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## National Security and Higher Education – Challenges, Risks and Threats

*Globalisation raises the risk of unwanted leaks of information from higher education institutions and the use of the scientific results of one country for hostile purposes by another one. The national interests to be protected have their dynamics so national security has to also be in permanent development. Networking as a part of HUMINT has a growing importance among students and the teaching staff as well. The protective measures need urgent upgrading in order to prevent any possible risk on behalf of state and non-state actors. As the students are the most exposed to different radical ideas, the preventive measures have to be focused on them. It is also important to keep an eye on the laboratories accessible at the higher education institutions where electronic, technical and chemical tools and devices can be illegally elaborated for illicit purposes.*

*Keywords: networking, HUMINT, upgrading the protective measures*

### 1. National security issues and globalisation

One of the most important side effects of globalisation is the growth of factors challenging the global economic, social, political and security status quo. On the one hand, it is the consequence of the boosted will of every country to make their interest prevail. On the other hand, it is also a consequence of the limited and shrinking space where these interests can be represented without affecting the interests of others. If one wants to deepen in this problem, she or he also has to consider the differences between the tools of the different countries they have access to make their interests respected. The differences are the imminent result of the disparity in the level of development of the countries. The higher is the level of development the more sophisticated and more expensive the tools can be. Some countries have

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developed their own electronic and other technical devices for surveillance and gathering data and information while others have to spend significant amounts of money to procure less sophisticated devices, or to find the accessible (i.e. corruptible) human resources to satisfy the information requests.

Another side effect of globalisation in the field of national security is that oscillations in the status quo in any part of the world can provoke unforeseen processes anywhere, even in the most remoted parts. The phenomena provoking oscillations in the status quo, includes the same factors we usually mention as migration-generating ones and as factors leading to radicalisation.

Thus, the national security of every country is dynamic and its dynamism depends on the complex impact of factors concerning the local, bilateral, multilateral, sub-regional, regional, intercontinental and at least global levels of economic, social and political processes.

What does it have in common with higher education? To obtain information from abroad and from national sources as well, it is not always necessary to use expensive devices. It is rather cheaper to use interpersonal contacts, to meet interesting and important people and maintain contact with them for a long time. This is usually called networking. One of the best places for that purpose is any institution of higher education in any country. Of course, it is an important task to choose the institution where gathering information is not so complicated from the point of view of contacting students and staff members, lecturers, researchers and professors as a source of valuable information. The higher education institutions can be the experimental field for HUMINT at the level of the students and an important operational field at the level of the staff with a higher scientific ranking.

## **2. Higher education as a part of the national security response to current challenges**

It is evident the challenges change all the time, therefore national security as a whole, in its complexity has to change. It is a process of permanent adaptation to the progressing circumstances. This adaptation is not an option, it is necessary and it equally refers to the fields of economic, social and defence policy, legislation and law enforcement. The adaptation in the social field includes all levels of education, beginning from kindergarten, preliminary or ground schools, secondary schools, colleges and all the institutions of higher education. There are several dozens of publications about the role of the scholar system in the preparation of the society to face new threats and perhaps a little one about the role of higher education as a theatre of operations. What does it mean? Without any doubt, the intelligence and counterintelligence services are active in all segments of the life of every given country also beyond their borders. Subsequently, operations of intelligence and counterintelligence might be carried out in higher education institutions, as well. The activities of these services include pointing out some potential contacts among the students and the academic staff. The higher education institutions give a big advantage to the national security

services once they can easily recruit people to use them for a while or for as long as possible as a source of information or even as collaborators or trusted persons in an academic institution. Being close or even participate immediately in the academic activities has other advantages, as well. Thus, the national security services have direct and mostly unlimited access to the academic materials; they can study the methods of training and academic requirements and also have access to the technical devices used in the process of training. This complex knowledge might be copied in countries with less opportunities and resources.

These goals can be achieved openly, and legally within the frameworks of inter-institutional bilateral or multilateral agreements. At the same time, none of the national security services, either the intelligence or the counterintelligence should leave this area unattended. The intelligence of the sending country can collect valuable data for different purposes through the students and the counterintelligence of the same sending country should prevent the intents of the hosting country's security services to approach the foreign nationals. On the other side, the intelligence of the hosting country has to follow the studies of the foreign students, whether they can have valuable information on the sending country's economic, political, defence, social and other issues. Sometimes, the foreign students can have high-ranking contacts back home through their families, potentially useful for building and developing relations between two countries.

