate, and for triangulation as both a scientific safeguard and an ethical practice. Ethically, we drew attention to the gap between the declaration of ethical principles and their operationalisation, and to the importance of participatory approaches that position communities as knowledge producers rather than as subjects of measurement.

Several implications follow for research practice in forensic psychology, victimology, and related fields. First, the design of evaluation frameworks should be integrated into the planning of interventions from the outset, rather than appended retrospectively, since the evaluability of an intervention depends on decisions made during its design phase. Second, indicators should be selected on the basis of their substantive meaning for the populations concerned (and not merely on the basis of their measurability), and operationalised with sufficient specificity to permit verification. Third, the ethical architecture of an evaluation, including informed consent procedures, data protection mechanisms, and strategies for minimising distress (e.g., the availability of psychological support during or after data collection), should be treated as a constitutive element of the methodological design rather than as an administrative requirement.

Finally, the paper invites reflection on the relationship between evaluation and transformation. If impact is the consequence of engagement rather than merely of evidence, then the evaluation process itself is a form of intervention, one that can either reinforce or undermine the conditions for genuine change. Conducted with rigour, transparency, and genuine concern for the communities involved, evaluation in sensitive contexts can be not only a means of demonstrating impact but a vehicle for producing it.

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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLS OF THE POLICE IN RELATION TO THE PUBLIC: A RESEARCH-IN-PROGRESS PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction and Context of Police Communication

In contemporary societies, communication between public institutions and citizens has become a key factor influencing trust, legitimacy, and public safety. In an environment shaped by digital media, rapid information exchange, and increasing information overload, the ability of police institutions to communicate effectively is more important than ever. Police communication is no longer only about providing information, but also about shaping public perception, influencing behaviour, and responding to emerging security risks in real time. The way in which police communicate can directly affect how people understand risks, how they behave in crisis situations, and how they perceive the role of public institutions in society.

Communication between the police and the public represents an essential component of modern policing. In democratic societies, effective communication helps to build trust, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and support cooperation between law enforcement authorities and citizens. Such cooperation plays an important role not only in solving criminal cases but also in preventing crime, sharing relevant information, and maintaining long-term public safety. Without effective communication, even well-functioning police work may not lead to the expected outcomes, because the public may not understand, accept, or respond appropriately to police actions and recommendations.

In recent years, the communication environment in which police institutions operate has undergone significant transformation. The development of digital technologies, social media platforms, and online communication channels has fundamentally changed the ways in which information is produced, distributed, and consumed. Information spreads faster than ever before, often without verification, and public institutions must react quickly while maintaining accuracy and credibility. This creates a situation in which speed and correctness must be carefully balanced, which is not always easy in practice. At the same time, the acceleration of information flows has led to the phenomenon of "information saturation," where individuals are exposed to large volumes of competing messages, which may reduce their ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information.

In addition, the increasing presence of misinformation and disinformation further complicates the communication landscape. Police institutions are no longer only providers of verified information, but also actors who must actively respond to false narratives, rumours, and manipulative content. This creates new demands on communication strategies, including the need for monitoring online environments, identifying emerging narratives, and responding in a timely yet credible manner.

At the same time, police communication must operate within a complex framework of legal regulations, ethical standards, and institutional procedures. Police organizations must balance the need for transparency with the responsibility to protect sensitive information, ongoing investigations, and personal data. This balance often creates tension between openness and necessary confidentiality, which makes communication decisions more demanding and complex, especially in sensitive or high-profile cases. In such contexts, communication is not only a technical activity but also a strategic and ethical decision-making process.

For this reason, police communication can be understood as a complex institutional process that requires professional expertise, experience, and careful strategic decision-making. Communication is no longer a secondary activity but an integral part of police work and daily practice, influencing both operational and strategic outcomes. It is closely connected to other aspects of policing, including prevention, crisis management, community policing, and public relations.

Communication also plays a fundamental role in shaping public trust. Citizens who trust police institutions are more willing to report crimes, provide information, and cooperate with police officers. Police communication therefore represents not only an informational tool but also an important mechanism influencing public behaviour, attitudes, and perceptions of security. Trust, however, is not static; it is continuously shaped by repeated communication experiences. Positive communication may strengthen trust over time, while negative or inconsistent communication may rapidly undermine it.

From a broader perspective, communication can also be seen as a tool of social influence. Through communication, police institutions contribute to defining what is considered risky behaviour, acceptable conduct, or socially undesirable activity. In this sense, communication is not only reactive but also proactive and normative, influencing social norms and expectations.

Communication Challenges in Contemporary Policing Practice

Communication plays a fundamental role in shaping the relationship between the police and society. When police institutions communicate clearly, consistently, and in a timely manner, they can strengthen public trust and support cooperation between citizens and law enforcement authorities. This relationship is particularly

important in situations where public cooperation is necessary for achieving security goals and solving complex or time-sensitive cases.

Public trust in the police significantly influences the effectiveness of policing. Citizens who trust police institutions are more willing to cooperate, share information, and actively participate in ensuring public safety. On the other hand, unclear, delayed, or inconsistent communication may lead to misunderstanding, distrust, or reduced willingness to cooperate. In extreme situations, it may even contribute to the spread of misinformation, fear, or panic among the population. This demonstrates that communication failures may have not only reputational consequences but also direct impacts on security outcomes.

Police communication also plays an important role in prevention. Through public information campaigns, warnings about risks, and educational activities, police institutions can increase awareness about safety issues and encourage responsible behaviour among citizens. Preventive communication may reduce the occurrence of risky behaviour and contribute to long-term improvements in public safety, especially among vulnerable groups such as children, adolescents, and elderly individuals. The effectiveness of such communication depends not only on content but also on the form, timing, and channel through which the message is delivered.

Today, police communication takes place through a wide range of channels. These include traditional media, official press releases, preventive programmes, and increasingly digital communication platforms such as social networks and online information systems. These platforms allow police institutions to reach large audiences quickly, share updates in real time, and respond rapidly to emerging situations. However, they also create a dynamic environment where communication is subject to immediate public feedback, comments, and reinterpretations, which may influence the original meaning of the message.

However, different groups within society may interpret police communication differently. Younger generations often rely primarily on digital platforms and social media, while older citizens may prefer traditional sources of information such as television or radio. Language barriers, cultural differences, and varying levels of media literacy may also influence how communication messages are received and understood. In some cases, misinterpretation of messages may lead to unintended consequences, including confusion or inappropriate reactions.

For this reason, modern police communication strategies must consider the diversity of audiences and adapt communication tools accordingly. It is not sufficient to communicate information; it is necessary to ensure that the information is understandable, accessible, and relevant to different groups. This requires not only linguistic adaptation but also the use of appropriate formats, visuals, and communication styles.

The importance of trust-based communication between police institutions and the public can also be illustrated visually (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Illustration of trust-based communication and positive interaction between a police officer and members of the public. Source: AI-generated image (author's own creation)

The importance of effective communication can be clearly illustrated in the field of drug prevention and monitoring of emerging psychoactive substances. The rapid development of new substances and constantly changing patterns of drug use require fast and accurate information sharing between institutions and the public. Delayed or unclear communication in this area may lead to serious health consequences, including life-threatening situations.

According to professional consultations with experts working in the field of drug monitoring and prevention (TOŠNAROVÁ, 2026), the number of newly emerging substances and products associated with drug use has increased significantly in recent years. Many of these substances are presented in forms that resemble attractive consumer products, such as sweets, beverages, or other visually appealing items, which may significantly reduce the perception of risk and create a false sense of safety among users. This phenomenon represents a growing challenge for both preventive efforts and communication strategies, as traditional warning formats may not be sufficiently effective.

This issue is particularly relevant for younger individuals. Young people may be strongly influenced by their social environment, peer pressure, or online trends and may experiment with such products without fully understanding the potential health risks or long-term consequences associated with their use. Their decision-making is often influenced by immediate social context rather than rational risk evaluation, which further increases their vulnerability.

For this reason, timely and targeted communication about emerging risks is essential for protecting public health and safety. Communication must be clear, understandable, and adapted to the target audience, especially when addressing younger populations. It should also be designed in a way that competes with other information sources in the digital environment, including content created by influencers or peer groups.

The need for rapid and effective communication extends far beyond the field of drug prevention. According to the professional experience of police prevention specialists (KREJČOVÁ, 2026), the speed and precision with which information is

communicated to the public are crucial in situations where a missing person may be in immediate danger. This includes cases involving serious health conditions, the need for regular medication, mental health crises, or suicidal intentions.

In such situations, rapid dissemination of relevant information significantly increases the chances of locating the person in time and preventing potentially fatal consequences. Communication may therefore directly influence the outcome of such cases and must be treated as a priority. This highlights the operational dimension of communication as an active component of police work.

Another important area concerns the digital environment. Police institutions increasingly encounter cases of fraudulent phone calls, online scams, and other forms of cyber-enabled crime. Public warnings and timely information sharing can help prevent additional victims and increase awareness about emerging forms of criminal activity. In this context, communication also serves as a preventive tool that can reduce the overall impact of such crimes and support digital resilience among citizens.

Communication also plays an important role in addressing harmful phenomena that spread through online platforms and social networks. Various risky or self-destructive online challenges may influence young people, who can be particularly vulnerable to social pressure and peer influence. Timely and clearly targeted communication by public institutions can therefore contribute to reducing the risks associated with such phenomena and support safer online behaviour.

These examples demonstrate that police communication tools are not only instruments of public information but also important mechanisms for protecting human life, preventing harm, and strengthening public resilience in a rapidly evolving information environment.

Research Focus and Methodological Approach

This research focuses on understanding how police officers evaluate the effectiveness of police communication tools used in relation to the public. The aim is not to measure communication outcomes statistically, but to understand how these tools are perceived and interpreted by professionals who use them in practice and who are directly involved in communication processes.

Instead of analysing public opinion directly, the study examines the perspectives of police professionals who work with communication tools in their everyday practice. These include prevention officers, communication specialists, and senior police officials responsible for communication strategies and decision-making. Their insights provide valuable information about real-world communication challenges, institutional constraints, and practical solutions.

The research also considers how police officers perceive communication with different groups of citizens, including young people, elderly individuals, people with language barriers, and citizens living abroad. Each of these groups may

require a different communication approach, which must be reflected in communication strategies. Understanding these differences is essential for developing more effective and inclusive communication tools and avoiding communication gaps.

The study is designed as a qualitative research project. The main method of data collection consists of semi-structured interviews with police professionals. These interviews allow for deeper insight into professional experience, decision-making processes, and interpretation of communication effectiveness. They also enable the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and potential barriers in communication practice.

These interviews are complemented by qualitative content analysis of selected police communication outputs, including official statements, preventive campaigns, and digital communication channels. This allows the researcher to compare intended communication strategies with actual communication practices and identify potential discrepancies or inconsistencies.

The combination of these methods allows for methodological triangulation and supports a deeper and more reliable understanding of police communication practices. This approach increases the credibility of the research findings and allows for a more nuanced interpretation of results.

Expected Contribution and Conclusion

The expected contribution of this research lies in improving the understanding of police communication as a complex institutional process shaped by both internal organizational factors and broader social dynamics. The study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical approaches to institutional communication and practical experience from the field of policing.

By analysing the perspectives of police professionals, the study aims to identify key factors that influence the effectiveness of police communication tools, including organizational culture, available resources, training, and technological capabilities. These insights may contribute to academic discussions in the fields of policing, institutional communication, and public trust.

At the same time, the research may offer practical insights that could help police institutions further develop their communication strategies and adapt them to the needs of different groups within society. This may include better targeting of communication, improved clarity of messages, and more effective use of communication channels in different contexts. It may also contribute to the development of training programmes for police officers in the field of communication and public interaction.

Effective communication between the police and the public remains a key element of modern policing. In a rapidly evolving information environment, the ability of police institutions to communicate clearly, quickly, and responsibly plays an essential role in ensuring public safety and strengthening trust between

institutions and citizens. Strengthening communication capacities may therefore have long-term positive impacts not only on policing outcomes but also on social cohesion and stability.

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PROTECTION OF SOFT TARGETS IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: PREVENTIVE ACTIVITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Introduction

In recent years, the protection of soft targets has become an increasingly important part of states' security policy and a subject of professional interest in security studies. The dynamics of the current security environment, characterized by a growing risk of violent incidents, terrorism, or other forms of crime, point to the increased vulnerability of publicly accessible spaces in which a larger number of people are concentrated. These areas are referred to as soft targets in professional literature and security practice. Despite the term's frequent use in security discourse, there is no uniform, generally accepted definition of it at the level of international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or the United Nations (UN). In general, however, this term refers to objects and spaces open to the public that are characterised by limited or absent access control and a relatively lower level of physical security. At the same time, a characteristic feature of these places is a high concentration of persons, which can make them a potentially attractive target for various forms of violent or criminal acts.[1] Typical examples of soft targets include, in particular, schools, health facilities, hotels, shopping malls and shopping streets, places of cultural and sporting events, transport infrastructure, or religious buildings. These spaces can be operated by both public and private entities and can be either permanent, such as schools, transport terminals, or hotels, or temporary, such as concerts, festivals, sporting events, or public gatherings. The growing attention paid to this issue reflects the need for the systematic application of preventive measures to reduce the vulnerability of these areas and, at the same time, increase the level of protection of persons in them. In this context, not only is the implementation of adequate security mechanisms becoming increasingly

[1] Central Asia Regional Workshop on the Protection of Soft Targets from Terrorist Attacks. Workshop report (27-28 May 2024), Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. Co-organized with the Law Enforcement Academy under the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan. 1. https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/a/7/575686.pdf.

important, but also professional research and analysis of factors that affect the level of risk and the potential for effective protection of soft targets.

Strategy for the Protection of Soft Targets in the Slovak Republic

On 26 March 2025, the Government approved the first Action Plan on the Protection of Soft Targets for 2025 (the 'Action Plan'). This document is aimed at strengthening security in areas such as school facilities, hospitals, shopping malls, offices, cultural and sports events, festivals, and public transport. These are places that, unlike controlled-access objects or government or military buildings, do not have such a level of protection and can therefore be potential targets for attacks. Following the adoption of the Action Plan, the Government of the Slovak Republic adopted a resolution that set specific tasks for individual central state administration bodies.[2] The Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic has a number of measures that concern, for example, the identification and sharing of domestic and foreign examples of good practice in the field of soft target protection, the implementation of scientific research activities aimed at proposals for making the protection system more effective in the future, the development of a methodological manual for the creation of soft target security plans, as well as the introduction of the issue of soft target protection into the selected subjects of the study programme of security sciences at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava.[3]

In this context, it is also necessary to mention the government measures already implemented in the field of crime prevention and protection of soft targets, such as the "Policeman for Every School" project, under which each school has a contact police officer assigned to it. The Action Plan is a strategic document that was developed on the basis of Resolution No. 6 of the Council of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Crime Prevention (hereinafter referred to as the "Council") of 20 February 2024. Its aim is to develop the strategic plan for the Strategy for the Prevention of Crime and Other Anti-Social Activities in the Slovak Republic until 2028, aimed at strengthening the protection of public spaces and increasing residents' sense of security. The preparation of the action plan was based on the analysis of available data on crime incidence, the assessment of the level of physical and building security of selected facilities and public spaces, sociological research, and examples of good practice from abroad. The document also follows up on other strategic materials of the Government of the Slovak Republic on the prevention and fight against radicalization, extremism,

[2] The government has approved the Action Plan for the Protection of Soft Targets with comprehensive measures to increase the safety of public spaces. 2025. https://www.minv.sk/?prevencia_aktuality&sprava=vlada-schvalila-akcny-plan-ochrany-makkych-cielov-s-komplexnymi-patreniami-na-zvysenie-bezpecnosti-verejnych-priestorov.
[3] Resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic No. 150 of 26 March 2025 on the Action Plan for the Protection of Soft Targets for 2025.

and terrorism, as well as on the Slovak Republic's international obligations in this area. The Action Plan was prepared by the Interdepartmental Working Group for the Protection of Soft Targets established by the Council in response to current security risks that may threaten the lives and health of residents in public spaces in Slovakia and abroad. According to Article 2(2) of the Statute of the Working Group, its task is to propose solutions, recommendations, and conceptual, legislative, organisational, and personnel measures related to the protection of soft targets.[4]

One of the tools for strengthening security in this area is the national project "Increasing the resilience of soft targets through strengthening professional capacities and crime prevention services in the Slovak Republic". The main objective of the project is to improve the availability and quality of preventive services and, at the same time, strengthen the ability of the state, local government, and other entities to respond to security risks in public spaces. An important part of this approach is also the development of cooperation between individual institutions and the promotion of coordinated procedures in identifying and addressing potential security threats. The need for such cooperation and a comprehensive approach emerged and was highlighted in the workshop on the protection of soft targets.[5] Strengthening crime prevention is implemented by expanding the network of information offices for victims of crime and strengthening their personnel capacities. With the successful implementation of the national project "Improving access to services for victims of crime and creating contact points for victims", 16 workplaces were established, two in each region.[6]

These workplaces provide basic information, guidance, and mediation of professional assistance to persons affected by criminal activity. Their establishment and expansion into individual regions improve the availability of support for a wider range of inhabitants and, at the same time, create space for the implementation of preventive and awareness-raising activities at the regional level. The project also includes the implementation of analytical and research activities focused on investigating the causes and conditions of crime related to threats to soft targets. Attention is paid mainly to phenomena such as bullying, cyberbullying, hate speech, radicalization, or violent extremism. The results of these analyses should serve as a basis for developing effective preventive tools and practice recommendations. An important part of the project is also systematic educational activities. Through professional seminars, lectures, and information

[4] Statute of the Working Party on the Protection of Soft Targets.
[5] Central Asia Regional Workshop on the Protection of Soft Targets from Terrorist Attacks. 2024. Workshop report. 27-28 May 2024, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. Co-organized with the Law Enforcement Academy under the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan.1. https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/a/7/575686.pdf.
[6] One workplace is established in a regional city and the other in a locality with statistically the highest crime rate. https://www.minv.sk/?projekt-obete-trestnych-cinov-sluzby.

campaigns, public awareness of crime-prevention options and procedures that can enhance security in public spaces is increased. The implementation of these measures represents an important step towards systematically building the resilience of society to security threats that may threaten soft targets.[7]

Education and Prevention

The Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic implements several initiatives to raise awareness of security risks posed by soft targets and strengthen the protection of the population. As part of these activities, in cooperation with the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava, the Department of Order Police of the Presidium of the Police Force, the Special Purpose Unit of the Presidium of the Police Force, and the Training Department, a joint methodological material was developed regulating recommended procedures in the event of an armed attack. This material also includes a recommended procedure, referred to as "USB" (Run – Hide – Fight), which is a simple, understandable framework of behaviour for people in a vulnerable situation to minimise risk and increase the likelihood of survival. At the same time, the methodological material provides practical guidelines for appropriate behaviour and decision-making based on the current state of the situation. To support the effective implementation of this methodology, an instructional video was prepared to illustrate the recommended procedures and responses in the event of an armed attack.[8]

Information and preventive materials related to the protection of soft targets are also made available to the public through communication channels, including social networks, such as the Crime Prevention account. An important role in the field of education is played by the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava, which ensures the inclusion of soft target protection in selected subjects of study programs. This topic is integrated into the teaching process and supplemented with modern technologies, especially elements of virtual reality. Through VR simulation, students are exposed to a model situation in which they face an armed attack scenario. Successful mastery of such a simulation presupposes not only theoretical knowledge, but also practical application of the principles of the "USB – Run, Hide, Fight" methodology. At the same time, the academic environment creates space for the development of professional knowledge, exchange of experience, and presentation of examples of good practice in the field of protection of school facilities as a specific category of soft targets. Education on soft goals is also provided through accredited programs. In May 2025, the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic created the 1st accredited

[7]National project "Increasing the resilience of soft targets through strengthening professional capacities and crime prevention services in the Slovak Republic" https://eurofondy.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Zvysenie-odolnosti-makkych-cielov.pdf.
[8] Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic: Run, hide, fight https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELRycMilnfg.

educational program "Specialist in the Prevention of Crime and Other Anti-Social Activities", which consisted of 7 educational modules (social prevention, situational prevention, victimization prevention, protection of soft targets, physical/object security or counselling/lecturing skills) with the aim of training specialists in the given areas.[9]

In 2025, the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, through the Crime Prevention Office, the Riot Police Department and the Training Department of the Presidium of the Police Force, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic, initiated a prevention campaign called "Breaking Silence – Safely in Schools".[10] The main objective of this initiative is to strengthen preventive activities to prevent violence in the school environment and, at the same time, support the ability to identify manifestations of risky behaviour in time. The campaign is primarily aimed at pedagogical and professional employees of schools, as well as other staff of school facilities, who play an important role in recognizing warning signs of violence, bullying, or cyberbullying. The aim is to increase their readiness to respond to these situations professionally, sensitively, and in accordance with the applicable legislation. Particular emphasis is placed on expanding knowledge about criminal law aspects, preventive approaches, and intervention options in cases of violence between children and youth.

The secondary target group of the campaign is primary and secondary school pupils and students. Through information and educational activities, the message is conveyed to them that open communication about problems such as bullying or violence is a responsible and courageous approach that can help resolve situations as they arise. At the same time, parents and the wider public are also involved in the initiative, as their cooperation is important in creating a safe and supportive environment for children and young people. A symbolic element of the campaign is a whistle, which is a call to break the silence, draw attention to the problem, and support victims of violence. At the same time, this symbol underscores the importance of a proactive approach to conflict resolution and the need for a timely response in situations that may escalate to violent behaviour. The campaign highlights that passivity or silence can indirectly contribute to the persistence of undesirable phenomena, while openness and willingness to communicate can help to address them and, in some cases, prevent serious consequences. The results of the campaign so far indicate a positive response in the school environment. Educational activities were completed by more than 1,715 pedagogical, professional, and other school employees. At the same time,

[9] Accredited education. https://www.minv.sk/?makke-ciele-ochrana-narodny-projekt.
[10] The campaign is implemented as part of the National Project "Increasing the resilience of soft targets by strengthening professional capacities and crime prevention services in the Slovak Republic".

494 primary and secondary schools participated in the project, which represents approximately 16.4% of all schools of this type in the Slovak Republic.[11]

Analysis of selected attacks in schools

The presented analysis is based on three serious violent incidents that took place in the school environment in the Slovak Republic in recent years. These are the attack at the joint secondary school in the town of Vrútky in 2020, the attack at the secondary vocational school in Nováky in 2022, and the latest incident at the grammar school in Spišská Stará Ves in 2025. These cases represent significant security incidents that have highlighted the vulnerability of school facilities as a specific category of soft targets. The analysis of selected violent incidents identifies several recurring risk factors that significantly affect the security of school facilities as soft targets. At the same time, the examined cases emphasize the need for systematic prevention, early identification of risky behaviour, and preparedness of the school environment for crisis situations. One of the common features of the analysed attacks is the fact that the perpetrators were individuals acting alone, with no direct link to organized extremist or terrorist structures. The motivation for their actions was predominantly associated with personal, social, or psychological problems that had manifested in them over a longer period of time.

These factors often included interpersonal conflicts, social isolation, frustration, or long-term psychological distress. However, in many cases, these warning signs were not recognized in time or adequately addressed, underscoring the importance of systematic monitoring of risky behaviour in the school environment. Another important finding is the occurrence of so-called "insider" attacks, in which the perpetrator is directly part of the school environment – for example, as a pupil or former student. Such a situation poses a particular security challenge, as the offender has ready access to the building and is familiar with its internal layout. As a result, the effectiveness of traditional security measures, such as access controls and physical facility protection, is significantly reduced. This highlights the need to complement technical and organisational security measures with social and preventive mechanisms. At the same time, the analysis confirms that the school environment is vulnerable not only to physical safety concerns but also to social relationships and psychological factors. Therefore, the prevention of violence must include a broader set of measures, including, in particular, early identification of behavioural warning signs, systematic work on interpersonal relationships within school teams, the availability of psychological and social

[11] In the campaign Break Silence - Safely at Schools, the Ministry of the Interior joins forces with ZMOS. 2026. https://www.minv.sk/?prevencia_aktuality&sprava=v-kampani-prelom-ticho-bezpecne-na-skolach-spaja-ministerstvo-vnutra-sily-so-zmos.

support for pupils, and the creation of an environment conducive to open communication about problems.

At the same time, the analysed cases highlight the importance of school staff's readiness to deal with crisis situations. Teaching and professional staff play a key role in recognising risky behaviour, providing early intervention, and coordinating emergency procedures. In this context, systematic education for school staff, the implementation of preventive programs, and the cooperation of schools with security and professional institutions seem important. On the basis of the above analysis, it can be concluded that the effective protection of schools as soft targets requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach that combines safety, social, psychological, and preventive measures. The basic prerequisite for reducing the risk of violent incidents is, in particular, early intervention, systematic prevention, and the creation of a safe and supportive environment for pupils and school staff.[12]

Conclusion

Effective protection of the school environment as a specific type of soft target requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. Key measures include the development and regular updating of emergency safety plans, the systematic development of a safety culture among students, teachers, and other school staff, and the implementation of regular exercises and simulations of crisis scenarios. Equally important are close cooperation among schools, security forces, and other relevant actors, the implementation of technical and organisational security measures, and the raising of safety awareness through educational and preventive activities. Effective prevention also includes the early identification of risk phenomena, such as bullying, radicalisation, or other forms of violent behaviour, and the provision of adequate psychological support to individuals at risk. These measures represent an important prerequisite for strengthening school safety and reducing the risk of violent incidents against soft targets (BIENIEK, 2021).
In the long term, it is therefore essential to continue developing prevention programmes, strengthen safety standards in school facilities, and promote a culture of zero tolerance towards violence.

[12] https://hnonline.sk/slovensko/96189620-najvaecsie-tragedie-na-slovenskych-skolach-naposledy-smrtelne-utocil-ziak-pred-styrmi-rokmi-prehlad.

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ARMED CONFLICTS AS A WORKPLACE STRESSOR IN SPORTS

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Introduction

People working in sports, whether they are athletes, coaches, sports managers, or members of the support staff, are particularly exposed to the challenges of workplace stress. These stressors can arise from a variety of factors and significantly impact individuals' mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Workplace stressors can include a bad coach, constant discomfort caused by working conditions, a dirty locker room, constant travel, and disruption of circadian rhythms. In the case of athletes, everyone has one goal in mind: how to achieve peak performance, how to win the next competition, and how to achieve their personal best. There are many factors that must be met simultaneously: travel, organization, special nutrition, etc. Based on Johannes Siegrist's work on work stress and health, the terminology used in my study regarding the word stressors requires clarification. As Siegrist's study indicates, a longstanding ambiguity of the term stress, the present study adopts the term stressor to refer to an environmental demand or threat that taxes or exceeds an individual's capacity to cope (SIEGRIST, 2001). The present study adopts this approach.

In occupational psychology, the study of workplace stressors has a considerable literature, but in the lives of professional athletes, whose actual work is sports, they often encounter other types of workplace stressors that are rarely examined. According to Hungarian law, the employment of athletes, when compared with the relevant provisions of the Labor Code and the Sports Act, is considered atypical employment (RESPERGER & GÉCZI, 2022), in which classic workplace stressors appear but operate under a different organizational logic. The impact and combinations of these workplace stressors can have a particularly strong impact on athletes' life paths. This means that it has a number of structural, psychosocial, and existential characteristics that differ from traditional workplaces.

There are competitions on holidays and weekends, and the location of employment is not a specific location, which is the employer's premises, but consists of several training and competition locations. Competitive sports, therefore, create a work context that is characterized by increased performance expectations, constant performance measurement, an uncertain future, the risk of

injury, time pressure, and public and often hostile environmental feedback (RESPERGER & GÉCZI, 2022).

As a result, the workload of athletes is not only intense but also qualitatively different from the stress processes examined in classic organizational work environments. Occupational psychology research has shown that the impact of workplace stressors plays a decisive role in the well-being of employees, but these workplace stressors have never been examined specifically in sports. Athletes may be exposed to several sport-specific workplace stressors, such as travelling on shared buses, cold conditions at ice rinks, health issues related to the gastronomic characteristics of foreign countries, equipment damage, or competing against opponents from a nations considered adversaries in times of conflict.

These sport-specific workplace stressors significantly influence the development of athlete well-being, performance, burnout, and dropout rates. We also assume that, in different combinations, these endanger the athlete's physical integrity and mental well-being even more, thereby affecting their sports results. Of course, these may appear differently in individual and team sports. However, most current empirical studies focus on isolated stressors (e.g., coach-athlete relationship, performance pressure, injury), while paying little attention to the configurations in which these factors exert their effects on athlete functioning, reinforcing or weakening each other (RESPERGER et al., 2025).

Our knowledge is particularly lacking regarding the specific workplace stressors that increasingly appear in the world of sports, yet are fundamentally unpredictable and uncontrollable for the athlete. These include, among others, geopolitical conflicts, war situations, terrorist threats, international political tensions, and their indirect or direct manifestations at sporting events. Such situations can include, for example, exclusion from international competitions, symbolic conflicts between athletes (e.g., refusal to shake hands), or hostile, hateful expressions from the audience. These phenomena can function functionally as workplace stressors, but their essential difference is that the athlete is neither able to control nor predict them.

This article presents the findings of a recent study on new research—the investigation of workplace stressors in sports—where my research colleagues and I endeavored to identify the workplace stressors impacting athletes in accordance with current occupational psychology guidelines.

The study involved both active and retired Hungarian top athletes, encompassing participants from team and individual sports. In the second phase of the research, which has recently commenced, we aim to supplement the previously identified workplace stressors, considering the current geopolitical situation, with a new stressor that, in my professional opinion, impacts athletes. The name of this stressor would be "unpredictable and uncontrollable workplace stressors in sports," with the specific content referring to workplace stress originating from conflicts such as wars and terrorist threats.

2. Classification of workplace stressors in occupational psychology

Workplace stress often arises from excessive expectations, deadlines, competitive situations, or a lack of work-life balance. In contrast, sports stressors, such as competitive pressure, performance pressure, or risk of injury, can also impose a significant psychological burden on athletes. The literature on workplace stressors covers a very wide spectrum, and in terms of their classification, they can be as follows (JUHÁSZ, 2002).

Workplace stressors	**Subcategories**	**Sub-subcategories**
Task-related stressors (missing deadlines, overtime, mistakes,etc.)	Quantitative or qualitative overloading or underloading	
	Working conditions	
	Changes in the work	
	Keeping pace with rapid technological change	
Work environment stressors (noise, heat, lighting, air quality, etc.)		
Stressors related to roles within the organization	At the individual level	role ambiguity role conflict too much or too little responsibility for employees career development
	At a group level	lack of cohesion lack of good working relationships relationship with superiors/subordinates
	At an organizational level	organizational climate management styles control systems technology and its change excessively low pay job insecurity
Stressors outside the organization	family relationships, financial problems	
	difficulties in balancing family and work roles	
	personal beliefs, convictions	
	frequent relocation	
	transportation to the workplace	
Stressors for specific layers	women (harassment at work, balancing work and family roles, gender inequality in the labour market)	
	physical workers (uncertainty, lack of understanding)	
	mental workers (family problems, interpersonal relationships)	
	stressors for managers (e.g., stressors for middle managers)	
	subordinates' stressors (e.g., lack of control)	

Table 1: Categories of workplace stressors adapted from Juhász (2002:7-19).

Based on Table 1, can we identify typical stressors in athletes' work? Can we differentiate between genders in the experience of athlete stressors? Do athletes experience different athlete stressors differently depending on their age group? Is there a difference between those who play team sports and those who play

individual sports? How do athletes deal with the uncertainty arising from war and the threat of terrorism?

In modern societies, competitive sports are increasingly interpreted as a professional occupation that involves complex psychological, physical, and social stress. The everyday activities of athletes – training, competing, regeneration, and continuous evaluation of performance – can be compared in many respects to the classic workplace environment. Despite this, the examination of athletes' stress load has long been primarily linked to competitive situations, while the organizational and structural stressors of athletes' "work" have received less attention. Research on workplace stress has well-established theoretical frameworks in occupational and organizational psychology that can be adapted to the specific environment of athletes (KAIN & JEX, 2010). However, sport is not just an atypical workplace but a special performance-oriented system in which individual and organizational stressors interact closely.

In the first part of our research on workplace stressors in sport, we prepared a questionnaire specifically adapted for athletes, taking into account Juhász's work-related stressor grouping (JUHÁSZ, 2002), which was preceded by an interview with 10 athletes before the survey. Based on the initial findings, we were able to identify:

- Women perceive a higher level of work-related stress in sports compared to men.
- Individual athletes experience greater levels of work-related stress than those participating in team sports, as group dynamics likely play a more protective role against anxiety.
- Occupational stress does not exhibit a linear relationship with the level of competition (RESPERGER et al., 2025).

There are several parts of the questionnaire that are still under publication, such as the occurrence of workplace psychological terror among Hungarian athletes. We would like to validate this questionnaire in the future and supplement it with a stress factor that specifically measures anxiety and uncertainty arising from the geopolitical situation.

The impact of the current geopolitical situations on sport and athletes

Although the feeling of powerlessness plays a major role in how we perceive stressful situations, the awareness that we can influence the events in our lives to some extent can help reduce anxiety (JUHÁSZ, 2002, 4). In our lives, there are many events that may seem uncontrollable at first glance but in reality, we can still influence them through our own decisions and behaviour. Geopolitical events, however, are usually so far removed from an individual's intimate sphere of influence that there is no real possibility of affecting or predicting them. This can

lead to stressful situations that cannot be effectively managed either individually or as a group, characterized primarily by uncertainty and unpredictability.

Among the civilian population working in a classic workplace, the threat of terrorist attacks or war does not usually manifest itself in a direct, immediate way, especially if it is not taking place in their own country or place of residence, but rather through indirect effects such as rising oil prices, increasing inflation, or other socio-economic consequences. Although these can be sources of stress, they generally do not exert their effects directly during work. In many cases, the general public does not fully comprehend the connections between geopolitical events and their impact on their personal lives.

However, when examining the situation of an athlete in the workplace, a different picture emerges. In their case, the outbreak of a war can act as an immediate uncontrollable factor affecting their work, as it can directly impact their training, competition opportunities, travel, or even their livelihood. For this reason, we will examine this phenomenon in the following sections from the perspective of workplace stressors for athletes.

As of now, the Russian-Ukrainian war continues, anti-terrorist operations are ongoing in the Gaza Strip, and recently, the U.S. and Israel have launched attacks on Iran. The current American-Iranian armed conflict is already impacting international sports in multiple ways. These effects mainly involve international competitions, athlete travel, sports diplomacy, and sports economics. Since no scientific research has yet been conducted on this topic, we mainly rely on interviews with athletes and media reports related to the American-Iranian situation. What appears to be emerging is that the war is affecting athletes' lives in several areas.

Postponement or cancellation of competitions

Several sporting events have already been cancelled, or their organization has become uncertain. The holding of Formula 1 races in the Middle East (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia) (LAMONATO, 2026) has become questionable. Regarding Hungarian involvement, the International Fencing Federation announced that the Grand Prix Budapest competition will be postponed (KLICASZ, 2026). With regard to into soccer, matches held in the AFC Champions League[13] and other Asian club competitions involving Middle Eastern teams were postponed until further notice. An ATP tennis Challenger tournament in Fujairah, United Arab Emirates, was suspended and later cancelled due to the country's security alert. In Iran and Qatar, football matches were also postponed (REUTERS, 2026). As to the uncertainty surrounding the staging of the Spain – Argentina match, the sports event was also cancelled due to the regional conflict (MARDSEN, 2026).

[13] The premier annual professional club football competition in Asia, organized by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC)

Travel and safety problems for athletes

The war has led to airspace closures and security restrictions, which have prevented many athletes and coaches from traveling on time, as flights have been cancelled or routes have been altered. As a result, some athletes have been forced to withdraw from competitions or have been unable to reach the venue. Indian badminton star Pusarla Venkata Sindhu was stranded in Dubai due to the airspace closure, forcing her to miss the prestigious All England Open (NAIK 2026). This may particularly affect sports where competitors often fly to the Middle East (e.g. motorsport, tennis).

Political problems of major sporting events

The conflict also seriously affects sports diplomacy. It has become questionable whether Iran will participate in the 2026 FIFA[14] World Cup, which is co-hosted by the United States. If Iran withdraws or is excluded, it will pose a serious political and organizational problem for FIFA (DÓZSA, 2026). It is also uncertain whether any ban on athletes will be implemented in the near future, similar to the sanctions imposed on Russian and Belarusian athletes following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022 (KAPROS & RESPERGER, 2023).

Olympic and Paralympic participation

This issue has already had concrete consequences. Iran was unable to participate in the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Paralympics because its athlete was unable to travel safely. The conflict also has a significant impact on the lives of athletes, even bringing about life-changing changes. Perhaps the best example of this is Aboulfazl Khatibi Mianaei, who was unable to compete in the 2026 Paralympics due to the conflict, even though he would have been Iran's only athlete and flag bearer, and had been preparing for this event for years (AZZONI, 2026). Notably, the American-Iranian situation demonstrates that there are parallels in timing to the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war, given that the Middle Eastern armed conflict started during the period of the Olympic Truce, as adopted by the United Nations (UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2025:5).

The threat to holding sports facilities and domestic championships

The war also directly affects the sports infrastructure. For instance, in Iran, championships were halted, and certain sports facilities sustained damage.

[14] Fédération Internationale de Football Association (it is the international governing body for association football, beach soccer, and futsal.)

Notably, the Azadi Indoor Stadium in Tehran was destroyed during an airstrike (IRAN INTERNATIONAL 2026).

The war affects athletes not only at the organizational level but also at the individual, psychological level, which can manifest in three main ways.

- Loss of career opportunities (e.g., Paralympics, the case of an Iranian competitor).
- Family and psychological burdens (e.g., national team players) Sara Didar - Iranian women's national football team player, spoke in tears at a press conference about the fact that the members of Philippatat do not even know what is happening at home during the tournament (THE ASSOCIATED PRESS 2026).
- Logistical problems and cancellation of competitions (fencing, equestrian sports). Philipp Weishaupt (German Olympic show jumper) said that his horses were already in Qatar when the conflict escalated. According to him, drones were flying over the stables, which scared both the horses and the staff. According to the competitor, the biggest problem was that it was not possible to fly in the area, so neither the horses nor the staff could be moved safely (WEHRMANN, 2026).

Summary

Armed conflicts affect athletes not only at the organizational or competition calendar level but also pose a significant psychological burden. When a war directly affects the region or the athletes' country of origin, athletes often experience increased stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. Many athletes have family members living in conflict-affected areas, which causes constant worry and makes it difficult to prepare for and concentrate on competitions. Missing competitions, travel difficulties, or missing out on qualification opportunities can lead to frustration and motivational problems, especially when an athlete's years of preparation are at stake. Along with the uncertainties, there is the unpredictability factor of how athletes will be affected in the future, as geopolitical conflicts and wars influence travel opportunities. This impact is not only about reaching competition locations but also about official requirements, such as visas, and how bans and sanctions can affect global sports and the athletes involved.

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FEMALE INMATES' PERSPECTIVES ON PRISON LIFE AND INSTITUTIONAL TREATMENT

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Introduction

Criminological literature has historically treated men as the normative standard for explaining crime, contributing to the relative invisibility of women within the criminal justice system (DALY et al., 1988; WRIGHT et al., 2012). According to the Direção-Geral de Reinserção e Serviços Prisionais (Portuguese Directorate-

General for Reintegration and Prison Services), as of 15 March 2026 women represented only about 7,3% of the incarcerated population in Portugal. The smaller numerical representation of women in prison populations has reinforced the perception that their needs are secondary in the design of criminal justice policies and interventions (CASTRO RODRIGUES et al., 2025). However, a growing body of research demonstrates that women's criminal trajectories differ significantly from men's in terms of age of onset, duration of criminal careers, patterns of prior victimization, and contexts of social vulnerability (SALISBURY & VAN VOORHIS, 2009; WRIGHT et al., 2012).

In many countries, prison systems have been designed around male profiles, replicating architectural structures, daily routines, and security regimes that fail to adequately address the specific needs of women (UNODC, 2014; WRIGHT et al., 2012). Research on quality of life and social climate in prison indicates that both the social and material environment have a direct impact on well-being, mental health, and the potential for reintegration among incarcerated individuals (LIEBLING et al., 2012; MULLER et al., 2019; TONKIN, 2016). The literature on women's imprisonment further highlights the centrality of factors such as trauma, mental health issues, caregiving responsibilities, and prior socioeconomic exclusion, emphasizing the importance of gender-responsive approaches (BLOOM et al., 2003; COVINGTON, 2007; SALISBURY & VAN VOORHIS, 2009; FERREIRA et al., 2025).