Counterintelligence has multiple tasks.<sup>2</sup> First, it must take care of the pre-screening of the foreign students who want to study in the hosting country. This task is not so easy. There are licensed private recruiting enterprises whose business is to attract the maximum possible amount of students from abroad. Obviously, the profit of the recruiting companies has two sources: the payments of the recruited students for the admittance exams, and if they are admitted, the admitting academic institution pays a certain part of the tuition fee for every semester to the recruiting company once the student passes the semestral inscription. The requirements of documents are limited to the basic ones: documents about the finished secondary school, certification that the applicant does not have criminal records, medical certificate of vaccination and the absence of epidemiological threats. It could work almost perfectly in the case of countries where the emission of these documents is strongly controlled and the country has a highly reliable registration system. That is the problem. Usually, a large number of the potential students are from countries with serious problems of governability, high levels of corruption, presence of organised criminal groups and national and international terrorist organisations, etc. In addition to these there are other migration-generating factors, too. Thus, the counterintelligence of the hosting country hardly has the tools for preliminary background checking, for double-checking the validity of the presented documents. This is the point why counterintelligence must have active cooperation with the structural unit of every faculty dealing with the foreign students' issues directly, or through the vice dean

<sup>2</sup> See 1995. évi CXXV. törvény a nemzetbiztonsági szolgálatokról [Act CXXV of 1995 on National Security Services].

responsible for academic affairs. There is no need to underline that the contact persons have to be carefully chosen.

Another challenge is the appropriate protection of laboratories mostly where chemical, biological or even nuclear experiments take place. The protection should not be trusted to the security service of the academic institution but must be under strict control by the national institutions responsible for biological, chemical and nuclear technologies. The relevant protocols have to be observed and the measures in case of any emergency must be taught to the personnel and the students. The practical exercises should not be limited to the process of evacuation in case of fire but must include the tasks and the actions of every person in the given institution in any emergency.

### 3. State and non-state actors as a security risk

An emergency can occur even during the ordinary training program accidentally, without any hostile background. But, what if an emergency is provoked on purpose? What if we are targeted by a terrorist act?<sup>3</sup> There are well-elaborated protocols in case a terrorist attack has already taken place. In order to prevent or to be better prepared, if such an incident happens, we have to analyse why we are a target for the terrorists? What do we have in higher education that attracts the attention of the terrorists? Anything applicable as a weapon or for preparing a weapon capable to harm a significant group of persons or destroy entirely or partially material valuables attracts the terrorists' attention. Once the higher education institution disposes of laboratories for different experiments, terrorists could use them for their own purposes. They could develop substances, devices and other parts for bombs, explosives and ignition mechanisms, remote controllers for electronic ignition or neutralisation of electronic protection like jammers, etc.

Access to electronics laboratories can make them easier to interfere with the local and outer networks, alter the databases, drain important and sensible data to uncontrolled data storage, hide and encrypt their communication, misuse the institution's resources for their own goals. The interference in the institution's network and through that in the national network of higher education system would give the chance to alter the database content whenever and wherever it is necessary for them. Are we prepared for this kind of hostile activity? Are our systems protected up-to-date? Are the protection systems revised, assessed and developed in due time?

Individuals or groups, following the violent way of terrorism, perpetrate usually the acts described above. They can be state actors and non-state actors, as well. As the experience of the last decades proves it, Hungary has not been a primary target for either terrorist groups or other non-state actors. The violent acts, which took place in Hungary, were not perpetrated as acts of classic foreign or national terrorism. These were just crimes using the method of terrorism. In its turn, the Hungarian foreign policy has been keeping the country far beyond the collision of

<sup>3</sup> See Marie-Helen Maras: *A terrorizmus elmélete és gyakorlata*. Budapest, Antall József Tudásközpont, 2016.

different interests. This attitude has prevented the outbursts of conflicts with states supporting terrorism or with their proxies. According to the National Security Strategy of Hungary of 2020, our country has no hostilities with any country; therefore, it is hardly believable that any government would send groups specialised in subversive operations under the actual status quo.

#### **4. Security risk at the institutions of higher education during the Ukrainian–Russian conflict time**

The only feasible threat in our region is the armed conflict initiated by the Government of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Under the circumstances of this wide-scale military operation – a factual war – the institutions of higher education have to be prepared to face some unexpected phenomena. Young people can have different opinions regarding the events on the Ukrainian–Russian frontline and there is a chance that different groups of students may undertake some actions to express their opinion. These expressions can go beyond peaceful protest even within the perimeters of universities or other institutions. As soon as these acts become violent, it is already a risk for national security, which needs some measures to be taken urgently.<sup>4</sup> The national security services have to elaborate the necessary protocols for such cases including the tightening control of the laboratories and workshops, and applying very strict rules for registering hazardous materials.