International research indicates an overrepresentation of women with low educational attainment, socioeconomic disadvantage, and histories of victimization and health-related vulnerabilities within female prison populations (BATRIĆEVIĆ, 2023; BUCERIUS & SANDBERG, 2022). Evidence also shows that incarcerated women frequently present higher levels of mental health needs and social marginalization compared to the general population (FEDOCK et al., 2013; KOONS et al., 2020; KINGS & SMITH, 2024).

Furthermore, research highlights that women's pathways into crime are often shaped by cumulative disadvantage, including trauma, disrupted social bonds, and chronic marginalization, which may also influence patterns of recidivism (BUCERIUS & SANDBERG, 2022). Recent studies in prison contexts additionally suggest that incarcerated individuals often perceive imprisonment as predominantly punitive and insufficiently oriented toward rehabilitation, particularly in environments lacking supportive institutional climates (CASTRO RODRIGUES et al., 2025; FAVRIL & VAN GINNEKEN, 2023).

In the context of women's imprisonment, gender-responsive approaches stress the importance of staff training in effective communication, relational skills, and trauma-informed practices (BLOOM et al., 2003; COVINGTON, 2007). Given the high prevalence of prior victimization and mental health needs among incarcerated women, supportive and consistent staff engagement is considered essential for reducing the risk of self-harm, improving institutional adjustment, and promoting rehabilitation (BUCERIUS & SANDBERG, 2022).

In Portugal, research on the prison system remains limited, and within this field, studies focusing specifically on women are particularly scarce (JÓLLUSKIN et al., 2022; CASTRO RODRIGUES et al., 2025). This gap makes it difficult to assess the extent to which prisons respond to the specific needs of incarcerated women, including perceptions of safety, respect, material conditions, and opportunities for personal development (FERREIRA et al., 2025; MULLER et al., 2019).

Research on prison quality of life highlights that domains such as personal development, autonomy, and engagement in meaningful activities are critical for more positive perceptions of prison life and for supporting desistance trajectories (LIEBLING et al., 2012; MULLER et al., 2019). Limited access to such opportunities may contribute to frustration, disengagement, and reduced prospects for successful reintegration, especially in settings perceived as highly punitive (FAVRIL & VAN GINNEKEN, 2023). Moreover, the literature on women's imprisonment emphasizes that access to gender-responsive programs — including leisure, education, and vocational training — is essential for strengthening skills, promoting self-esteem, and fostering pro-social engagement (BUCERIUS & SANDBERG, 2022; SEMERTZIDOU, 2020). The absence or inadequacy of such interventions may undermine both well-being and rehabilitation outcomes for incarcerated women (FERREIRA et al., 2025).

The present study seeks to contribute to this field by analysing the perceptions of incarcerated women regarding treatment conditions within a Portuguese prison context, situating the findings within the international literature on prison quality of life and gender-responsive penal policies (BLOOM et al, 2003; JÓLLUSKIN et al., 2022; WRIGHT et al., 2012). Specifically, the study aims to: (1) describe the sociodemographic and criminal characteristics of the participants; (2) characterize perceptions of institutional treatment across different domains of prison life; and (3) discuss the findings in light of international evidence and their implications for gender-responsive policies (BATRIĆEVIĆ, 2023; MULLER et al., 2019; VAN VOORHIS et al., 2010).

Methodology

The sample consisted of 73 women serving prison sentences in a Portuguese correctional facility. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 71 years, with a mean age of approximately 43 years. Most were single or divorced and had low levels of educational attainment, with around 72.6% having completed only compulsory education or less.

In terms of criminal status, 11% were foreign nationals. Sentence lengths ranged from 6 to 156 months (M ≈ 45 months), with maximum sentences reaching up to 300 months. Approximately 20.8% were repeat offenders, although nearly four out of five participants were first-time offenders.

A sociodemographic questionnaire was administered to collect information on age, education level, marital status, criminal status (first-time vs. repeat

offender), criminal history, sentence length, and time already served. To assess perceptions of prison treatment conditions, the treatment module of the Prison Quality of Life Questionnaire was used, consisting of 13 items inspired by established frameworks for evaluating prison life quality, such as the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life- MQPL (LIEBLING et al., 2012).

The items assessed participants' perceptions across multiple domains of prison life, including whether prison conditions were perceived as better than those experienced outside; the extent to which staff demonstrated concern, understanding, and support; institutional efforts to prevent self-harm and suicide; the level of tolerance toward aggression between inmates and the support provided to victims of violence; the availability of support for substance use problems, including safe detoxification; the ability to maintain personal hygiene and cell cleanliness; overall evaluations of living conditions; satisfaction with how personal needs were addressed; perceptions of respectful interpersonal treatment; access to meaningful leisure activities; and the extent to which womens' rights were respected.

The study complied with all ethical requirements applicable to research involving individuals deprived of liberty. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of University Fernando Pessoa, as well as authorization from the Portuguese Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services and the administrations of the participating correctional facilities.

Potential participants were selected according to institutional criteria and were invited to participate on a voluntary basis, following the provision of informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality of all data were ensured throughout the research process. Data collection took place within the prison setting, with instruments administered in questionnaire format.

Results

Regarding perceived conditions in prison versus in the community, a large proportion of the women disagreed that prison offers better living conditions than those available outside, and more than half strongly disagreed with this statement. Only 11.0% of participants reported believing that prison provides better conditions than the external environment. These findings suggest that incarceration is not perceived as a space of protection or improvement in living conditions, but rather as a context in which pre-existing vulnerabilities persist or may even be exacerbated.

Table 1
Perceived conditions in prison versus in the community: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I have conditions in this prison that I wouldn't have on the outside	n	%
Strongly agree	4	5.5
Agree	4	5.5
Neither agree nor disagree	9	12.3
Disagree	17	23.3
Strongly disagree	39	53.4

Perceptions regarding relationships with prison staff were mixed. In Table 2, 39.7% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that staff show concern and understanding, while 41.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 19.2% remained neutral. This ambivalence suggests variability in the quality of interpersonal interactions, indicating that supportive relationships are not consistently experienced across the institutional context.

Table 2
Relationships with prison staff: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

The prison staff show concern and understanding towards me.	n	%
Strongly agree	12	16.4
Agree	17	23.3
Neither agree nor disagree	14	19.2
Disagree	13	17.8
Strongly disagree	17	23.3

Regarding the prevention of self-harm and suicide, 50.7% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that prison staff make a lot of effort in this domain, while 21.9% neither agreed nor disagreed and 27.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This distribution indicates that institutional efforts are recognized by just over half of the participants, but a substantial minority do not perceive such efforts as clearly visible or effective from their perspective.

Table 3
Perception of prevention of self-harm and suicide: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

The prison staff make a lot of effort to prevent self-harm and suicide	n	%
Strongly agree	13	17.8
Agree	24	32.9
Neither agree nor disagree	16	21.9

Disagree	11	15.1
Strongly disagree	9	12.3

These results align with international literature emphasizing that the quality of staff–prisoner relationships is a central dimension of prison life, particularly for women. Positive interactions characterized by respect, care, and emotional support are strongly associated with better mental health outcomes, lower levels of psychological distress, and reduced risk of self-harm (FAVRIL & VAN GINNEKEN, 2024). Conversely, environments perceived as unsupportive or lacking responsiveness may exacerbate vulnerability and distress.

Perceptions of safety and the management of violence among prisoners were mixed. In Table 4, 50.7% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that aggression between inmates is not tolerated, while 21.9% neither agreed nor disagreed and 27.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This distribution suggests that perceptions of institutional control over violence are not uniform, indicating variability in how safety is experienced within the prison environment.

Table 4
Perceptions of Safety: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

In this prison, aggression between inmates is not tolerated	n	%
Strongly agree	13	17,8
Agree	24	32,9
Neither agree nor disagree	16	21.9
Disagree	11	15.1
Strongly disagree	9	12.3

Regarding the handling of violence, Table 5 shows that 52.0% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that victims of fights receive all the help they need. However, 28.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 12.3% remained neutral. This pattern suggests a broadly positive perception of institutional response, but also reveals a substantial minority who do not perceive support as sufficient, which may reflect inconsistencies in access, visibility, or perceived effectiveness of assistance.

Table 5
Perceptions of violence management: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I think that when there are fights in prison, the victims get all the help they need	n	%
Strongly agree	16	20.5

Agree	23	31.5
Neither agree nor disagree	9	12.3
Disagree	14	19.2
Strongly disagree	12	16.4

Similarly, Table 6 shows that 55.5% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that people with drug problems receive help to detox safely, while 21.9% were neutral and 21.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Although the overall tendency is positive, the responses again indicate that institutional support is not experienced uniformly by all women. This may point to variation in the implementation, accessibility, or credibility of substance-use-related interventions within the prison context.

Table 6
Perceptions of substance use problems management: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I think that anyone with a drug problem who comes to this prison gets help to detox safely	n	%
Strongly agree	16	21,9
Agree	26	33,6
Neither agree nor disagree	15	20.5
Disagree	7	9.6
Strongly disagree	9	12.3

These findings align with the literature on prison quality of life, which identifies safety, violence, victimization, and substance use as core dimensions in the assessment of prison environments. Research suggests that perceptions of safety and protection are closely associated with psychological well-being, with lower perceived safety linked to higher distress and vulnerability among incarcerated individuals (FAVRIL & VAN GINNEKEN, 2024).

Regarding concrete aspects of daily life, most women reported being able to maintain personal hygiene and keep themselves clean and well-groomed. In Table 7, 69.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Here I can keep myself clean and tidy." Similarly, in Table 8, 61.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they were given opportunities to keep their cell clean. These findings suggest a certain degree of agency and capacity to manage basic self-care and immediate living spaces within the constraints of the prison environment.

Table 7
Perceptions on Conditions for personal Hygiene: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

Here I can keep myself clean and tidy.	n	%
Strongly agree	19	26.0
Agree	32	43.8
Neither agree nor disagree	6	8.2
Disagree	7	9.6
Strongly disagree	9	12.3

Table 8
Perceptions on Material Conditions for Cell Hygiene: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

In this prison I am given opportunities to keep my cell clean	n	%
Strongly agree	19	26,0
Agree	26	35.6
Neither agree nor disagree	6	8.2
Disagree	8	11.0
Strongly disagree	14	19.2

However, a considerably smaller proportion of participants agreed that the overall living conditions in prison are good. In Table 9, only 28.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 31.5% neither agreed nor disagreed and 39.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This contrast indicates that, although basic hygiene needs may be met, broader evaluations of the prison environment remain substantially less favourable.

Table 9
Perceptions on living Conditions: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I think we have good living conditions in this prison	n	%
Strongly agree	9	12.3
Agree	12	16.4
Neither agree nor disagree	23	31.5
Disagree	13	17.8
Strongly disagree	16	21.9

Overall evaluations of personal needs satisfaction and well-being were similarly ambivalent. In Table 10, 37.0% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their needs were being met, 26.0% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 36.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This distribution suggests that, according to our participants, the prison environment may not provide a consistently perceived standard of care or support across individuals.

In the domains of leisure and rights, only a minority of participants strongly agreed that they were able to engage in leisure activities they enjoyed or that their rights were respected, while substantial proportions expressed neutral or negative views. In Table 11, 41.1% agreed or strongly agreed that they could practice the leisure activities they enjoyed, whereas 37.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Table 12, 39.7% agreed or strongly agreed that their rights were respected, while 41.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed. These findings raise concerns about the meaningful use of time in prison and the protection of fundamental rights, both of which are closely linked in the literature to rehabilitation processes and the prevention of risk behaviours.

Table 10

Perceptions on satisfaction of Needs: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I think my needs are being met	n	%
Strongly agree	11	15.1
Agree	16	21.9
Neither agree nor disagree	19	26.0
Disagree	12	16.4
Strongly disagree	15	20.5

Table 11

Perceptions on Leisure activities: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I can practice the leisure activities I enjoy	n	%
Strongly agree	13	17.8
Agree	17	23.3
Neither agree nor disagree	16	21.9
Disagree	18	24.7
Strongly disagree	9	12.3

Table 12

Perceptions on Rights: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I feel that my rights are respected	n	%
Strongly agree	10	13.7
Agree	19	26.0
Neither agree nor disagree	14	19.2
Disagree	16	21.9
Strongly disagree	14	19.2

In contrast, perceptions of interpersonal treatment were slightly more favourable. In Table 13, 46.5% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were treated

well in prison, while 24.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 28.8% remained neutral. This suggests that, for some women, interactions with others, particularly staff, may involve a minimum level of respect, despite broader dissatisfaction with institutional support and responsiveness to personal needs. This distinction reinforces the importance of differentiating between relational experiences and structural or systemic conditions within prison settings.

Table 13
Perceptions on how are they treated: Distribution of participants' responses by frequency and percentage

I think I'm treated well in this prison	n	%
Strongly agree	12	16.4
Agree	22	30.1
Neither agree nor disagree	21	28.8
Disagree	7	9.6
Strongly disagree	11	15.1

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight mixed perceptions among incarcerated women regarding living conditions and institutional treatment within the Portuguese prison context. In line with international research on prison quality of life, the results reveal a combination of relatively positive evaluations, alongside areas of marked dissatisfaction (BATRIĆEVIĆ, 2023; MULLER et al., 2019).

The observation that only a minority of participants consider prison to offer better conditions than the community suggests that incarceration is not perceived as a setting that protects or compensates for prior vulnerabilities. Instead, it appears to operate as a continuation of trajectories of social exclusion. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that incarcerated women frequently face compounded disadvantage, including poor material conditions, limited access to services, and unmet health needs, all of which negatively affect their well-being (FERREIRA et al., 2025). More broadly, research on women's imprisonment indicates that incarceration rarely mitigates structural inequalities; rather, it tends to reflect and reproduce previous experiences of marginalization and health vulnerability (BUCERIUS & SANDBERG, 2022).

These results are also consistent with international studies that generally report low overall quality of life scores among incarcerated populations, particularly in domains related to the physical environment and access to resources (LIEBLING et al., 2012; MULLER et al., 2019; PAPE & JOHNSEN, 2026). In line with this, Pape and Johnsen (2026) found that prisoners' overall satisfaction with prison is strongly predicted not only by the quality of staff–

prisoner relationships but also by specific features of the physical environment, such as outdoor areas and the view from the cell.

Studies conducted with female prison samples similarly highlight reduced quality of life and unfavourable living conditions, especially in environmental dimensions, reinforcing the relevance of the present findings (BATRIĆEVIĆ, 2023; FERREIRA et al., 2025). In this sense, improving prison quality of life requires attention to both relational climate and material and architectural conditions, as more favourable physical environments are associated with higher satisfaction and a less punitive perception of imprisonment (PAPE & JOHNSEN, 2026).

For women in prison, limited access to health care, mental health support, and basic services has been repeatedly linked to poorer quality of life and heightened perceptions of punitiveness (CASTRO RODRIGUES, et al, 2025), while more favourable physical environments are associated with higher overall satisfaction with prison (PAPE & JOHNSEN, 2026).

Additionally, the findings related to leisure and rights suggest that prisons do not yet consistently provide meaningful opportunities for structured use of time, nor do they guarantee a clear perception of respect for fundamental rights. This is especially significant in light of international recommendations on gender-responsive correctional policies, which emphasise the need to develop interventions tailored to women's criminogenic needs, such as substance use, prior victimisation, and mental health problems, and to promote life skills, autonomy, and pathways to reintegration (CASTRO RODRIGUES et al., 2025; SEMERTZIDOU, 2020; UNODC, 2014). Limited access to gender-responsive educational, vocational, and leisure programmes may contribute to frustration, disengagement, and reduced prospects for successful reintegration (BUCERIUS & SANDBERG, 2022; SEMERTZIDOU, 2020).

When compared with Portuguese studies on women serving custodial and non-custodial sentences, similar patterns emerge, characterised by perceptions of high punitiveness and a weak rehabilitative orientation (CASTRO RODRIGUES et al., 2022, 2025). Such perceptions may undermine trust in the justice system and reduce motivation for change and desistance. Overall, the present findings point to the need to reconsider prison models that remain largely centred on male-oriented paradigms and insufficiently adapted to the realities and needs of women (BUCERIUS & SANDBERG, 2022; UNODC, 2014).

Several study limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small and context-specific sample restricts the generalisability of the findings, and the reliance on self-report data may be influenced by social desirability or fear of institutional repercussions. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal conclusions or for the assessment of change over time. Future research should examine subgroup differences (for example, foreign versus national prisoners, primary versus repeat offenders), employ mixed methods to capture more nuanced experiences, and incorporate standardised measures of prison

quality of life to enable international comparisons and to evaluate the impact of institutional reforms.

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THE RECRUITMENT OF REFUGEE CHILDREN INTO ARMED CONFLICTS: SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS

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Introduction

Until recently, war was largely perceived as an activity "reserved" exclusively for men, while children were mentioned in the context of armed conflicts only as a category of civilian victims. However, the active participation of children in armed conflicts has unfortunately become an increasingly frequent phenomenon in contemporary hybrid and asymmetric wars.

Although there are no precise data indicating when the recruitment of children for participation in armed conflicts began, children were not initially involved directly in combat operations. As Singer noted in *Children at War* (2005a: 9–15), they were first used for logistical tasks—as messengers, equipment carriers, scouts, or guards. In this regard, it can be argued that the direct participation of children in combat operations has become more pronounced in contemporary armed conflicts characterized primarily by the dominance of non-state armed actors and the weakening of institutional control.

Given that children, due to their age, insufficient psychological maturity, and physical development, are recognized as a particularly vulnerable category of the population—especially in the context of armed conflicts—they enjoy enhanced protection within international humanitarian law. The provisions of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols established the foundations of this protection, while the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) further emphasized the obligation of states to provide special care for children affected by armed conflict and to refrain from recruiting children under the age of 15 for direct participation in hostilities (Art. 38).[1]

Furthermore, the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) raised the minimum recruitment age from 15 to 18 and extended the prohibition to non-state armed groups (Art 2. and Art. 4); The Rome Statute also classified the recruitment of children under the age of 15 as a war

[1] The Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949); Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions (1977); and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

crime (Art. 8).[2] For these and other reasons, the issue of children's participation in armed conflicts has become the subject of numerous academic studies and professional analyses. Their vulnerability, as well as the severe consequences that armed conflicts have on children's physical, psychological, and social development, attract significant attention from both the academic community and the broader public.

This paper focuses on what we consider a relatively under-researched aspect of child recruitment in armed conflicts—namely, the recruitment of children from refugee camps. In the context of this study, the term *refugee camps* also includes camps for internally displaced persons.[3]

Recruitment of Children for Participation in Armed Conflicts

The process of using children for direct participation in hostilities typically unfolds in three phases: recruitment, indoctrination and training, and direct involvement in combat (MUTAVDŽIĆ, 2025, 84). The transformation of a child into an effective combatant begins precisely with recruitment.

According to the Paris Principles, recruitment may take several forms, including compulsory, forced, and voluntary recruitment (United Nations, 2007). While compulsory recruitment is generally regulated by national legislation and limited by international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 38) and the Optional Protocol (Art. 2), forced and voluntary recruitment represent a significant challenge in understanding and addressing the phenomenon of child soldiers[4].

In recent years, the recruitment of children into armed conflicts has been recognized as a significant and complex social and security issue. Numerous

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[2] Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000); The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998).

[3] A *refugee camp* is defined as "a plot of land temporarily made available for accommodating refugees in temporary shelters. UNHCR, host governments and other humanitarian organizations provide basic services in refugee camps, including food, sanitation, healthcare and education."
Refugees are defined as "persons outside their countries of origin who require international protection due to a well-founded fear of persecution or serious threats to their life, physical integrity or freedom in their country of origin as a result of persecution, armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder."
An *internally displaced person (IDP)* is "a person who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who has not crossed an internationally recognized State border." See: (UNHCR, 2023).

[4] A "child soldier" is defined as any person under the age of 18 who is recruited or used by armed forces or armed groups in any capacity, including as fighters, couriers, scouts, spies, porters, cooks, or for sexual purposes. See: (United Nations, 2007).

academic studies have addressed this topic, and many international and non-governmental organizations regularly conduct research and publish reports on the matter.[5] UNICEF reports indicate that thousands of children continue to be recruited and used in armed conflicts worldwide. Between 2005 and 2022, more than 105,000 cases of child recruitment and use by parties to armed conflicts were verified, although the actual number is believed to be significantly higher.[6]

Brett and Specht (2004) note that mechanisms of child recruitment may involve either coercion or seemingly voluntary enlistment. However, it should be emphasized that "voluntary" participation is often not the result of genuine free choice but rather a consequence of structural factors such as poverty, lack of alternatives, and the need for protection (BRETT & SPECHT, 2004, 108). This distinction between forced and voluntary recruitment is also supported by Beber and Blattman (2013), who argue that the concept of voluntariness often contains elements of coercion that are not formally acknowledged. Similarly, Mutavdžić (2025: 85) points out that voluntary recruitment of children is often more controversial than forced recruitment.

In cases of forced recruitment, the mechanisms involved are relatively clear—for example, abduction on the way to school or kidnapping from refugee camps. In such situations, coercion is applied directly. On the other hand, the response given by a boy named Arthur from Sierra Leone when asked why he joined the military junta AFRC (Armed Forces Revolutionary Council) — "One of my friends was shot in the head because he refused to join the AFRC." (BRETT & SPECHT, 2004, 73)— illustrates that hidden coercion is often present even in cases of so-called voluntary recruitment.[7] This example illustrates that children's decisions to participate in armed conflicts are often shaped by their age and limited psychological maturity, which prevents them from fully understanding the consequences of their involvement. Moreover, when children find themselves in circumstances characterized by immediate threats—such as war, hunger, or separation from their families—they frequently perceive that they have no real choice. In reality, most cases of child recruitment occur within a grey zone between voluntary and forced recruitment, where children make decisions based on the limited information available to them at the time of recruitment (BJØRKHAUG, 2010, 2).

Recruitment of Children from Refugee Camps

[5] According to the United Nations report (A/75/873–S/2021/437), forced recruitment of children was identified as the leading cause of violations of children's rights in armed conflicts. In the subsequent report (A/76/871–S/2022/493), it was categorized as the second most common violation, after sexual violence against children.

[6] See: Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups | UNICEF.

[7] As Singer notes: "The rebels told me to join them, but I said no. Then they killed my younger brother. I changed my mind. — L., age 7." (Singer, 2005b: 1).

A particularly alarming aspect of this problem is the increasingly frequent recruitment of children from refugee camps. Although these camps are formally intended to provide protection and assistance to civilian populations, in practice they often become environments of heightened vulnerability.

More than three decades ago, Graça Machel highlighted this issue in her report *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (UN A/51/306, 1996), pointing out that refugee children constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in armed conflicts. The conditions prevailing in refugee camps, combined with the absence of adequate family and institutional protection, significantly increase the risk of their recruitment into armed groups.

This concern is further reinforced by data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025, 3), which indicate a dramatic increase in the number of forcibly displaced persons worldwide due to numerous armed conflicts. By the end of 2024, more than 123 million people had been forcibly displaced, approximately 40 percent of whom were children under the age of 18—around 50 million individuals.[8] Earlier UNHCR research (2002) also showed that children constitute approximately 57 percent of the population in refugee camps (In the Central African countries).

It is also important to emphasize that the recruitment of children for participation in armed conflicts is primarily carried out by non-state armed actors. More precisely, according to a UNICEF report (2022, 18), between 2005 and 2022 more than 80% of children who were recruited and used in armed conflicts were exploited by non-state actors (including 86% in 2020), while the remaining cases were attributed to state armed forces or could not be clearly determined.[9]

Consequently, refugee camps can reasonably be considered high-risk environments for children affected by armed conflicts. This is particularly true for camps located in areas of protracted or "frozen" conflicts or in regions where state institutions lack full territorial control—for example, the Ain Issa camp[10] in northern Syria—where security and institutional protection remain limited.

Under such conditions, non-state armed actors may gain relatively easy access to camp residents, either through direct incursions or through local intermediaries, thereby creating favourable conditions for the recruitment of children into armed groups.

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[8] "Between 2010 and 2024, the global number of displaced children nearly tripled from approximately 17 million to 48.8 million. According to UNHCR data, more than 2.3 million children were born as refugees between 2018 and 2024 alone, which is equivalent to about 337.800 children each year." See: *Child displacement and refugees*. UNICEF Data. https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/.

[9] "In most conflicts, state forces were responsible for approximately or less than 5% of cases, except in Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen (around 15%), South Sudan (36%), and Myanmar (84%)." See: (UNICEF, 2022: 18).

[10] Ain Issa is a camp for internally displaced persons and one of three camps in northeastern Syria where Human Rights Watch documented that the People's Protection Units (YPG) recruited children for military participation. See: (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Mechanisms of Child Recruitment in Refugee Camps

The recruitment of children in refugee camps occurs through various mechanisms that combine coercion, manipulation, and the exploitation of vulnerability. In this context, three dominant recruitment methods can be identified. According to the Paris Principles, the first two may be categorized as forms of conditional voluntary recruitment, while the third represents forced recruitment.

One of the most common mechanisms is economic coercion. In conditions typical of refugee camps—poverty, hunger, limited access to education, and general instability—armed groups often offer material incentives such as food, money, protection, status, or a sense of belonging. For minors from socially disintegrated families, such offers may appear to represent the only viable alternative. In this sense, recruitment is not always directly violent but is often conditioned by the absence of real choice (BRETT & SPECHT, 2004; BEBER & BLATTMAN, 2013). For example, in an interview given by the mother of a thirteen-year-old girl who voluntarily joined the Kurdish armed group YPG in Syria, she stated: "We are poor, so they told my daughter they would give her money and clothes." (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Another mechanism involves ideological indoctrination. Camps located near conflict zones or under the influence of radical groups may become spaces where extremist narratives spread. Children already experiencing psychological trauma and identity loss due to displacement may be particularly susceptible to messages offering belonging, purpose, and revenge. As Noor (2016, 2991) observed, the phrase "Allah has chosen you" became one of the most recognizable recruitment messages during the Syrian civil war. The process of radicalization often unfolds gradually through informal educational activities, religious or political propaganda, and peer influence (WESSELLS, 2006).

A third form of recruitment involves direct coercion and the forced removal of children from camps. In conditions of weak security control, armed groups may physically enter camps or operate through local intermediaries. Achvarina and Reich (2006, 140), in one of the earliest studies addressing the recruitment of displaced children, pointed out that refugee camps often lack physical barriers such as walls or fences, making it relatively easy for armed actors to infiltrate and recruit children through coercion, including abduction.

Taken together, the mechanisms of child recruitment from refugee camps rely on a combination of structural vulnerability, institutional weakness, and the presence of irregular armed actors. This combination of factors makes refugee camps potentially favourable environments for the militarization of children, with far-reaching consequences for both regional and international security.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of recruiting children for active participation in armed conflicts can no longer be viewed solely as a military issue. Rather, it should primarily be understood as a humanitarian, security, and legal problem that requires a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach. This is particularly evident in the case of recruiting children from refugee camps.

Of particular concern is the fact that these camps, instead of providing protection for children who have already experienced significant trauma, may under certain circumstances become environments of heightened vulnerability. In addition to the difficulties that children living in refugee camps inevitably face—such as separation from parents or family members, poverty, psychological trauma, and disruption of formal education—displaced children are also exposed to structural deficiencies within the camps themselves, particularly in terms of security.

These conditions create an environment in which armed actors, most often non-state groups, can relatively easily gain access to children and recruit them through coercion, manipulation, or ideological indoctrination.

The structural weaknesses of refugee camps cannot be viewed solely as a consequence of the objective circumstances of armed conflicts. Rather, they often reflect limited political will and the practical constraints of host states, on whose territory the camps are located, as well as the insufficient effectiveness of international organizations and international protection mechanisms.

If refugee camps continue to remain spaces characterized by weak security control, limited institutional oversight, and insufficient access to basic living conditions, they will undoubtedly be perceived by armed actors as favourable environments for recruiting children into armed conflicts, as well as for other forms of exploitation.

Therefore, the problem of child recruitment from refugee camps cannot be reduced exclusively to the actions of armed groups. It must also be understood as a consequence of systemic shortcomings in the organization and protection of these humanitarian spaces. Existing practice demonstrates that preventing the recruitment of children into armed conflicts does not depend solely on the prohibitions established under international law. To a significant extent, it also depends on the capacity of the international community and host states to ensure adequate protection within refugee camps.

For this reason, prevention—based primarily on strengthening security within refugee camps, enhancing monitoring by international and national institutions, and ensuring access to social support and education—represents a key element in preventing the involvement of children in armed conflicts.

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EVALUATION OF CONTROL OVER SECRET SERVICES – OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Introduction

In countries that embarked on the path to democratisation following the authoritarian regimes of the 20th century, it became necessary to establish new control mechanisms for national security services that, on the one hand, are consistent with the principle of the separation of powers and, on the other, ensure effective oversight.

In carrying out their duties effectively, the secret services come into conflict with citizens' constitutional rights to the protection of their homes and privacy, and possibly with the interests of other states. It is self-evident that these organisations and their working methods should be regulated at the highest possible constitutional and statutory level, thereby ensuring transparency and operation free from abuse. Based on the principle of the separation of powers, either the legislative or the judicial branch must fulfil the necessary control functions to ensure that the requirements of the rule of law are fully met. The Hungarian National Assembly opted for the former when it declared that parliamentary oversight of the national security services would be exercised by the National Security Committee, which operates as a standing committee within the National Assembly. [1]

By 'control' in the title, we primarily mean external, legal or political oversight, and we distinguish between these; however, in the international context, there are also examples of professional or internal security supervision, which, given the scope of this study, are not the subject of this examination. The subject of a legal audit is the examination of full compliance with the Constitution, legislation and other public law regulatory instruments, whilst under political control the supervisory body primarily examines efficiency (ŐSZE, 2019). Naturally, other state bodies are also entitled to audit national security services; in Hungary, for example, in addition to the aforementioned Committee, the National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information has supervisory powers in matters of data management and data protection, and the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights has such powers in cases where a violation of fundamental

[1] Act XXXVI of 2012 on the National Assembly, Section 16(2)

rights is alleged. It is important to note, however, that these organisations are only able to exercise control in accordance with their own remit.[2]

Different models of oversight

It can generally be observed that in countries where there is a clear separation between military and civilian services, the supreme representative body of the people examines their operations through various committees: civilian services are usually scrutinised by national security committees, whilst military services are examined by defence committees (GULYÁS, 2017). From this perspective, the Military National Security Service is in a special position in Hungary, as both the National Security Committee and the Defence and Law Enforcement Committee exercise oversight over its legality, whereas Hungarian civilian services are controlled only by the former. As in Hungary, the military services are overseen by the defence committee in Albania, Romania, Spain and, for example, Latvia, whilst in Finland, Denmark and, for example, Portugal, they are overseen by the national security committee (JASUTIS, FUIOR, & VASHAKMADZE, 2021). The undoubted advantage of committees with a national security focus is that their oversight is limited to organisations operating within the intelligence sector. This mandate ensures much more effective oversight for elected members, both in terms of resource utilisation and time management. On the other hand, membership of the defence committee provides elected members with a much more complex and broader perspective, since, based on international examples, military services are largely part of a state's armed forces, and personnel performing professional service are part of the army (BÖRCSÖK & VIDA, 2014). Members performing a supervisory role can carry out these tasks with a comprehensive understanding, as they oversee the security sector as a whole.

It is also important to address the composition of the committees. This may be influenced by the form of government of the nation in question, as where the parliament is essentially bicameral, the participation of both the lower and upper houses is essential to ensure stronger legitimacy (NEAL, 2017). Another question is the proportion in which seats are allocated. It can be universally stated that nations with a parliamentary system follow the principle of proportional representation; opposition and minority parties are also represented on the committees, and elected representatives undergo national security vetting (SMUK, 2008). This method of determining the composition naturally has significance in terms of the rule of law and legitimacy, as it ensures that the agencies serve the interests of society rather than the preferences of the party in power. However, there is a difference regarding the person holding the chairmanship: in some countries, these duties are performed by a representative of the political party currently in power, whilst in others only an opposition representative may be

[2] Act CXI of 2011 on the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Section 23(2)

appointed. One example is the Croatian Act on the Security and Intelligence System, which stipulates that the parliamentary committee responsible for national security is chaired by a member of parliament from the ranks of the largest opposition party.[3] The same provision applies in Slovakia.[4] The nine elected members of the German Parliamentary Control Panel oversee six intelligence services, including military counter-intelligence; its composition also consists of Members of Parliament from both the ruling party and the opposition, and the chairmanship rotates annually between opposition and ruling party Members of Parliament.[5]

In Hungary, the chair of the National Security Committee can only ever be an opposition Members of Parliament. To answer the question of whether this increases the effectiveness of oversight, it is worth first looking at the range of additional duties associated with the chairmanship: convening committee meetings, sending out invitations containing the proposed agenda, opening and chairing them, granting the floor to speakers, and announcing the results of votes; however, it should be emphasised that the committee chair votes alongside the committee members, and consequently their vote carries no special weight or additional significance. It follows from this that in Hungary, the chair's powers are purely administrative in nature (ŐSZE, 2019).

Whether we are talking about national security committees or defence committees, in both cases constitutional oversight of the secret services is exercised by a body whose members are Members of Parliament. One clear advantage of this is that representatives elected by the public, who represent a range of values, hold the services to account, thereby ensuring legitimacy and popular representation (MÁRTON, 2013). It is important to note, however, that Members of Parliament do not necessarily possess the intelligence service experience that would enable them to fully understand certain operations or formulate professional criticism; furthermore, they do not necessarily possess the legal knowledge that would allow them to gain a complex, comprehensive picture of how the services operate. It can also be stated with complete certainty that, since elected representatives are primarily individuals engaged in political work in public life, who must participate in plenary debates and party meetings, maintain contact with their constituents, and in many cases are also members of other committees, all of which further reduces the time available for them to engage meaningfully with their duties on the National Security Committee. A further limiting factor for members of parliament in deepening the national security system is that, during periodic elections, a given member may not be re-elected

[3] Security and Intelligence System Act of the Republic of Croatia, Article 105(4)
[4] The Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic dated January 21, 1993 on the Slovak Information Service, Article 5
[5] N.a.: *Supervision and oversight*. verfassungsschutz.de, 2026. (Source: https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/EN/about-us/mission-and-working-methods/supervision-and-oversight/supervision-and-oversight_article.html)

after completing their term of office, and the composition of the committees – in line with the formation of parliament – is subject to constant rotation. In such a heterogeneous committee, political clashes are inevitable, particularly given the diversity of the individual parties. Nor should one overlook the abuse of power, which can occur on the part of both government and opposition representatives; the former may, for example, boycott hearings, whilst the latter may use information that serves purely party-political interests.

To address the shortcomings outlined above, expert oversight bodies have emerged in international practice which are not integrated into the parliamentary system of the country in question; although their members are, of course, elected by parliament, they operate independently of it. They act independently in decision-making, have their own budget and an expert support secretariat, and the officials delegated to them serve the public interest outside parliament; consequently, they are not members of any parliamentary committee, thus enabling them to carry out their supervisory and control functions in a much more focused and effective manner on a continuous basis rather than periodically – their mandates are not affected by periodic elections. Another argument that should not be overlooked is that the organisation's exposure to political interests can also be minimised if individual officials are not delegated from the ranks of political parties. Although the disadvantages listed in the previous paragraph do not apply to this body, one must reckon with a decline in democratic legitimacy, as those holding office are elected by parliament rather than by the electorate (LUKÁCSI, 2019). By way of comparison, I would like to note that the 'outsourcing', so to speak, of audit functions is not unknown to the Hungarian legal system either; consider the State Audit Office, which is the National Assembly's supreme financial and economic audit body and carries out its work under the authority of parliament.[6] To ensure independence, a person who has been a member of the Government in the preceding four years, or who has held an elected leadership position in the national (central) organisation of any party, or who is required to take an oath of office, cannot be nominated as President of the State Audit Office; these are safeguards that reinforce the principle of the rule of law (ŐSZE, 2020).

Norway has established such an independent parliamentary oversight body. The Parliamentary Intelligence Oversight Committee consists of seven members, headed by a chair and a deputy chair, with the supreme legislative body – the Norwegian Storting – having the authority to decide on the appointment of these positions.[7] Members of the committee serve a five-year term and may be re-elected once; efforts must be made to ensure that no more than four members are replaced at any one time. It is worth noting that a person who has previously

[6] Act LXVI of 2011 on the State Audit Office, Section 1(1)
[7] EOS Committee: Annual Report 2023. eos-utvalget.no, 2026 (Source: https://eos-utvalget.no/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EOS-Committee-Annual-Report-2023-web.pdf.pdf)

served in any body falling within the scope of their oversight cannot be appointed as a supervisor. The focus of the audit is primarily legal; their main task is to ensure legality, in accordance with the protection of citizens' civil liberties and the upholding of constitutional principles. The effectiveness and significance of their work is well illustrated by the fact that in 2023 they carried out a total of 25 inspection procedures, which – naturally with strict regard for the protection of classified information – were presented in the annual report, broken down by service. From the above and an analysis of the reports, it can be concluded that Norway places great emphasis on the transparent and lawful operation of its national security services.

Areas for improvement

The transparency of legislation governing the secret services needs to be improved; these laws must be codified and their respective remits clearly defined (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). This recommendation is particularly relevant to military national security services, as in many countries these services have such strong ties to national defence that they are not defined in a separate law. In Hungary, we can see that the Act CXXV of 1995 on the National Security Services (hereafter: Nbtv.). meets these requirements, as its scope extends to both military and civilian services, the delineation of their responsibilities is clearly defined, and it contains codified provisions regarding their management and supervision, as well as the measures that may be implemented by the services.

Access to information must be facilitated for the committees carrying out the oversight (Parliamentary Resolution No. 10/2014 (24 February)). This recommendation may stem from the fact that the remit of committees in certain states tends to lean in one direction or the other between effective oversight and the principle of the services' secrecy; by this I mean that effective oversight can only be achieved with access to information, yet not all information of a national security nature falls within the committee's remit. Striking a balance in this regard is a very difficult task. In light of the above, the Hungarian committee also faces difficulties in certain matters, despite the fact that the representatives carrying out the oversight have undergone national security vetting and have also taken an oath to safeguard classified information – the breach of which may entail criminal liability.

The expertise of committee members must be enhanced, both in legal and national security terms (JASUTIS, FUIOR, & VASHAKMADZE, 2021). It goes without saying that effective oversight can only be exercised with the appropriate legal knowledge and expertise. In many cases, it is evident that Members of Parliament are unfamiliar with the operational mechanisms of the national security services, which can lead to a kind of asymmetry. They must be aware of the scope of fundamental rights, the tools available to the services and their legal status, and

they must understand the various branches of intelligence and operational methods, but they do not always have sufficient time for this.

Review of the legal framework governing the procedures available to oversight committees (JASUTIS, FUIOR, & VASHAKMADZE, 2021). In my view, the Hungarian legislature was correct to include these provisions in the Nbtv. In other countries, the procedures of the committees are defined by framework regulations which do not specifically assign different procedures to different committees but rather set out powers in general terms. However, a criticism that can be levelled at the Hungarian legal framework is that provisions concerning the Committee itself are contained not only in the Nbtv. but also in the Act XXXVI of 2012 on the National Assembly (hereafter: Ogytv.). It would be advisable, for example, to define within the framework of the Ogytv. that the committee in question is a standing committee, as the law currently states, whilst the detailed rules concerning the Committee (for example, that it is chaired by the current opposition representative) would be transferred in their entirety to the Nbtv. A further direction for development could be the strengthening of the chair's position, as currently has no authority over any additional functions beyond the administrative powers already referred to.

Organising joint meetings and supervisory activities (JASUTIS, FUIOR, & VASHAKMADZE, 2021). On this point, the authors of the study present their otherwise welcome proposal that, although we generally understand control functions to refer primarily to the work of parliamentary committees, other actors should also actively scrutinise the operation of the services. These bodies could organise joint meetings on the subject, consult with one another, and initiate a form of discussion that might even involve an exchange of experiences within the framework of a consultative forum. In Hungary, it would be conceivable to establish a joint forum in which the National Security Committee, the Defence and Law Enforcement Committee, the National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information, and the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights could participate.[8]

Conclusion

We will not find a supervisory committee that is beyond criticism and performs its duties with maximum effectiveness in every situation. It is clear that every control model has its advantages and disadvantages; it is a matter of legal policy and constitutional history how these conditions develop in a given country, what the national traditions are, what society's demand for accountability is, and to what extent the government in power endeavours to meet these demands.
Analysing the domestic regulatory environment in the course of the study, it can be concluded that although the Hungarian audit system is open to improvement,

[8] Act CXI of 2011 on the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Section 23(2)

if we proceed purely from the principles of the separation of powers and parliamentarism, the legal system contains adequate checks and balances.