Another source of risk is that in a situation when the discrepancies between the opinions of different groups of students (and staff) can grow, these can lead to the spontaneous formation of groups. The vulnerability of the students is imminent. Any “self-proposed leader” might convert the community with united opinion into a community of joint actions. This seemingly lone influencer might be a well-prepared conspired manipulator, a “mole”, representing interests opposite to the national security interests of Hungary. This person might be a member of a national or international organised crime syndicate or a member of a proxy organisation, one of the existing Private Military Companies, or might be an operative officer of a special service of an unknown country. That is a clear threat.

#### **5. Students’ groups and organisations as a possible hotbed for spreading unfriendly views**

Any community unites people with different views. Among them, the differences may emerge based upon their family background, cultural affiliation, religion, ethnicity, and – of course – political platforms and affiliation. All these factors play an important

<sup>4</sup> Concerning the problems of measures see Péter Nyeste – Ferenc Szendrei: *A bűnügyi hírszerzés kézikönyve*. Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019. 6.

role in building a real community of students, tolerant of each other, accepting and respecting the differences and trusting in the goodwill of each other. Under unfavourable conditions, the same factors can boost hostilities, intolerant behaviour, forming of groups or fractions with opposite views to each other. In extreme cases, nobody excludes clashes and violent actions. It is a permanent challenge that can escalate into a risk if the external conditions change. Internal critical situations in the social, political and economic fields of the home countries of the students or clashes on the borders – for example, between India and the People’s Republic of China, between India and Pakistan, or the civil war in the Middle East – can radicalise students very quickly. The same has happened recently as the Russian Government unilaterally started military operations against Ukraine. Once radicalised the students may not refrain from the active expression of their positions. When the first violent action takes place, the situation converts into a real threat that needs urgent measures from the national security structures. At what level are we prepared? Do we have the necessary sources of information and tools for a reaction? Is it possible to prevent radicalisation and escalation amongst the students? The answer is affirmative. The precondition of our successful activities in this field is the permanent contact and exchange of information with the competent leaders of the universities, colleges, and meaningful dialogue with the students using the appropriate conspirative technics. We should be able to respond to the questions, the answer to which the students cannot find alone. Thus, we can prevent the spreading of fake news, rumours, incompetent explanations of important problems or even the spreading of false information or misinterpretation on purpose. Through these conversations and students’ forums, we can have access to information, which can help us discover the source(s) and the mechanism of spreading information opposite to our interests, or even incompatible with our national security doctrine.

## 6. Recruiting amongst the students

During the last years, another task of the national security structures in institutions of higher education has obtained major importance. If we look at the age of persons involved in terrorist acts or supporting activities in the U.K., we see that between 2001 and 2021 51% of the people arrested for terrorist-related activities were under 30 years of age, and 4% under 18.<sup>5</sup> It is also interesting that according to these statistics, 90% of the arrested were male and 10% were female.<sup>6</sup> This proportion has remained throughout the twenty years long period. The conclusion is clear: young people are the most vulnerable and mostly exposed to intentional, purposeful manipulation. The reasons are also clear once young generations are gathered in a relatively small space they live a vivid social life, always communicating with each other even across borders. They are always hanging on the global networks, having an interest in the

<sup>5</sup> Home Office: *Operation of police powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 and subsequent legislation: financial year ending March 2021*. Table A.10. 10 June 2021; see also Grahame Allen – Megan Harding: *Terrorism in Great Britain: The statistics*. *House of Commons Library*, 14 October 2021. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Allen–Harding (2021): op. cit.

processes of the world surrounding them, consuming news without due criticism and appropriate knowledge to sort it. Due to the overwhelming information and the relative lack of experience and knowledge, these youngsters hardly notice the contradictory elements in different narratives, they can hardly filter the real news from the fake ones, the true information from the targeted manipulation. The phenomenon causing alert in case of facing contradictory information is called cognitive dissonance and it provokes criticism on behalf of the more experienced social groups. This is another example why the national security of the hosting country have a special responsibility to prevent the young people especially at the universities from being manipulated for hostile, terrorist or criminal purposes.

On the other side, these groups of youngsters are the ideal targets for recruiting for any service, domestic or adverse. It is clear that for any recruiting the knowing of the specific human and professional background at a high professional level before making the first contact is indispensable. The same knowledge, skills and practices become even more important when the task is to filter out the adverse recruiters or operatives among the students.