In my view, having weighed up the pros and cons, the legislature must adapt to international trends, the volatile geopolitical environment, the threat landscape, and social, economic and technological changes, and should consider establishing an independent body which – whilst leaving the political oversight function with the legislature – is directly accountable to the National Assembly and is capable of carrying out independent, comprehensive and effective oversight whilst safeguarding national security interests. Its members would be directly elected by parliament, and during their five-year term their main task would be to conduct legal and operational oversight of the national security services. It would be desirable to elect legal, economic or national security experts who, thanks to their expertise, could carry out genuine, effective and continuous oversight of the services' activities, naturally following a national security vetting process. Conflict-of-interest rules could also be established to provide further safeguards; for example, members could not belong to a political party, and thus could not engage in public life, nor could they hold interests in commercial companies; they might even be protected by the parliamentary immunity enjoyed by Members of Parliament. A five-year term would ensure that they are free from political realignments, although their legitimacy would suffer. It would report annually to the National Assembly and, through open reports, bring the secret services closer to the public, fostering a sense of trust within society, which is of paramount importance in countries with an unfortunate historical trajectory. A separate law, possibly requiring a two-thirds majority, could regulate their legal status, and this body could be called the National Security Supervisory Committee.

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FIFTEEN YEARS OF CRIMINALISING PARTICIPATION IN AN ORGANISED CRIMINAL GROUP: EVIDENCE FROM CZECH JUDICIAL PRACTICE (2010–2024)

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Organised Crime as a Security and Criminological Phenomenon

There are few phenomena to which legal theorists, criminologists, international organisations, legislators, politicians, the public, and the media devote as much attention as organised crime (TEJNSKÁ, 2021). Organised crime has long constituted a significant security threat, perceived not only by experts but also by the broader public. This threat is likewise reflected in the assessments of national security institutions (e.g., the Security Information Service of the Czech Republic, the Prison Service of the Czech Republic) and in key strategic documents of the Czech Republic, including the current Security Strategy of the Czech Republic adopted in 2023 (SMOLIK, 2025; Ministerstvo zahranicnich věcí Ceske Republiky, 2023). The reasons for the extensive interest in this issue lie in the harmful consequences associated with organised crime, namely:

a) direct and indirect threats to life and health (e.g., murder, extortion, environmental damage, and the distribution of harmful substances and goods);
b) substantial pecuniary and non-pecuniary harm resulting from the activities of criminal groups (in the form of tax evasion, property damage suffered by victims of banking fraud and cyberattacks, as well as the financial resources that individual states must allocate to combat organised crime and to remedy the consequences of organised criminal activity);
c) the disruption of the proper functioning of lawful markets, as organised structures also penetrate legitimate markets for the purpose of laundering so-called "dirty money" and obtaining further resources to finance their principal profit-generating activities. The considerable volume of financial resources with which they enter legal markets, combined with illicit

practices (e.g., price dumping, elimination of competitors, racketeering), leads to market monopolisation and distorts fair competition;

d) the infiltration of organised crime into state structures, for example through the corruption of public officials, with the aim of creating more favourable conditions for the continued activities of criminal groups (e.g., the issuance of permits for illegal enterprises, the adoption of legislative amendments influenced by lobbying from criminal structures) and preserving their covert nature (e.g., bribing officials to refrain from reporting or prosecuting criminal activity);

e) the emergence of a so-called parallel society formed by criminal structures, operating independently of and beyond the control of state authorities and irrespective of legal norms. By virtue of the substantial financial resources at their disposal, such structures acquire social power and contribute to the destabilisation of state authority (TEJNSKÁ, 2021).

In a recent public opinion survey, 60% of respondents identified organised crime as a major threat, alongside terrorist groups and war (CVVM, 2025). Comparable findings are reflected in earlier data (CVVM 2023, 2007). In the academic literature, organised crime is likewise characterised as one of the most significant global problems threatening societal stability (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005) and as a non-military security threat (EICHLER, 2002).

Organised crime is marked by a high degree of adaptability and a capacity to exploit modern technologies and organisational principles, while disregarding both legal and moral constraints, thereby enabling it to accumulate economic and subsequently political power (MUSIL, 1999; Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky, 2023). It typically possesses extensive financial resources, technical infrastructure, and a willingness to employ violence (Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České Republiky, 2023; CEJP, 1999). At the same time, its empirical conceptualisation remains challenging, and it has therefore sometimes been described as a phenomenon oscillating between "myth and reality"(KAISER, 1994).

A further characteristic of organised crime is its latency, which denotes a substantial discrepancy between its actual scope and the extent captured by official crime statistics. A significant proportion of activities remains concealed, not only as a result of sophisticated conspiratorial practices and the internal discipline of criminal structures, but also due to the intimidation of victims and witnesses or their own involvement in illicit activities. Organised crime frequently operates in spheres where the legal and illegal economies intersect, which further complicates its identification and detection. Latency is reinforced by corrupt practices and by the ability of such structures to penetrate public administration and the business environment, thereby establishing protective mechanisms against criminal prosecution. Consequently, law enforcement authorities possess only fragmentary information regarding the true scale and forms of organised crime. This reality complicates not only repressive interventions but also the

formulation of effective preventive strategies, as decision-making is based on an incomplete representation of the phenomenon under examination.

Definitional Approaches

There is no universally accepted definition of organised crime, as different states and institutions conceptualise it in divergent ways (NOŽINA, 2003; TEJNSKÁ, 2021). Nevertheless, certain common features may be identified. Organised crime is generally understood as the coordinated activity of three or more persons who cooperate over a prolonged period with the aim of obtaining profit or power through violence, intimidation, or corruption, while simultaneously penetrating the legal economy (ADAMOLI, 1999; NOŽINA, 1997, 2003; KOLEKTIV UČITELŮ INSTITUTU VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ VS ČR, 2003).

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime defines it as a structured group existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing serious offences in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit. Similarly, the European Commission and the Council of Europe identify core defining features such as the long-term cooperation of multiple individuals, engagement in serious criminal activity, and an orientation towards profit or power (ADAMOLI, 1999; ELVINS, 2004). Organised crime may be defined from two distinct perspectives: first, with reference to the subject of organised crime (subject-based definitions), and second, with reference to the criminal activities perpetrated by organised criminal groups (TEJNSKÁ, 2021).

In Czech criminology, a working definition is employed according to which organised crime consists of the systematic and coordinated commission of serious criminal offences by criminal groups with the objective of maximising illegal profit while minimising risk through contacts within societal structures (CEJP, 1999, 2004; SCHEINOST, 2014). Organised crime thus represents rather a "process" or method of committing crime than a specific type of offender (ADAMOLI, 1999).

Characteristics and Structure of Organised Crime

The key characteristics of organised crime are generally considered to include:

- long-term cooperation among multiple individuals with a division of roles (CEJP, 2004)
- a profit-oriented focus and systematic nature of activities (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005),
- organisational continuity extending beyond individual members (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005),
- professionalism, internal discipline, and conspiratorial practices (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005),

- the use of violence or the threat thereof as a means of control (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005),
- money laundering and infiltration into the legal economy (BALOUN, 1999; (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005),
- penetration into political and economic structures (NOŽINA, 1997, 2003),
- international scope and the globalisation of activities (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005).

Organised crime is frequently likened to a form of enterprise: it operates on the basis of supply and demand and reinvests its profits into further activities, thereby constituting a "crime industry" (NOŽINA, 1997, 2003). At the same time, it differs from terrorism primarily in terms of motivation: whereas terrorism pursues ideological objectives, organised crime is primarily oriented towards economic gain (CEJP, 1999; MAREŠ, 2005).

Criminology distinguishes between several levels of group criminality, ranging from ad hoc or opportunistic groups to fully developed criminal organisations or syndicates (KAISER, 1994; KOLEKTIV UČITELŮ INSTITUTU VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ VS ČR 2003). In terms of territorial scope, organised crime may be categorised as domestic, transnational, or global (ADAMOLI, 1999). With regard to organisational structure, a distinction is drawn between mafia-type structures based on personal ties and managerial–entrepreneurial structures employing sophisticated operational methods (SCHEINOST, 1997).

These characteristics demonstrate that organised crime cannot be reduced to a mere association of offenders engaged in serious criminal activity; rather, it constitutes a complex and adaptive social phenomenon with its own internal structure, rules, and survival strategies. Its capacity to combine elements of illicit activity with mechanisms typical of legitimate business, to exploit processes of globalisation, and simultaneously to penetrate public and economic structures renders it a specific form of criminality that undermines not only the legal order but also the fundamental principles of fair competition and democratic governance. It is precisely this multi-layered character and its capacity for long-term reproduction that explain why organised crime is regarded as one of the most serious security threats facing contemporary societies.

Societal Impacts and Development

Research into organised crime is burdened by fundamental methodological limitations. Direct empirical inquiry is virtually impossible, as the relevant environment is inherently conspiratorial and systematically concealed (CEJP, 2004). Criminologists are therefore reliant on indirect sources, such as official statistics, documentary materials, expert assessments, and investigative journalism (CEJP, 1999; KROUPA & ČECH, 2011). Consequently, research findings are

predominantly exploratory and descriptive in nature, and the scope for generalisation remains limited.

Notwithstanding these research constraints, organised crime entails significant political, economic, and societal consequences. Its manifestations, particularly acts of violence, heighten public perceptions of insecurity and erode trust in institutions, including the police, the judiciary, intelligence services, and the broader political and social system (CEJP, 1999). Such distrust may foster support for populist or extremist solutions and weaken democratic mechanisms. Direct threats also extend to politicians, security professionals, investigative journalists and their family members, as well as entrepreneurs who are not connected to organised crime or who actively oppose it (e.g., witnesses).

The economic repercussions include increasing costs of prevention, the destabilisation of the economic environment, the distortion of fair business practices, and the deterrence of foreign investment (CEJP, 1999). The most serious risk lies in the infiltration of organised crime into public administration, local government, business, and politics, thereby creating opaque and resilient networks with the potential to undermine state development (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005).

Organised structures are undergoing processes of professionalisation and decentralisation, making extensive use of information technologies and expanding into new, less risky activities, including the penetration of "grey" markets and foreign territories (ADAMOLI, 1999). There is a gradual transformation towards networks of independently cooperating cells, which enhances organisational resilience and adaptability. Organised crime thus constitutes a long-term, dynamic, and adaptive phenomenon with a substantial impact on state stability, economic systems, democratic structures, and societal values (Kolektiv učitelů Institutu vzdělávání VS ČR, 2003; CEJP, 1999).

Factors facilitating the growth of organised crime include both external and internal political and economic conditions, prevailing moral standards, the quality of public administration, standards of living, levels of education, and the social structure of the population, as well as the character and value orientations of offenders (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005; NĚMEC, 1995). Criminogenic influences encompass, inter alia, irregular migration, societal liberalisation, the internationalisation of economic and social relations, the abolition of border controls, and the reluctance of state authorities to confront organised criminal groups effectively (SMOLÍK, 2010).

The Legal Framework of Organised Crime in Czech Law

In Czech law, organised crime is primarily addressed in Section 361 of the Criminal Code (participation in an organised criminal group) (SCHEINOST, 2014). The offence of participation in an organised criminal group (Section 361 of the Criminal Code) criminalises the very existence of such a group as well as any

conduct facilitating its operation, including its establishment, participation in its activities, and support thereof. The offence is completed at the moment the group is established, an individual joins its activities, or support is provided.

The establishment of an organised criminal group requires the concerted action of at least three criminally responsible persons and, in material terms, entails the creation of an organisational structure, a division of roles, and a sustained objective of committing criminal offences. Participation in the group's activities consists of continuous or repeated conduct contributing to its functioning, including supportive or service activities; it suffices that the offender, through such participation, facilitates the existence or activities of the group, irrespective of whether the group derives direct benefit. Support encompasses conduct carried out for the benefit of the group that does not meet the criteria of establishment or participation.

An offender may act either as a member of the group ("internal") or as an external collaborator ("extraneous"), with differing requirements as to the duration and nature of involvement. Neither the specific objective pursued by the offender nor the concrete criminal offence intended is decisive; the essential element is the conscious affiliation with an organised criminal structure.

An offender convicted under Section 361 may be sentenced to imprisonment for a term of two to ten years or to forfeiture of property. Where the offence is committed by a person acting as a leader or representative of the group, a more severe penalty applies, namely imprisonment for a term of three to twelve years or forfeiture of property. The provision thus penalises not only membership but also leadership and organisational management of a criminal group.

Methods

For the purposes of this study, a combination of two complementary data sources was employed in order to enable a comprehensive analysis of the practical application of the offence of participation in an organised criminal group under Section 361 of the Criminal Code in the Czech Republic.

To analyse developments in criminal proceedings, prosecutions, and convictions, data were drawn from the statistical reports of the Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic (CSLAV – criminal statistical sheets for natural persons). The analysis focused exclusively on the offence defined in Section 361 of the Criminal Code – participation in an organised criminal group.

The analysis covered the period 2010–2024. The starting point of 1 January 2010 reflects the entry into force of the new Criminal Code (Act No. 40/2009 Coll.); earlier data would not be comparable in terms of the structure of the offence or the sanctioning framework. The available data were systematically organised into time series and converted into tabular form to facilitate the identification of developmental trends.

The principal analytical procedures comprised:

1. Descriptive statistical overview – monitoring the number of cases concluded, the number of prosecuted persons, the number of convicted persons, and the structure of penalties imposed under Section 361.
2. Trend analysis – identifying the dynamics of prosecutions and convictions over time, including fluctuations after 2019.
3. Analysis of procedural measures – evaluating the use of pre-trial detention and its duration as indicators of the seriousness and evidentiary complexity of proceedings.
4. Analysis of sentencing policy – examining the structure of imposed sanctions (custodial sentences, both suspended and unsuspended, pecuniary penalties, and property sanctions) and their evolution over time.

This approach makes it possible to quantify not only the volume of judicial decision-making but also the character of the state's repressive response to participation in organised crime.

The second data source consisted of statistical records from the Police of the Czech Republic, drawn from the Crime Statistical Recording System (ESSK), specifically from the criminal statistical classification corresponding to Section 361 (TSK 786). This internal dataset enables analysis of the detection phase of criminality, including the number of recorded offences, clearance rates, and offender characteristics.

These data were analysed for the period 2010–2025, with particular attention paid to a methodological discontinuity in 2016. From that year onwards, the ESSK began recording all criminal offences committed by an offender irrespective of the order of seriousness of the principal offence and simultaneously altered the method for determining the offender's age. Data from before and after 2016 are therefore not fully comparable and were interpreted with due regard to this discontinuity.

The analytical procedure included:

- monitoring the number of registered and cleared offences;
- analysing clearance rates over time;
- examining the structure of prosecuted persons (natural/legal persons, sex, nationality, recidivism);
- comparing these findings with developments in judicial case processing.

While CSLAV captures the judicial outcome (court decisions), ESSK reflects the criminological reality of detected crime. By combining both datasets, it is possible to examine the entire procedural chain under Section 361 – from the detection of an organised criminal group by the police, through prosecution, to final conviction and the type of sentence imposed. Such an approach enables the identification not only of the scale of criminality but also of the effectiveness of

criminal policy and the practical functioning of an offence designed preventively to sanction participation in an organised criminal structure as such.

Results

Table 1 presents the year-on-year development of recorded and cleared offences in the Czech Republic between 2010 and 2025 in relation to the offence of participation in an organised criminal group under Section 361 of the Criminal Code (TSK 786), including the structure of prosecuted persons. The data permit an analysis both of the dynamics of recorded offences and of investigative effectiveness, as well as of the personal profile of prosecuted offenders. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account methodological discontinuities arising from the reconstruction of the statistical system in 2016 and from the legislative amendment adopted in 2020. The reconstruction of the statistical system in 2016 precludes direct comparison of the number of prosecuted persons before and after that year. The legislative amendment of October 2020, which doubled the thresholds for damage and illicit gain in criminal offences, renders the periods before and after 2020 difficult to compare, particularly in the context of property and economic crime.

The number of recorded offences remained relatively low in the years 2010–2013 (4–9 offences annually), with a marked fluctuation in 2014 (31 offences). A subsequent decline occurred between 2015 and 2018; however, from 2019 onwards, a renewed increase is observable, culminating in 2023 (32 offences). In the final two years under review (2024–2025), a decrease is recorded to 22 and 12 offences respectively.

The clearance rate of recorded offences (excluding subsequently cleared cases) fluctuates within a broad range of 50–100%. The highest clearance rate was achieved in 2015 (100%), with comparatively high values also in 2014 (83.9%) and 2020 (77.8%). By contrast, the lowest levels (50%) were recorded in 2021, 2022, and 2025. In the long term, clearance rates predominantly range between 55% and 80%, which, for an offence typically associated with latent and structurally organised criminality, represents a relatively high level of procedural effectiveness. Subsequently cleared offences constitute a marginal share in most years (0–2 cases annually). However, in 2023 and 2024 they reached higher levels (5 cases), significantly increasing the overall number of cleared offences (22 in 2023 and 18 in 2024).

The number of prosecuted persons exhibits considerably greater volatility than the number of offences. In the period 2010–2015, figures ranged between 1 and 26 persons annually. In 2016, however, a dramatic increase to 73 persons occurred, attributable to the reconstruction of the statistical system, which renders direct year-on-year comparison before and after 2016 methodologically problematic. Further significant peaks are evident in 2020 (143 persons) and

subsequently in 2023 (117) and 2024 (107). In 2025, the number declined to 80 prosecuted persons.

A specific feature concerns the development in the prosecution of legal persons. Prior to 2014, their number was zero. From 2014 onwards, however, such cases appear (6 cases), reaching their highest level in 2025 (20 cases). This may reflect the gradual application of corporate criminal liability in the sphere of organised crime.

Natural persons constitute the overwhelming majority of prosecuted individuals. With regard to gender structure, men predominate over the long term; nonetheless, the proportion of women is relatively significant in certain years (e.g., 2013 – 9 women out of 17 persons; 2019 – 32 out of 95; 2024 – 37 out of 107; 2025 – 21 out of 80). This may indicate broader female involvement in organised criminal structures or a transformation of roles within such groups.

The number of repeat offenders remains low in most years (0–7 persons), with the exception of 2019 (15 persons) and 2025 (11 persons). This may signal a higher proportion of individuals with prior criminal records during certain periods of intensified enforcement against organised crime.

In terms of nationality, Czech nationals predominate, with particularly marked increases in 2016 (68 persons), 2020 (119 persons), and 2023–2024 (74–77 persons). Nevertheless, the number of prosecuted foreign nationals is not negligible and reaches significant levels in certain years (e.g., 2017= 20 persons; 2020= 22 persons; 2023= 30 persons). This finding confirms the international dimension of organised crime.

Criminality consisting in participation in an organised criminal group displays pronounced fluctuation during the analysed period, with several distinct peaks (2014, 2019–2020, 2023). Clearance rates are relatively stable and comparatively high, indicating a systematic approach by law enforcement authorities. After 2016, there is an increase in the number of prosecuted persons, including legal entities, and in certain years a higher proportion of women and foreign nationals is observed. These trends may reflect both structural changes within organised crime and shifts in state enforcement strategies, as well as modifications in statistical methodology.

Table 1. Development of recorded and cleared offences and the structure of prosecuted persons under Section 361 of the Criminal Code according to police statistics (2010–2025).

CZECH REPUBLIC
Year-on-year comparison for the period 1 January – 31 December
TSK 786 – Participation in an Organised Criminal Group (Section 361 of the Criminal Code)

Item /year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016[1)]	2017	2018	2019	2020[4)]	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Recorded offences	4	6	9	5	31	9	11	5	9	24	18	22	22	32	22	12
Cleared offences (from recorded ,excl. subsequently cleared)	3	4	5	4	26	9	6	4	6	14	14	11	11	17	13	6
Clearance rate (%)	75	66,7	55,6	80	83,9	100	54,5	80	66,7	58,3	77,8	50	50	53,1	59,1	50
Subsequently cleared offences	0	1	0	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	5	5	2
Total cleared offences	3	5	5	5	27	11	8	5	7	16	15	13	12	22	18	8
Prosecuted persons[1)]	4	5	1	17	25	26	73	42	64	95	143	44	49	117	107	80
Legal persons prosecuted	0	0	0	0	6	13	0	14	3	5	2	5	5	13	9	20
Natural persons prosecuted	4	5	1	17	19	13	73	28	61	90	141	39	44	104	98	60
Men	4	1	1	8	15	9	59	27	48	58	107	36	37	87	61	39
Women	0	4	0	9	4	4	14	1	13	32	34	3	7	17	37	21
Repeat offenders among prosecuted persons	3	0	0	2	0	1	3	3	7	15	5	3	2	10	1	11
Foreign nationals prosecuted	0	3	1	10	11	3	5	20	2	10	22	10	8	30	21	15
Czech nationals prosecuted	4	2	0	7	8	10	68	8	59	80	119	29	36	74	77	45

[1)] The numbers of all categories of prosecuted persons before and after 2016 are not comparable due to the reconstruction of the statistical system in 2016.
[2)] The item is not the sum of cleared offences committed by juveniles and young offenders, as a single offence may have been committed by persons from both age categories and would therefore be counted twice in the aggregate
[3)] Owing to the reconstruction of the statistical system in 2016, the numbers of prosecuted persons under 18 years of age from 2016 onwards are not the sum of juveniles and young offenders, since an individual may commit different offences at the threshold between juvenile and young offender status and may therefore be recorded in both age categories. Individual age categories are not comparable with previous periods.
[4)] In October 2020, the legislature doubled the statutory thresholds for damage and illicit gain in criminal offences. This amendment particularly affected property and economic offences (and aggregate categories including them). Consequently, the year 2020 and the periods before and after it are not directly comparable.

Table 2 presents the outputs of the judicial phase of criminal proceedings in respect of the offence of participation in an organised criminal group (Section 361) for the period 2010–2024. In contrast to police statistics, which primarily

reflect recorded crime and clearance rates, these data capture the procedural handling of cases by public prosecutors and courts, that is, the scope of adjudicative activity, the extent of criminal prosecution, and the intensity of interference with personal liberty (pre-trial detention).

The number of cases concluded against persons displays a long-term fluctuating trend with several pronounced peaks. In the initial period (2010–2016), figures generally ranged between 28 and 42 persons annually, with a minimum in 2016 (28). A marked increase followed: 54 persons in 2017, 82 in 2018, and 79 in 2019. A further culmination occurred in 2021 (104 persons), followed by a decline in 2022 (42), a renewed increase in 2023 (82), and a slight decrease in 2024 (77).

The number of offences concluded is virtually identical to the number of persons processed, which corresponds to the nature of this offence: typically, one act is attributed to one individual within an organisational structure, rather than involving an extensive series of partial acts. By contrast, in certain years the total number of offences is higher (e.g., 98 in 2018; 136 in 2021), indicating that in some cases courts addressed multiple offences within a single set of proceedings or instances of concurrent offences.

Discontinuation of proceedings outside shortened preparatory proceedings is practically negligible, occurring only in 2012 (4 cases), 2021 (1 case), and 2023 (1 case). This suggests that once a case in this category reaches the judicial stage, it is generally brought to a decision on guilt and sentence. In other words, case selection primarily takes place during the investigative phase conducted by the police and the public prosecutor.

The number of persons against whom criminal prosecution was conducted closely mirrors the number of persons whose cases were concluded. This confirms a low level of procedural filtering at later stages of the proceedings: the courts function primarily as bodies delivering decisions on the merits rather than as an additional filtering mechanism.

A particularly significant indicator is the number of persons remanded in custody. For this offence, the figure is exceptionally high, ranging between 9 and 39 persons annually and frequently constituting a substantial proportion of those prosecuted. This confirms that participation in an organised criminal group is systematically assessed by courts as an offence associated with a high risk of absconding, continuation of criminal activity, or interference with witnesses.

The structure of the duration of pre-trial detention exhibits features typical of serious and organisationally structured criminality. Short-term detention of up to two months occurs only sporadically (generally 0–5 persons annually) and may be regarded as an exceptional procedural instrument used in limited circumstances. Medium-term detention of two to four months is somewhat more frequent (approximately 1–10 persons annually), likely serving to secure essential procedural acts, such as interrogations, expert evidence, or measures of international legal cooperation. Longer detention of four to eight months is

consistently represented (usually 2–9 persons annually), indicating greater evidentiary and organisational complexity. However, in most observed years the dominant category is very long detention lasting eight to twelve months. This category reached, for example, 24 persons in 2011, 22 in 2012, 13 in 2018, and 18 in 2024. The predominance of this category confirms the high procedural complexity of the cases concerned, as dismantling the structure of an organised criminal group typically requires extensive operational intelligence, financial analysis, and often intensive international judicial cooperation.

Table 2. Processing of criminal cases and use of pre-trial detention under Section 361 of the Criminal Code according to judicial statistics (2010–2024).

Indicator /year		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Cases concluded against persons		11	42	41	28	41	32	28	54	82	79	64	104	42	82	77
Offences concluded		11	42	41	28	41	32	28	55	82	79	64	104	42	82	77
Total number of offences		11	42	41	29	41	32	28	55	98	79	64	136	44	85	77
Discontinued (outside shortened preparatory proceedings)		0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Persons prosecuted		11	42	37	28	41	32	28	54	82	79	64	103	42	81	77
Persons remanded in custody		3	30	28	16	15	20	9	22	22	9	14	17	23	21	39
	Up to 2 months	0	0	0	1	0	4	0	5	0	1	5	1	8	1	2
	2 to 4 months	2	1	4	3	1	8	4	5	6	2	3	7	3	7	10
	4 to 8 months	0	5	2	1	2	3	5	5	3	3	3	2	5	6	9
	8 to 12 months	1	24	22	11	12	5	0	7	13	3	3	7	7	7	18

Table 3, based on judicial statistics, captures the development of final convictions for the offence of participation in an organised criminal group in the period 2011–2024, including the structure of imposed sanctions. The data reveal pronounced dynamics both in the number of convicted offences and in the number of convicted persons.

In the period 2011–2016, the figures are relatively low and fluctuating (e.g., 1 convicted offence in 2011, none in 2012, 12 in 2013, 25 in 2014), while in 2016 no person was convicted. From 2017 onwards, a gradual acceleration is observable, culminating in the years 2020–2024. A particularly marked increase occurred in 2020 (49 convicted offences, 37 convicted persons), followed by further growth in 2023 (59 offences, 46 persons) and 2024 (65 offences, 56 persons), representing the highest values in the observed period.

With regard to the structure of sanctions, custodial sentences clearly predominate. Unsuspended terms of imprisonment constitute the principal penal response in most years (e.g., 10 out of 12 persons in 2013, 14 out of 18 in 2014, 18 out of 37 in 2020, and 26 out of 56 in 2024). This confirms that courts assess this offence as highly socially harmful and requiring the effective enforcement of punishment.

Suspended custodial sentences are applied selectively, particularly in years with a higher number of convicted persons (e.g., 17 cases in 2020, 15 in 2022, 24 in 2024), which may reflect differences in the hierarchical position of individual members within the organisational structure or a lower degree of participation.

Financial penalties remained entirely marginal for a prolonged period and appear only from 2022 (2 cases), with a significant increase in 2023 (19 cases), followed by a decline in 2024 (3 cases). This development may indicate a greater emphasis on the property-related dimension of criminal repression and on the combination of sanctioning instruments. Forfeiture of property or other assets is recorded only in 2024 (1 case), suggesting that this instrument has thus far been used only to a limited extent in relation to this offence.

Table 3. Final convictions and structure of imposed sentences under Section 361 of the Criminal Code (2011–2024).

Indicator/year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of convicted offences	1	0	12	25	9	3	8	10	2	49	40	39	59	65
Convicted persons	1	0	12	18	9	0	4	8	0	37	29	32	46	56
Unsuspended custodial sentences	0	0	10	14	9	0	4	7	0	18	15	15	19	26
Suspended custodial sentences	1	0	2	4	0	0	0	1	0	17	12	15	8	24
Financial penalty / pecuniary measure	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	19	3
Forfeiture of property or other asset	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

The marked increase in final convictions after 2020 may be interpreted within a broader societal and technological context. One possible explanation lies in the intensive shift of communication and social interaction into the online environment, accelerated particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The digitalisation of the public sphere not only increased the frequency of potentially unlawful conduct but also enhanced its traceability, archiving capacity, and evidential usability. Law enforcement authorities may thus have been able to monitor and document conduct occurring in cyberspace more effectively, which could have translated into a higher number of initiated prosecutions and subsequent convictions.

At the same time, potential changes in judicial practice and the priorities of national criminal policy cannot be overlooked. The increase in recorded cases may reflect not only a genuine rise in criminal activity but also a more intensive focus by repressive authorities on this specific type of offence, or methodological harmonisation in its legal qualification. The broader security and geopolitical context after 2022 may likewise have heightened the sensitivity of state authorities to certain forms of unlawful conduct. The development in the imposition of financial penalties may indicate a trend towards greater individualisation of

sanctions and more frequent use of alternative penalties alongside traditional custodial sentences.

Conclusion

The analysis of data from 2010–2025 demonstrates that criminality associated with participation in an organised criminal group in the Czech Republic is markedly dynamic, with recurring fluctuations in recorded cases, prosecutions, and convictions. From a security and criminological perspective, several fundamental conclusions with deeper interpretative implications may be drawn:

1. The latent and adaptive nature of organised crime

Fluctuations in the number of recorded offences and prosecuted persons confirm that organised crime constitutes a highly adaptive phenomenon. Peaks in 2014, 2019–2020, and 2023 may reflect both genuine changes in the activity of criminal structures and the impact of state enforcement strategies or changes in statistical methodologies (reconstruction of the statistical system in 2016; legislative amendment in 2020). This pattern supports the interpretation that organised crime operates as a dynamic network of independently cooperating cells capable of flexibly adapting to repressive pressure, legislative change, and economic opportunities (ADAMOLI, 1999).

2. Effectiveness of repressive mechanisms

Clearance rates, ranging in most years between 55% and 80%, indicate relatively high effectiveness of law enforcement authorities in the context of latent and structurally complex criminality. Notably, a proportion of cases consists of subsequently cleared offences, suggesting the capacity of police and prosecutors to respond operatively to information retrospectively revealing group structures. The high number of persons remanded in custody and the predominance of long-term detention (eight to twelve months) further confirm that courts systematically assess participation in an organised criminal group as a high-risk offence requiring intensive procedural supervision.

3. Transformation of offender structure

The data indicate a changing demographic composition of prosecuted persons. The increasing proportion of women and foreign nationals suggests that organised groups may be diversifying their membership base, possibly to enhance operational flexibility and conceal identity. The inclusion of legal persons from 2014 onwards reflects the expansion of organised crime into the legal economy and the business environment, thereby increasing its capacity to penetrate public administration and public structures (KUCHTA & VÁLKOVÁ, 2005).

4. Sentencing policy and its interpretation

Analysis of the judicial phase demonstrates that unsuspended custodial sentences constitute the dominant instrument, often combined with suspended sentences. This approach indicates judicial differentiation between principal actors within organisational structures and peripheral participants, corresponding to theoretical models of decentralised and cellular organised crime structures. The significant increase in financial penalties in recent years may be interpreted as an attempt by the state not only to punish but also to disincentivise the economic gains derived from criminal activity, thereby responding to increasingly sophisticated infiltration of organised crime into the legal economy.

5. Societal and security implications

The latent character and adaptability of organised crime enhance its potential to destabilise the political and economic environment, as suggested in theoretical literature (CEJP, 1999; Kolektiv učitelů Institutu vzdělávání VS ČR, 2003). The growing involvement of legal persons and foreign nationals' points to the globalisation and internationalisation of criminal activity, reinforcing the necessity of international cooperation. At the same time, the findings confirm that insufficient preventive and repressive capacities may lead to recurring fluctuations in criminal activity and to the consolidation of criminal networks.

6. Long-term perspective and state adaptation

The development of statistical data and judicial measures suggests that the state is capable of partially responding to organisational and operational transformations of organised crime; however, such responses are often retrospective. The state tends to function as a "follower of trends" rather than as a preventive actor capable of disrupting the emergence and consolidation of cellular structures at an early stage. This confirms that organised crime is a long-term adaptive phenomenon whose complete elimination is unrealistic; state interventions are more effective in reducing harm and maintaining control than in eradicating the threat entirely.

The findings indicate that organised crime in the Czech Republic operates as a complex, adaptive, and partially decentralised network reacting to legislative, economic, and enforcement conditions. Its latent character, evolving offender structure, and penetration into the legal sphere increase the difficulty of empirical detection and repressive control. State interventions are targeted and relatively effective, particularly with respect to prosecuting principal actors; however, systemic prevention and the early disruption of cellular structures remain a challenge. Interpretation of these trends underscores the long-term necessity of combining repressive, preventive, and economic measures, including international cooperation, in order to mitigate the destabilising effects of organised crime on the state and society.

For the prevention of organised crime, the integrity of public life is of paramount importance, as are democratic oversight, free access to information, freedom of the press, and a consistent fight against corruption within politics, public administration, the police, and the judiciary. It is essential to prevent infiltration of economic life, politics, and the media, as criminal organisations seek to place their representatives and informants within these spheres (SCHEINOST, 1997).

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WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING? - CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS – THEORETICAL REVIEW

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Introduction: Definitions of critical thinking – The APA Delphi report

Critical thinking is the ability to effectively acquire, evaluate and apply information, it implies rational thinking in a focused manner (STERNBERG et al., 2007), a multi-component phenomenon that integrates the abilities to organise, translate, evaluate and analyse data (MANEVAL et al., 2012).

According to Sünbül and Kurnaz (2016), critical thinking is a rational inference, considering similar situations, comparing them with the current problem, finding contradictions while analysing opinions, beliefs and theories, in critical thinking, information is reliable because it is based on independent and objective thinking.

Lilienfeld et al. (2009) defined critical thinking as thinking that aims to avoid cognitive biases. Individuals who can effectively apply their critical thinking skills are able to consider other people's points of view more effectively, collect and verify data based on events, provide supporting evidence for their arguments, and have higher decision-making ability.

In the late 1980s, the APA Delphi study aimed to provide a unified definition of critical thinking with the use of the concept analysis method. The Delphi research method aimed to review the basic issues and definitions of critical thinking. More than half of the experts who participated in the study were philosophers, but also teachers, social scientists and physicists shared their professional experience and arguments about critical thinking.

The process was led by a director, with participants providing detailed written answers supported by arguments to six sets of questions, which the director shared with everyone. The experts were allowed to see each other's opinion anonymously, so they did not influence each other's decisions.

More than 95% of the experts agreed that critical thinking skills include analysis, evaluation and inference, and a majority also agreed that the core skills of critical thinking include interpretation, explanation and self-regulation. Although critical thinking skills are present in many domains, i.e. they are domain-general skills, their application in different contexts requires domain-specific knowledge, using different methods to make informed decisions.

The study put particular emphasis on the identification of critical thinking dispositions alongside critical thinking skills, as the philosophers involved in the research drew attention to the personality traits that determine critical thinking, in the absence of which critical thinking skills are not applied (FACIONE, 1990).

Theoretical models of critical thinking

Halpern's theory of critical thinking

According to Halpern (1997), critical thinking is the application of cognitive skills and strategies that increase the chances of achieving a goal, focused, consistent thinking, and thinking applied to problem solving, which requires making inferences, considering probabilities and making decisions, in relation to a given thinking task.

Critical thinking is more than 'thinking well' or reflecting on thinking. Critical thinking is the application of cognitive skills and strategies that increase the chances of achieving the desired outcome. It is the type of thinking used in problem solving, inference making, probability calculations, decision making, when a person applies skills that are appropriate to the task or context.

Critical thinking as the skill of persuasion

One possible manifestation of critical thinking is the level of development of persuasive skills. Persuasion is achieved through arguments, which are claims, declarative statements that are either true or false. Arguments are used to support or refute a conclusion or an issue, which is also a claim. These arguments for or against a conclusion are called premises. Critical thinking is the evaluation of whether the claims used in persuasion (which may be our persuasion by another person, our persuasion by ourselves, or us persuading others) are true, the extent to which the arguments are good, or the ability to develop good arguments (EPSTEIN & KERNBERGER, 2006).

Kallet's model of critical thinking

Based on Kallet's (2014) theoretical model, the critical thinking process is built on three main components. The first step is the clarification and specification of the problem, situation or goal. The next step is to develop possible solutions and actions in reaction to the problem. This is the brainstorming phase, the second stage of which is the evaluation of ideas, solutions and actions. The third stage is the decision stage, in which the person commits to and implements certain solutions and actions. Most people combine the inference and decision stages because of automatic thinking, but it is important to separate them for the thinking process, as the possible actions are not necessarily the same as the actions that we are committed to. One of the characteristics of automatic thinking is that little time is invested in clarifying the problem, task or goal, immediate, quick conclusions and decisions are made, whereas in critical thinking, clarifying and

understanding the problem or goal takes more time than drawing conclusions and making decisions. Once the problem is clarified, the person formulates conclusions based on assumptions, hypotheses; conclusions are answers to assumptions, or possible solutions. Assumptions are based on objective facts, observations and personal experience about the problem or goal. Assumptions are thus present as premises in the critical thinking process, and the person's beliefs about the premises influence the conclusions. The decision-making process is influenced by several factors, such as the decision deadline, decision criteria and potential risk factors.

The developmental model of critical thinking

Paul and Elder (2020) identified critical thinking not only as the analysis and evaluation of ideas, but also as a continuous effort to improve them, on the basis of which they distinguished six stages of its development. At the first level are the unreflective thinkers, who are not aware of the significant problems and biases that determine their thinking, while the challenged thinkers already recognise some errors in their thinking, the beginner thinkers already try to correct the errors and improve their thinking, but this effort is not systematic. Practising thinkers apply thinking strategies in a regular and organised way, and through this their thinking gradually improves. Advanced thinkers start to internalise critical thinking habits, while for accomplished thinkers critical thinking is already a part of the personality, a cognitive activity that does not require effort. Eight elements of thinking are distinguished: formulating and identifying goals, asking questions about the goal or problem, gathering and evaluating information, identifying and selecting facts (e.g., theories, models, definitions), formulating assumptions based on available information (experience, observations, facts), formulating conclusions and alternative conclusions based on premises, exploring the implications of those conclusions, taking into consideration other perspectives.

Critical thinking: skills and attitudes

Critical thinking includes different skills, attitudes and knowledge, critical thinking skills and dispositions as well (ENNIS, 2018; FACIONE, 1990; HABER, 2020). To be a critical thinker, it is not sufficient to possess high levels of critical thinking skills alone, but it also requires the presence of certain critical thinking dispositions that contribute to the application of these skills in practice (ENNIS, 2018; HALPERN & STERNBERG, 2020).

Critical thinking skills

Different models explaining critical thinking skills include different cognitive skills within critical thinking. Watson and Glaser (1980) distinguished five cognitive sub-skills within critical thinking: deduction, hypotheses formulation, recognising assumptions, inference, interpretation and evaluation of hypotheses.

Facione's (1990) theoretical approach emphasises six different comprehensive cognitive skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, conclusion, explanation, self-regulation. Interpretation involves categorisation, decoding, significance and clarification of meaning. The second skill is analysis, which involves the examination of ideas, formulating arguments and their analysis. Evaluation as a cognitive skill is nothing more than the assessment of claims and evidence. Conclusion involves questioning evidence, hypothesising alternatives and drawing conclusions. Explanation involves stating results, justifying procedures and presenting evidence. Self-regulation is the sixth skill of critical thinking, which involves self-assessment and self-improvement as well.

Critical thinking skills can be grouped into four main categories. While clarifying the problem, thinkers focus on one issue at a time, they analyse arguments, ask themselves questions by which they verify the information about the problem situation, they use tools of visual representation of the problem to understand it better, they draw diagrams and apply basic mathematical skills. Advanced clarification skills include deciding to define concepts, discovering ambiguous information and clarifying it, identifying unsupported arguments, forming hypotheses and assumptions, identifying and correcting errors, metacognitive thinking (conscious thinking and monitoring and controlling the quality of thinking). Critical thinking also includes decision making skills. The person defines the correctness and credibility of sources, analyses and summarises the selected information and observations, makes use of prior knowledge, including information from the Internet (but with particular attention to identifying its credibility), prior experience of the problem situation, and prior conclusions. Inference as a skill category includes deductive thinking, inductive thinking, reasoning (ENNIS, 2018).

Critical thinking dispositions

In addition to critical thinking skills, other affective traits, critical thinking dispositions also influence a person's critical thinking performance (KU, 2009). A disposition for critical thinking implies engaging in complex tasks and persevering in these tasks, flexible thinking, and the ability to abandon unproductive strategies and correct mistakes when necessary (HALPERN & STERNBERG, 2020). Van Dongen et al. (2005) concluded that a disposition for critical thinking enables a person facing uncertainty and conflict to solve problems and make decisions by asking questions, considering alternatives and conflicts. The critical thinking disposition includes motivation and a person's commitment to apply critical thinking in necessary situations (HALPERN, 1997). The affective dimension can be further subdivided into two subgroups, motivational tendencies and behavioural habits. Motivational tendencies are the tendency to know the truth and a disposition of curiosity, while behavioural habits include analytical and compliance habits (GENÇ, 2017).

A critical thinker can be characterised by personality traits such as curiosity, creativity, empathy (HABER, 2020), and intellectual habits such as intellectual humility, courage, autonomy, integrity, perseverance, self-confidence and impartiality. Through intellectual humility, a person discovers and keeps count of their difficulties in thinking as well as their strengths. The intellectually humble person despite the social pressure actively argues for their opinions rather than passively accepting those of others. Through intellectual empathy, the person adopts the viewpoints of others to gain a greater understanding of their positions. Intellectual autonomy implies the autonomy and uniqueness of thoughts, opinions and formed arguments, which are independent of the opinions of others. Intellectual integrity is objectivity regarding one's own and others' arguments, admitting and accepting one's own errors of reasoning. Intellectual perseverance is the effort to overcome obstacles that arise in the case of difficult questions, problems, issues, to answer questions, solve problems, make arguments. Confidence in thinking and reasoning means the determination that critical thinking is the best way to acquire knowledge and solve problems. Impartiality ensures that everyone's views are treated with equal objectivity, excluding emotional reactions and group norms, peer influence (PAUL & ELDER, 2020).

People with advanced critical thinking gather and develop clear, objective arguments about the issue or problem at hand, which are in a logical connection with each other and with the conclusion, are well informed, use credible sources and observations to build arguments, and refer to these in the process of reasoning. They take into consideration the whole situation and problem, are open to other explanations and alternatives, and consider the views of others. In the absence of sufficient evidence, they do not state their opinion but depending on credible evidence they stick to their position or change it (ENNIS, 2018).

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FROM CYBERSECURITY STRATEGY TO INFORMATION SECURITY DOCTRINE - AN ANALYSIS OF A CONCEPTUAL DIVERGENCE

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Introduction

How is it possible that whilst NATO and EU countries are successively adopting cybersecurity strategies, Russia – against whose activities these strategies are intended to act – does not have one? How is it possible that the West accuses Russia of hybrid warfare, whilst Russian experts regard it as a Western concept? Why is the concept of information security, which is interpreted differently in the West, such an all-encompassing term in Russia? The questions raised not only go beyond conceptual differences and mistranslations, but also highlight the fact that key international actors perceive and interpret reality within significantly different frameworks, even when it comes to areas of fundamental importance from a defence perspective. These differences are amplified in the practical application and elaboration of various concepts, which is why it must be recognised that the West's defence preparedness can only be effective if it is based on the operational realities of the entities to which it seeks to respond (JOHNSON, 2025; FARKAS, 2021).

The Russian approach to information security differs greatly from the Western approach, which has recently come to focus on cybersecurity. Of course, cybersecurity and cyberspace are not unknown concepts in Russia, but at a doctrinal level they are generally interpreted within the broader framework of information security and the information sphere, as a technical component. Russia, therefore, if you will, more firmly embraces the view reflected in NATO's information operations doctrine (NATO, 2023), approaching cyber activities more as tools within a broader—and necessarily complex—information operations framework. One striking sign of the differing legal, institutional and doctrinal trajectories and the resulting differences in approach is the absence of a

Russian National Cybersecurity Strategy. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that, following the adoption of the NATO Cyber Defence Pledge in 2016 (NATO, 2016), it is unusual for a member state not to have, or indeed not to regularly update, a National Cyber Defence / Cybersecurity Strategy. To this end, NATO itself has issued guidelines through the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, based in Tallinn (KLIMBURG, 2012). Examples include Hungary's Cybersecurity Strategy adopted in 2025 (Hungary's Cybersecurity Strategy, 2025), the United States 2023 National Cybersecurity Strategy (National Cybersecurity Strategy, 2023), and Germany's Cybersecurity Strategy for Germany 2021, updated in 2021(Cybersecurity Strategy for Germany, 2021). This raises the question: why does Russia, which plays a significant role in cyberspace for a variety of reasons, not have a strategic document that is considered almost a fundamental requirement in the West? The simplest and most widely known answer is that Russia has developed a strategic framework in line with its own specific approach, the relevant element of which in this context is the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation (Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации), adopted in 2016. However, the provisions of this doctrine—which, in certain respects, functions as the equivalent of a cybersecurity strategy (KOVÁCS, 2018) —as already mentioned, differ significantly from what is customary in Western thinking.

Although an analysis of current Russian legislation and doctrines from a security policy and academic perspective holds many areas yet to be explored, they are often characterised by limited and restricted accessibility. However, a document that serves as a reference point for answering the aforementioned question – regarding the absence of a Russian cybersecurity strategy – is publicly available; this document, which is rarely discussed even in English-language literature (CHISLOVA & SOKOLOVA, 2021), is the parliamentary debate on the never-adopted Concept for the Cybersecurity Strategy of the Russian Federation (Концепция стратегии кибербезопасности Российской Федерации) (Federation Council, 2013). All this is relevant primarily because the document reveals the line of argument put forward by the concept's supporters, whilst the press reports accompanying the rejection of the concept allow us to reconstruct, to some extent, the motivations of the state actors opposing it. Although these may at first glance appear to be technical details, and it is indeed unnecessary to overestimate the document's significance, they offer a rare insight into the intersection of the Russian business-civilian 'cyber' and the typically intelligence-driven 'information security' concepts.

The parliamentary debate

On 29 November 2013, the Federation Council's temporary committee convened a meeting to discuss the findings and recommendations of experts working in the field of information security. The document presented at the event was discussed

with the participation of experts from the business sector, civil society, the scientific community and state bodies. The aim of the concept – which at that stage existed only as a discussion paper – was to lay the foundations for a comprehensive national cybersecurity strategy with a different focus from the approach taken up to that point.

During the debate, a number of arguments and observations were put forward; for instance, it was pointed out that several other major powers already have – it is worth remembering that this was in 2013 – a cyber security strategy, whereas Russia has not yet developed one. A further argument put forward was that, alongside state involvement, the engagement of society and the business sector is also essential, as the protection of cyberspace can only be achieved through the active cooperation of the 'society – business – state' triad, since the state alone is unable to provide comprehensive protection. This concept – which is based on the sharing of responsibility rather than the primacy of the state – undoubtedly represented a novel, and indeed somewhat alien, approach compared to traditional Russian security thinking, as it implicitly emphasised the independent/equal role of civil and market actors, in this case, in shaping national cybersecurity. However, given the specific interrelationships within Russian state-society-economy, this innovation – despite its novelty – would presumably not have posed an insurmountable obstacle to the existing Russian power structure.

Representatives of the intelligence services were also present at the meeting, including the FSB (Federal Security Service), and although the FSB's position is not available in official form, its criticism and the role it played in the rejection of the strategy can be reconstructed in broad terms from various studies (CHISLOVA & SOKOLOVA, 2021; IVANOV & ROGOZHINA, 2022), and press reports and state media coverage (CHERNENKO & IVANOV, 2013; IVANOV & CHERNENKO, 2013). On this basis, the agency considered the 'Western-style' cybersecurity concept, which also involved civil society and market actors, to be overly technology-focused and not sufficiently sovereignist in outlook. It is also worth mentioning that a draft law was submitted for debate shortly before the strategy was presented, or in parallel with it, which would have expanded the FSB's powers regarding operational and intelligence-gathering activities in the information domain (IVANOV, 2013). Following the government decision to broaden the scope of information operations, it can therefore be assumed that the FSB would have regarded the launch of a cybersecurity model in which the civilian sector would have operated partly independently as a step backwards.

A cyber security strategy similar to that of the West has not been adopted in Russia since then, whilst the framework, which is fundamentally focused on information security, has been strengthened. Furthermore, these developments suggest that in Russia, the future of the digital space – and, through it, the protection of the Russian system – was seen more in the strengthening of the role of security organisations than in a multipolar cybersecurity model with a strong civil and economic emphasis.

Subsequently, academic critiques of the above concept also emerged; for example, Vladimir Mikhailovich Siskin, who, in a 2017 collection of studies, described it as a fortunate development that the 'Russian Cybersecurity Strategy', which had been thoroughly prepared in 2012–2013, ultimately did not come to fruition. Among Siskin's criticisms of the strategy, or those referring to it, is that it was based on documents adopted in Western countries, that it was secondary (вторичный), and that it placed an emphasis on technology rather than sovereignty. Siskin also pointed out that the document was drafted under the pretext of updating the current doctrine – which was, incidentally, timely – but in reality was intended to replace the existing Information Security Doctrine (SHISHKIN, 2017).

A number of conclusions can be drawn from these events, though naturally without overlooking the fact that not every detail can be revealed. One of the most striking lessons from the debate surrounding the concept is that certain elements of Western-style thinking are also present in Russia, as the concept gave rise to a demand for the development of a more transparent, multi-stakeholder, society-based cyber security system, particularly in the business and civil spheres.

The example of the 2013 draft cyber strategy clearly shows that the professional sphere recognised the global trends considered important in Western thinking and sought to bring Russia closer to them. The fact that, in the end, a top-down, state-centred logic prevailed can likely be interpreted as a consequence of Russia's specific historical, economic and social development, as well as the current institutional and political balance of power. Taking a step back, it is also worth noting in this context that various analyses of Russia have long emphasised the pivotal role of influence and information operations in the current Russian model of power, both domestically and globally (GALEOTTI, 2022; 2016). In this institutional setting, the shelving of a genuine model shift is therefore unsurprising.

If we examine the narrower factors, the institutional and political balance of power, it can be assumed that the failure to adopt the strategy is underpinned by a 'snowball effect', whereby security organisations, through their powers which have gradually expanded over recent decades, have set Russian information security policy on a course from which it would now be difficult to deviate. The embeddedness of the FSB and other state organisations, as well as the strategic importance of the information space (ARO, 2022; NESTER, 2020), mean that any reform aimed at reducing their powers would face institutional resistance. If this approach is correct, then there are not only theoretical but also very practical obstacles to the development of a national cyber strategy in the Western sense, one that is technically based and built on public participation. However, it must also be recognised that Russian operations over the past decade have been shaped by the logic of actual, intensive and interventionist operations; in other words, greater emphasis is placed on the diversified and, where possible, covert pursuit

of political and information warfare than on the maintenance of framework-type documentation.

And if the above were to prove true, any related change – if indeed possible – could only be envisaged as the result of a comprehensive shift in the political and security paradigm, one that would extend far beyond the realm of cyber security and might even affect the fundamental logic underpinning the functioning of the Russian state. In all this, it is important to bear in mind that the debate took place in 2013, that is, before the annexation of Crimea, the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war (CSIKI-VARGA et al., 2025), and the introduction of sanctions, the effects of which on Russian security perceptions certainly did not favour the spread of a Western-style interpretation of cyberspace. Furthermore, it must be considered that although the public currently associates Russian operations with Putin personally, they have long-standing traditions, particularly in the realm of information operations, as well as significant institutional traditions. It cannot therefore be ruled out that a distinctively Russian approach would persist even in the event of a change in political power.

Historical and Institutional Contexts of Information Control

If we seek an institutional interpretative framework for our findings, it is worth paying attention to the potential role of the FSB, and in this context to the phenomenon whereby the restriction of the free flow of information and the significance of various national security agencies in this regard have a long history in Russia. On this subject, the work by Soldatov and Borogan (2015) clearly demonstrates that the control of information flows and the prominent role of the secret services are not unique to the modern Russian state, but rather a long-standing pattern inherited from the Soviet Union, whilst also drawing heavily on the experiences of the political police of the Tsarist era. As early as the Stalinist era, in the so-called sarashka (шарашка) institutions – closed labour camps reserved for engineers – supervised by the KGB's predecessor organisations, devices were developed for, among other things, the secure encryption and interception of landline telephone calls. In the 1960s, with the involvement of the KGB, the free use of the first Soviet photocopier was banned; subsequently, Xerox machines imported from the West could only be used with a licence, in locked rooms and under constant supervision.

A similar logic prevailed during the development of the telecommunications infrastructure, particularly in the run-up to the 1980 Moscow Olympics. The aim of the modernisation was to provide reliable international telephone connections for foreign journalists and delegations; however, the KGB strongly opposed the expansion of the lines, as it viewed the free flow of information as a potential security risk. A compromise was eventually reached whereby every caller had to dial their own identifier alongside the number being called, ensuring that no one could remain anonymous. Furthermore, the engineers incorporated a technical

solution into the system that allowed for the automatic interception of all calls. This solution met the KGB's requirements: the network could expand whilst the service retained full control over communications. According to the authors, the SORM system (Система оперативно-розыскных мероприятий / System of Operative-Search) launched by the KGB —the 'black box' through which the FSB has direct access to Russian internet traffic—also fits into this pattern (SOLDATOV & BOROGAN, 2015).

Based on the historical continuity outlined, a similar logic prevails from the closed technological developments of the *special* labour camps to SORM's centralised data surveillance: information technologies appear not only as tools of innovation and development, but also of stability, control and, ultimately, security. This institutional approach to national security, which is clearly not a recent development, may also have played a role in the failure to implement a more open cyber strategy concept involving civil society actors, which could potentially have reduced the role of the state and national security agencies in the information sphere.

Conclusion

To summarise the above, it can be concluded that certain elements of a Western-style cybersecurity approach already exist in Russian society, particularly within the economic and research communities. The dominant influence, however, continues to stem from the approach of the much broader, intelligence-service-focused information security doctrine, which reinforces influence activities, information operations, and state involvement.

Whether there will be any change in this regard in the future, and in what direction, is a difficult question, determined not only by the specific characteristics of Russian power politics but also by the long-standing traditions of state action in the information sphere, which are characterised by control and influence.

However, it is important to note in this context that if the West is to defend itself effectively against Russian information operations, the solution lies not in doctrinal competition, but in a better understanding of Russian operations and strategic mindset, as well as in practice- and operations-oriented capability development—an area to which this study also seeks to contribute.

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PREPARING THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY TO PREVENT SUICIDE AND SUPPORT STUDENTS AFTER A SUICIDE ATTEMPT

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Introduction

Suicide is a major global public health challenge, with an estimated 727,000 deaths worldwide in 2021, accounting for more than one in every 100 deaths globally (WHO, 2025; BARBOSA et al., 2021; Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses (Portuguese Psychological Association [PPA], 2022; PPA, 2025b; PPA, 2025c). It is the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 29 and the third among those aged 15 to 34 (BARBOSA ET al., 2021; PPA, 2018; PPA, 2022; PPA, 2025c). For every completed suicide, research indicates there are at least 25 attempts (BARBOSA et al., 2021; PPA, 2022; PPA, 2025c). Approximately 77–79% of suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries, reflecting structural

inequalities in access to mental health care (WHO, 2025; BARBOSA et al., 2021). For every suicide, there are substantially more suicide attempts, although reliable global estimates of this ratio are not available and likely vary across contexts (WHO, 2025).

In Portugal, suicide mortality remains a relevant public health issue. The number of deaths by suicide remains higher than in any other country in the southern part of the European Union (PPA, 2025b). The mortality rate in 2022 was 9.9 per 100,000 inhabitants, with an average of three deaths per day (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2024; PPA, 2025c). The suicide rate among youth (15-24 years) reached 4.9 per 100,000, the highest recorded value in the last 20 years (PPA, 2025c). Statistics show that rates are higher among males, older age groups, and rural populations, specifically in the Portuguese regions of Alentejo and Algarve (BARBOSA et al., 2021; PPA, 2022). Furthermore, there is a significant concern regarding underreporting, as many deaths in Portugal are often classified as 'undetermined causes' (PPA, 2018; PPA, 2022; PPA, 2025a).

Hungary continues to have one of the highest suicide mortality rates in the European Union, with 16.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022, significantly exceeding the EU average of 10.6 (Eurostat, 2022). Evidence from community-based interventions, particularly the European Alliance Against Depression (EAAD), demonstrates that multi-level interventions can significantly reduce suicidal behaviour. The Szolnok intervention reported a reduction in suicide rates from 30.1 to 13.2 per 100,000 within one year, representing a reduction of over 50% and exceeding national trends (HEGERL et al., 2006).

Importantly, a substantial proportion of individuals who die by suicide have limited or no contact with mental health services prior to death. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that only approximately 30–50% had contact with mental health care in the year preceding suicide, and the proportion is considerably lower in the period immediately before death (LUOMA et al., 2002). These findings suggest that many individuals at risk remain outside the reach of specialised services, particularly in the final stages prior to suicide.

2. Review of Suicide Prevention Programmes

The impact of suicide on public health in Portugal, the rise in suicide rates over the last decade, the under-reporting of suicides (which has masked the true scale of the phenomenon), the prevalence of risk factors (particularly mental illness), the difficulty in standardising terminology relating to the various types of suicidal acts and self-harming behaviours (which hinders their study), the difficulty in recording and evaluating the effectiveness of measures implemented or to be implemented, and the need to create synergies with existing experiences and resources, led Portugal, in 2013, to propose a National Suicide Prevention Plan for the period 2013–2017 (DIREÇÃO-GERAL DA SAÚDE, 2013).

The main objectives of this plan in its initial phase were (DIREÇÃO-GERAL DA SAÚDE, 2013). to begin a thorough assessment of the situation; to improve psychological well-being; to increase access to healthcare; to reduce access to lethal means; to improve follow-up care following discharge from hospital; to improve mental health information and education; to reduce the stigma surrounding depression, suicidal ideation, self-harming behaviours and suicidal acts; raise awareness amongst the media of the need to apply the defined principles for reporting on self-harming behaviours and suicidal acts. In a second phase, it aimed (DIREÇÃO-GERAL DA SAÚDE, 2013) to increase mental health information and education; to increase the monitoring of people with suicidal ideation, self-harming behaviours and suicidal acts at the primary healthcare level; to increase access to specialised care through the establishment of specialist clinics in all districts; and to increase research in this field, with an emphasis on the socio-cultural and other aspects related to self-harming behaviours and suicidal acts.

This national plan identified the following as target groups (DIREÇÃO-GERAL DA SAÚDE, 2013) the general public, healthcare professionals, adolescents, seniors, prison population, law enforcement agents, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and people with intellectual disabilities.

In Portugal, as part of the National Suicide Prevention Campaign, led by the National Coordination of Mental Health Policies, a network of partners has been established comprising all organisations that proposed implementing suicide prevention initiatives aimed at their staff, members, beneficiaries and service users, in accordance with the needs identified and the resources available in each region. The aim was to broaden the campaign's reach by creating opportunities for inter-regional cooperation with a view to developing initiatives in regions with fewer resources and by employing a national communication strategy (Coordenação Nacional das Políticas de Saúde Mental, n.d.). However, these initiatives appear to have ended in 2022, and there is no known independent study on the effectiveness and impact of the plan drawn up or the campaign. In September 2025, a new National Suicide Prevention Helpline (1411) was launched.

In both Portugal and Hungary, suicide prevention is not organised as a single, centralised system but is instead integrated into existing health and social care structures. In practice, this involves a range of services, including primary care, psychiatric outpatient treatment, addiction services, and emergency crisis intervention, alongside telephone-based emotional support (ZALSMAN et al., 2016). This reflects a broader European pattern in which preventive efforts are distributed across multiple sectors and levels of care rather than confined to specialised mental health services. Within this context, the EAAD has contributed to the development of community-based approaches, including in Hungary (HEGERL et al., 2006). Its model brings together several components, such as strengthening depression care in primary care settings, raising public awareness, and providing targeted training for non-specialist actors who may be in a position

to identify individuals at risk. It also includes interventions aimed at groups considered to be at higher risk. Findings from intervention studies suggest that this type of multi-level approach can be associated with reductions in suicidal behaviour, although the magnitude of these effects appears to depend on local conditions and the way programmes are implemented (HEGERL et al., 2006).

The OSPI-Europe project extended this approach by seeking to standardise implementation across regions while placing greater emphasis on systematic evaluation (HEGERL et al., 2009; HEGERL et al., 2019). In Hungary, elements of this framework have been adapted at the local level – e.g., in Miskolc - where cooperation between healthcare providers, municipal actors and civil organisations has supported more coordinated responses to crisis situations. Although the evidence base for specific local adaptations remains limited, these experiences illustrate how broader European models are translated into practice under local conditions. Alongside these system-level interventions, crisis helplines continue to represent an important, and often more immediately accessible, component of suicide prevention. Their relevance lies partly in the fact that a substantial proportion of individuals at risk do not engage with formal mental health services. Telephone-based support services can therefore function as a first point of contact, offering anonymous, low-threshold assistance and, where necessary, facilitating referral to further care. Empirical studies suggest that such services are associated with short-term reductions in distress and suicidal ideation, even if their long-term impact is more difficult to establish (GOULD et al., 2007).

Recent findings from the EAAD-Best project provide further support for the relevance of training-based components within multi-level suicide prevention strategies (COPPENS et al., 2026). Across seven European countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, and Spain), structured training programmes targeting both healthcare professionals and community facilitators were associated with improvements in perceived competence and behavioural intentions related to the recognition and management of depression and suicidal behaviour. Within the EAAD-Best project, Hungary was among the countries where both Level 1 (healthcare professionals) and Level 3 (community facilitators) training programmes were implemented across multiple regions. While changes in attitudes were more modest—likely reflecting already favourable baseline levels—the observed gains in practical competencies suggest that such interventions may strengthen the capacity of both clinical and non-clinical actors to respond to suicide risk. Notably, similar effects were reported across different national contexts and delivery formats, including online training, indicating a degree of scalability of the approach.

In recent years, digital interventions have also become more prominent within European prevention strategies. The iFightDepression tool, developed within the EAAD framework, is a guided, internet-based self-management programme grounded in cognitive behavioural principles. Its use is typically supported by trained professionals, which distinguishes it from fully unguided applications and

allows for a degree of clinical oversight (SCHNITZSPAHN, 2025). Metaanalysis findings suggest that guided digital interventions can lead to modest but clinically relevant reductions in depressive symptoms, particularly in cases of mild to moderate severity (CUIJPERS et al., 2013). Within stepped-care models, such tools are increasingly positioned as an early or intermediate intervention rather than a substitute for specialised treatment.

International models widely referenced in the literature include Signs of Suicide (SOS), which teaches students to identify symptoms in themselves and peers using the ACT technique (Acknowledge, Care, Tell) alongside depression screening tools (DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014; Ordem dos Enfermeiros, 2012). Similarly, the LEADS For Youth program focuses on increasing literacy through a curriculum that addresses depression symptoms and barriers to seeking help (DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014). The Trevor Project, in its turn, offers to specialized crisis services for LGBTQ youth and an interactive training for university staff to foster a safe climate (DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014).

Essential techniques commonly used in these programmes include Gatekeeper Training for faculty and peers to recognize warning signs and refer students to professional help (DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014; University of Porto, 2024). They also include the development of Safety Plans between professionals and individuals in crisis, which is a brief clinical tool developed between a professional and an individual to manage suicidal crises (Barbosa, et al., 2021). Furthermore, the Restriction of Lethal Means to prevent impulsive acts, limiting access to medications, chemicals, and unsecured physical locations like rooftops or bridges (Direção-Geral da Saúde, 2013; DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014). Combined, these initiatives aim to reduce stigma, improve literacy, and ensure students have a clear path to professional support (Direção-Geral da Saúde, 2013; University of Porto, 2024).

Furthermore, integrated programmes based on technological and clinical strategies are also important in these efforts. Columbia University TeenScreen Program is a screening program which uses validated computer questionnaires to identify mental illness and suicide risk in youth for follow-up by professionals (DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014; Ordem dos Enfermeiros, 2012). The use of online platforms (like Psic.ON) for psychological support and help-seeking facilitation has been a valuable resource too (University of Porto, 2024). For over a decade, research has supported the following principles (Direção-Geral da Saúde, 2013):

a) prevention programmes should be tailored to address the specific issues identified within the local community or population group;
b) the greater the risk to the target population, the more active and early the prevention plan should be; and
c) prevention programmes should be age-specific, developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive.

Overall, suicide prevention in academic settings appears to be less a question of introducing entirely new programmes than of strengthening existing connections between actors, services, and levels of intervention.

3. Suicide prevention programmes in higher education institutions

University students represent a high-risk group due to developmental transition, academic pressure, and social stressors. Epidemiological studies indicate increasing prevalence of suicidal ideation and mental health problems in higher education populations (AUERBACH et al., 2018). Enrolment in higher education marks the start of a transition process into the world of work and towards the young adult's independence. This process takes place at a crucial stage in the student's overall development, as their concerns and problems manifest themselves in difficulties in completing the developmental tasks characteristic of the stage they are at - the transition from adolescence to adulthood (PPA, 2018).

The impact of university life on students' mental health is widely recognised. This is a period marked by multiple pressures and challenges that call for the ability to adapt to a new way of life, which are not always overcome in the most appropriate way (PPA, 2013). University students and young adults are a high-vulnerability group due to academic pressures, social isolation, and the challenges of transitioning to adulthood (University of Porto, 2024). It is responsibility of universities to ensure the conditions necessary for promoting the overall well-being of their students, including emotional and psychological aspects (PPA, 2013). These programmes can be aimed at different groups: students, university staff and lecturers, as well as the broader community. Universities are well placed to engage all these stakeholders, whether through their role in supporting the ongoing professional development of their staff, their close connection with students, their responsibility to offer community outreach, providing students with skills for their future careers, and preparing them to be active and socially responsible citizens.

Suicide prevention in higher education requires a comprehensive and integrated approach, combining different types of intervention that act at multiple levels within the university context. Effective programmes should not be limited to raising awareness, but also aim to strengthen individual competencies, enhance the capacity of the academic community to respond to risk, and create mechanisms for early identification of students in vulnerable situations. So, it is important to combine strategies that promote mental health literacy and reduce stigma with interventions aimed to develop socio-emotional skills, coping, problem-solving, and help-seeking. These are relevant dimensions in a context where many students may struggle to adapt to academic, social, and personal demands, and may not seek support in a spontaneous way.

University staff and lecturers play a central role in prevention efforts. Due to their proximity to students, they are often in a privileged position to notice

changes in behaviour, emotional state, or academic performance that may indicate increased vulnerability. A key component of an effective prevention strategy is to offer train to promote skills to recognize warning signs, to approach students in an appropriate manner, and to active referring them to support services whenever is needed. This social gatekeeping function should be supported by clear institutional procedures, ensuring that responsibility is shared, that no professional is expected to manage risk situations in isolation and that professionals' role is not supposed to be that of a clinical professional.

Finally, prevention efforts should also allow the early detection of risk, particularly among students who may remain unnoticed. When implemented with appropriate precaution, these strategies can contribute to a more proactive and responsive system, reinforcing the university's capacity to promote well-being and respond to situations of psychological distress in a timely and coordinated manner.

Literature emphasizes that effective prevention in hight education institutions requires multi-level strategies including universal, selective, and indicated interventions (Direção-Geral da Saúde, 2013; DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014; University of Porto, 2024). An analysis of different suicide prevention programmes reveal that distinct approaches have been adopted in the last years and it is possible to identify four types of prevention programmes (DUMON & PORTZKY, 2014):

a) *Psycho-educational programmes* which aim to enhance students' knowledge and influence their attitudes toward mental health issues and suicidal behaviour. They may also promote mental health services and helplines, as these seem to be effective ways of reaching adolescents at risk of suicide. Nevertheless, research suggests that they have no effect on the use of coping styles or levels of hopelessness. Therefore, although effective, it is strongly recommended to integrate these types of programmes into broader and more comprehensive programmes.
b) *Skills training programmes* aim to strengthen students' abilities, such as self-esteem, coping, problem-solving, decision-making, and self-disclosure, while also helping them recognize signs of suicidal behaviour in others. Some programmes focus on peer leadership, where trained students support their peers. These programmes encourage appropriate responses, connection with trusted adults, and positive coping norms. However, peer leaders must be carefully selected, supported, and monitored.
c) *Gatekeeper training programmes* recognize that teachers and school counsellors can play a key role in identifying students at risk and referring them to appropriate care. Training them to recognize risk factors and warning signs of suicidal behaviour, as well as how to respond and refer in crisis situations, has been shown to be an effective prevention strategy. In addition, teachers can help reinforce protective factors, foster a

supportive school environment, and make it easier for students to access healthcare.

d) *Screening programmes* recognize that teachers and counsellors should actively monitor students' well-being (such as social isolation, relationship difficulties, and academic performance) to detect potential warning signs of mental health issues. There are validated screening programmes that can support this process, consisting of using self-report questionnaires and/or interviews to identify students at risk of suicidal behaviour and to refer them to specialised support when needed.

Hungary does not have a fully developed, stand-alone national suicide prevention strategy of the kind seen in some other European countries, and school-based initiatives tend to be implemented unevenly rather than through a coordinated nationwide framework (ZALSMAN et al., 2016). At the same time, there has been a gradual expansion of mental health–related training initiatives, including school psychology services and teacher-oriented programmes focusing on the recognition of warning signs and early response. In higher education, elements of suicide prevention are also present within professional training. For instance, clinical psychology programmes include content on the recognition and management of suicidal crisis states, as reflected in the curriculum at Semmelweis University.

In Portugal, the University of Porto Suicide Prevention Plan (PPS.UP) is a flagship initiative for university students organized around five axes: social connection, access to services, risk identification, postvention, and research (University of Porto, 2024). This is complemented by BAMBUP, which uses a *stepped care* model to provide gradual preventive and adaptive interventions depending on a student's mental health needs (University of Porto, 2024). Another prominent Portuguese program is +Contigo, which targets adolescents and young adults to promote socio-emotional skills, self-esteem, and the training of school "gatekeepers" to identify early warning signs (Ordem dos Enfermeiros, 2012).

Where to start? An initial step that higher education institutions can easily take is to develop brief training programmes designed for university staff. These programmes should be structured around four core components:

a) First, they should provide conceptual clarification and present suicidal ideation as a warning sign rather than a diagnosis. Common myths about suicide should be explicitly deconstructed to reduce stigma and promote informed intervention. Participants should learn about protective factors, key warning signs and practical questions to help differentiate situational distress from risk of self-harm.

b) Second, programmes should focus on what to do when suicide risk is suspected. It is important to offer clear guidance on how to ask directly and calmly about suicidal thoughts, how to listen without judgment or

minimization, how to avoid dramatization or secrecy, what to do concerning institutional referral pathways and the limits of confidentiality.

c) Third, it is also important to provide specific guidance for welcoming a student returning after a suicide attempt, encouraging staff to adopt a supportive (but a non-clinical) role, coordinating with institutional services, using respectful and non-intrusive language, maintaining structure and predictability, and implementing temporary academic adjustments when needed.
d) Finally, suicide prevention programmes should address postvention and self-care. It is essential to train staff in skills as: how to cope when a member of the community dies by suicide, how to support survivors, how staff can check and protect their own emotional wellbeing, and what to do if one experiences suicidal thoughts oneself.

Conclusion

Suicide prevention in Portugal and Hungary is not easily captured as a single, coherent system. Rather, it unfolds across a range of interconnected services and practices embedded in healthcare, social care, and community settings. This dispersed structure reflects a broader European pattern, where prevention relies on the interaction of multiple actors and levels of intervention. In this context, combining population-level measures with more targeted responses remains essential, particularly given that many individuals at risk do not come into contact with specialised mental health services. Experiences from initiatives such as the European Alliance Against Depression and OSPI-Europe suggest that coordinated, multi-component approaches can offer a useful framework for intervention. At the same time, outcomes are not uniform. Differences across regions point to the importance of local conditions, including the availability of resources, the extent of collaboration between sectors, and the continuity of monitoring and evaluation.

These issues are especially apparent in higher education. Universities are often among the first environments where emerging mental health difficulties become visible, yet they are not designed as clinical settings. This creates a need for approaches that support early recognition and response without blurring professional roles. Interventions that emphasise practical competencies—such as identifying warning signs and facilitating access to appropriate services—appear particularly relevant in this regard.

Overall, the findings suggest that relatively modest, practice-oriented measures can make a difference when they are embedded in existing institutional structures. Their impact, however, depends on how well they are connected to available services and whether they are sustained over time. In this sense, strengthening coordination and continuity may be at least as important as expanding the range of interventions themselves.

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RUSSOPHILIA AS A MANIFESTATION OF THE VALUE AND IDENTITY EROSION OF THE EURO-ATLANTIC SPACE

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Introduction

The security environment of the Euro-Atlantic area is currently shaped not only by the return of open power rivalry and military force, but also by the intensification of conflict over the interpretation of reality, the legitimacy of political orders, and the value-based anchoring of modern societies. Alongside traditional instruments of state power, non-military forms of influence are increasingly coming to the fore, especially information operations, strategic communication, psychological influence, narrative manipulation, and the long-term weakening of citizens' trust in their own institutions (GERASIMOV, 2013; GILES, 2016; JAITNER & GEERS, 2015). In the analyzed context, it thus becomes evident that contemporary security challenges cannot be interpreted exclusively at the level of military capabilities, geopolitical competition, or diplomatic crises, but must also be examined within a broader normative and identity-based framework.

One of the phenomena that requires analytical attention within this framework is Russophilia. In its traditional understanding, Russophilia is primarily associated with cultural, linguistic, religious, or historical closeness to Russia. However, such a definition is no longer sufficient under the conditions of contemporary geopolitical developments. In many cases, contemporary Russophilia no longer appears merely as an expression of admiration for Russian culture, literature, or history, but rather assumes the character of a politically and security-relevant orientation through which distrust toward liberal democracy, pluralism, European integration, and transatlantic security cooperation is articulated (BACON 2015; BOKŠA 2019; LARUELLE 2015).

The relevance of the issue under examination increased significantly after 2014 and gained new intensity following the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine. It was precisely in this period that it became fully evident that the conflict with the Russian Federation is waged not only at the level of territorial control, military superiority, or diplomatic pressure, but also at the level of meanings, interpretations, and societal loyalty (BĒRZIŅŠ, 2014; RÁCZ, 2015). Russian strategic thinking has long operated through the blending of military and non-

military means, with information influence, propaganda, psychological operations, and the use of purposefully constructed narratives constituting an integral part of a broader repertoire of power (GILES, 2016; HEICKERÖ, 2010). This picture is also consistent with our research, which emphasizes that information operations deepen societal polarization, weaken trust in democratic institutions, and represent one of the most serious challenges for European democracies. (KOLLÁR, 2022)

The present article therefore proceeds from the assumption that Russophilia in contemporary Euro-Atlantic space does not represent merely a marginal phenomenon of cultural or geopolitical sympathy but may instead be understood as an indicator of a deeper crisis in the normative cohesion of the West. The aim of the article is to analyse Russophilia as a manifestation of value and identity erosion in the Euro-Atlantic area, with attention focused on three interrelated dimensions: first, the conceptual and theoretical definition of the phenomenon of Russophilia; second, its connection to the weakening of the value-based and identity consensus within the Euro-Atlantic area; and third, the security implications of this phenomenon in the context of disinformation, strategic narratives, and hybrid influence.

Methodology of Research

The research methodology constitutes a fundamental building block of the present article. Regarding the nature of the issue under examination, the stated aim of the article, and the character of the research questions, we consider a qualitative research strategy to be the most appropriate choice. Such an approach corresponds to the logic of qualitative inquiry, in which research seeks to understand the meaning of the phenomenon under examination and is grounded in an inductive sequence of observation, identification of regularities, inference, and theorization. We regard the qualitative approach in this case as particularly appropriate because the subject of inquiry is not an easily measurable variable, but rather a complex socio-political phenomenon manifested at the level of ideas, narratives, symbolic identifications, value orientations, and political attitudes. In the contemporary Euro-Atlantic area, Russophilia does not represent merely a cultural preference or sentimental attachment to Russia, but a broader phenomenon formed at the intersection of historical memory, identity, strategic communication, disinformation influence, and geopolitical orientation.

From the perspective of research design, the text is structured around a combination of interrelated methodological procedures. The first is conceptual analysis, the second is the comparison of selected scholarly approaches, and the third is the use of elements of a case study. Conceptual analysis serves to refine the basic categories with which the text works, namely the concepts of Russophilia, value erosion, identity erosion, the Euro-Atlantic area, strategic narratives, and influence of disinformation. The need for such an analysis also

stems from the fact that, in the field of security studies, conceptual ambiguity frequently arises and the meaning of the terms employed is often extended beyond their analytical usefulness, as has also been emphasized in recent work on hybrid warfare. (KOLLÁR, 2025)

The second methodological pillar is the comparison of scholarly approaches. The aim of this comparative dimension is not to compare individual authors mechanically, but rather to identify points of convergence and divergence in the ways different strands of literature explain the relationship between Russian information influence, narrative politics, identity, and the weakening of democratic legitimacy. We compare security, political science, and communication-oriented approaches. Security literature places emphasis on hybrid influence, information confrontation, and the strategic use of non-military instruments (GERASIMOV, 2013; GILES, 2016; JAITNER & GEERS, 2015; BĒRZIŅŠ, 2014). Political science and ideational approaches accentuate the importance of narratives, identity, and the civilizational framing of conflict (BACON, 2015; LARUELLE, 2015; TSYGANKOV, 2019). Communication and media literature, in turn, highlights the effects of disinformation on public discourse, trust, and societal polarization (FREELON & WELLS, 2020; BENNETT & LIVINGSTON, 2018).

The third methodological element consists of case-study features. This approach also draws on the logic of case-study research, which enables the researcher to focus on a specific case and to examine in greater depth the mechanisms of the phenomenon under investigation. The primary empirical-illustrative frame of reference is the period after 2014, and especially after 2022, when Russian narratives, argumentative frameworks, and schemes of legitimation intensified significantly, while at the same time the extent of their reception within part of the social and political sphere became more clearly visible.

Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

Defining the Concept of Russophilia

The concept of Russophilia is used rather loosely in both scholarly and public debate, with its meaning ranging from cultural sympathy toward Russia to explicit political support for Russia's foreign policy orientation. From an analytical perspective, it is therefore necessary to specify this concept more precisely and distinguish it from related phenomena such as Pan-Slavism, anti-Americanism, conservatism, or general criticism of the West. For the purposes of the present article, we will understand Russophilia in a narrower sense, namely as a set of positive cognitive, emotional, and normative orientations toward Russia that go beyond the framework of cultural affinity and are manifested in the justification of Russian policy, the relativization of Russian aggression, the acceptance of Russian civilizational narratives, or the preference for Russia as an alternative value center vis-à-vis the Euro-Atlantic space (SHERR, 2013; LARUELLE, 2015; GAUFMAN, 2017).

Russophilia understood in this way has at least three basic dimensions. The first is the cultural dimension, based on the notion of historical and civilizational proximity. The second is the geopolitical dimension, in which Russia appears as a counterweight to American dominance or to "Brussels centralism." The third is the normative-identity dimension, which is central to our research: here, Russia functions not merely as a state, but as a projection screen for order, strength, sovereignty, traditional values, and anti-liberal resistance to the West (LARUELLE, 2015; TSYGANKOV, 2019).

For this reason, Russophilia cannot be reduced merely to an ordinary foreign policy opinion. If it were exclusively a rational preference for another pole of power, this would not explain the high degree of tolerance for authoritarian practices, selective morality, or revisionist actions on the part of the Russian Federation. Russophilia, in the sense examined here, rather points to a deeper problem of normative orientation.

The Euro-Atlantic Area as a Value-Based and Identity Community

In the present text, the concept of the Euro-Atlantic area cannot be reduced merely to a geographical category or to the sum of the member states of the EU and NATO. From a theoretical point of view, it is more appropriate to draw on approaches that understand the Western community as both a security and a value-based community, that is, as a space in which security cooperation is linked to shared norms, rules, and identity ties (DEUTSCH et al., 1957; ADLER & BARNETT, 1998). The Euro-Atlantic area may therefore be interpreted as a historically constituted political community grounded in liberal democracy, the rule of law, the protection of human rights, the plurality of political competition, trust in constitutional institutions, and the principle of collective security.