These tasks would be difficult to implement without regular and reliable contacts among the academic and administrative personnel of the higher education institution(s). Those members of the staff, who have an appropriate personal attitude and approach to the students as individuals gaining their trust, can be the most useful for the national security goals. Obviously, the old fashioned teaching attitude of playing the role of “Caesar of the Cathedra” instead of being a partner of the students up to a certain point, is counterproductive. Therefore, choosing the best approach to the student’s personality has vital importance to help them through a possible turning point of their lives.

## **7. Preventing infiltration into scientific structures**

There is another latent problem with roots in higher education. There are many different studies on the stealthy penetration and integration of organised crime into the economic life of the United States in the 1930s. Another amount of studies and publications present how the organised crime syndicates approached and got close to the highest levels of power.

In recent years, we have also witnessed the change of paradigm of terrorism, how terrorist organisations have changed their “Modus Operandi” depending on the defensive capabilities of different countries – fallen or strong. In the fallen countries, with unsolvable problems of governance, the terrorist organisations and/or their local representatives maintain violent attacks as the main tool to gain power. On the other side, in the strong countries, where along the last decades despite numerous and extremely violent terrorist acts, did not achieve any other result than strengthening the national security services and the collaboration between them, terrorist organisations have taken a different way to achieve the same goals. Thwarting terrorism has become one of the common goals of the countries sharing democratic values. As terrorism develops its methods, we have to be aware of the

threat of these changes. One of the fields where terrorism may intend to penetrate and infiltrate as deeply as it can is scientific life, mostly in the applied sciences such as physics, electronics, cybernetics, microbiology, virology, chemistry and engineering. It is clear, that these are the most useful fields, where the results of the research and experiments can be immediately applied for building new destructive materials, substances, devices and organisms. The best access point to the scientific results is participation in the process of research. If a well-embedded covert terrorist has a long-term access to the results of scientific researches and even actively participates in these works, he/she and the organisation behind him/her will acquire more reliable and applicable results to be used for terrorist purposes. How can the terrorists get there? On the one hand, terrorist organisations – when their financial resources afforded it – hired scientists and built their own laboratories. Among the scientists serving terrorists there were graduates of many distinguished and high-ranked institutions. Some scientists were kidnapped by the terrorists just to do some jobs for them. Although the terrorist engineers succeeded to develop a large variety of devices at their not so well-equipped laboratories, scientific development in many fields has always been faster. The financial resources have become much smaller, so the cost-effectiveness of the research and the violent acts using explosives and combine the method with the participation of many smaller groups at the same time in different places became very low. Consequently, there are two conclusions. The first of them is that terrorist organisations have no chance to take power by violent terrorist acts, by force through intimidation of the people in the countries with strong governmental structure and democratic institutions. The second conclusion is that if terrorist organisations still want to seize power they must act slowly, penetrating unnoticed into the social, economic, political and executive structures.

The terrorists have to have a very low profile in society, must become modest and recognised members of the communities, must approach the most vulnerable social groups by helping them bringing assistance in their daily problems, and must gain their trust to be their representatives in the local governments and higher as soon as possible. In other terms: the terrorist can get into political power from inside the society, without violence, by the common will of the voters, following the example of the organised crime syndicates in the U. S. in the 1920s and 1930s. This is the essence of the new paradigm of terrorist organisations.

The second conclusion: to consolidate their influence in the field of education and science, terrorist organisations must infiltrate the main centres: the prestigious universities, colleges, scientific research centres and institutes, etc. The most secure way to long-term success is – besides financing targeted research through different foundations – the long-time participation in the institutional and scientific life through permanent students' groups, maintaining contacts with the old "buds", cooperation with partner institutions abroad, which may be under the influence of any terrorist organisation or group. The higher education centres usually have problems with their financial background. As soon as this problem approaches its solution from sources outside the centre, the outer influence will have growing importance. This might be a high risk or even a threat to national security and the protection of national interests in different fields.

## 8. Conclusions

The socio-economic development of every society depends not only on the subject taught at the educational centres, the teaching methods, or the scientific level and performance of the academic staff, but progress also depends on the conditions and circumstances the state administration can provide. The safe conditions to be guaranteed by the national security structures and other governmental bodies for the higher education institutions are vital. The importance of safety is constantly growing as the political and security challenges are in permanent change. Sometimes, even the key role-players in the training of the new generations of scientific researchers are not fully aware of their own roles and the threats they face. If this paper did not do anything else than draw the attention of some competent persons to some aspects of national security in higher education, it is worth the time and effort.

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