A community understood in this way does not arise and endure solely through treaties, defence commitments, and institutional architecture. Equally important is the identificatory dimension, that is, the degree to which individual societies and their citizens perceive themselves as part of a broader political and civilizational whole. Risse points out that European and transatlantic identities are not given automatically, but emerge through processes of communication, political socialization, and public meaning-making (RISSE, 2010). Once this conviction weakens, the cohesion of the entire area is weakened as well.

Russophilia in the Context of Russian Strategic Narratives

To understand contemporary Russophilia, it is not sufficient to analyse only the demand-side factors within receiving societies, such as the crisis of trust, polarization, or identity insecurity. It is equally important to examine the supply side, namely the very structure of Russian strategic narratives that create an interpretive framework enabling the acceptance of pro-Russian attitudes. In this respect, it is useful to draw on the concept of strategic narratives, which understands narratives as tools used by political actors to shape the meaning of

international order, the identity of actors, and the legitimacy of their actions (MISKIMMON O'LOUGHLIN & ROSELLE, 2013).

Russian strategic narratives systematically operate with several stable motifs. The first is the motif of encirclement and betrayal, in which Russia presents itself as a power that has long been humiliated and threatened. The second is the motif of civilizational distinctiveness, according to which Russia is the bearer of authentic and traditional values in contrast to the alleged moral decay of the West. The third is the motif of protecting the "Russian world," that is, a transnational cultural-political space extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation (LARUELLE, 2015; SHER, 2013).

Russophilia as a Manifestation of the Value Erosion of the Euro-Atlantic Area

If Russophilia in the contemporary European and transatlantic context is to be interpreted with analytical precision, it cannot be understood merely as an outward-facing attitude toward Russia. It also reveals the condition of the internal value world of the societies in which it appears. It is precisely for this reason that Russophilia may be regarded as one of the manifestations of the value erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area.

By the term *value erosion,* we mean the gradual weakening of the binding force of fundamental democratic principles within the political consciousness of society. This does not necessarily entail a formal rejection of democracy as a regime, but rather a decline in the practical and moral weight of such values as the rule of law, the protection of human rights, respect for pluralism, trust in independent institutions, and the rejection of political violence. As Bermeo shows, contemporary democratic backsliding often has a gradual and creeping character, proceeding through the weakening of democratic norms rather than solely through sudden institutional ruptures (BERMEO, 2016). Similarly, Levitsky and Ziblatt point out that the stability of democracy depends not only on constitutional rules, but also on informal norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance (LEVITSKY & ZIBLATT, 2018).

The first important manifestation of this value erosion is the normalization of the authoritarian model of power. Within Russophile discourse, Russia is often portrayed as a state that "knows how to impose order," "protects national interests," and "does not succumb to the decadent trends of the West." Such formulations are not politically neutral. In fact, they signal a shift in value orientation in which strength begins to be valued more highly than freedom, obedience more highly than plurality, and geopolitical sovereignty more than the universality of rights. Norris and Inglehart show that, in an environment of cultural backlash and anti-liberal reaction, the demand for more authoritarian forms of order and for policies promising a return of certainty, identity, and control is strengthened (NORRIS & INGLEHART, 2019).

The second manifestation of value erosion is the relativization of aggression and selective morality in the evaluation of international events. If part of the public can justify or downplay Russian aggression against Ukraine by referring to "Western provocation," "Russia's security concerns," or an alleged "historical right," this is not merely a different geopolitical opinion. Rather, it reflects a shift in the moral evaluation of political violence, in which the principles of territorial integrity, state sovereignty, and the protection of civilians become conditional and selective. Russian political framing of the conflict deliberately constructs the image of Russia as the defender and the West as the party responsible for escalation (KOLLÁR, 2022).

The third dimension is the weakening of trust in democratic institutions as carriers of truth, legitimacy, and public interest. As our study on disinformation shows, contemporary harmful information influence seeks to generate chaos, undermine trust in the state, and reinforce distrust toward public institutions. (KOLLÁR, 2022) This also corresponds with the broader literature on disinformation, according to which its effect lies not only in persuading people of specific falsehoods, but also in dismantling the shared epistemic framework upon which democratic politics rests (FREELON & WELLS, 2020; BENNETT & LIVINGSTON, 2018).

Based on the above, it may be concluded that Russophilia is a manifestation of the value erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area in at least three senses: it normalizes an authoritarian model of power, relativizes aggression, and grows out of distrust in democratic institutions, which it simultaneously reproduces in return.

Russophilia as a Manifestation of the Identity Erosion of the Euro-Atlantic Area

If the previous section demonstrated that Russophilia is closely linked to the weakening of normative consensus, this section seeks to show its second dimension, namely its connection to the identity erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area. Values and identity cannot be strictly separated here. Democratic values are not merely a set of rules, but also a component of collective self-understanding.

By *identity erosion* we mean the gradual weakening of the sense of belonging to the Euro-Atlantic political and civilizational space. This does not concern only the relationship with institutions such as the EU and NATO, but also a deeper level of collective self-understanding. The identity of the Euro-Atlantic area is based on the idea that its members share a certain historical-political destiny, an institutional framework, and a set of legitimizing principles (RISSE, 2010). Once these processes weaken or are called into question, space emerges for competing identities and counter-identifications.

Russophilia, in this sense, often appears as a form of negative identity. Its core need not primarily be love for Russia, but rather the rejection of the West as a frame of reference. A segment of society ceases to identify with the notion of the

"political West" and begins to search for an alternative civilizational anchoring. In such a situation, Russia may appear culturally closer, historically more authentic, or morally more intelligible than liberal and pluralist Western democracies. Laruelle points out that the concept of the "Russian world" is effective precisely because it functions not only as an instrument of foreign policy, but also as an identity offer for groups that feel alienated from the dominant Western model of modernization (LARUELLE, 2015).

The identity erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area is manifested primarily in several interrelated processes. The first is the weakening of civic and constitutional identity in favour of a resentment-based identity. Instead of identification with the democratic order and its institutions, an identity grounded in feelings of grievance, threat, and cultural loss is strengthened. Mounk, as well as Norris and Inglehart, show that populist and anti-liberal currents draw their strength precisely from a sense of cultural displacement and resistance to a pluralist order (MOUNK, 2018; NORRIS & INGLEHART, 2019).

The second process is the externalization of identity, that is, the relocation of the reference point outside one's own political space. In stable democratic communities, the legitimate political order is perceived as "ours," even when it is the subject of criticism. Under conditions of identity erosion, however, the opposite phenomenon occurs, that domestic institutions come to be perceived as alien or imposed, while an external actor may be idealized as the bearer of authenticity and order. Sympathy toward Russia thus means that the symbolic source of legitimacy is shifting from one's own Euro-Atlantic framework to an external civilizational center.

The third process is the emergence of a hybrid or fragmented identity. Formally, a society may be part of Euro-Atlantic structures, yet symbolically and discursively, a segment of its population no longer identifies with this space. The result is not always a complete change of identity, but rather an internal contradiction: "we are in the EU and NATO, but we do not belong to the West." Such an environment is, at the same time, one of high vulnerability to strategic narratives that offer a simple and emotionally powerful alternative.

Security Implications of Russophilia for the Euro-Atlantic Area

If Russophilia is interpreted as a manifestation of the value and identity erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area, then its consequences cannot be limited merely to the sphere of public opinion or ideological preference. It is a phenomenon with clear security implications as well. These are manifested primarily in the weakening of societal resilience, in complicating the strategic communication of democratic states, in undermining political consensus on questions of security orientation, and, ultimately, in reducing the coherence of the Euro-Atlantic community itself.

The first security implication is the weakening of the societal and political resilience of democratic states. The modern security environment is characterized

by the fact that the boundary between the external and internal dimensions of security is becoming increasingly blurred. Hybrid influence targets not only the military capacities of the state, but also its institutional legitimacy, public discourse, social cohesion, and society's ability to distinguish between legitimate plurality and manipulative influence. Paul and Matthews point out that contemporary information operations function through high volume and frequency, multiple channels, and a low commitment to factual consistency, which makes them considerably more difficult to counter through traditional rebuttal methods (PAUL & MATTHEWS, 2016). In such an environment, Russophilia acts as an amplifier of vulnerability, because it makes part of society fundamentally more receptive to the narratives disseminated by a hostile actor.

The second implication is the disruption of the shared epistemic framework without which democratic decision-making cannot function over the long term. Democracy presupposes disagreement over solutions, but not the complete collapse of consensus regarding basic facts, the legitimacy of institutions, and the rules of political competition. Bennett and Livingston warn that the contemporary "disinformation order" weakens precisely those intermediary institutions that historically stabilized the public sphere and enabled societies to produce a shared understanding of reality (BENNETT & LIVINGSTON, 2018). If Russophilia leads part of the audience systematically to reject the credibility of the media, expert communities, or democratic institutions and instead to adopt pro-Russian interpretive frameworks, a security problem arises in the fullest sense of the term.

The third implication is the complication of the strategic communication of the state and its allies. If a society is internally fragmented and part of the audience rejects in advance the authority of state institutions, defence structures, or allied commitments, the state's ability to explain its security decisions is fundamentally diminished. In such an environment, strategic communication cannot be reduced to the technical refutation of false claims; it must work with values, trust, identity, and long-term narrative consistency. In this context, strategic communication is one of the key instruments for countering disinformation, since disinformation campaigns often do not target isolated falsehoods, but rather seek to construct a broader harmful narrative.

The fourth security implication is the weakening of the internal coherence of the Euro-Atlantic area. Security communities rest not only on formal treaties, but also on the expectation of mutual solidarity and a shared identity (DEUTSCH et al. 1957; ADLER & BARNETT, 1998). If attitudes spread within the member societies of the EU and NATO that legitimize Russia's geopolitical objectives, relativize allied commitments, or delegitimize the transatlantic bond itself, then the political capacity of these organizations to act in unity is weakened as well.

Discussion and Conclusion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Russophilia may be interpreted both as a manifestation and as an amplifier of the value and identity erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area. Such a conclusion, however, requires several important clarifications. First, it must be emphasized that not every criticism of the West, the EU, NATO, or liberal democracy is automatically an expression of Russophilia. The democratic political sphere is founded on plurality, contestation, and the legitimate possibility of rejecting policies or ideological trends. From an analytical point of view, it would be erroneous to equate every conservative, sovereigntist, or anti-establishment position with a pro-Russian orientation.

At the same time, however, the opposite risk also applies: the underestimation of Russophilia as a security-relevant phenomenon. If this phenomenon is interpreted merely as an "alternative opinion" without regard to its narrative sources, value implications, and practical effects, its broader significance escapes attention. The issue is not simply whether someone holds a more positive attitude toward Russia, but whether, together with this attitude, they also adopt narratives that relativize aggression, weaken trust in democratic institutions, and call into question the legitimacy of the Euro-Atlantic community.

The present text does not claim that Russophilia is the primary cause of the value and identity erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area. More accurately, it should be understood as both a symptom and a multiplier of already ongoing processes. Russophilia emerges in an environment in which there is already a crisis of trust, fatigue with democratic procedures, fragmentation of the public sphere, and identity insecurity. At the same time, however, it deepens these processes in return by providing an external point of reference for anti-liberal and anti-Western attitudes.

The aim of the present article was to analyse Russophilia as a manifestation of the value and identity erosion of the Euro-Atlantic area. The analysis has shown that contemporary Russophilia cannot be reduced to cultural affinity toward Russia, historical closeness, or an isolated geopolitical preference. In the current security and political context, it assumes the character of a broader ideological and identity-based phenomenon that is closely interconnected with the crisis of trust in democratic institutions, the weakening of normative consensus regarding liberal democracy, and the growing receptiveness to Russian strategic narratives.

We have shown that Russophilia is a manifestation of value erosion in at least three dimensions: it normalizes the authoritarian model of power, relativizes aggression, and grows out of distrust toward democratic institutions. At the same time, it is a manifestation of identity erosion, since it appears as a form of counter-identification with the "political West," as an alternative civilizational anchoring for groups dissatisfied with liberal democracy, and as a mechanism through which belonging to the Euro-Atlantic community is weakened.

The security implications of this phenomenon are evident. Russophilia weakens societal resilience, complicates the strategic communication of the state, disrupts allied cohesion, and increases the effectiveness of cognitive and narrative influence conducted by the Russian Federation. Information operations are aimed at deepening polarization, weakening trust in democratic institutions, and undermining the cohesion of the transatlantic community.

Based on the analysis conducted, it may therefore be concluded that contemporary Russophilia in the Euro-Atlantic area appears above all as both a symptom and an accelerator of the already ongoing erosion of values and identity. It is not the sole cause of this erosion, but it functions as one of the mechanisms through which the normative cohesion of democratic societies and their resilience to external influence are weakened. The response to this phenomenon therefore cannot be exclusively repressive or purely technical. It is essential to strengthen strategic communication, media and civic literacy, trust in democratic institutions, and the ability of the Euro-Atlantic area to articulate its own positive identity in a convincing manner.

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THE SCHARFF TECHNIQUE IN HUMINT ELICITATION

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Introduction

The Scharff technique has attracted increasing attention in the HUMINT literature as a non-coercive approach to elicitation that relies on interpersonal management and strategic communication rather than pressure-based questioning. This section outlines the main elements of the technique and considers the psychological processes that may help explain its effectiveness, particularly in relation to selected concepts from classical psychological theory.
In recent years, the Scharff technique has attracted growing interest among both practitioners and researchers concerned with intelligence interviewing and elicitation (GRANHAG, 2024; GRANHAG et al, 2020). Developed by Luftwaffe

interrogator Hanns Joachim Scharff (1907-1992) during the Second World War, the method became known for its use in non-coercive interviews with Allied prisoners of war. Rather than relying on confrontation, Scharff favoured conversational, rapport-based exchanges that often produced operationally useful information (GRANHAG et al., 2015a).

One of the distinctive features of the technique is that it seeks to reduce the resistance commonly associated with formal questioning. Instead of overt pressure, it uses indirect elicitation strategies that encourage the source to speak more freely, sometimes without fully appreciating the informational value of what has been disclosed (GRANHAG et al., 2015b). At its core, the method addresses a familiar psychological tension: whether to reveal, withhold, confirm, or correct information during an interaction perceived as sensitive. In the literature, this approach is usually described through five interrelated tactics: rapport and trust building, narrative-based elicitation, the creation of an illusion of knowledge, the use of confirmatory or corrective statements instead of direct questioning, and the concealment of informational salience (GRANHAG et al., 2016). These tactics are intended to reduce defensiveness, although the extent to which this effect depends on situational and individual variables remains open to question.

Rapport and trust

Rapport and trust are central to the Scharff approach because disclosure is more likely when the interaction is experienced as non-threatening and socially manageable. In this context, rapport may be understood as an interactional state marked by attentiveness, responsiveness, and a degree of emotional synchrony between the parties. Such relational cues communicate psychological safety and affirm the Contact's dignity and autonomy, thereby enhancing cooperation. Trust is built upon the perception that the operative is competent, reliable, and acting in good faith (NEEQUAYE & MAC GIOLLA, 2022; LEVINE, 2022).

In applied settings, the operative deliberately avoids adversarial signals and instead cultivates a warm, respectful atmosphere, reducing the Contact's sense of threat and anxiety. This perception of safety facilitates cognitive relaxation and greater openness. As rapport deepens, spontaneous and voluntary information sharing becomes increasingly likely, requiring minimal prompting or challenge.

Narrative elicitation

The second pillar replaces the conventional question–answer interrogation format with a narrative-based model. Instead of posing direct queries, the operative delivers plausible statements or anecdotes that invite elaboration. This structure reframes the interaction as a collaborative dialogue, lowering the stakes and encouraging spontaneous participation. From a psychological perspective, the narrative format changes the expectations attached to the exchange. Conventional

interrogation formats often signal asymmetry and scrutiny. By contrast, a narrative frame can make the exchange appear less adversarial and less consequential, which may in turn lower resistance.

The illusion of knowledge

The third tactic aims to create the impression that the operative is already well informed. This can encourage the Contact to correct, refine, or casually supplement what appears to be already established knowledge. The illusion is sustained through the delivery of well-informed and specific statements, although its effectiveness likely depends on the Contact's prior knowledge and situational awareness. The tactic draws on cognitive heuristics and perspective-taking. The operative must anticipate how the Contact is likely to interpret the exchange and shape statements accordingly. When this is done successfully, the Contact may confirm or correct details with limited awareness of their informational value. In this way, the operative's apparent knowledge can reduce the Contact's sense of control while preserving rapport.

Confirmatory or corrective statements

The fourth element relies on the fact that people often feel compelled to respond to incomplete, inaccurate, or suggestive statements, even when no direct question has been asked. These responses, which are not elicited by direct questioning, reveal valuable information through tone, expression, or micro-behaviours. Watzlawick et al. (1993) argued that "*one cannot not communicate.*" Even silence, changes in tone, facial cues, or body posture become communicative signals. The operative's attentiveness to these subtle cues - supported by well-developed observational and emotional intelligence skills - allows for nuanced interpretation and extraction of information.

Hiding the significance of information

The fifth and final component involves masking the operative's true informational goals. When the Contact discloses valuable content, the operative displays no visible interest or surprise, sustaining the illusion that the information is already known. This reduces the Contact's anxiety about exposure and promotes continued cooperation. By maintaining a perceived balance of knowledge, the Contact feels secure and autonomous. The operative's feigned indifference maintains the emotional equilibrium and subtly incentivises further disclosure.

Psychological impact studies of the scharff technique

A substantial empirical literature supports the efficacy of the Scharff technique in both experimental and applied HUMINT settings. Reviews conducted under the auspices of the U.S. High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group (HIG) identified a number of studies specifically examining the method, with findings generally favouring Scharff-based approaches over more conventional formats in terms of information yield, relevance, and perceived cooperation (HIG, 2016; GRANHAG et al., 2016). It should also be noted that most studies rely on simulated or semi-controlled environments, which may overestimate the technique's effectiveness under real operational constraints. This means that questions of ecological validity remain important, particularly when considering cultural variation and the unpredictability of real operational settings.

Training and operational effectiveness

One practical advantage of the method is that it appears to be learnable even through relatively brief training. Granhag (2024) demonstrated that even brief training - such as a three-hour session - enabled law enforcement and military personnel to deploy the technique effectively. These trained operatives asked fewer direct questions but secured more relevant disclosures than untrained control groups. Crucially, Contacts underestimated how much they had revealed and were more willing to engage in future interactions. This suggests that the method enhances both effectiveness and sustainability by maintaining cooperation while concealing its own impact.

Reducing resistance and influence through rapport

Part of the technique's effect appears to depend on how the Contact comes to perceive the operative. The illusion of knowledge fosters a belief that the operative already knows essential facts, reducing the Contact's motivation to withhold information (LUKE, 2021). This perception is reinforced through narrative pacing, strategic feedback, and subtle mirroring. Studies by May et al. (2014) and Granhag et al. (2015a) confirm that even brief, spontaneous affirmations from Contacts often contain valuable information, though the source may believe they are merely confirming pre-known facts.

Information quality and strategic yield

Across several studies, Scharff-based interviews have been associated with more useful and more relevant disclosures than traditional questioning formats. Oleszkiewicz et al. (2014) found that the method's strategic effectiveness lies in balancing cognitive load, reducing anxiety, and preserving the Contact's

autonomy. These conditions promote disclosure of novel, high-value material. Luke (2021), in a meta-analysis of 13 experimental studies, affirmed the technique's superior outcomes across diverse operational environments, particularly in partially cooperative scenarios. Tribbels and Michels (2025) found that rapport-based methods - like Scharff's - yielded not only more accurate and abundant information, but did so with significantly lower psychological strain. These findings underscore that non-coercive, evidence-informed techniques outperform conventional methods both ethically and practically. Together, these findings validate the Scharff technique as a psychologically sophisticated and operationally robust tool for a wide range of HUMINT tasks, including counterterrorism, witness debriefing, and source handling.

Scharff technique in classical psychological approaches

The Scharff technique can also be read through several established psychological traditions, although these frameworks do not explain its effects in equal measure. While these frameworks offer useful interpretative angles, they are not fully compatible at a theoretical level, and their explanatory power in operational HUMINT contexts remains uneven. From the perspective of learning theory, the technique's low-pressure, rapport-oriented environment acts as positive reinforcement. Cooperative behaviours are rewarded through politeness and attention, while defensive reactions are not reinforced, thus extinguishing them over time (OLESZKIEWICZ et al., 2014). Cognitive psychology offers additional insight. The illusion of omniscience alters mental representations, prompting the Contact to spontaneously complete narratives or fill perceived gaps. These processes are governed by both automatic mechanisms and conscious self-monitoring (GRANHAG & HARTWIG, 2008). Perspective-taking - the cognitive-emotional skill of inferring another's mental state - is integral to anticipating and circumventing evasive behaviours such as minimisation or diversion (GRANHAG et al., 2015a). This anticipatory capacity allows operatives to adapt dynamically and maintain the interaction's effectiveness. Self-regulation theory further elucidates how individuals monitor and adjust internal goals and emotions, especially in ambiguous or high-stress contexts (CARVER & SCHEIER, 2006). The ability to modulate arousal and behavioural inhibition directly influences the likelihood of information sharing. From a humanistic perspective, empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard help explain why resistance may decrease in such interactions. These conditions enhance trust and reduce resistance, echoing the therapeutic alliance observed in clinical contexts (ROGERS, 1957; LEVINE, 2022).

Finally, psychodynamic theory explains how unconscious factors - such as attachment history, defence mechanisms, and transference - may shape interactions with authority figures. By minimising threat and fostering empathic engagement, the Scharff technique reduces these unconscious barriers.

Mentalisation - the capacity to understand one's own and others' mental states - becomes crucial in navigating interpersonal dynamics during elicitation.
These perspectives help explain why the technique may be effective, although they should be treated as complementary rather than unified explanations.

Conclusions

The Scharff technique represents a well-supported and increasingly influential approach to HUMINT elicitation, although its effectiveness is likely contingent on contextual and interpersonal variables. Its core components - rapport building, narrative elicitation, the illusion of knowledge, non-interrogative statement testing, and the masking of information goals - together form a synergistic structure that lowers resistance and fosters meaningful disclosures (GRANHAG et al., 2016; OLESZKIEWICZ et al., 2014).

Overall, the Scharff technique appears to offer a psychologically informed and operationally useful model of HUMINT elicitation. Its emphasis on rapport, indirect elicitation, and the careful management of informational salience makes it particularly relevant in settings where overt pressure would be counterproductive. At the same time, its effectiveness depends on context, training, and interpersonal skill, and further field-sensitive research would help clarify both the strengths and the limits of the approach.

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HIGH-SECURITY PSYCHIATRIC WARDS IN HUNGARY

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Introduction

In Hungary, the second half of the twentieth century was still characterized by the expansion of institutional psychiatric care. Across Europe, mental institutions continued to shape the organization of treatment, as the limited availability of effective therapeutic tools led to the dominance of removal from society and containment practices (FOUCAULT 2001, 32; LAFFERTON, 2022, 85). These institutions functioned as heterotopias of deviance, reinforcing widespread practices of social isolation (FOUCAULT, 1989, 24). One of the enduring risks of psychiatry is its potential to operate as an extralegal system of control (KEPE, 2023, 66). The legal status of psychiatric patients may create conditions in which individuals, already marginalized, become particularly vulnerable within institutional settings. Consequently, the design of secure psychiatric units requires a complex approach that addresses containment while promoting reintegration into society. Previous research has demonstrated that the spatial organization of wards and the broader socio-physical environment significantly influence patient outcomes (ITTELSON et al., 1970, 259).

In recent years, Hungarian scholarship has also increasingly engaged with the historical and sociological analysis of psychiatry, reflecting diverse methodological approaches and interpretative frameworks (CSIKÓS, 2024, 45; CSIKÓS, 2026, 10; KOVÁCS, 2026a, 180; KOVÁCS, 2026b, 60).

In Hungary, one of the first comprehensive sociographic analyses of psychiatric institutions was conducted by Bakonyi (1984, 112), who revealed the internal dynamics and hidden structures of closed wards. These institutions have often risked becoming "total institutions" in the sense described by Goffman (1961: 13), where hierarchical control and isolation may foster oppressive practices. Following the political transition, structural changes in psychiatric care intensified. While in many Western countries deinstitutionalization was accompanied by the development of alternative community-based services (Bachrach 1978: 574; Heo et al. 2021: 5), in Hungary the process took a different trajectory. Rather than a gradual transformation, numerous psychiatric wards were closed after 1990, culminating in the dissolution of the National Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology (hereinafter: OPNI).

The closure of OPNI created a significant gap in the institutional system. In particular, the disappearance of sub-intensive units and closed wards made it increasingly difficult to accommodate patients posing a risk to themselves or others. This paper examines the emergence of high-security psychiatric units as a response to this institutional gap, focusing on their legal framework and functional role within the Hungarian healthcare system.

A particularly important aspect of the institutional transformation concerns the operation of the National Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology (OPNI) before its closure. At Lipótmező, approximately 800–1,000 patients were treated in both acute psychiatric and chronic care units. The institute comprised thirteen psychiatric wards and three neurology wards, each with a specialized profile, which together created a unique professional synergy. This institutional structure also played a crucial role in medical training. Resident physicians had the opportunity to gain experience across the full spectrum of psychiatry and neurology, enabling them to develop an integrated approach to patient care. The closure of the institute, therefore, did not merely reduce capacity but also disrupted a complex system of professional knowledge transfer. One of the significant consequences of this process was the elimination of sub-intensive units operating within active wards, which had previously served to isolate and manage severely ill patients. In parallel, most closed wards in the classical sense were also discontinued, further limiting the system's ability to accommodate high-risk individuals.

Following the reorganization, forensic psychiatric functions—such as psychiatric observation and the treatment of inmates—were partially transferred to Semmelweis University and to the Judicial Observation and Psychiatric Treatment Institute (IMEI), albeit with substantially reduced capacity. At the same time, the system failed to adequately address patients who, while in a psychotic state and posing a danger to themselves or others, had not committed a criminal offence. In such cases, placement in a forensic institution would have been disproportionate, as the primary function of forensic psychiatric examination is to assess criminal responsibility and the individual's capacity for discernment at the time of the offence.

The establishment of an intermediate institutional form can therefore be interpreted as a necessary response to this gap. This inherently dual (hybrid) structure incorporates certain elements of the penal system—such as enhanced security measures, surveillance, and restricted movement—while formally remaining within the domain of civil healthcare. As such, it entails not only physical restraint but also a significant restriction of personal liberty.

The Legal Framework of the Secure Psychiatric Unit

The rights of psychiatric patients, as well as the definitions of dangerous and immediately dangerous behaviour, are regulated by Act CLIV of 1997 on Health

Care (hereinafter: Health Act). Chapter X of the Health Act specifically addresses the medical treatment and care of psychiatric patients and distinguishes between two key categories. "Dangerous behaviour" refers to situations in which a patient, as a result of a mental disorder, may pose a significant threat to their own or others' life, physical integrity, or health. In such cases, the absence of treatment may lead to further deterioration; however, immediate institutional admission is not necessarily required. By contrast, "immediately dangerous behaviour" describes cases in which an acute mental disorder results in a direct and serious threat to life or physical integrity. In these situations, the absence of immediate treatment would lead to further deterioration, necessitating urgent institutional care. Individuals falling into the second category must be transported to the territorially competent psychiatric ward in accordance with the applicable referral procedure. Importantly, this classification does not automatically entail placement in a high-security unit; rather, it determines the urgency and legal basis of admission.

Pursuant to Section 196 of the Health Act, admission to institutional psychiatric care may take place in three forms:

a) with the patient's consent or at the request of an authorized person (hereinafter: voluntary treatment);
b) in cases of immediately dangerous behaviour, based on the decision of the attending physician (hereinafter: emergency treatment);
c) based on a court order (hereinafter: mandatory treatment).

Admission to a secure psychiatric unit may also occur with the patient's consent in cases where immediately dangerous behaviour is identified during emergency care or rescue operations. The third category represents a measure of a forensic nature, applied to individuals who, having committed a criminal offence, are deemed not criminally responsible due to their mental condition and are therefore subject to compulsory treatment subject to periodic judicial review. The legality of involuntary psychiatric treatment is ensured through mandatory judicial oversight. This requires the regular review of the necessity of treatment, taking into account the opinions of a judge or court clerk and an independent psychiatric expert. If the legal grounds for treatment persist, the measure may be extended. Compulsory medical treatment is typically preceded by a period of psychiatric observation in a designated institution, usually lasting 30 days, with the possibility of a further 30-day extension. During this period, an expert assessment is conducted to determine whether the individual possessed the capacity to understand the consequences of their actions at the time of the offence. If criminal responsibility is excluded, compulsory treatment is ordered.

In the case of acute psychiatric patients, physical restraint measures—including mechanical restraint (e.g., straps or bed rails) and chemical restraint (e.g., antipsychotics or benzodiazepine-based sedatives)—may be applied where necessary, as further specified in Decree No. 60/2004 (VII. 6.) of the Ministry of

Social Affairs and Labour. However, such interventions are subject to strict safeguards: their use must be justified, regularly reviewed, and accompanied by continuous monitoring of the patient's condition and vital signs.

The Significance of Closed Wards and Secure Psychiatric Units in Hungary

Although high-security psychiatric units are classified as restrictive measures, in line with international practice, their function extends beyond mere containment and includes preventive and rehabilitative objectives. In institutions such as the Judicial Observation and Psychiatric Treatment Institute (IMEI), the primary aims include the prevention of recidivism and the promotion of resocialization (Almeida et al. 2017: 60). In this sense, secure psychiatric units may be understood as "gatekeeping" institutions: they are designed to prevent the commission of further offences and, in cases of prior convictions, to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. At the same time, they operate at the intersection of healthcare and penal control. While their organizational logic shares certain characteristics with the penal system—such as heightened security, surveillance, and restricted movement—they remain formally embedded within the framework of civil healthcare.

From a theoretical perspective, these institutions may be interpreted as heterotopias of deviance (FOUCAULT, 2001, 32), characterized by the coexistence of therapeutic and disciplinary functions. Although they differ from classical total institutions in certain respects, the presence of strict control mechanisms raises concerns similar to those identified by Goffman (1961, 17). In particular, the risk of reinforcing social exclusion and stigmatization must be considered (BROWN, 1995, 40).

The establishment of high-security psychiatric units in Hungary was intended to address a structural gap within the institutional system. According to the official justification, the aim was to reduce the burden on general psychiatric wards and to ensure the safe and immediate isolation of patients exhibiting violent behaviour, in compliance with strict security standards. As no comparable "civilian" high-security facilities had previously existed in Hungary, the introduction of such units required the definition of specific legal, organizational, and infrastructural requirements.

The relevant ministerial decree, in particular, Decree No. 41/2023 (IX. 27.) of the Ministry of the Interior facilitated the creation of this new institutional framework by amending sectoral legislation governing psychiatric care. Its primary objective was to ensure legal harmonization and to establish the operational conditions of specialized high-security psychiatric units.

Importantly, treatment within these units is not limited to the application of restrictive measures. A wide range of therapeutic interventions is available, reflecting the rehabilitative dimension of care. These include biopsychosocial

therapies, physical and sports activities, art therapies (such as music and visual arts), as well as individual and group psychotherapies.

In addition, the physical environment of the units is subject to specific requirements. High-security wards must include single-occupancy, vandal-resistant patient rooms, while security-level wards must provide specially designed, low-stimulation isolation units. These infrastructural conditions are intended to ensure both patient safety and staff protection.

Overall, the guarantees embedded in the regulatory framework aim to ensure that security measures are implemented in a manner that is proportionate, controlled, and compatible with the principles of healthcare provision.

Summary

This study examined the preventive isolation of patients in a dangerous state from a historical perspective, with particular emphasis on developments in Hungary after 1990. The closure of the National Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology (OPNI) led to a significant reduction in the number of closed psychiatric wards, which in turn created substantial challenges in the placement of patients exhibiting self-harming or socially dangerous behaviour.

The analysis highlighted the interaction between two key subsystems: healthcare and the correctional system. While the Judicial Psychiatric Treatment and Observation Institute performs essential forensic functions, including psychiatric observation and the treatment of inmates, within the correctional framework, its limited capacity and specific mandate make it unsuitable for addressing the broader needs of high-risk psychiatric patients. As a result, a structural gap emerged within the care system.

The establishment of the High-Security Psychiatric Unit within the National Institute of Psychiatry and Addictology can be interpreted as a response to this long-standing institutional deficiency. Its primary function is to provide a centralized facility for the admission and treatment of patients from across the country whose condition requires enhanced supervision and security.

Although the legal framework governing admission and treatment is clearly defined in the Health Act, the restriction of personal liberty extends beyond the application of physical restraint. It also involves limitations on freedom of movement, including patients' inability to leave the ward. Such restrictions must therefore comply with the fundamental principles of necessity and proportionality, which must be satisfied simultaneously throughout the course of treatment.

Overall, the study demonstrates that high-security psychiatric units occupy a complex position at the intersection of healthcare and control. While they address a critical gap in the institutional system, their operation raises important legal and ethical questions regarding the balance between patient rights, public safety, and the objectives of psychiatric care.

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RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST GROUPS IN SLOVAKIA: THE ROLE OF RUSOPHILIA IN CONTEMPORARY RADICALISM

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Introduction

In recent years, pro-Russian narratives and geopolitical framings that challenge Euro-Atlantic institutions have increasingly been incorporated into far-right political discourse in Europe. Slovakia is a particularly interesting case in this regard. Several political figures operating within or on the margins of democratic processes employ narratives that depict the Russian Federation as a culturally and historically aligned partner, while simultaneously criticising the EU, NATO, and liberal democratic principles. Russophilia is not a new phenomenon in Slovak political culture. Its historical roots can be traced back to the 19th-century national revival movement, when the intellectual and political elite often viewed Russia as a potential protector of the Slavic nations under the Habsburg monarchy. These sentiments evolved further during the twentieth century, through the interwar period, the communist era, and the post-1989 transformation. In contemporary political discourse, these historical narratives are frequently reinterpreted and exploited by politicians seeking to promote alternative geopolitical visions for Slovakia. This analysis examines how contemporary far-right actors in Slovakia incorporate Russophile narratives into their political communication. The research focuses on four political groups that are often categorised as far-right: Kotleba - People's Party Our Slovakia (Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko), The Republic (Republika), Home – National Party (Domov – Národná strana) and Slovak Revival Movement (Slovenské Hnutie Obrody). The study uses public statements, campaign materials and online communications to explore how Russia is portrayed within their ideological frameworks and the extent to which these narratives contribute to political mobilisation.

Applying the Discourse-Historical Approach to Far-Right Communication

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main method to look at how language, power and ideology work together in political communication. CDA offers a systematic way of understanding how discourse contributes to the

construction of social and political realities, particularly by revealing how linguistic practices either reproduce or challenge power relations. By focusing on the strategic use of language, CDA helps to identify how political actors legitimise specific worldviews, shape collective identities and influence public perception (WODAK et al., 1999).

Within this framework, the study applies the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which was developed by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl (2009). The DHA combines detailed linguistic analysis with a strong emphasis on historical and political context, enabling a thorough examination of how discourse evolves over time. This approach is particularly relevant for analysing political narratives, as it connects discursive practices to collective memory, identity construction and broader ideological developments.

The DHA is particularly well-suited to examining Russophilia within Slovak far-right discourse. This is because it enables the systematic identification of the linguistic and argumentative strategies through which Russia is presented as a geopolitical partner and a civilisational ally. In the context of significant events such as the war in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and wider tensions between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic sphere, this approach allows for a multi-layered analysis of political narratives. Recurring representations, such as portraying Russia as a protector of traditional values, a defender of the Slavic world, or a counterweight to the liberal West, serve to legitimise Russophilia within a broader geopolitical and moral framework.

These narratives frequently rely on a dichotomous "us versus them" logic, contrasting the "Slavic world" with external actors while portraying Russia as a culturally and historically close partner of Slovakia. Such representations are reinforced through rhetorical and emotional strategies, including civilisation metaphors, historical analogies, and moralising appeals to sovereignty and tradition. These strategies present Russia not only as a strategic ally, but also as a bearer of shared values and historical continuity. The DHA framework identifies several key strategies for systematically analysing such discursive constructions:

Discursive Strategy	Analytical Focus	Function in Rusophilic Discourse	Example in Contemporary Political Narratives
Nomination (Referential Strategy)	How actors, groups or phenomena are named and categorized.	Constructs symbolic alliances and identities between Slovakia and Russia.	Russia described as a *"Slavic brother"*, *"strategic partner"*, or part of the broader Slavic world.
Predication (Attribution Strategy)	What qualities or characteristics are attributed to actors.	Builds a positive image of Russia and a moral contrast with Western actors.	Russia framed as *"protector of traditional values*, *defender of sovereignty,"* or *"counterbalance to Western liberalism."*

Argumentation (Topoi)	Logical patterns used to justify claims and positions.	Legitimizes pro-Russian positions through narratives about security, sovereignty or historical ties.	Argument that cooperation with Russia protects *national interests*, energy security, or geopolitical stability.
Perspectivization (Framing Strategy)	The perspective or viewpoint from which events are described.	Frames geopolitical conflicts through a narrative sympathetic to Russian positions.	Conflicts interpreted as results of Western expansion or geopolitical pressure on Russia.
Intensification / Mitigation	Strengthening or softening particular statements.	Emphasizes the importance of relations with Russia while minimizing criticism.	Strong rhetorical emphasis on "historical friendship" with Russia while downplaying controversial policies.

Table created by author, using DHA by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl (2009)

Clear conceptual definitions are essential for the systematic study of the far right. In this regard, Roger Griffin's work on fascism provides a key analytical foundation. Griffin (1991) defines fascism as a revolutionary form of ultranationalism centred on the concept of national rebirth (palingenesis), involving radical societal transformation and the creation of a new version of man. However, Griffin also cautions against the overuse of the term, arguing that applying it too broadly to all forms of radical nationalism diminishes its analytical precision. Many contemporary developments in Europe are more accurately understood as forms of right-wing populism.

This phenomenon typically emphasises cultural homogeneity, nostalgia for a perceived national golden age, and opposition to globalisation and migration. While it often challenges liberal institutions and political elites, it generally lacks the revolutionary ambition associated with fascism; however, it can contribute to the broader legitimisation of more extreme positions. Building on this distinction, Cas Mudde (2019) differentiates between the extreme right and the radical right. While the extreme right rejects democracy outright, the radical right operates within democratic systems but opposes key liberal principles, such as minority rights and the rule of law. Mudde also links the rise of the radical right to structural developments, including the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, and the European migrant crisis. In the Slovak context, these theoretical insights help to explain the particular form that far-right discourse takes and helps to define which actors are within the far-right spectre according to theories presented by both Roger Griffin and Cas Mudde.

The current Slovak far-right has its roots in Slovak Togetherness

The ideological foundations of contemporary Slovak far-right politics can be traced back to the Slovak Togetherness (Slovenská Pospolitosť) movement. This served as an early organisational and ideological platform for nationalist activism

in the 2000s. This legacy was later formalised within parliamentary politics by Marian Kotleba's party, the People's Party Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko - ĽSNS), which was founded after he split from the original movement (NOCIAR, 2012). The party's entry into parliament in 2016 was a significant turning point, as individuals widely considered to be extremists gained representation within democratic institutions. ĽSNS in their ideology combines ethnonationalism, authoritarian tendencies, and anti-liberal rhetoric (ŽEŇUCHOVÁ, 2020). In line with Roger Griffin's framework, elements of palingenetic ultranationalism are evident in its emphasis on national rebirth, cultural homogeneity, and rejection of liberal democratic values.

At the same time, the party corresponds to Cas Mudde's concept of the radical right, operating within democratic structures while challenging principles such as minority rights and political pluralism. Within this ideological framework, party representatives often interpret the war in Ukraine as being primarily caused by NATO expansion, portraying Russia as reacting to geopolitical pressure rather than as the main aggressor. This perspective is reinforced through references to Slavic solidarity, which fosters a sense of shared identity between Russians and Ukrainians, while rejecting the notion of Ukraine as a victim of aggression. For example, Marian Kotleba stated: *'As a member of a Slavic nation, I fully understand the struggle now taking place in Ukraine.*[1] This quote is from Kotleba's letter to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych during the 2014 protests in Ukraine.

The party has also repeatedly criticised European Union sanctions against Russia, arguing that they harm Slovak citizens more than Russia itself. The slogan *'For cooperation with Russia, against sanctions!*[2] encapsulates the position taken by this organisation in its 2019 campaign, and reflects its broader geopolitical orientation. At the same time, the party's communication often employs emotionally charged, civilisation-based language, as illustrated by the statement: *'The longer this conflict lasts, the more precious Christian and Slavic blood is shed in it.... Glory to the Slavs and peace to the world!'*[3]. Similarly, NATO is framed as a direct threat, as seen in the claim: *'The goal of NATO is to completely encircle the borders of the Russian Federation from the European side. It is therefore only a matter of time before Slovakia, as a NATO member, will be drawn into a war with Russia!'*[4]

[1] VRAŽDA, D. (2014). Kotleba píše ukrajinskému prezidentovi Janukovyčovi: Neustupujte. SME. https://domov.sme.sk/c/7086506/kotleba-pise-ukrajinskemu-prezidentovi-janukovycovi-neustupujte.html
[2] ŠNÍDL, V. (2019). Kotleba sa líškal proruským voličom, Rusi ho označili za extrémistu. Denník N. https://dennikn.sk/1473609/kotleba-sa-liskal-proruskym-volicom-rusi-ho-oznacili-za-extremistu/
[3] Noviny Ľudovej Strany Naše Slovensko. (2022). Volume 5, Number 1, March 2022. http://kotlebovci.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/noviny-marec-2022.pdf
[4] Noviny Ľudovej Strany Naše Slovensko. (2023). Volume 6, Number 2, September 2023. http://kotlebovci.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/noviny-september2023.pdf

The Republic as a dominant far-right player in Slovakia

In 2021, a significant faction split from the ĽSNS party to establish the new party, The Republic (Republika). Led by figures such as Milan Uhrík and Milan Mazurek, the new party represents a continuation rather than a rupture with the ideological framework of its predecessor. Although The Republic has sought to moderate its public image by abandoning explicit fascist symbolism and adopting a more professional style of political communication, this shift is widely interpreted as strategic rather than ideological. The party continues to exhibit core features associated with the radical right, including nativism, populist anti-elitism, and a "us versus them" narrative directed at political elites, minorities, and supranational institutions (RÁCZ, 2023). The Republic is also connected to smaller actors within the same ideological space, such as Home – National Party (Domov – Národná strana), led by Pavol Slota (TASR, 2024). Although electorally marginal, this party shares a similar nationalist orientation and promotes narratives centred on Slavic solidarity, national sovereignty, and closer relations with Russia. Its discourse focus on the broader patterns of ethnically defined nationalism and cultural conservatism that are characteristic of the radical right.

In its foreign policy communications, The Republic employs narratives that are similar to those previously associated with the ĽSNS, particularly with regard to the war in Ukraine and Russia's role in the international political arena. Party representatives often criticise what they describe as anti-Russian sentiment in European political and media discourse. For example, Milan Uhrík stated: *'In the EU, I stood up against the distasteful anti-Russian frenzy on behalf of Slovakia. It is frightening to see how bloodthirsty Eurofanatics are in their attacks against the Russian Federation'.*[5] Within such narratives, Russia is often portrayed as a victim of unjust targeting, framed in terms of a shared Slavic identity. This is reflected in the statement by former candidate for the party Tomáš Špaček: *'Russia, like other Slavic states, is our brother nation. For this reason, I am particularly sensitive to the West's efforts to destroy or weaken it.*[6] This positioning is further reinforced in political messaging, including slogans such as *'Most pro-Slavic candidate'*[7], and rhetorical questions that reframe perceived threats, like *'I refuse anti-Russian hysteria'*[8] or rhetorical questions that reframe perceived threats such as *'Do you also think that Slovakia should fear Brussels*

[5] Slovanské Noviny. (2021). Uhrík v EP: už toho protiruského besnenia stačilo. Je čas prestať počúvať Američanov. Available at: https://slovanskenoviny.sk/uhrik-v-ep-uz-toho-protiruskeho-besnenia-stacilo-je-cas-prestat-pocuvat-americanov [Cit. 24.03.2026].

[6] Slovanský Výbor. (2023). Post on Facebook. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/reel/234117435868180 [Cit. 24.03.2026].

[7] ŠNÍDL, V. (2023). Dve proruské strany sa hádajú, Uhrík považuje hlasy pre SNS za prepadnuté. Denník N. Available at: https://dennikn.sk/3413261/dve-proruske-strany-sa-hadaju-uhrik-povazuje-hlasy-pre-sns-za-prepadnute/ [Cit. 24.03.2026].

[8] Ibid. [Cit. 24.03.2026].

more than Russia?'[9] At the same time, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and claims of geopolitical hypocrisy appear in party communication. This is evident in Uhrík's statement: *'Being Russian in Ukraine today means being a highly persecuted person... I cannot imagine the regions of Donbas, Zaporizhia or Crimea being recaptured by the Ukrainian army and returned to Ukrainian influence. There would be genocide.'*[10] Such claims contribute to a narrative in which Russia is depicted as both a victim and a legitimate geopolitical actor, while the positions of the West and Ukraine are called into question.

Similarly, the Home – National Party as a party advocates for close cooperation and cultural ties with Russia within the Slavic community. Historical and civilisational ties are frequently talked about in the party's rhetoric, with Russia being presented as a natural partner for Slovakia. For instance, Pavol Slota said that *'The Slovak and Russian peoples are Slavic nations; together, we are one large ethnic family, and that should unite and bring us closer together,'*[11] framing bilateral relations in explicitly ethnic and cultural terms. This perspective is accompanied by criticism of Western influence. In another example, Slota claimed that *'there is also a very vocal and aggressive minority in Slovakia that has been influenced by anti-Russian propaganda...,'*[12] portraying pro-Western positions as misguided and externally driven. Finally, the party promotes broader geopolitical visions centred on Slavic unity, as seen in the following statement: *'If an inter-Slavic union were created, it would give rise to a geopolitical force that no one in the world could match. It is time for Slavic nations to unite and bring order to the world.'*[13] These narratives reinforce the idea of Russia as a central partner within a wider Slavic geopolitical and cultural space, while portraying Western institutions as destabilising competitors.

The Slovak Revival Movement adds antisemitic narratives

Another relevant player is the Slovak Revival Movement (Slovenské Hnutie Obrody -SHO), one of the most prominent and old far-right organisations in Slovakia. The movement openly glorifies the wartime Slovak state and its leader, Jozef Tiso, and regularly organises commemorative events associated with this period in history. Ideologically, the SHO promotes an authoritarian and ethnically

[9] LAUKOVÁ, L. (2026). Post on Facebook. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/LeaLaukovaRepublika/posts/pfbid0rR5SYNtg2gZVczY8AGCa82ys14xgga5bMBx5ATAg1ALWfkHfBL2YPTJHDVNAz1Aml [Cit. 24.03.2026].
[10] Slovanský Výbor. (2026). Milan Uhrík: Rozdelení Slovania sú v záujme Anglosasov | V centre diania. Youtube. Available at: https://youtu.be/_x0MzoeNTiQ [Cit. 24.03.2026].
[11] SLOTA, P. (2024). Fico ide žiadať Putina o pomoc. Blog Pravda. Available at: https://pavolslota.blog.pravda.sk/2024/12/21/fico-ide-ziadat-putina-o-pomoc [Cit. 24.03.2026].
[12] SLOTA, P. (2025). Zoroslav Kollár podpísal. Blog Pravda. Available at: https://pavolslota.blog.pravda.sk/2025/03/14/zoroslav-kollar-podpisal [Cit. 24.03.2026].
[13] SLOTA, P. (2025). BRICS fórum v Petrohrade. Blog Pravda. Available at: https://pavolslota.blog.pravda.sk/2025/11/25/brics-forum-v-petrohrade/ [Cit. 24.03.2026].

exclusive understanding of national identity, placing it at the radical end of the far-right spectrum. In theory, the SHO is closer to the extreme right because it challenges the legitimacy of pluralist democracy and exhibits elements of fascist-like nationalism through an emphasis on national regeneration and the idealisation of an authoritarian past (NOCIAR, 2012).

In its interpretation of international politics, the movement adopts a civilisation-based perspective, contrasting liberal Western societies with traditional value systems often associated with Russia. Within this framework, cooperation with Russia is justified by references to shared cultural identity, historical memory and resistance to the West's perceived moral decline. This orientation is reflected in statements such as: *'The SHO has long advocated a balanced foreign policy towards all parts of the world, Slavic mutuality, and cooperation between nations and states on the principle of equality,'*[14] which frames foreign policy in terms of balance and Slavic cooperation.

At the same time, the movement employs highly polarised rhetoric when discussing current geopolitical conflicts. For example, the war in Ukraine is not just presented as a political or territorial dispute; it is also presented as a clash of value systems. This is evident in the following statement: *'Ukraine is witnessing a clash between two value systems: a world of moral decadence, in which respect for traditional values such as family, ancestral heritage, and respect for elders is equated with extremism and obsolescence, and a world that actively protects its ancestral heritage, honours its national memory, respects its veterans, and educates its youth to be patriotic and to respect their elders... This conflict can end in two ways. First: Either the West and Russia will agree to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for their different ways of life... Or second, it will have to be decided once and for all who will own the future of the world, if any future is still possible.'*[15] Here, geopolitical tensions are framed as an existential struggle between competing civilisational models, reinforcing the idea of a dichotomy between a morally declining West and an alternative grounded in values. This narrative is accompanied by strong anti-Western and conspiratorial rhetoric. For example, it claims that *'Russia is not a security risk for Slovakia and the world. The security risk is the Jewish state and all those who support or turn a blind eye to its policy of genocide, the mass murder of civilians and the systematic violation of international law'*.[16] Such statements reject dominant Western security perspectives and redirect perceived threats towards other actors,

[14] SKÝPALA, P. (2020). Matovičova vláda. Naď a Korčok: Rusko je náš nepriateľ! SHO: Ste vojnoví štváči. SHO webpage. Available at: https://sho.sk/matovicova-vlada-nad-a-korcok-rusko-je-nas-nepriatel-sho-ste-vojnovi-stvaci/ [Cit. 24.03.2026].
[15] ŠVEC, R. (2023). Post on Facebook. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/robertsvecsho/posts/pfbid04oF7LLvnRKCDcGDMiq49SEJtz9gesexpFJVsGkbhxTMwWXzpiX8VZmqZQXkdvA7nl [Cit. 24.03.2026].
[16] ŠVEC, R. (2025). Noviny Právo Národa: Je Rusko bezpečnostnou hrozbou pre Slovensko a svet? Róbert Švec odpovedá… SHO webpage. Available at: https://sho.sk/noviny-pravo-naroda-je-rusko-bezpecnostnou-hrozbou-pre-slovensko-a-svet-robert-svec-odpoveda/ [Cit. 24.03.2026].

reinforcing a worldview characterised by hostility towards liberal international structures. In addition to its rhetorical posture, the SHO has been an active proponent of initiatives that demand the lifting of sanctions against Russia, further illustrating the pervasiveness of pro-Russian and anti-Western discourses within its political agenda.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that Russophilia is a consistent feature of Slovak far-right discourse, shared by various individuals and groups despite organisational differences. Russia is frequently portrayed as a culturally and historically akin partner, with references to Slavic identity fostering a perception of a shared civilisation. In contrast, NATO and the European Union are portrayed as external forces threatening national sovereignty, providing a foundation for criticising Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic orientation. These narratives also serve a mobilising function. By linking geopolitical issues to identity and sovereignty, far-right actors use Russophilia to construct collective identities, define opponents and justify their stance. Overall, Russophilia forms part of a broader ideological framework combining nationalism and anti-liberalism, which shapes how the Slovak far right interprets and communicates international politics.

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MONTENEGRO'S ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL DRUG TRAFFICKING AND LAW ENFORCEMENT COOPERATION (2020–2025)

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Introduction

Following the parliamentary elections of August 30, 2020, in Montenegro, the Democratic Party of Socialists moved into opposition after three decades of governance (BALK News, 2020). The incoming coalition identified the fight against corruption and organized crime as a top priority, given its decisive role in the European Union accession process (TOMOVIĆ, 2020). This governmental intent was bolstered by international action against encrypted communication platforms, which led Belgian, Dutch, and French authorities to compromise the Sky ECC system in March 2021 (The Brussels Times, 2022). During the operation, 80 million messages became accessible, providing law enforcement with invaluable data regarding the activities of criminal groups, including those operating in the Western Balkans (THE BRUSSELS TIMES, 2022). This data not only enabled the mapping of criminal structures but also highlighted their infiltration into state institutions.

The European Commission's country reports on Montenegro for the period 2020–2025, examined in this study, confirm that corruption and organized crime remain entrenched within judicial and law enforcement institutions (EC, 2025).

The central question of this study is how the political changes after 2020, combined with the information derived from the decryption of encrypted communication platforms, influence Montenegro's role in the fight against international drug trafficking and its cooperation with law enforcement agencies. Within this framework, it examines how international law enforcement cooperation—particularly involving Europol and CEPOL—is implemented despite existing structural problems, and how this process incentivizes the reform of judicial and law enforcement sectors. The analysis also explores the extent to which data obtained from these systems affects the transparency of state bodies.

The hypothesis of the study is that information originating from the decryption of encrypted communication platforms significantly contributes to uncovering criminal networks and increasing the efficiency of international cooperation; however, such data on its own is insufficient to prevent the

infiltration of corruption and organized crime into judicial and law enforcement agencies.

The theoretical framework of the analysis is provided by contemporary interpretations of security concepts. Factors influencing security increasingly originate outside the administrative borders of states, and the strict exclusionary role of traditional borders has diminished (DOBÁK, 2022, 15). The development and widespread use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) play a significant role in this process. In line with this, Géza Finszter interprets national security as a state of dynamic equilibrium, in which the primary task of the state is the timely recognition of threats and the assurance of a rapid response (FINSZTER, 2019, 105). The compromise of encrypted platforms draws attention to the complex technological, legal, and cooperative nature of these recognition capabilities. The complexity of threats is defined by the convergence of various forms of organized crime (BÁCS, 2022, 48). In this context, international drug trafficking is closely linked to other illegal activities, forming multi-level networks. This approach suggests that Montenegro's situation should not be interpreted as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of a broader, transnational system.

Methodologically, the study is based on qualitative analysis. The research relies on European Commission country reports, documents from EU law enforcement agencies, and officially available data released during the Sky ECC decryption process.

The impact of the political turn in Montenegro and the decryption of Sky ECC between 2020–2025

The results of the August 30, 2020, elections in Montenegro brought about a political turn. For the new government, fulfilling the requirements of Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security) of the EU accession process became a priority, which includes effective action against organized crime and corruption. In its 2020 country report, the European Commission stated that Montenegro was moderately prepared in the fight against organized crime (EC, 2020). According to the document, the police force requires more lead investigators to combat organized crime and drug trafficking. However, in addition to human resource shortages, legal obstacles also hinder the work of the authorities. The Commission's 2020 report highlights that, following a 2018 Constitutional Court decision, the use of several special investigative measures essential for criminal investigations became impossible (EC, 2020). Consequently, the prosecution can no longer employ undercover investigators or the method of "controlled delivery" (EC, 2020). This legal hurdle significantly limits the tracking of drug shipments and the identification of network leaders. According to the Commission's assessment, this impedes the fight against organized crime; therefore, Montenegro must prioritize restoring the applicability of special

investigative measures while ensuring full respect for constitutional principles (EC, 2020).

In close cooperation—and with the support of Europol and Eurojust—the judicial and law enforcement authorities of Belgium, France, and the Netherlands took significant steps to prevent large-scale organized crime groups from further using encrypted communications (EUROPOL, 2021). In March 2021, Belgian, Dutch, and French police breached the Sky ECC encrypted messaging service,[1] enabling them to intercept 80 million messages (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022).

This provided law enforcement with valuable information regarding the activities of criminal groups, including those operating in the Western Balkans. According to former Serbian Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin, approximately 30% of the 70,000 phones using the Sky application were in the hands of Balkan criminals (RTS, 2022). It is believed that several politicians, prosecutors, judges, and police officers in the region also used the application.

The information obtained during the decryption of Sky ECC had severe consequences in Montenegro. According to the Commission's 2023 country report, some progress was made in Montenegro in the fight against organized crime and corruption. In 2022, Montenegrin law enforcement agencies achieved success in the struggle against criminal networks. Twenty-four members of the Balkan Cartel, suspected of drug trafficking, were arrested. According to the report, the Mayor of Budva was detained in April 2023 on suspicion of creating a criminal organization and drug trafficking (EC, 2023). Charges were also brought against the former President of the Supreme Court of Montenegro, Vesna Medenica,[2] as well as her son,[3] her former bodyguard, and nine other individuals

[1] Sky ECC, developed by the Canadian company Sky Global, became the primary communication channel for organized crime groups after authorities dismantled the EncroChat network, which operated on similar principles, in the spring of 2020. Sky ECC was a secure messaging application developed by the Canadian firm Sky Global. Messages were encrypted and automatically deleted after 30 seconds. If the network could not reach a phone, the message was stored for up to 48 hours before being deleted. If a user entered a "panic password," the device erased the content of the messages. https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-013/01-decryption-of-messaging-app-criminal-activities.html

[2] Over the past two decades, Vesna Medenica was one of the most influential figures in the Montenegrin judiciary. She held judicial positions for seventeen years. She was elected President of the Supreme Court three times, even though the Montenegrin Constitution allows a maximum of two terms. Prior to this, she served as the Supreme State Prosecutor.
https://www.ludovika.hu/blogok/ot-perc-europa-blog/2026/02/17/latin-amerikai-kokainkartellek-europaban/

[3] On January 28, 2026, the High Court in Podgorica sentenced Miloš Medenica, the son of the former President of the Montenegrin Supreme Court, Vesna Medenica, to ten years in prison in a first-instance ruling. The former President of the Supreme Court was acquitted of the charge of creating a criminal organization but was found guilty of unlawful influence, accepting bribes, and manipulating court decisions. Her son was found guilty of drug trafficking, cigarette smuggling, bribery, illegal possession of weapons, and the creation and leadership of a criminal organization.

(EC, 2023). Medenica was accused of creating a criminal organization, unlawful influence, and trafficking drugs and cigarettes originating from Colombia (FÓRIS, 2022). On April 14, at the direction of the Montenegrin Special Prosecutor's Office, former Special Chief Prosecutor Milivoje Katnić and former high-ranking police officer Zoran Lazović were arrested (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024). Katnić and Lazović were suspected of creating a criminal organization and abuse of official position (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024). Subsequently, on April 17, 2024, Jelena Perović, Director of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, was also arrested on suspicion of abuse of official position (ZSIVITY, 2024). The high level of corruption and organized crime points to serious operational deficiencies within state bodies and institutions. These cases support the theoretical premise of the study: that criminal groups do not function in isolation but operate as part of transnational networks embedded in state structures, where technological detection is indispensable but cannot, in itself, replace reforms affecting judicial institutions and law enforcement agencies.

The information resulting from the breach of encrypted communication platforms has simultaneously highlighted structural deficiencies and a human resource crisis, the analysis of which is essential for understanding the state of the Montenegrin judicial system and the law enforcement sector.

Structural deficiencies and the challenges of international cooperation

The effectiveness of the fight against organized crime is limited not only by the infiltration of corruption into law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions but also by severe resource shortages. During the 2020–2025 period, the capacity of the police significantly weakened, and the country is currently struggling with a shortage of personnel; there is a deficit of 1,500 police officers within the system (RTCG, 2024).

According to the Commission's 2024 assessment, the efficiency of the judiciary must be significantly improved. The backlog of cases pending before the courts is substantial: by the end of 2023, the number of cases older than three years had increased by 20%. Regarding organized crime, in 2023, a total of 97 cases were pending at the High Court in Podgorica against 761 defendants (690 natural persons and 71 legal entities) (EC, 2024). The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that 124 judges have left the Montenegrin judiciary over the past five years. This has led to a gradual erosion of public trust in the justice system and the national security apparatus. This environment provides an opportunity for criminal groups to continue their activities without fear of retribution. An additional problem is that a judicial career is not attractive to young legal professionals due to inadequate organizational conditions,

https://www.ludovika.hu/blogok/ot-perc-europa-blog/2026/02/17/latin-amerikai-kokainkartellek-europaban/

unfavourable working environments, and political pressure exerted on the judiciary. In a country of 600,000 inhabitants where social ties are tight, the personal safety and susceptibility to blackmail of judges and police officers represent a daily risk.

In its 2025 country report, the Commission identified the appointment of the President of the Supreme Court through a merit-based and transparent procedure, as well as the salary increases for justice sector employees, as positive developments. At the same time, it pointed out that filling high-level judicial and prosecutorial positions remains a serious challenge (EC, 2025). According to the document, a grave institutional issue is that the Police Director and most department heads serve only in an acting capacity. This practice undermines organizational stability and the consistency of professional work while increasing the risk of political interference. This risk was further heightened in September 2024 when the Montenegrin legislature amended the laws governing police recruitment—notably without public consultation or the involvement of civil society. Following these amendments, the Ministry of the Interior launched a recruitment campaign for 815 positions in 2025 (EC, 2025).

Difficulties in cooperation between law enforcement agencies and providers of encrypted communication platforms (such as Telegram and Signal) pose a significant security risk (JONES, 2025). Criminal organizations consciously exploit the reluctance of service providers to cooperate with authorities, which can render services "blind" in the digital sphere. In this environment, judicial institutions and law enforcement agencies must operate with flexibility. If law enforcement and national security services lack the necessary competencies regarding encrypted messaging, they lose the capability of "timely recognition" emphasized by Finszter. Based on these examples, European institutions must exert increased pressure on encrypted communication platform providers, as these surfaces may emerge as potential future networks for organized crime groups. Furthermore, the technological asymmetry resulting from deficiencies in cooperation favors criminal organizations.

In this context, the roles of Europol and CEPOL are becoming increasingly significant. International cooperation—particularly the professional supervision and training programs of Europol and CEPOL—represents not only technical assistance but also an external control mechanism that enforces transparent operations, which may counterbalance the fragility of the Montenegrin institutional framework.

Efforts have been made to integrate CEPOL training into the Ministry of the Interior's training plan. Montenegro has also proposed involving representatives from the prosecution in CEPOL activities. This step is fundamental for conducting effective joint investigations and establishing joint investigation teams (Ministartsvo unutrašnjih poslova, 2023).

According to the European Commission's 2025 Report, Montenegro possesses sufficient operational capacity for international police work, as evidenced by its

activities within the frameworks of Europol and INTERPOL. Montenegro is an active participant in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), where it took part in 76 operational actions and assumed a co-leading role in three cases (EC, 2025).

Montenegro finds itself in a paradoxical situation. While it formally complies with numerous EU foreign policy and legislative expectations, deep-seated structural problems undermine the institutions of the rule of law and public trust. The reform of the security sector is a prerequisite for stability and EU integration. Real progress, however, requires genuine political will.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the success of the fight against organized crime is inconceivable without the organic coordination of international technological assistance and profound institutional reforms. While cooperation within the frameworks of Europol and CEPOL temporarily compensates for the lack of technical and professional resources, long-term stability necessitates a comprehensive transformation of the judiciary and the law enforcement sector.

This primarily entails addressing personnel shortages, restoring the prestige of judicial and police careers, and establishing robust guarantees for a merit-based career advancement system free from political influence. The international partnership serving as an "external control mechanism" can only yield sustainable results if the Montenegrin judicial system and law enforcement organizations become capable of the independent and transparent application of the adopted methods, procedures, and instruments.

At the same time, in the process of security sector reform, Montenegro must avoid the practice of attempting to increase efficiency at the expense of democratic guarantees. The debates surrounding the 2026 legislative amendments concerning the National Security Agency and the internal administration highlight the tension between the demand for broader investigative powers and EU data protection principles (GDPR) (ZSIVITY, 2026b). The key to bridging this divide lies not in "traditional" national security logic that ensures unrestricted control, but in complying with 21st-century rule-of-law standards. A genuine integration breakthrough requires a regulatory environment in which the efficiency and accountability of security services are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing factors. This ensures that technological advancements—such as the acquisition of data from encrypted platforms—result in systemic transformation rather than merely symptomatic treatment within the operations of the Montenegrin judiciary.

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THE ROLE OF INFORMAL INMATE STRUCTURES IN VIOLENCE WITHIN CZECH PRISONS

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Introduction

The prison environment represents a complex social structure in which formal rules and regulations constitute only a part of the reality of daily life for incarcerated individuals. Far more influential on behaviour, interactions, and social order are the informal hierarchies and relationships among inmates, which often develop spontaneously and independently of formal regulations. These informal structures include hierarchies of individuals and informal groups, which may be associated with behavioural norms that regulate access to personal protection, prison resources, or prestige among inmates themselves (GOFFMAN, 2017). In Czech prisons, this dynamic can manifest not only in routine interactions among inmates but also in violent incidents, bullying, intergroup conflicts, and unequal positioning of individuals. Understanding these structures is crucial for effective violence prevention, risk assessment, and ensuring the safety of both inmates and staff (BLATNÍKOVÁ, 2016).

The aim of this text is therefore to analyse how informal hierarchies influence manifestations of violence in Czech prisons, to identify mechanisms that either promote or inhibit violence, and to outline strategies for risk management and improving the safety of both prisoners and staff, who engage daily not only with inmates but also with the environment itself. Additionally, it highlights that the issue of inmate hierarchization may also relate to attacks against staff. For some incarcerated individuals, such acts represent a question of personal prestige, demonstrating a refusal to submit to the prison system and an attempt to attain a higher status within the inmate hierarchy (URBAN et al, 2024). Achieving such status can secure a more significant position within the informal structures among inmates.

Informal Groups in the Prison Environment

The historical development of the Czech penal system is closely intertwined with changes in the political and social order. From medieval dungeons to the prisons of the Austro-Hungarian era, where inmates often had to survive under harsh

conditions relying on their own skills and networks, and onward to modern institutions after 1989, with an emphasis on the humanization of conditions, rehabilitation, and professionalization of staff (KÝR, 2026; DIRGA et al., 2016). Nevertheless, despite the implementation of modern control systems, informal structures persist, often reflecting the historical experiences of prisoners. These structures developed as adaptive survival mechanisms—the ability to navigate the prison community determined not only personal safety but also access to resources, information, and social status (BELL et al., 2022).

The environment of incarceration is characterized not only by its confinement but also by the social bonds that emerge within it. From the perspective of inmates' informal groups, certain unwritten rules, commonly referred to as the prison code, regulate interactions by teaching prisoners to respect others and, in some cases, demonstrate resilience in social interactions. Adherence to—or violation of—these unwritten rules plays a crucial role in prison subculture, carrying both rewards and sanctions that influence the social standing of inmates within their own subcultural hierarchy (WELLFORD, 1967).

From a theoretical standpoint, informal inmate groups can be analysed using several approaches that illuminate how norms, values, interactions, and power relations are formed in the penitentiary environment. One approach is the subcultural theory perspective, rooted in classical sociology, which conceptualizes the group as a social entity with its own rules, values, and norms, creating a parallel cultural system. This system often conflicts with the formal norms of institutional regulations. In prisons, subcultural rules may pertain to, for example, respect for newcomers, resource-sharing practices, or careful adherence to unwritten behavioural codes that, while absent from official prison regulations, strongly shape inmates' daily interactions. These concepts lie at the core of research on prison subculture, which emerges as an adaptive mechanism for survival and socialization within the correctional environment (HIGGS, 2013).

Social dominance and hierarchy constitute another theoretical framework that helps explain how structured systems of power and status emerge within closed environments. According to this theory, originally formulated in the broader field of social psychology, human social groups tend to establish unequal, hierarchical arrangements in which certain individuals or subgroups possess greater prestige, control over resources, and the ability to assert their interests despite the actions and intentions of others. Although the original formulation of social dominance was not specifically aimed at the penitentiary context, its principles of hierarchical organization can be applied to prison environments, where dominant individuals or groups enforce rules and maintain control over scarce resources through power, reputation, or the capacity to sanction deviations (GRAHAM-KEVAN, 2011).

Research on informal prison groups is not limited to international contexts; there is also empirical work conducted directly within the Czech prison system. This research documents the presence of informal social groups and analyses

different types of inmate status within these groups. It demonstrates that prisoners organize themselves according to informal rules, values, and norms, often in opposition to formal institutional regulations. Individuals may accept or reject the roles assigned to them based on personal survival strategies, status ambitions, or the level of influence they can exert within the group (DIRGA et al., 2016).

Hierarchy among inmates arises from a complex interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors. Endogenous factors include, for example, physical strength, reputation within the subculture, criminal history, length of incarceration, or control over limited resources. Exogenous influences stem from interactions with prison staff, their attitudes, interventions, and official decisions, which may strengthen or weaken an individual's position within the hierarchy. In practice, this means that dominant individuals or groups not only set behavioural norms but also control access to scarce resources and social advantages, such as protection, privileged services, or access to internal trading networks within the prison (DIRGA, 2021).

Inmate Hierarchization and Participation in Informal Groups

From a legal standpoint, all inmates are formally equal; however, inequality and hierarchization persist within prisons. This hierarchy is determined by differentiated access to power. Key factors shaping unequal inmate status include pronounced masculinity—highly valued in prison settings—criminal history, length of incarceration, and similar characteristics. The formation of hierarchy is also influenced by the activities of prison staff, whose roles and interventions can shape power and social relations among inmates. Prison life additionally involves the exchange of scarce commodities, such as mobile phones, addictive substances, cigarettes, and coffee. In the case of mobile phones and addictive substances, these are prohibited items, and their presence in prisons poses a significant security risk capable of affecting the operation of the entire prison system (KOLÁŘ, 2023). Transactions occur not only through barter but also via other mechanisms, which may relate to an inmate's status within an informal group, the bullying of weaker prisoners, or group pressure (DANICS et al., 2021).

Tattoos are another inextricable feature of prison culture, despite legislation prohibiting both the practice and possession of tattooing equipment. Tattoos serve as an important tool for identity formation and status enhancement within the prison. Some tattoos may also be linked to violations of unwritten prison rules and function as a form of retaliation against inmates who refuse to participate in illicit activities or who cooperate with prison staff (LOCHMANNOVÁ, 2020).

Informal hierarchies in prisons evolve gradually and result from interactions among inmates. Key factors, as previously noted, include physical strength, experience in the prison environment, communication skills, charisma, and strategic abilities, such as negotiating access to scarce resources. Dominant

inmates, often referred to as "alphas," exert significant influence not only over the groups they control but also over the broader social climate of the prison. Their status is maintained through the respect of other inmates and their capacity to enforce informal rules.

The classification of roles within the prison hierarchy encompasses a diverse range of positions, from leaders—often referred to as the "king," who determines rank, allocates resources, and maintains discipline—to various specialists whose skills, such as knowledge of trading small goods or access to information, secure the respect of others, and finally to the "jesters," who contribute to the social atmosphere in prisons and serve as neutral intermediaries (JUŘÍČEK & SMOLÍK, 2023). At the lowest levels of the prison hierarchy are inmates who are often first-time offenders or individuals who are physically less capable (DIRGA et al., 2016; KOLÁŘ & LOCHMANNOVÁ, 2024).

It should be noted that social hierarchization of inmates can be categorized in various ways, and the basic classification described above does not represent a dogmatic reality. For instance, from the perspective of roles within an informal prison group, inmates can be classified into four primary categories: the informal leader holds the most significant role; next is the elder, usually respected due to long-term incarceration; followed by the foot soldier, who has clearly defined duties; and at the bottom is the outsider, typically the weakest individual, who may be subject to various forms of victimization, including sexual violence (FISCHER & ŠKODA, 2014).

Occasionally, it is suggested that leading groups in prisons are organized as so-called prison gangs. Such gangs may form along ethnic or racial lines or for other reasons and may play a key role in maintaining security within the facility. They are typically well-established in other countries, primarily in the United States and Central America (VEGRICHTOVÁ, 2017).

The situation in the Czech Republic is different, and terms such as "gang" or "organized criminal group" are generally associated with environments outside of prisons and with other types of criminal activity (POHANKA, 2025). A gang is typically defined as an association of individuals united by shared interests and group identity, possessing a recognizable leadership structure, authority hierarchy, and other organizational features. Gang members act in a coordinated manner to achieve specific objectives, usually including the commission of illegal activities and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of operation. This definition emphasizes that a gang is not a casual group of friends but a stable, hierarchically organized unit with its own identity and norms (PETERSEN, 2000). In Czech prisons, therefore, it is not appropriate to describe inmate groups as gangs in the above sense. Instead, they constitute informal associations of individuals formed on the basis of hierarchical and social relationships.

The influence of informal groups on inmate violence

Informal hierarchies and social structures among inmates play a central role in the emergence of violent behaviour in prisons, as well as in various mechanisms of social control. Power relations, status, and dominance within the informal inmate network determine not only how conflicts are negotiated but also how violence is proactively regulated and systematized. Hierarchical organization provides a measure of social stability, with dominant individuals or groups occupying roles that define expected behaviour and the sanctions for violating unwritten rules. This form of organization also helps reduce the risk of direct and spontaneous conflict between individuals, as such interactions are replaced by implicit control structured through informal rules and authority within the hierarchy (JUŘÍČEK & SMOLÍK, 2023). In relation to violence, it is important to note that, alongside the introduction of prohibited items and substances into prisons, *inmate-on-inmate* violence remains one of the most pressing challenges faced by the contemporary Czech penal system (KOLÁŘ, 2023) .

Violence in prison settings can be categorized into collective forms such as riots or mass food refusals, which disrupt institutional operations and interpersonal forms, occurring between individual inmates and affecting the daily life within the facility. Interpersonal violence may take physical, psychological, economic, or sexual forms, with common manifestations including loud verbal threats and insults in prison argot (BLATNÍKOVÁ, 2016). Violence in prisons can also be instrumental rationally aimed at achieving power, control, or higher status within the inmate hierarchy or expressive, as a spontaneous outlet for stress or tension (LOVAŠ, 2010).

Given the highly specific nature of the prison environment, violent acts themselves are distinctive events, in which an informal group may use confrontation to defend its position, "test" new inmates to observe their responses, or assert dominance. Typically, during violent incidents, not only are the perpetrators evaluated, but also the so-called bystanders those not directly involved in the violence who are observed to determine how they respond during investigations by the Czech Prison Service authorities. Their willingness to testify or, conversely, to remain silent can indicate the individual's character and potential for participation in illicit inmate activities, often involving the introduction of contraband, addictive substances, or the misuse of mobile phones.

The specificity of the prison environment is further reflected in the rapid degradation of physical evidence following violent incidents. Evidence is often removed or cleaned up quickly, leaving investigators reliant primarily on surveillance camera footage, which may be of limited quality due to camera placement, age, or technical condition. These factors are crucial in detecting and investigating unauthorized inmate activities. Responsibility for these

investigations lies with personnel from the Prevention and Complaints Department, who act as the authorized investigative authority for all illicit conduct within prisons (KOLÁŘ & KUBÍN, 2017).

Violence in prisons occurs not only between inmates but also against staff, and occasionally by staff toward inmates. The most common incidents, however, involve *inmate-on-inmate* violence. Such conflicts can be triggered by a variety of factors, including substance abuse prior to or during incarceration, differing mental capacities, social status outside the prison subculture, financial resources, or family support. A notable challenge is that statistical data from the Czech Prison Service do not provide comprehensive insight into the frequency of violent encounters among inmates. Available statistics are limited to cases resulting in serious injury, which are then classified as criminal offenses, potentially leading to additional incarceration for the aggressor/s. Open sources indicate that such incidents are not isolated. These typically involve bodily harm (ALEŠ, 2026), though occasionally more severe crimes, such as murder, occur. For instance, in 2021, a high profile case in a Czech prison involved an inmate killing a fellow prisoner (DUBSKÝ, 2021).

A significant issue concerning inmate violence is aggression directed toward prison staff. Employees of the Czech Prison Service are divided into two main categories, with their roles primarily determined by whether they are uniformed personnel or civilian staff. Uniformed personnel are responsible for maintaining security standards within the facilities and are typically assigned to either the prison guard or supervisory service. Civilian staff, on the other hand, are mainly responsible for activities related to the implementation of treatment and rehabilitation programs (KOLÁŘ & SMOLÍK, 2025).

Incident	**2020**		**2021**		**2022**		**2023**		**2024**	
	CHG	INM	CHG	INM	CHG	INM	CHG	INM	CHG	INM
Assault on Uniformed Staff	14	35	7	30	10	33	8	43	8	32
Assault on civilian staff	1	2	1	4	0	4	0	4	0	3

Table 1 – Violence against Czech Prison Service staff, 2020–2024. Compiled by the authors (URBAN et al, 2024). Legend: CHG – charged, INM – inmate.

However, violence can also occur in the opposite direction, with inmates themselves becoming victims. It cannot be stated that this represents a widespread unlawful practice for which a large number of Czech Prison Service employees are prosecuted each year; nevertheless, such cases do occur. When an incident is identified, the General Inspectorate of Security Forces is tasked with investigating it and subsequently submits a recommendation for criminal prosecution. The decision on further proceedings then rests with the court

(FREIWILLIGOVÁ, 2026; HOLÁ, 2025). While this text does not aim to speculate on the reasons behind such actions, it is acknowledged that inappropriate responses by staff toward inmates may be one contributing factor.

The impact of violent incidents on prison security

Informal inmate structures have a significant impact on overall prison security and the effectiveness of state administration within this institutional environment. Their existence often leads to the emergence of parallel systems of governance and regulation that operate alongside the official rules established by the Czech Prison Service. These informal structures create their own norms, sanctioning mechanisms, and conflict-resolution procedures, which in daily practice may be more binding for inmates than the formally declared internal regulations. As a result, formal control by staff may be weakened or directly challenged by informal authorities among inmates, complicating effective management of the institution. Prison staff themselves perceive the blurred boundaries between controllers and the controlled, noting that inmates can significantly influence the operation of the prison and daily interactions through informal mechanisms (DIRGA et al., 2014). Informal inmate groups may assume quasi-governing functions, such as resolving conflicts, distributing resources, or enforcing rules, effectively supplementing or substituting state authority (BUTLER et al., 2018).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that informal structures are not solely destabilizing; they can also have a stabilizing effect on prison security. On one hand, they may facilitate violence, inequalities, or illicit activities, but on the other, they can contribute to a degree of internal regulation and order maintenance, particularly in contexts where staff capacity or presence is limited (DEAMBROGIO, 2025).

The impacts of violent incidents on prison security manifest on multiple levels. At the inmate level, informal structures contribute to the emergence of violence, bullying, and conflicts, which may have both short-term and long-term consequences. Vulnerable inmates or those at the lowest hierarchical positions face a higher risk of physical and psychological attacks, potentially leading to trauma, deterioration of mental health, and disruption of social cohesion within the prison (IRWIN & CRESSEY, 1962; LIEBLING, 2003). Conflicts between inmates can escalate into more organized confrontations, posing risks to a broader portion of the prison population.

At the staff level, this dynamic represents a security risk for employees, who must navigate not only the formal regulations but also the informal rules operating among inmates to prevent incidents and minimize the risk of escalation (LIEBLING et al., 2010). The presence of informal inmate groups also complicates the execution of imprisonment, as traditional control tools such as routine inspections, surveillance, and disciplinary measures are not always capable of intervening in hidden networks of influence and power relations. The Czech

Prison Service often has to rely on informal cooperation with certain dominant individuals, who may assist in maintaining order and mediating conflicts. This paradox where parts of the inmates' informal structures can act as stabilizing intermediaries while simultaneously being sources of violence highlights the complexity of prison management and the need for sophisticated strategies to ensure security and prevent violent incidents (SKARBEK, 2014).

Statistics and case studies from Czech prisons confirm that the level of violence and conflict is closely linked to the structure of the inmate population and interactions between prisoners. Empirical research conducted in the Czech context indicates that violent incidents are often associated with so-called problematic or dominant individuals and with the dynamics of relationships among inmates, underscoring the significance of informal structures in the emergence of conflict (BLATNÍKOVÁ, 2016; KOLÁŘ & LOCHMANNOVÁ, 2024).

Prevention of violent behaviour among inmates

Effective prevention of violence in prison settings requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that goes beyond formal rules and procedures. Standard formal measures, such as cell and property searches, other regime controls, or disciplinary sanctions, are necessary but alone are insufficient to ensure long-term stability. In practice, prison security also depends on understanding the informal social mechanisms that influence inmates' behaviour in daily life (SKARBEK, 2014).

A key component of this understanding is the analytical mapping of social dynamics within the prison subculture. This includes identifying hierarchies, informal leaders, social groups and their interrelations, as well as the specific roles that individual inmates occupy within informal networks. Only a detailed knowledge of these social structures enables prison staff to anticipate potential conflicts, identify weak points in the stability framework, and recognize individuals or groups that may serve as sources of tension or, conversely, as guarantors of order (BOTTOMS, 1999; BLATNÍKOVÁ, 2016).

One of the core strategies within this approach is the systematic assessment of inmates' needs and risks. This process should encompass social mapping, identification of dominant individuals and key actors, analysis of group ties, and determination of vulnerable inmates (BAKER & FAULKNER, 1993).

The Czech Prison Service employs a system of coded classifications for identifying inmates, which plays a significant role in mapping the prison environment and providing staff with an overview of inmates and their potential involvement in violent incidents. Specifically, these classifications include:

- MON – potential victim of violence
- MPN – potential perpetrator of violence
- STH – reduced body weight

- NMU – low mental capacity
- DVO – other identified individual
- DVO-P – other identified individual characterized by professional activity (VS ČR, 2022).

Prisoner classification in the Czech Republic is conducted according to risk profiles and the nature of the committed offenses. The MON category includes perpetrators of sexual offenses against human dignity who face an increased risk of becoming victims of physical or sexual violence within the prison environment. The MPN category encompasses inmates identified as having potential for aggressive or violent behaviour, as well as perpetrators of serious violent crimes. Conversely, the STH and NMU categories primarily serve to protect potential victims, that is, individuals whose physical or psychological characteristics make them more vulnerable to other inmates. The DVO category includes inmates who are publicly known or involved in high-profile cases, such as particularly serious offenses against children. The special subcategory DVO-P covers inmates who, prior to imprisonment, served in security forces, where this background may increase the risk of unwanted attention from other prisoners (BLATNÍKOVÁ, 2016).

An essential component of prevention is staff training and preparedness. Personnel must be capable of recognizing manifestations of informal hierarchy and intervening in a timely manner, while maintaining a balance between direct supervision and respect for prison social dynamics to avoid inadvertently provoking conflicts. In certain cases, communication between staff and dominant inmates can serve as a useful tool for stabilizing the social environment. Staff, however, must be equipped with skills to maintain authority and secure boundaries without reinforcing informal power structures outside the institutional framework. It can be concluded that the prevention and management of risks associated with violent acts by inmates must be multidimensional, combining knowledge of informal structures with traditional security measures, rehabilitation programs, and staff training. Only through such a comprehensive approach is it possible to achieve long-term stability, reduce the incidence of violence, and ensure a safe environment that respects not only institutional rules but also the social dynamics of the prison community.

Conclusion

The analysis of informal structures among inmates in Czech prisons demonstrates that hierarchies, group leaders, and social networks significantly influence manifestations of violence, institutional security, and the daily lives of individuals serving custodial sentences. Informal structures operate as a parallel system of rules, regulating access to limited resources, providing protection, defining social

status, and in many cases controlling individual behaviour more effectively than formal regulations. This is ambivalent: while it can stabilize the environment and mitigate spontaneous conflicts, it also serves as a source of violence and tension between individuals or groups. Prisoners' positions within the hierarchy directly affect their vulnerability and risk of victimization, with first-time offenders, individuals of low status within the prison subculture, or newly arrived inmates facing significantly higher risks.

From a security and custodial management perspective, informal structures present a complex challenge. Formal control mechanisms are often insufficient to fully penetrate these informal networks of influence, necessitating a combination of traditional security measures with a deep understanding of inmates' social dynamics. Preventing violent incidents in prisons therefore requires systematic risk assessments, mapping of social relationships, staff training, and rehabilitative programs that promote prosocial behaviour and alternative avenues for achieving status.

Overall, understanding informal inmate structures is essential for improving safety, enhancing prison management, and protecting vulnerable individuals. The focus of both researchers and prison staff, who engage daily with incarcerated populations, should be on a deeper examination of the roles of different types of leaders, intergroup interactions, and the impact of intervention programs on violence reduction. Insights gained from such analyses can then be applied to optimize preventive strategies, minimize risks, and contribute to the development of a safer and more effective prison system in the Czech Republic.

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MIGRATION BACKGROUND AS A PREDICTOR OF RISK BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: RESEARCH APPROACHES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICE PRACTICE

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Introduction

Migration represents a long-standing and socially sensitive issue, which in contemporary discourse is often shaped by media and political narratives. These narratives may create a securitization framework, presenting migration as a security threat, as described by the Copenhagen School of security studies. The media thus co-constructs meanings attributed to migration and crime, influencing both public debate and institutional approaches to children and adolescents with a migration background. Despite the frequent association between migration and crime in the media, the Czech academic context lacks systematic and empirically grounded research focusing on the impact of migration background on juvenile delinquency.

In the European context, juvenile delinquency among individuals with migration experience is frequently discussed within political, media, and security debates, which further reinforces the urgency of this issue (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019). Although empirical studies repeatedly point to differences between population groups, it often remains unclear who is actually included under the labels "migrant" or "person with a migration background." This ambiguity may lead to oversimplified interpretations and to the neglect of broader social contexts.

The aim of this study is to define the ways in which migration background is conceptualized, to highlight the problematic nature of this category, and to assess its role as a potential explanatory factor of risk behaviour. The main research question therefore focuses on whether migration background represents a meaningful analytical factor, or whether it rather functions as a proxy category that obscures other underlying social mechanisms.

This study is based on the assumption that "migration background" does not constitute an independent explanatory factor of delinquent behaviour, but rather operates as an analytical construct that conceals the effects of structural inequalities and mechanisms of social reaction. It therefore seeks to demonstrate its limited analytical capacity and to show that its uncritical use may lead to analytical distortions as well as normatively problematic conclusions.

The importance of criminological theories for examining the impact of migration background on juvenile delinquency

Criminological theories represent a systematically organized body of knowledge aimed at explaining the origins, structure, and dynamics of crime. Their significance lies not only in identifying factors contributing to the emergence of criminal behaviour, but also in providing an interpretative framework for the development of both preventive and repressive strategies of criminal policy. At the same time, as empirically grounded approaches, they cannot rely on mere speculation, but must be based on research-based evidence (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019).

None of these theories, however, offers a universal explanation of crime, as social reality is historically, culturally, and structurally conditioned, and each theoretical approach reflects the context in which it emerged. Their primary contribution therefore lies in their analytical potential, enabling a structured understanding of the complexity of crime and the relationships between individual, social, and institutional factors (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019).

In the context of examining the impact of migration background on juvenile delinquency, this theoretical grounding is particularly important, as it concerns a socially sensitive area often burdened by stereotypes. Criminological theories make it possible to systematically analyse whether and how migration experience enters into the structure of risk and protective factors influencing delinquent behaviour among young people.

Strain theory and its relevance for examining migration background

Robert K. Merton's strain theory explains crime as a result of tension between culturally defined goals (such as economic success) and the unequal availability of legitimate means to achieve them (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019). Modern society places a strong emphasis on these goals, yet does not provide equal opportunities to all individuals, which leads to different forms of adaptation, including deviant behaviour.

Table 1: Types of adaptation to anomic strain according to Merton

Type of adaptation	Cultural goals	Legitimate means	Mode of strain reduction
Conformity	+ accepted	+ accepted	Achieving goals through legitimate means
Innovation	+ accepted	− rejected	Use of illegitimate means
Ritualism	− weakened	+ accepted	Abandonment of goals, adherence to rules
Retreatism	− rejected	− rejected	Withdrawal from society
Rebellion	± replaced	± replaced	Replacement of existing goals and norms

(VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019)

From the perspective of crime, innovation is particularly important, as it describes a situation in which individuals accept societal goals but, due to the lack of legitimate means, resort to illegitimate ones. Other responses include conformity, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion.

For the analysis of juvenile delinquency among individuals with a migration background, this theory offers significant interpretative potential. Migration may increase structural strain, for example due to socioeconomic disadvantage, language barriers, or experiences of discrimination, without constituting a direct criminogenic factor. In the case of the second generation, a conflict may arise between aspirations acquired in the educational system and the limited opportunities for their realization, which can increase the likelihood of innovative adaptation, particularly in environments where illegitimate opportunities are available. Conversely, factors such as strong family cohesion or positive integration experiences may support conformity.

As noted by Válková et al. (2019), strain theory has certain limitations, particularly in relation to non-property crimes and individual differences, and therefore should be combined with other approaches. Its main contribution lies in the analysis of the distribution of legitimate opportunities and the subjectively perceived accessibility of social mobility as key factors influencing delinquent behaviour among youth with a migration background.

Critical criminology and the labelling approach

Labelling theory, within the framework of critical criminology, shifts attention from the act itself to the process of its social interpretation. Deviance is not understood as an inherent property of an act, but as the result of labelling shaped by institutions of social control, such as the family, school, or criminal justice system. As noted by Válková et al. (2019), a distinction is made between primary deviance, which does not significantly affect an individual's identity, and secondary deviance, which emerges as a result of repeated labelling and the internalization of a deviant role.

Table 2: Schematic representation of the labelling process

Stage of the process	Characteristics	Possible consequences
Primary deviance	One-time violation of norms without major identity change	Minimal impact on self-concept
Social reaction	Labelling behaviour as deviant (school, police, surroundings)	Stigmatization
Internalization of the label	Adoption of the "problematic" or "delinquent" role	Change in identity
Secondary deviance	Behaviour corresponding to the assigned role	Stabilization of a deviant trajectory

A key element of labelling theory is the power dimension of social control, as certain groups are subjected to higher levels of surveillance and regulation (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019). In the context of migration, children and adolescents with a migration background may be more frequently labelled due to increased institutional and societal attention, even if they do not exhibit higher levels of primary deviance. This may lead to stigmatization, reduced life opportunities, and the gradual development of secondary deviance. In the case of the second generation, issues of identity may also arise, including a weakened attachment to the majority society.

Labelling theory thus complements structural approaches: while strain theory explains the emergence of deviance, labelling theory demonstrates how social reactions contribute to its stabilization. In the context of migration, this allows for the consideration of an interaction between structural strain and selective social reaction, which together create a cumulative process leading to deviance. Although this approach may underestimate the causes of primary deviance, its main contribution lies in the analysis of institutional responses and their impact on the life trajectories of young people. It thus enables migration background to be understood not as a direct cause of crime, but as a factor mediated by social conditions and mechanisms of control (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019).

Culture and acculturation in the context of migration background

The concept of culture refers to a set of shared values and norms that structure individual behaviour. In the context of migration, it is particularly important, as migration also entails entering a different normative environment. Closely related to this is acculturation, understood as a process of change resulting from long-term contact between cultures, which is selective, gradual, and does not necessarily lead to assimilation (HERSKOVITS, 1997). This process takes place at the level of the individual, the family, and society, and is shaped by the conditions of the receiving environment, particularly its openness and institutional support (MATYSOVÁ, 2011).

For children and adolescents with a migration background, acculturation occurs between two normative frameworks, the family and the majority society, which may lead to tensions as well as questions of identity and belonging, especially among the second generation (MATYSOVÁ, 2011). However, cultural difference in itself does not constitute a cause of crime. It becomes relevant only in interaction with structural factors, such as social inequalities or limited access to opportunities. Acculturation theory thus makes it possible to analyse the behaviour of young people with a migration background as the result of a dynamic interaction of cultural, social, and structural influences, rather than as an outcome of cultural determinism.

The theoretical approaches outlined above suggest that the relationship between migration background and delinquency cannot be understood as direct

or unambiguous. Instead, migration experience operates indirectly through structural inequalities (as emphasized by strain theory), selective social reactions (as highlighted by labelling theory), and processes of acculturation and integration. Migration background therefore does not function as a causal factor, but rather as an indicator of broader social mechanisms that shape individual life trajectories.

Who is a "migrant"? The problem of definition

In academic literature and empirical research on migration and crime, significant terminological inconsistency can be observed, which complicates both the comparison of findings and their interpretation. Different studies often operate with differently defined categories, whose meanings vary depending on legal, statistical, or research contexts.

The category of a "foreigner" refers to the legal status of a person who does not hold the citizenship of a given state and is based solely on the criterion of nationality (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019), rather than on place of birth or family background. In contrast, the term "migrant" refers to an individual who has moved from one country to another (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019), with emphasis placed on the act of migration itself. The category of the "second generation" includes individuals born in the host country whose parents migrated, and whose life experience is thus indirectly shaped by the migration process (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019).

The broadest and at the same time least consistently defined concept is that of "migration background," which usually includes both migrants themselves and individuals whose at least one parent migrated or did not acquire citizenship at birth. However, its exact definition varies across national and research contexts (WILL, 2019).

The genesis of the concept of "migration background"

The genesis of the category "migration background" demonstrates that it did not emerge as an analytical concept, but primarily as a tool of statistical and political governance. Its subsequent application in research on social phenomena, including crime, therefore cannot be considered neutral, as it carries implicit assumptions that may influence the interpretation of empirical findings.

The term "migration background" (Migrationshintergrund) began to appear in German discourse in the late 1990's, with one of its first documented uses found in a government report of the German Bundestag from 1998 (Deutscher Bundestag, 1998), where it was used without a precise definition. A major shift occurred in 2005 with the introduction of so-called "migration-related questions" into the microcensus, which made it possible to statistically capture not only foreigners, but also naturalized individuals and second-generation migrants (Deutscher Bundestag, 2004).

The concept was subsequently stabilized through the influence of international research (particularly PISA) and national education reports, which systematically employed the category of individuals with a migration background and contributed to its institutionalization in both academic and political discourse (WILL, 2019). As noted by Will (2019), this category did not originate as a theoretically precise concept, but rather as an administrative and statistical construct shaped by the intersection of integration policy, population statistics, and educational research. Its content gradually expanded over time without clear normative anchoring.

Definition of the category "migration background" in German statistics

The category "migration background" was officially defined in 2005 by the Federal Statistical Office in connection with the introduction of migration-related questions into the microcensus. The original definition combined several criteria, including migration after 1949, nationality, place of birth, and parental background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009 [2007]). Since 2016, the definition has been simplified: an individual is considered to have a migration background if at least one of their parents did not acquire German citizenship at birth (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017). The category is thus primarily based on a legal and genealogical principle.

From a methodological perspective, it is important to note that this category is not based on self-identification, but on administrative classification derived from factual data (e.g., place of birth, citizenship, parental background), which makes it a statistical construct rather than an expression of subjective identity (WILL, 2019). Although the possibilities for capturing more detailed information on origin have gradually expanded, the fundamental logic of classification has remained unchanged.

As summarized by Will (2019), "migration background" has become a standard category in both official statistics and research; however, it carries significant normative implications. By defining a distinction between individuals "with" and "without" a migration background based on legal and genealogical criteria, it contributes to shaping the ways in which belonging and difference are constructed within society.

Proposed research approach

The central problem of current research on juvenile delinquency in the context of migration does not primarily lie in a lack of methodological tools, but in the analytical status of the category "migration background" itself. In empirical studies, this category is often used as a self-evident explanatory variable, although it does not represent an analytically homogeneous category, but rather an administrative and statistical construct. This construct groups together highly

diverse individuals based on legal and genealogical criteria, which has significant implications for the interpretation of empirical findings (WILL, 2019).

First, complex social processes are reduced to a single variable, which obscures the role of structural factors. From the perspective of strain theory, it is precisely socioeconomic inequalities, educational trajectories, and spatial segregation that constitute key mechanisms shaping individuals' life chances and their potential involvement in delinquent behaviour (VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019). When these factors are replaced by the aggregated category of "migration background," a distorted image of reality emerges, in which structural conditions are misinterpreted as culturally or ethnically determined differences.

Second, labelling an individual as a "person with a migration background" does not merely describe their social position, but may actively contribute to its construction. The labelling approach demonstrates that social reactions and institutional practices can significantly shape individual life trajectories. The category of "migration background" may thus function as an implicit marker of difference, increasing the likelihood of selective control, stigmatization, or differential treatment by institutions of social control. As a result, false causalities may be produced, in which delinquency is attributed to "origin" rather than to the processes of social reaction that co-produce it.

Third, the cultural dimension cannot be reduced to formal markers of origin. Theories of acculturation and integration emphasize that processes of identity, belonging, and cultural adaptation are differentiated and strongly context-dependent. The category of "migration background," however, flattens these dynamics and replaces them with a static label that fails to capture the variability of individual experiences and diverse adaptation strategies.

It follows that the uncritical use of the category "migration background" in research does not merely lead to imprecision, but can systematically produce distorted conclusions and reinforce misleading assumptions about causal relationships. The problem, therefore, is not the absence of data, but the analytical frameworks through which these data are interpreted.

In this context, a combined research approach represents an appropriate solution. Rather than relying on one-dimensional categories, it integrates multiple levels of analysis. By combining objective indicators with subjective experiences and systematically incorporating contextual variables, it becomes possible to capture structural, institutional, and cultural dimensions without reducing them to a single characteristic. Such an approach also enables a critical reflection on the analytical categories themselves and avoids their uncritical adoption from administrative and statistical frameworks (GŘIVNA et al., 2019).

The combined approach thus represents not only a methodological choice, but a necessary correction of current research practice. It makes it possible to overcome the limitations of the category "migration background" and contributes to a more precise, theoretically grounded, and empirically adequate understanding

of the relationship between social inequalities, migration experience, and juvenile delinquency.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the relationship between migration background and juvenile delinquency cannot be interpreted through simple causal frameworks. Criminological theories, particularly strain theory and the labelling approach, clearly show that structural inequalities and processes of social reaction play a decisive role, rather than migration background itself. Migration background does not function as a direct factor of delinquency, but enters the analysis only indirectly, through socioeconomic conditions, institutional mechanisms, and the course of integration processes (WILL, 2019; VÁLKOVÁ et al., 2019).

A fundamental issue remains the category of "migration background" itself. As shown, it constitutes an administrative and statistical construct that aggregates heterogeneous groups and ignores the subjective dimension of identity (WILL, 2019). Its uncritical use does not merely lead to imprecision, but systematically produces distorted conclusions and reinforces symbolic boundaries between social groups.

This leads to a clear methodological imperative: research must abandon "migration background" as a self-evident explanatory variable. Instead, it is necessary to analytically disentangle the underlying mechanisms that this category obscures—particularly structural inequalities, institutional practices, and processes of acculturation. Only in this way can false causalities be avoided and empirically valid conclusions be achieved.

At the same time, it is essential to systematically apply a combined research approach that integrates objective indicators with subjective experiences and consistently incorporates contextual factors. Such an approach makes it possible to overcome reductive categorizations, refine the analytical understanding of the studied phenomena, and limit stigmatizing interpretations. Without this methodological and conceptual correction, research on the relationship between migration and crime will remain fundamentally distorted.

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GENERAL NEW IN PORNOGRAPHY AND POSSIBLE INFLUENCE ON METHODS IN CRIMINALISTICS

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Short introduction

From historical empirical experience, we know, that in the mid 1980's most children in child pornography were not abducted or physically forced into it. They were primarily manipulated into creating child pornography through, for example, candy and other benefits (Tyler and Stone, 1985).

The Internet, especially Darknet as an open medium, has brought a high degree of anonymity to consumers of child pornography, (Meteňko, Meteňková, 2022) which has become even more prevalent during the past twenty years including the pandemic period. The use and even excessive consumption of pornography are also result from the misunderstanding and immaturity of users, i.e., distributors and consumers. Therefore, it is important to ensure that awareness is appropriate so that people have relevant information based on which they can take adequate decisions and actions. (Meteňko, Meteňková, 2024) The total restriction is not the solution, as it could be seen in the Danish experiment. There the release of all pornography did not bring an increase in crime, but even did the opposite. This is the reason why we think that the restriction of any pornography will not bring about its reduction in the sense of its consumption, but the opposite. (Ivančík, 2021) We see the solution in preventive programs such as the BRIDGE project. Outside the technical aspects, we see this information as more relevant for criminalistics tactics methods and procedures. Knowledge and ~~processes~~ application of criminalistic tactics, are primarily relevant to use these data for investigation and to prevention not only by police services, but in general for all social services, especially oriented to child protection. (Meteňko, ai., 2025)

Short historical excursion

The prevailing lay opinion in society is that defining pornography is easy and causes confusion and embarrassment when people learn that it is not as easy as they thought (Uzel, Myths and Superstitions in Sex, 2004). There have been several attempts to define pornography. The first of these attempts was the first meeting of the Mees Anti-Pornography Commission. The commission was supposed to finally define pornography. The paradox is that throughout the entire period of the commission's operation, the aforementioned task was not accomplished. The reason was simple – every assessment is significantly inter-individual, which means that what is completely unacceptable for one person is acceptable for another, and for another it can even be beneficial. From the above, it follows that no definition can ever suit everyone (Uzel, 2004).

There is no single definition of pornography. Several domestic and foreign authors agree on this, like Haavio-Mannila and Kontula 2003; Ferguson and Hartley 2009; Chochola 2010; Uzel 2010; Ford et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2012.

Chen et al. (2013) note a lack of research on the effects of Internet pornography on adolescents. The prevalence of Internet child pornography is unknown, but researchers agree that Internet child pornography is increasingly available. Evidence suggests that 31,226 URLs in 2014 contained child sexual abuse. The URLs are hosted on 1,694 global domains. All URLs containing child sexual abuse content originated from 45 countries, up from 43 in 2013 (Internet Watch Foundation, 2014).

The present

Even today, we can state that there is still no single and comprehensive definition of pornography, similarly to the case with other definitions in the ICD-10, such as the definition of alcohol dependence and others.

On the other hand, in the new ICD-11, which is still in transition and will come into effect in 2027, we can already find in the section Impulse Control Disorders under the subcategory and code 6C72 Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder. According to the established criteria, we can include a person who meets the following criteria: is characterized by a persistent pattern of inability to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges that lead to repeated sexual behavior. Symptoms may include repetitive sexual activities that become the primary focus of the person's life to the extent that they neglect health care, personal hygiene, and other interests, activities, and responsibilities; frequent unsuccessful efforts to significantly limit repetitive sexual behavior; persistent repetitive sexual behavior despite adverse consequences or little or no satisfaction from the activity; such behavior is repeated over a prolonged period (e.g., 6 months or more) and causes significant distress or impairment in personal, family, and social relationships, education, employment, or other important areas of

functioning; whereas distress that is solely related to moral judgments and disapproval of the sexual impulses, urges, or behavior is not sufficient to meet this requirement (ICD-11).

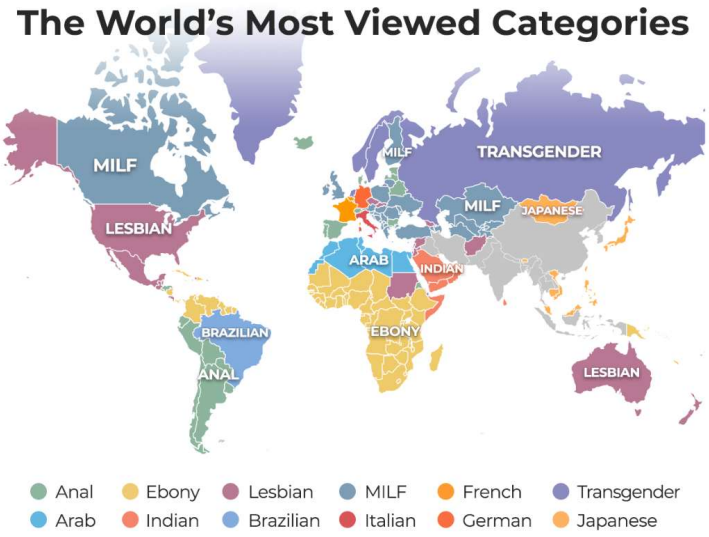
We can also state, based on empirical experience, that there is still a continued increase in websites with erotic pornographic material and also an increase in so-called black pornography on the Internet, especially on the darknet and 349ocument.

Pornography as such enjoys great interest from consumers, due to its availability virtually everywhere and great anonymity.

The world in numbers according to PornHub statistics from 2025

Figure number 1 shows the most viewed categories in the world within sexually explicit materials. Lesbians were the most viewed pornography in 2025, followed by the transgender category, which grew by 58% in 2025. A closer look at the two categories described reveals that the most viewed type of lesbian is the so-called lesbian scissors, which recorded a 79% increase, lesbian MILFs even grew by 102%, and lesbian strapon with a 62% increase. As for the transgender category, trans threesomes increased by 67%, trans amateur by 49%. Queer videos recorded a 132% increase, and bisexual videos increased by 88%. Interestingly, in Russia, transgender is the most viewed category. One explanation is the current law in Russia that prohibits LGBT+ people.

Fig. no. 1 – The world's most watched categories of pornography (PornHub 2025)



According to PornHub statistics from 2025, the most popular time to watch sexually explicit material is 10:00 p.m. or 12:00 p.m. The least preferred time is 4:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m. (Fig. 2). The most preferred day for consuming pornography is Sunday, and the least preferred day is Wednesday (Fig. 3).

Fig. No. 2 – Most preferred time for porn consumption (PornHub, 2025)

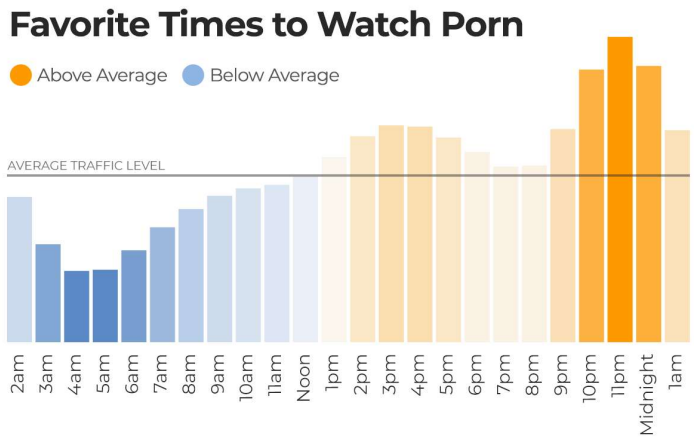
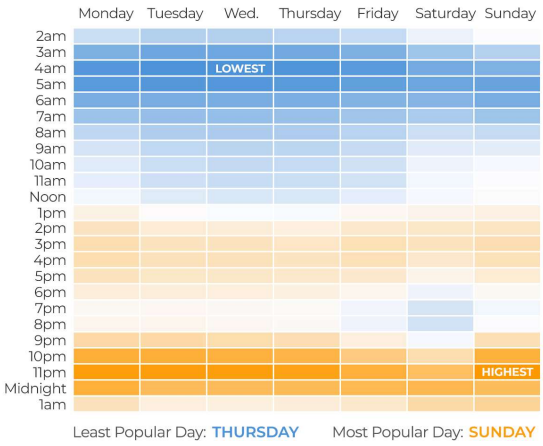


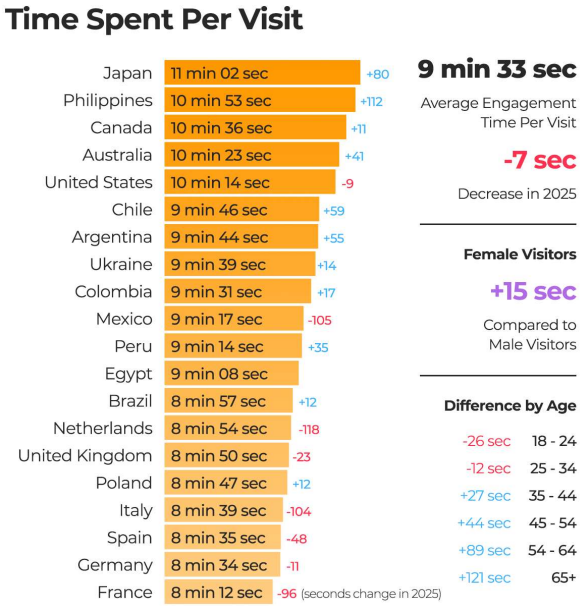
Fig. No. 3 – Most preferred day and time of porn consumption (PornHub, 2025)



The average time spent viewing (consuming) pornography was 9 min. and 33 sec., which is 7 seconds less than in 2024. On the other hand, women spent 15 seconds more time viewing sexually explicit material. The Japanese spent the most time viewing sexually explicit material (up 80 sec.) and the French spent the

shortest time viewing sexually explicit material (down 96 sec.). The time span and age categories are shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. No. 4 – Time spent consuming pornography in some countries (PornHub, 2025)



Within the statistics, 6 age groups were created (Fig. No. 5). The lowest age limit is 18 years, which can be considered the consensus limit of adulthood. The highest limit was 65+. The most consumers are in the age category 18-24 years, which represents 29%. Next is the age category 23-34 years with 23% and the age category 35-44 years makes up 17%. The remaining distribution is in Fig. No. 5.

Fig. No. 5 – Konzum pornografie podľa vekových kategórií (PornHub, 2025)

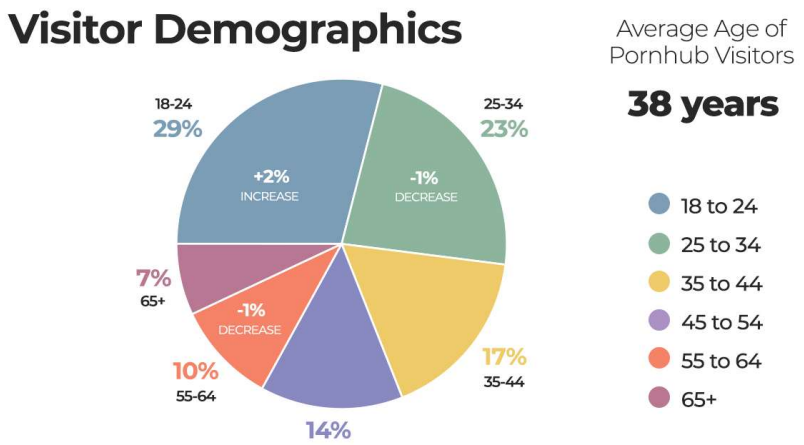
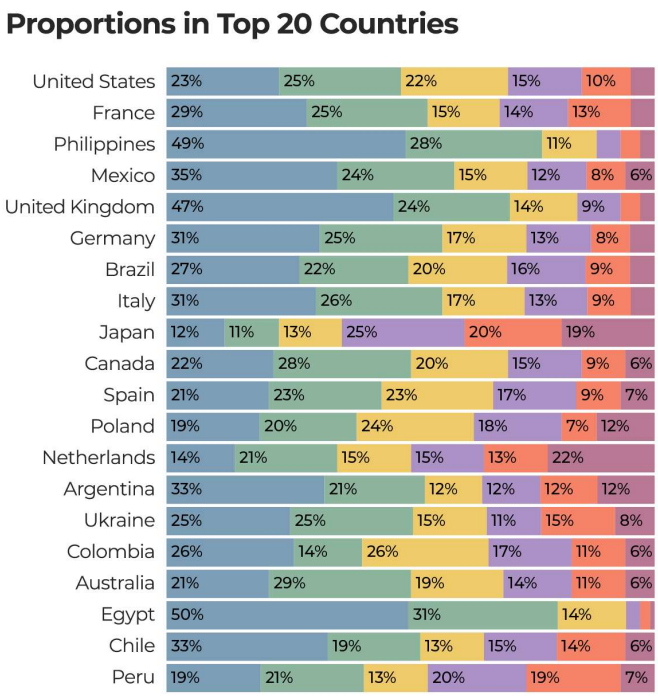


Figure 6 provides a graphical overview of selected countries in the world and a percentage view of pornography consumers by age category. For example, Egypt has a 50% share of pornography consumption in the 18-24 age category. In contrast, the age categories 45-54, 55-64 and 65+ are represented in percentage terms at a minimum. Japan and the Netherlands have approximately the same percentages for each age category. The Netherlands has the largest age category of 65+ of all countries. The rest of the distribution can be seen in Figure 6.

Fig. No. 6 – Age distribution of pornography consumers in selected countries (PornHub, 2025)



PornHub statistics also provide information on pornography consumption by Generation Z, Millennials, X, Boomer (55+). All of the above categories represent a percentage difference in popularity compared to all other age groups. From Fig. 7 we can see the preferred categories of pornography by Generation Z. For Generation Z, the Party category is in first place with a 385% increase, followed by the Feet category with a 347% increase, and the POV[1] category recorded a 301% increase.

For Millennials, the most preferred category is Fetish with a 152% increase, followed by Role Playing with a 136% increase and Squirting[2] with a 134% increase. A more detailed breakdown is shown in Fig. 8.

Generation X prefers Fisting[3] the most with a 252% increase, followed by Bukkake[4] with a 209% increase, and the third most watched category of pornography is Blondes with a 142% increase.

[1] Point of view – this is the narrative perspective from which the story is told and which determines who is telling the story and what they see.

[2] this is a physiological phenomenon in which fluid is released from the urethra in some women during sexual arousal or orgasm.

[3] this is a sexual act in which the entire hand, or possibly part of the forearm, is inserted into the vagina (brachiovaginal sex) or the anus (brachioproctal sex).

[4] it is a group sexual practice in which several men masturbate and ejaculate on the body of a woman (or man), usually on the face and mouth, where the semen is left, while another man repeats the act; in the classic case, there is no contact between the body of the man and the woman

Fig. No. 7 – Preferred categories of pornography according to Generation Z (PornHub, 2025)

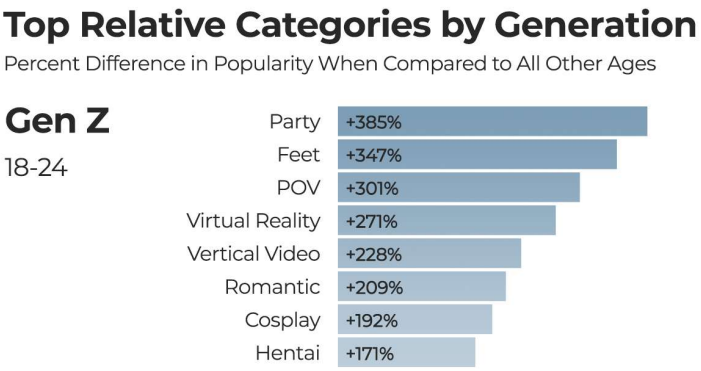


Fig. No. 8 – Preferred categories of pornography by generation Millennials – Generation Y (PornHub, 2025)

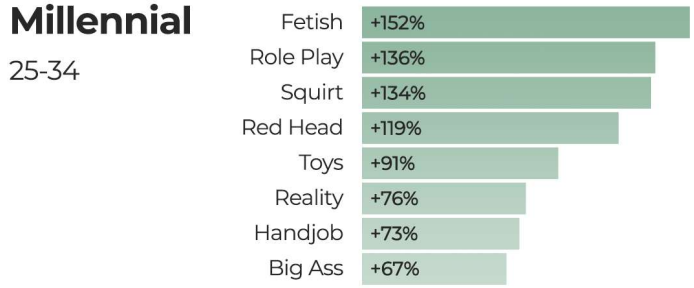
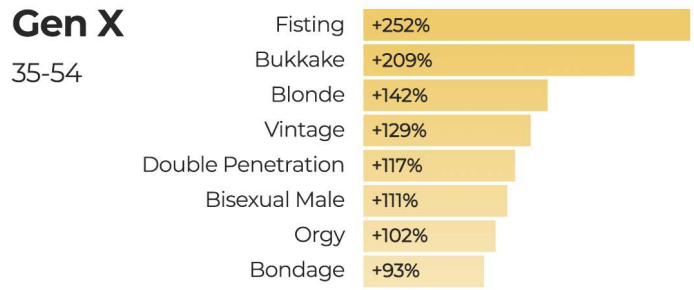


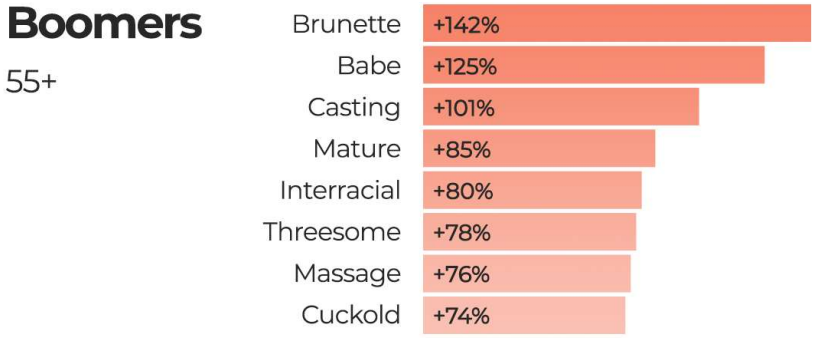
Fig. No. 9 – Preferred categories of pornography according to Generation X (PornHub, 2025)



The last category is also called Husákové deti (Husák's children) in our Slovak context. For this age category, the most watched pornographic category is brunette with a 142% increase, followed by the Babe category, which can be

loosely translated as young with a 125% increase, and the Konkurz category with a 101% increase. A more detailed distribution is shown in Fig. No. 10.

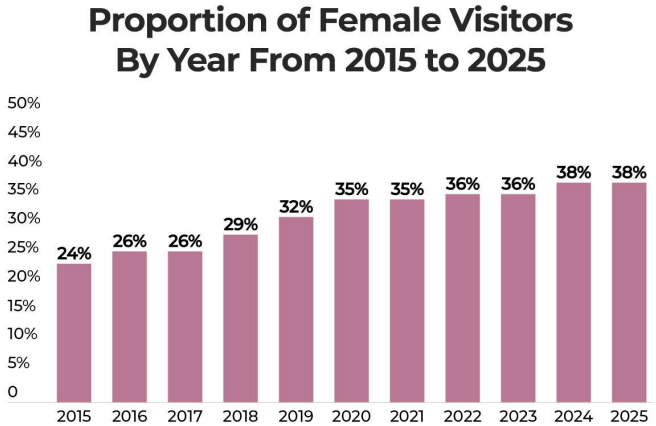
Fig. No. 10 – Preferred categories of pornography by the Baby Boomer generation (PornHub, 2025)



According to the results of statistical processing by PornHub (2025), the most common medium through which sexually explicit material is consumed is a mobile phone (87%) a desktop computer is used by 11%, and a tablet is used by 2% of pornography consumers.

From the already overcome stereotype and myth about women not consuming pornography (you can find more information about the consumption of pornography by Slovak women in the author's monograph: Women and Pornography) we see a 1.5% increase in 2025 and a total of 38% of women consume pornography according to the results of statistical work by PornHub (2025). From the statistical processing we see a total increase of 14% over the decade (from 2015 to 2025) (see Fig. 11).

Fig. No. 11 – Share of female consumers in 2015 – 2025 (PornHub, 2025)



Conclusion

Worldwide, we can observe an increase in the consumption of pornography from several perspectives. The first is the availability, or rather the access, that the Internet has allowed us. Of course, this option has been around for a long time and this has enabled the consumption of pornography anytime, anywhere and in any way. It also guarantees great anonymity, which opens up unlimited possibilities for child pornography available on the darknet or 356ocument. This is also related to the increase in sites with child pornography content and its restriction goes hand in hand with it.

Until now, we have not had any categories within the ICD-10 that would specifically regulate such well-known concepts in society as "addiction to masturbation, sex, or pornography." On the other hand, the new ICD-11, which will enter into force in 2027, will no longer recognize the diagnoses of "addiction to pornography, masturbation, or sex," but if a given person meets the established criteria, they can be assigned the diagnosis of Impulse Control Disorder, specifically 6C72 Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder, and can already be treated using evidence-based medicine.

PornHub's 2025 statistical summary showed that the most watched categories of 2025 were anal sex, lesbians, MILFs and transgender. It can also be stated that individual subcultures determine the future trend of watching categories in pornography. This includes, for example, the femboy category, which is a slang term for young men or non-binary people who present themselves in a way that includes traditionally feminine elements of clothing (skirts, knee-highs), makeup or gentle behavior. This is mainly an aesthetic matter that is not related to sexual orientation, as it can be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. The phenomenon is popular on social networks (such as TikTok, Reddit and others) as a form of self-expression.

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MYTHS AND REALITY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN INVESTIGATION

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The interpretation of nonverbal communication ranks among the most intriguing, yet at the same time among the most problematic, areas of investigation. Among the public, the belief persists that an experienced investigator is capable of reliably determining from body language whether a person is lying. It is often asserted that if an individual avoids eye contact, touches their face, appears restless, changes body position, or their voice trembles, this constitutes a clear sign of deception. Such an understanding, however, is misleading. There is no single nonverbal indication that can establish a lie with certainty. What may be observed with far greater accuracy during an investigation, during the application of individual means of evidence, is not deception itself, but rather the degree of comfort or discomfort experienced by the person being questioned. The true task of the investigator, therefore, is not to "read deception from the face," but to understand whether the person is in a state of psychological ease or unease and, if the person is experiencing discomfort, to examine the reasons why this is so. The fundamental problem in the interpretation of nonverbal behavior lies in the fact that the same manifestation may carry multiple meanings. For example, avoidance of eye contact may in some individuals be a consequence of discomfort, but it may equally result from shame, anxiety, respect for authority, cultural background, or a traumatic experience. Similarly, restless movements of the hands or feet need not signify that a person is lying but may instead constitute an expression of ordinary nervousness arising from a stressful situation. A person who sits rigidly may be concealing something but may also be profoundly frightened or may be attempting to exercise as much control as possible over their behavior. It is precisely for this reason that it is a serious error to draw an unequivocal conclusion about the truthfulness of testimony from a single gesture or a single form of behavior. Scholarly literature has long cautioned that nonverbal indicators of deception are weak, ambiguous, and of limited reliability in practice when assessed in isolation.[1]

[1] NAVARRO, J. *The End of Detecting Deception.* Psychology Today [online]. 2026 [cit. 2026-3-16]. Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/spycatcher/201807/the-end-detecting-deception

If nonverbal behavior does not reveal deception directly, what significance does it have within the investigative process? The answer lies in the fact that nonverbal manifestations function rather as indicators of a person's current psychological state. In this sense, they are valuable not as evidence, but as indicators. One of the principal areas of observation is precisely the dimension of comfort and discomfort. The investigator should observe whether the person feels comfortable or, conversely, displays signs of tension, anxiety, and inner unease. Comfort may be manifested through a more natural posture, calmer breathing, a more open body position, a smaller number of defensive barriers, and more fluent communication. Discomfort, by contrast, may be manifested through increased tension, changes in breathing rhythm, sudden turning of the body away, the creation of barriers through objects, restless movements, changes in eye contact, or attempts to increase distance from the source of stress. Even here, however, caution must be maintained.

Discomfort does not automatically signify deception. It signifies only that the person is experiencing psychological tension. The task of the investigator, therefore, is not to say: "This person is nervous; therefore, they are lying." The correct question is: "This person is nervous. Why?" It is precisely this question that is crucial. In the context of an investigation, discomfort may have numerous causes, and deception is merely one of them. A very frequent source of unease is the interview situation itself. If a person finds themselves in an unfamiliar environment, in front of an investigator, in the presence of a camera, or before several individuals, it is natural that they may feel under pressure. A police station, the execution of a custodial sentence, or detention constitute, in a certain sense, intimidating environments and may not be the most suitable places for a person to speak openly and truthfully. The layout of the room, obstacles within the space, the positioning of chairs, the distance between persons, and the overall arrangement of the room in which the interview is conducted all exert a strong psychological effect on the interviewee. If, therefore, a person behaves nervously, this may merely be a reaction to the environment rather than to their own deception. Another cause of discomfort may be fear of misunderstanding or of unjust accusation. Even a truthful person may be highly nervous if they feel that they are not believed or that suspicion already exists against them. This applies particularly in relation to sensitive topics, when a person fears that their words may be misinterpreted.

Trauma is an equally important factor. A victim of violence, sexual assault, or prolonged abuse may display pronounced discomfort even while speaking truthfully. Such a person may have difficulty speaking fluently, maintaining eye contact, and may appear chaotic or emotionally unstable. Such behavior, however, need not signify untruthfulness, but rather the consequence of a traumatic experience. For this reason, in the case of victims of criminal offences, it is first necessary to reduce the effect of the stress response, create a safer environment, and build rapport so that the person can focus on their statement at all.

Discomfort may also be caused by shame, social risk, or fear of revealing some other sensitive information. A person may be speaking truthfully about the essence of the act, while at the same time concealing something personal, intimate, or socially embarrassing. In such a case, the person may display tension that is unrelated to the act under investigation but rather connected with another area of their life. For example, a witness may exhibit signs commonly associated with deception not because they are involved in the criminal offence, but because they wish to conceal, for instance, an extramarital affair or some other personal circumstance. From this, an important conclusion follows. During an investigation, nonverbal manifestations must be understood as an impetus for further inquiry, not as a final verdict.[2]

Strictly speaking, an investigator should attend not merely to the gesture itself, but also to the moment in which it appeared, the topic to which the person was reacting, the intensity of the change, and whether it constitutes an isolated manifestation or a recurring pattern. In other words, the aim is not to "catch a sign of lying," but to register a change in comfort and subsequently ask what elicited it. If, when a particular topic is raised, a person suddenly withdraws, creates a barrier, or begins to answer in a more general manner, this may indicate that a sensitive area has been touched upon. That, however, still does not mean that the person is lying. It means only that there is a psychologically significant topic here which must be developed cautiously and verified through further questions and evidence. At this point, the method of rapport is of great importance.

Rapport demonstrates that successful communication, even in extremely tense situations, does not rest upon aggression, pressure, and the demonstration of power, but upon the ability to create a connection, remain calm, show respect, and at the same time maintain professional boundaries. Rapport is not manipulation, but an authentic connection that increases the likelihood that a person will speak more openly and provide useful information. Rapport does not guarantee a confession, nor does it reveal deception with certainty, but it does increase the likelihood of obtaining high-quality information. This approach is of fundamental importance for the interpretation of nonverbal communication. If an investigator behaves in an aggressive, cold, or condescending manner, the investigator may themselves create such a degree of discomfort that any subsequent observation of behavior loses its evidentiary value. Nervousness then says nothing about truthfulness; it says only that the communication has been poorly structured. Conversely, if rapport can be established, the level of unnecessary stress is reduced, and better conditions are created for observing which topics the person responds to naturally and which evoke specific tension.

[2] NAVARRO, J. *Perspective Detecting Deception.* FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin [online]. 2026 [cit. 2026-3-31]. Available at: https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/perspective/perspective-detecting-deception

Put differently, rapport helps to filter out the general stress inherent in the situation and to identify more accurately those behavioral changes that are genuinely significant in terms of content.[3]

An important component of a professional approach is also the careful planning of the interview. Planning is the most important aspect of conducting an interview, yet it is also the one most frequently neglected. This bears a direct relationship to the interpretation of nonverbal communication. If an interview is conducted without preparation, in an unsuitable environment, at an inappropriate time, with an inappropriate number of persons present, or without a well-considered strategy for building rapport, the investigator effectively creates the very conditions under which the interviewee will respond with stress. That stress may then be mistakenly evaluated as a sign of untruthfulness. The significance of the environment, the arrangement of chairs, barriers within the room, the timing of the interview, the presence of other persons during the interview (such as counsel or another person present during questioning), as well as the manner in which the interview is documented, all influence the degree of comfort and discomfort experienced by the interviewee. Equally important is the fact that mere observation of body language is insufficient.

The approach to detecting false testimony emphasizes that an investigation must be grounded in the strategic conduct of the interview and in the verification of the statement by objective evidence. Nonverbal manifestations may indicate where a sensitive area lies, but the truthfulness or untruthfulness of statements must be assessed through the content of the statement, its consistency, its level of detail, and its correspondence with external facts. A major risk in the incorrect interpretation of nonverbal communication is confirmation bias. If an investigator believes in advance that a particular person is lying, the investigator may notice only those manifestations that support that assumption and ignore everything that contradicts it. Nervousness then becomes "evidence," even though in reality it is merely a natural reaction to stress. Such an approach is dangerous not only methodologically, but also ethically, because it may lead to pressure being placed on an innocent person, to erroneous conclusions, and to a deterioration in the quality of the testimony. A professional approach therefore requires a considerable degree of discipline.

Nonverbal manifestations must not be understood as evidence of guilt, but only as an orientational signal that must subsequently be verified by factual evidence. From a practical perspective, this means that the investigator should observe primarily changes in behavior in context. The investigator should first form an impression of how the person presents in the initial stage of the interview, and only then begin to observe what changes in relation to topics. The investigator

[3] NAVARRO, J. *Perspective Detecting Deception.* FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin [online]. 2026 [cit. 2026-3-31]. Available at: https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/perspective/perspective-detecting-deception

should assess during which questions tension in the interviewee increases, whether the person begins to answer less specifically, whether they create barriers, whether they alter the orientation of their body, whether they distance themselves from the content of their statement, or, conversely, whether they exercise greater control over their manifestations. These changes, however, should always be interpreted cautiously and only as a signal that a sensitive area has been touched upon. The investigator should then develop the interview further through additional questions, alter the form in which questions are asked, give the person space to speak, or, where appropriate, strengthen rapport.

Myths concerning nonverbal communication in the investigative context are attractive because they offer an illusion of certainty. It is not possible to determine with one hundred per cent accuracy whether a person is lying solely based on body language. There is no universal sign of deception that functions in all circumstances. What may be observed far more reliably is the degree of a person's comfort and discomfort. It is possible to notice that the person does not feel at ease in relation to a particular topic, that tension is increasing, and that something is eliciting a defensive reaction. Even so, professional caution must always be maintained. Discomfort does not automatically mean deception. It may signify fear, shame, trauma, uncertainty, a cultural difference, stress caused by the investigator, or fear of the consequences.[4]

Conclusion

A truly expert approach does not rest on "reading deception from the body," but on a comprehensive understanding of the situation. The investigator must understand the influence of the environment, the planning of the interview, rapport, the emotional state of the interviewee, and the context of that person's behavior. The investigator must be capable of observing, while at the same time not being misled by simplistic conclusions. The investigator must work with hypotheses, not with prejudices. Above all, the investigator must understand that nonverbal manifestations are not an end in themselves, but merely one of the tools of orientation within the interview process.

The aim of an investigation is not to confirm the investigator's own assumption, but to obtain the most reliable information possible by lawful and ethical means. In this sense, it may be said that the greatest myth in the interpretation of nonverbal communication is the notion of complete certainty. By contrast, the greatest reality is the need for humility, context, and professional discipline. No, we cannot say with one hundred per cent certainty, solely based on a person's behavior, whether that person is lying or telling the truth. What we

[4] NAVARRO, J. *The Thrue About Lie Detection.* Psychology Today [online]. 2026 [cit. 2026-3-16]. Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/spycatcher/201203/the-truth-about-lie-detection

can observe much more effectively, however, is when a person feels comfortable and when they feel uncomfortable. And if the person is experiencing discomfort, we may ask, professionally and sensitively - why? This scientific study constitutes a partial output of the international scientific research project conducted at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava entitled "Application of Knowledge of Nonverbal Communication and Behavioral Analysis in the Investigation Process," project No. Výsk. 276.

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CONSPIRACY THINKING BEYOND UNCERTAINTY: EXPLAINING FAKE NEWS SUSCEPTIBILITY

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1. Introduction

The rapid spread of misinformation has intensified interest in the psychological mechanisms underlying susceptibility to fake news. One candidate factor is conspiracy mentality, which can be conceptualized as a generalized interpretive framework that predisposes individuals to attribute events to hidden and intentional actions of powerful actors (BRUDER et al. 2013). This framework reflects a stable individual difference and has strong predictive power for belief in a wide range of conspiracy narratives, suggesting that it operates as a proximal mechanism in information processing. Consistent with this view, conspiracy mentality has also been associated with belief in fake news, but not with belief in real news, indicating a specific link to misinformation (SZEBENI et al. 2021). More broadly, individuals with stronger conspiracy beliefs have been found to show greater receptivity to misleading information and lower trust in official sources across different national contexts (DE CONINCK et al. 2021; GUNDERSEN et al. 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, conspiracy beliefs are thought to emerge from epistemic motives, particularly the desire to understand complex or threatening

events under conditions of uncertainty (DOUGLAS et al. 2017). By contrast, intolerance of uncertainty refers to a broader dispositional tendency to experience ambiguity as aversive and to seek predictability and certainty (CARLETON 2016). While such uncertainty may motivate the search for explanations, it does not determine the specific content of those explanations (MOULDING et al. 2016). Recent research further suggests that Generation Z is frequently exposed to large volumes of digital information, including misinformation, and may experience difficulties in accurately distinguishing between true and false content (KOPS et al. 2025; KYRYCHENKO et al. 2025). Despite high levels of digital engagement, this group remains vulnerable to online manipulation and rapid information processing contexts (GHERGUȚ-BABII et al. 2025). Such environments are likely to increase ambiguity and cognitive load, thereby activating epistemic needs for explanation (DOUGLAS et al. 2017). In this context, conspiracy mentality provides a structured interpretive framework through which individuals make sense of complex and uncertain information (BRUDER et al. 2013). Individuals high in conspiratorial thinking are more likely to interpret information through assumptions of hidden intent and manipulation, increasing the plausibility of misleading narratives (SZEBENI et al. 2021; DE CONINCK et al. 2021; GUNDERSEN et al. 2024).

Taken together, the literature suggests that intolerance of uncertainty and conspiracy mentality may play distinct roles in susceptibility to misinformation. Intolerance of uncertainty may reflect a broader motivational disposition associated with the desire for certainty and explanation, whereas conspiracy mentality may be more directly related to how ambiguous information is interpreted. On this basis, the present study examined whether dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty and conspiracy mentality would differentially predict susceptibility to fake news among young adults in the context of the Romanian national elections. We expected conspiracy mentality to account for unique variance beyond intolerance of uncertainty.

2. Measurements and Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 73 young participants aged between 18 and 22 years (M = 20.51, SD = 1.18). Most respondents identified as female (81.0%). Nearly all participants were residents of Romania (96.6%), with a small proportion coming from the diaspora (3.4%). In terms of settlement type, the largest group lived in a town or city (44.8%), followed by those from rural areas (29.3%) and major cities (25.9%). Geographically, the sample was predominantly drawn from Harghita county (37.0%), followed by Cluj (19.2%), Mureș (13.7%), Satu Mare (8.2%), and

Covasna (6.8%), with smaller representation from Bihor, Sălaj, Bistriţa-Năsăud, and Braşov counties.

A priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (FAUL et al. 2007) for linear multiple regression (F-test), assuming a medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$), $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, and three predictors, indicating a required sample size of N = 77. The obtained sample (N = 73) was marginally below this estimate, which may be attributed to the constrained data collection window tied to the election period. Post-hoc power analysis confirmed that the achieved power was .84 ($f^2 = .20$, based on $R^2 = .17$), exceeding the conventional .80 threshold (COHEN 1988), indicating that the sample was adequate to detect the observed effect.

Measurements

Intolerance of Uncertainty. Intolerance of uncertainty was measured using the 12-item short version of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS-12; CARLETON – NORTON – ASMUNDSON 2007). The scale assesses individuals' negative cognitive and behavioral responses to uncertain situations across two dimensions: Prospective Anxiety (7 items), reflecting fear and anxiety related to future uncertain events, and Inhibitory Anxiety (5 items), reflecting uncertainty that inhibits action or experience. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*entirely characteristic of me*), with higher scores indicating greater intolerance of uncertainty. The original study reported excellent internal consistency for the total scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$) and good reliability for both subscales (Prospective Anxiety: $\alpha = .85$; Inhibitory Anxiety: $\alpha = .85$). In the present study, the two subscale scores were entered separately into the analyses. The Prospective Anxiety subscale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$), while the Inhibitory Anxiety subscale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

Conspiracy Mentality. The Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; BRUDER et al. 2013) measures individuals' general tendency toward conspiratorial thinking. The scale comprises five items rated on an 11-point scale (0 = certainly not true to 10 = certainly true). The CMQ demonstrates a unidimensional factor structure accounting for 60.6% of variance, with good internal consistency and test-retest reliability reported in the original studies ($a = .77–.82$; r = .84). In the present study, the scale showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $a = .77$).

Fake News Susceptibility. Susceptibility to fake news was assessed using five items adapted and translated into Hungarian from VERMA et al. (2023), who examined the role of confirmation bias and media literacy in social media users' vulnerability to misinformation. The original study reported good reliability and convergent validity (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$, CR = .83, AVE = .58). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true of me* to 5 = *very true of me*), with higher

scores indicating greater susceptibility. In the present study, internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's $a = .72$).

Procedure

The study employed a cross-sectional design. Data collection took place in May 2025, coinciding with the 2025 Romanian presidential election, which was held in two rounds (May 4 and May 18). Participants completed the questionnaire package in the days preceding the first round.

The target population consisted of Hungarian-speaking university students residing in Romania; accordingly, all study materials were provided exclusively in Hungarian. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling using a snowball approach, with the survey link disseminated through social media channels. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms and required approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Eligibility required participants to be at least 18 years of age, confirmed at survey entry. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

All study procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the relevant institutional and national research committees, and with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (1975, revised 2000). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to inclusion.

Data analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. To examine the extent to which intolerance of uncertainty dimensions and conspiracy mentality predicted susceptibility to fake news, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. In Step 1, the two subscales of intolerance of uncertainty (prospective anxiety and inhibitory anxiety) were entered as predictors. In Step 2, conspiracy mentality was added to assess its incremental contribution beyond the uncertainty-related variables. All statistical tests were evaluated at $\alpha = .05$, and 95% confidence intervals are reported throughout.

3. Results

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether prospective anxiety, inhibitory anxiety, and conspiracy beliefs predicted susceptibility to fake news. Table 1 shows the results of the analysis. In Step 1, prospective anxiety and inhibitory anxiety were entered as predictors. The model was not statistically significant, $F\ (2, 70) = 3.06$, $p = .053$, explaining 8 % of the variance in susceptibility to fake news. Neither prospective anxiety, nor inhibitory anxiety was a significant predictor.

In Step 2, conspiracy beliefs were added to the model. This variable significantly improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $p = .008$. The final model was statistically significant, $F(3, 69) = 4.68$, $p = .005$, and accounted for 16.9% of the variance in susceptibility to fake news. In the final model, conspiracy beliefs significantly predicted susceptibility to fake news ($\beta = .31$, $p = .008$). Prospective anxiety and inhibitory anxiety were not significant predictors.

Table 1
Multiple Hierarchical Regression Predicting Susceptibility to Fake News

Predictor	**B**	**SE**	***β***	***t***	***p***
Step 1					
Constant	7.66	2.39	-	3.21	.002
Prospective anxiety	0.34	0.77	.06	0.44	.660
Inhibitory anxiety	1.06	0.56	.25	1.89	.063
Model statistics					
R	.28				
R^2	.08				
Step 2					
Constant	5.58	2.41	-	2.31	.024
Prospective anxiety	-0.14	0.76	-.02	-0.19	.853
Inhibitory anxiety	0.98	0.54	.23	1.82	.073
Conspiracy beliefs	0.13	0.05	.31	2.71	.008
Model statistics					
R	.41				
R^2	.17				
ΔR^2	.09				

Note. N = 73. Dependent variable = susceptibility to fake news. Step 1 included prospective anxiety and inhibitory anxiety. Step 2 added conspiracy beliefs. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE= standard error of B; ***β*** = standardized regression coefficient. Values are rounded to two decimal places.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined whether dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty and conspiracy mentality were associated with susceptibility to fake news among

young adults in the context of the 2025 Romanian presidential election. The findings indicated that conspiracy beliefs were the only significant unique predictor of self-reported fake news susceptibility in the final model. Although the dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty accounted for a small and only marginally significant proportion of variance when entered alone, they did not remain significant once conspiracy mentality was included. These results suggest that conspiracy mentality may be more closely related to susceptibility to fake news than broader dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty.

This pattern is consistent with previous research showing that conspiracy mentality is reliably associated with endorsement of misinformation-related claims and distrust in official sources across a range of contexts (DE CONINCK et al. 2021; GUNDERSEN et al. 2024; SZEBENI et al. 2021). The present findings extend this literature by suggesting that conspiracy mentality retains explanatory value even when conceptually related dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty are considered. In this respect, the study contributes to a growing body of research indicating that vulnerability to misleading information may depend not only on general motivational dispositions, but also on the interpretive frameworks individuals use when evaluating ambiguous or contested claims.

One possible interpretation of these findings is that intolerance of uncertainty and conspiracy mentality operate at different levels of psychological specificity. Intolerance of uncertainty may reflect a broad dispositional tendency to experience ambiguity as aversive and to seek certainty or explanation (CARLETON 2016). However, as suggested by MOULDING et al. (2016), this motivational tendency does not necessarily determine the specific content of the belief's individuals adopt. By contrast, conspiracy mentality may provide a more specific interpretive lens through which ambiguous information becomes more plausible. From this perspective, intolerance of uncertainty may function as a background motivational factor, whereas conspiracy mentality may be more directly associated with how individuals evaluate questionable information. Importantly, this interpretation should be treated as theoretically consistent with the present findings rather than as a directly tested mechanism.

The findings may be particularly relevant in the case of young adults. Previous research suggests that younger individuals are frequently confronted with high volumes of online content, including misinformation, and may have trouble in evaluating the credibility of such material (GHERGUȚ-BABII et al. 2025; KOPS et al. 2025; KYRYCHENKO et al. 2025). In periods of heightened sociopolitical uncertainty, such as national elections, these conditions may further increase ambiguity and cognitive load. The present results are compatible with the view that, under such conditions, general discomfort with uncertainty may be less informative than the interpretive frameworks individuals bring to information evaluation.

Limitations and future directions

The present study has several notable strengths. Data were collected during a politically salient period — the 2025 Romanian presidential election — which enhances the ecological validity of the findings, as susceptibility to misinformation is particularly relevant in contexts of heightened sociopolitical uncertainty. Furthermore, the sample represents an understudied minority population: Hungarian-speaking university students in Romania, a bilingual community embedded in a distinctive media and political environment. Focusing on young adults is ecologically relevant, as this group is highly exposed to misinformation in digital environments. The two subscales of the IUS-12 were entered separately into the analyses, allowing for a more differentiated examination of intolerance of uncertainty than would be possible with a total score. Finally, the hierarchical regression design enabled the assessment of conspiracy mentality's incremental predictive contribution beyond intolerance of uncertainty, demonstrating its unique explanatory value.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a relatively small convenience sample of Hungarian-speaking university students in Romania. In addition, the geographic concentration of participants — with over half drawn from Harghita and Cluj counties — and the exclusive focus on the 18–22 age group further restricts the representativeness of the sample. Furthermore, all variables were assessed through self-report in a cross-sectional design. The Hungarian adaptation of the VERMA et al. (2023) scale has not yet been formally validated in this population, which warrants caution in interpreting the measurement properties of the scale.

In addition, the outcome measure captured self-reported susceptibility to fake news rather than actual performance in distinguishing false from accurate information. Taken together, these considerations mean that the results should be understood as evidence of differential association rather than as proof of a causal psychological process. The study also did not assess media consumption habits or political attitudes, both of which may moderate or confound the observed relationships — particularly given the well-documented overlap between conspiracy mentality and political orientation. Future research would therefore benefit from larger and more diverse samples, behavioral indicators of misinformation detection, and longitudinal or experimental designs that can better examine whether uncertainty-related dispositions contribute indirectly to misinformation susceptibility through conspiracy-oriented interpretive styles.

Overall, the present study highlights the importance of distinguishing between broad motivational dispositions and more specific interpretive frameworks when examining susceptibility to fake news. Although intolerance of uncertainty may be relevant as a general background factor, the findings suggest that conspiracy mentality is more closely associated with how young adults evaluate misleading

information in high-uncertainty sociopolitical contexts. In this sense, the study contributes to a more differentiated psychological understanding of misinformation vulnerability and underscores the value of examining belief-based interpretive styles alongside broader dispositional characteristics.

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CURRENT CHALLENGES IN TRAINING AND EDUCATION OF SECURITY AGENCIES

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1. Artificial Intelligence in the Educational Process as a Challenge

Modern technologies bring many challenges that also affect education. Contemporary education must respond to current challenges, which means a need to innovate the educational process. One of the most significant developments is artificial intelligence, which is increasingly applied in education, science, and research. It is used by students, teachers, and researchers alike. Artificial intelligence also affects the educational process at universities that train members of security forces. For this reason, it is essential to address these challenges while simultaneously modernizing and innovating the educational process on a comprehensive scale. Artificial intelligence brings many positives but also negatives, such as the misuse of AI in producing texts - term papers or final theses (bachelor's and master's theses). The ethical use of AI elements in preparing final theses is guided by the ethical principles established by educational institutions.

At the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava, in August 2025, the Rector's Instruction of the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava No. 152/2025 on the transparent use of artificial intelligence tools at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava was adopted. For students, the instruction sets the following rules for using artificial intelligence tools:

a) „*Do not use AI tools to bypass assessment processes. Using AI for final or academic works is allowed only with clear and original contribution. Never use AI in ways that could harm the Academy's academic integrity.*
b) *Use of AI must not replace a student's individual effort, creativity, and professional work; it may serve only as a supportive tool.*
c) *Do not use AI tools to produce full texts, draw conclusions, or make claims meant to be your own independent work.*
d) *Any use of AI tools (e.g., text generation, citing AI responses, image creation, translations, etc.) must be transparently disclosed by citing the relevant tool in accordance with the ISO 690 citation standard (see appendix).*
e) *The student is obliged to clearly declare the use of AI tools by means of a statement in the honor declaration and by explicitly indicating such use directly in the text of the*

work (see appendix). A student is not required to declare use of AI tools for grammar checks, language editing, drafting the work's outline, or gathering background information.

f) *Breach of the rules on the use of AI tools by students is considered a violation of the Academy's Code of Ethics and may also be classified as a disciplinary offense under the Academy's Disciplinary Rules, subject to disciplinary proceedings, or as academic fraud under the provisions of the Higher Education Act.*"[1]

For teaching staff, the instruction regulates the use of artificial intelligence tools as follows:

a) „*Academic staff are encouraged to actively support the integration of artificial intelligence tools into the educational process while guiding students toward their proper, responsible, ethical, and transparent use.*

b) Academic staff are encouraged to define in advance and adequately justify the rules for the appropriate use of artificial intelligence tools by students when fulfilling their study obligations.

c) When assessing students' written assignments, particular attention should be paid to the process of their creation, the way the final outputs are presented, and the verification of students' knowledge and skills, especially through professional discussion.

d) *Academic staff are also encouraged to use artificial intelligence tools in the implementation of scientific, research, development, and other creative activities in accordance with the rules set out in the Rector's directive. However, the use of these tools must comply with the principles of academic integrity.* "[2]

Pursuant to the new Act on Higher Education, all universities in Slovakia are required to adopt similar regulations defining the ethical rules for the use of artificial intelligence tools. However, regulation alone is not sufficient. Targeted, mandatory training on the ethical use of artificial intelligence should be provided to students and academic staff. These sessions should clarify guidelines for proper, legitimate use of AI in academic outputs, such as seminar papers, theses, and scientific publications. By implementing such training, higher education institutions can better ensure transparency and responsible AI use in academia.

To address these challenges, institutions should establish clear guidelines regarding the use and disclosure of artificial intelligence in thesis preparation. Supervisors and reviewers should receive training to identify AI-generated content, and students should be required to transparently state any use of artificial

[1] Art. 3 of the Rector's Instruction of the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava No. 152/2025 on the transparent use of artificial intelligence tools at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava

[2] Art. 4 of the Rector's Instruction of the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava No. 152/2025 on the transparent use of artificial intelligence tools at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava

intelligence as a source. Establishing standardized procedures for AI source acknowledgement may help reduce misuse and support academic integrity.

For this reason, the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic has prepared a new Act on Higher Education[3]. This legislation reflects the growing use, and in some cases misuse, of artificial intelligence in the preparation of final theses. The new Higher Education Act will enter into force on 1 September 2026. All higher education institutions in Slovakia are required to comply with the new legal provisions. The new Higher Education Act also reflects the growing problems associated with the preparation of final theses, particularly due to the increasing use of artificial intelligence**,** which has become a primary tool for generating academic content.

The new law introduces a new concept — the "Final Internship", which may replace the preparation of a final thesis**.** For example, in the case of bachelor's degree programs, the following provision is proposed:

"*The study program of the first cycle may include a final bachelor's thesis and a final internship. If the higher education institution determines that the study program of the first cycle includes both a final bachelor's thesis and a final internship, the student may choose whether to prepare a final thesis or complete a final internship.*"[4]

In the case of master's degree programs, the proposed legislation states:

"*The study program of the second cycle, as well as a study program combining the first and second cycles, shall include a final thesis and a final internship. The student may choose whether to prepare a final thesis or complete a final internship.*"[5]

The new legal framework thus introduces the option of completing a final internship instead of writing a final thesis. It will be up to the student to decide whether they prefer to prepare a final thesis or undertake a final internship. For higher education institutions, however, this presents a particular challenge, as they will need to revise their study programs to allow students to choose between the two alternatives. The university's task will be to determine the requirements and conditions for completing the final internship so that students can demonstrate

[3] Act No. 300/2025 Coll. on Higher Education Institutions and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts (Higher Education Act)

[4] Act on Higher Education Institutions Section 58 article. 5. In: https://www.slov-lex.sk/elegislativa/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2025/350/sprievodne-dokumenty?stadiumUuid=d968259f-3225-4896-b907-398c30b627b7

[5] Act on Higher Education Institutions Section 58 article. 5. In: https://www.slov-lex.sk/elegislativa/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2025/350/sprievodne-dokumenty?stadiumUuid=d968259f-3225-4896-b907-398c30b627b7

their ability to apply knowledge, skills, and competencies in a workplace setting, in accordance with the learning outcomes of the respective study program.

The final internship will be carried out under the supervision of a consultant, who must be a university teacher. The consultant's primary role is to provide professional guidance and monitor the progress of the internship. The new legislation also requires a mutual agreement between the university and the organization where the internship will take place. The student's primary obligation after completing the final internship is to prepare a report summarizing the internship, the activities performed, and evidence of their ability to apply their knowledge, skills, and competencies.

The consultant and the host organization where the internship was carried out are required to prepare an evaluation report, confirming the student's activities during the internship. The final stage is the internship defense, which the student presents before a committee and is a mandatory part of the state examination at both levels of higher education. All higher education institutions will need to adapt to these new requirements and incorporate the new legal provisions into their educational processes.

The Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava plans to modify its study programmes in order to reflect the new legal regulation. One of the proposed measures is the complete abolition of bachelor's theses, which is permitted under the new Act on Higher Education. In the case of master's theses, as mentioned above, it will be necessary to adjust the study programmes so that students may choose between completing a master's thesis or undertaking a final internship.

If opting for a final internship, both credit value and hours per credit mandated by law must be observed. The current programme assigns 5 credits to preparing and defending the final thesis. Legally, a credit is defined as: "a numerical value for each course, representing the proportion of work needed to complete the course and attain its learning outcomes within the standard workload for one academic year; one credit typically equals 25 hours of student effort, including self-study."[6]

Therefore, preparing and defending a final (master's) thesis requires 125 hours. The Academy's goal is for students to fulfill this requirement via a professional internship lasting at least 15 days, based on an eight-hour workday (125/8). Students will be required to complete the internship on a specific topic of their choice, under the supervision of an academic consultant and a designated person at the institution where the internship takes place. For students who are members of the Police Force, the internship may be conducted within the unit to which they are currently assigned. However, they will be required to strictly adhere to the selected topic. Civilian students may complete their internship at

[6] Act on Higher Education Institutions, Section 2, letter (j). In: https://www.slov-lex.sk/elegislativa/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2025/350/sprievodne-dokumenty?stadiumUuid=d968259f-3225-4896-b907-398c30b627b7

institutions of state or public administration (e.g., district offices, ministries, and similar institutions). Subsequently, students will be required to meet the additional conditions outlined above to be eligible to defend the final internship, which forms part of the state examination.

The solution introduced by the new Act on Higher Education partially curbs the misuse of artificial intelligence. This approach warrants a positive assessment. Besides reducing the abuse of generative artificial intelligence in final thesis preparation, it also reinforces the link between theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

2. Education of Security Forces in the Context of New Security Threats

Current technological developments and the capabilities of artificial intelligence are reflected in new methods for carrying out illegal activities. As a result, new security threats are emerging, to which it is necessary to respond, also within the higher education curricula of institutions that focus on the training of members of security forces.

The European Union is aware of the seriousness of the security situation across its Member States. For this reason, it has defined two key strategic documents that identify existing threats and emphasize the need to develop new tools and strengthen international cooperation among the security forces of EU Member States, as well as among selected security-related agencies.

These strategic documents include:

1. Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA)
2. European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)

Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA)

The EU SOCTA strategy (Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment) is a strategic analytical framework developed by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, Europol. „*Article 88 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establishes Europol's mandate, which includes coordinating and supporting investigative activities in the fields of terrorism and organised crime*."[7] The primary objective of this important document is to identify, analyse, and highlight key threats arising from serious and organised crime within the borders of the European Union. SOCTA provides an evidence-based assessment of criminal

[7] LACA, Nina. Aktivity Európskej únie v boji proti terorizmu. In: Lex et securitas: recentní výzvy právních a bezpečnostních věd (interdisciplinární diskurs), KŘÍHA, J., FELCAN, M., METEŇKO, J. et al. České Budějovice: Vysoká škola evropských a regionálních studií, 2025. s. 45.

phenomena, structures, and trends by integrating intelligence gathered from EU Member States, relevant EU agencies, and other partner entities, including those outside the European Union. Its main purpose is to support informed decision-making at the strategic and political levels and to serve as a fundamental pillar for setting operational priorities within the EU's policy framework for combating serious and organised crime (EMPACT). SOCTA thus represents a tool that enables a coordinated, intelligence-led approach to tackling serious and organised crime across the European Union. „The EU SOCTA report repeatedly emphasizes that the threat posed by serious and organised crime to the European Union and its Member States is pervasive, significant, and continuously evolving. All forms of criminal activity pose a threat to the EU; however, some stand out as key threats due to specific characteristics that heighten their danger. Through the EU SOCTA framework, Europol is tasked with identifying these key threats."[8]

European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats - EMPACT

The EU EMPACT strategy (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats) represents an operational framework of the European Union aimed at addressing the most significant threats arising from serious and organised crime through a coordinated, intelligence-led approach, building on the strategic SOCTA document. EMPACT translates the strategic priorities identified in SOCTA into concrete operational measures. It promotes structured cooperation among EU Member States, who lead and implement actions; the Europol agency, which supports with intelligence analysis; other EU agencies, which offer specialized expertise; and relevant partners. Cooperation includes integrating law enforcement authorities, judicial bodies responsible for prosecutions, customs administrations managing goods movement, border management authorities handling border security, and administrative bodies providing regulatory oversight.

The main objective of EMPACT is to enhance the effectiveness, coherence, and overall impact of the European Union's response to serious and organised crime by aligning strategic analysis with operational planning.[9]

[8] For more: Europol (2025), European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment - The changing DNA of serious and organised crime, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. In: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/EU-SOCTA%202025%20-%20Zhrnutie.pdf

[9] European Commission. EMPACT – Fighting crime together. In: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/law-enforcement-cooperation/empact-fighting-crime-together_en?utm

Security-focused higher education institutions that train security forces must review these strategic documents and incorporate them into their curricula. The Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava has identified three core departments where implementing the knowledge and findings of these strategic documents in teaching is necessary. These are the Department of Investigation, Department of Criminal Police, and Department of Criminal Law, all tasked with updating their course syllabi and thematic plans to ensure students thoroughly understand these essential strategic documents. Emphasis was placed on the internationalisation of educational processes, as the strategic documents themselves promote international and cross-border police cooperation among the security forces of EU Member States, with the aim of effectively combating existing threats with a transnational dimension.

3. E-learning as a Component of the Education of Security Forces

The measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic also significantly affected university education. All higher education institutions responded to the situation by introducing online teaching, which replaced traditional face-to-face instruction. Gradually, this led to the development of the idea of formally integrating e-learning into the educational process.

Within the Slovak higher education system, several practical approaches to e-learning have emerged and are currently being implemented. Some universities record lectures and subsequently make them available on their institutional websites. Other universities use various digital platforms to publish the core content of individual course topics, as well as additional relevant information related to course completion. In addition, some universities have adopted a blended learning model, allowing students to participate in both in-person and online learning.

The Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava is a specialized higher education institution that primarily trains members of the Police Force. For this reason, when deciding on the implementation of e-learning within the educational process, it was important to consider the possibility of using existing platforms containing knowledge in the fields of security, legal, and police sciences. As a result, a decision was made that both academic staff and students would be able to use the unique LEEd platform for e-learning activities, operated by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL).

The LEEd platform of CEPOL is the agency's central digital forum. It is designed to support education, training, and professional networking among law enforcement officers across the European Union. The LEEd (Law Enforcement Education and Training Platform) is an integrated online learning and cooperation system operated by CEPOL that provides EU law enforcement officers with access to e-learning courses, virtual classrooms, educational materials, expert communities, and knowledge-sharing tools. The platform

supports harmonising law enforcement training at the EU level by enabling continuous professional development, cross-border cooperation, and the exchange of best practices aligned with the European Union's internal security priorities. Main Functions of the LEEd Platform:

a) E-learning and blended learning – providing online courses, webinars, and virtual training activities coordinated by CEPOL.
b) Knowledge sharing – access to educational resources, research outputs, and policy-relevant materials related to EU security priorities (e.g., serious and organised crime).
c) Professional networking – facilitating interaction between law enforcement officers, instructors, and experts from EU Member States.
d) Support EU policies by aligning educational content with EU frameworks such as SOCTA and EMPACT, including intelligence-led policing.
e) Accessibility and standardisation – ensure all EU law enforcement officers have equal access to high-quality training.

The LEEd platform is CEPOL's digital infrastructure for law enforcement education in the EU, enabling the harmonised delivery of training, knowledge exchange, and professional cooperation in support of the European Union's internal security objectives.[10]

Both academic staff and students were granted access to the platform and encouraged to use webinars and online lectures during lectures, seminars, and practical classes. Participation in activities organised through the LEEd platform also provides academic staff with opportunities for further professional development in their respective fields of expertise. The platform provides access to specialised e-learning courses, study materials, and up-to-date knowledge on law enforcement within the European Union. The use of this platform may contribute to modernising teaching, expanding academic staff's professional knowledge, and strengthening the international dimension of education at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava. The use of the CEPOL LEEd platform within the educational process will also benefit students. Through e-learning courses, students gain access to current professional knowledge in law enforcement, case studies from police practice, and opportunities to further develop their professional, language, and digital competencies in an international context.

Students benefit significantly from using the LEEd platform. By registering and using its resources, they gain advantages such as:

a) Access to specialised online courses in areas such as combating organised crime, terrorism, cybercrime, financial investigations, and border protection

[10] For more: CEPOL. (2025). *About LEED*. In: https://www.cepol.europa.eu/training-education/leed

b) The opportunity to become familiar with current trends and practices in law enforcement across European Union Member States
c) Access to professional materials and the expertise of specialists from various European security institutions
d) The opportunity to participate in an international educational environment and communicate with experts and students from other countries
e) Students can earn CEPOL certificates after successfully completing courses. These certificates may help their future security careers.
f) The expansion of knowledge beyond the standard curriculum, complementing the professional knowledge acquired during university studies
g) The introduction of this platform as an e-learning module represents a valuable opportunity to develop professional expertise, acquire international experience, and improve preparedness for service in the field of security and law enforcement.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the three areas discussed in this paper, it can be concluded that it is necessary to modernise the educational process and take into account ongoing technological developments. Artificial intelligence offers numerous advantages in education. However, it is also important to address its negative aspects, particularly the misuse of artificial intelligence in the preparation of final theses. For this reason, the new Slovak legislation has introduced solutions that include the possibility of abolishing bachelor's theses. In the case of master's theses, the legislation envisages their retention while introducing the possibility of so-called final internships. At the same time, it is essential to place strong emphasis on the ethical use of artificial intelligence tools and on the need for education and training for students, academic staff, and researchers on their proper and responsible use.

New security threats at the European Union level also require a response from educational institutions. In particular, higher education institutions specialising in security studies must update their course syllabi to reflect the emerging threats and challenges faced by the European Union. It is also necessary to strengthen internationalisation and police cooperation, as these actors must work together to combat illegal activities that threaten the citizens of EU Member States. This cooperation involves not only collaboration among Member States themselves but also support from EU security agencies such as Europol, Frontex, and CEPOL. At the same time, it is important to strengthen the transmission of relevant knowledge within the educational process so that members of the Police Force are adequately prepared to perform their duties also in an international context.

E-learning cannot replace traditional face-to-face education, particularly for practical training, which members of the security forces must complete in person. Instead, e-learning should be understood as a complementary educational method. The LEEd platform presented in this paper offers unique opportunities for the education of members of security forces. The content available on the LEEd platform provides a wide range of training across various areas of policing and security. The integration of this platform into the educational process will benefit both students and academic staff and will undoubtedly strengthen the international dimension of education, an essential aspect of the contemporary environment.

The integration of theory and practice remains a key aspect of the education of security force members. An appropriate balance between theoretical knowledge and practical training ensures that security personnel are reliably prepared to perform their duties. Practical experience plays a crucial role in education, and it is therefore necessary to support both national and international practice-oriented activities.

Modern education for security force members must be a priority for both the Member States of the European Union and the European Union as a whole. For this reason, it is necessary to call upon relevant national and European institutions to continue creating and strengthening opportunities for education and practical training in order to ensure an effective response to existing threats and illegal activities.

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