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DIGITAL POLICING AND GENERATIONAL CHANGE: CHALLENGES FOR PREPARING GENERATION Z FOR LEADERSHIP AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HUNGARY

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Abstract
This study examines the intersection of rapid technological modernization and organizational generational turnover within Hungarian law enforcement, specifically focusing on the structural challenges of preparing emerging Generation Z officers for tactical leadership and conflict-management roles. Grounded in transformational leadership, generational cohort, and emotional intelligence theories, the study employs an exploratory mixed-methods design that triangulates content analysis of national policing directives, institutional curricula, non-participant observations of scenario-based training cycles (5.5 aggregate hours), and descriptive survey metrics from active-duty officers and trainees (N = 53).The empirical findings reveal a significant structural divergence between technological adaptation and socio-emotional readiness: 77.4% (n = 41) of respondents express high operational confidence in executing functional digital policing tasks, whereas only 45.3% (n = 24) report competence in structured conflict-resolution techniques, and only 41.5% (n = 22) demonstrate readiness for autonomous command under high-stress conditions. Qualitative content and behavioral observations confirm that current training frameworks compartmentalize technical digital proficiency from real-time mediation and emotional-regulation modules. While acknowledging the non-generalizable limits of this exploratory sample, the paper exposes a critical pedagogical gap and argues for a curriculum transformation that integrates automated digital systems directly into interactive, scenario-based mediation and tactical decision-making exercises to build comprehensive institutional capacity.

1 Introduction

The transformation of modern policing is increasingly influenced by two interrelated processes: digitalization and generational change. Digital policing encompasses the use of digital communication, data systems, analytics, and other technologies that alter how police organizations collect information, coordinate work, communicate with citizens, and make operational decisions [1], [3]. At the same time, Generation Z is entering public-sector workplaces with substantial exposure

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to digitally mediated communication and learning environments [2], [4]. These developments do not imply that all members of a generation share identical preferences; rather, they provide a useful analytical lens for examining how organizational structures and changing workforce expectations may interact [5].

In European law-enforcement systems, including Hungary, these developments raise questions about the adequacy of existing leadership-development and conflict-management training. Police organizations necessarily retain formal authority structures, procedural rules, and accountability mechanisms [16]. However, contemporary police work also requires communication, judgment, collaboration, and adaptive decision-making in situations that may be technologically mediated and socially complex, [21]. The relevant issue is therefore not whether hierarchy should be removed, but whether training systems provide sufficient opportunities for officers to develop leadership capacities alongside procedural competence.

Conflict-management and mediation skills are increasingly important in policing because officers regularly operate in situations involving interpersonal tension, uncertainty, public scrutiny, and emotionally charged interactions. Emotional intelligence provides a useful framework for considering self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal communication as leadership competencies, [12]. Digital competence alone does not guarantee these capacities. Consequently, the modernization of police education requires attention to the relationship between technological proficiency and socio-emotional competence rather than treating them as separate training domains.

Despite growing academic and institutional attention to digital transformation, leadership, and police modernization, there remains limited empirical discussion of how these developments intersect within Hungarian law-enforcement training. The present study therefore treats the Hungarian case as an exploratory context in which institutional training structures, participant perceptions, and training observations can be considered together. The study does not claim that the observed patterns represent all Hungarian police personnel or all members of Generation Z.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research problem: to what extent do current leadership-development and conflict-management training arrangements in Hungarian law enforcement prepare younger officers for leadership roles in digitally transforming policing environments?

The aim of this paper is to critically evaluate leadership-development and conflict-management training practices in Hungarian law-enforcement contexts, with particular attention to Generation Z officers. The study contributes to the discussion of police modernization by connecting leadership theory, generational research, emotional-intelligence perspectives, and empirical observations of training practices. Its central argument is that technological proficiency should be complemented by opportunities to practice autonomous decision-making, communication, mediation, and emotional regulation. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the methodology, Section 3 discusses the results, Section 4 provides analysis and discussion, and Section 5 concludes with policy recommendations.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study uses an exploratory mixed-methods design to examine the preparation of younger officers for leadership and conflict-management responsibilities in Hungarian law-enforcement training. A mixed-methods orientation is appropriate because the study combines qualitative evidence from institutional documents and training observations with descriptive survey evidence, following established mixed-methods principles [7]. The purpose is triangulation and analytical depth, not statistical generalization from a representative national sample.

The methodological approach integrates three sources of evidence: document analysis, survey-based empirical insights, and non-participant observations in police-training environments. Document analysis examines training curricula, leadership-development guidance, and conflict-management or mediation content [9], [13]. Survey data capture participants' perceptions of digital competence, leadership readiness, and conflict-management capability. Observational data provide contextual evidence about how training content is translated into practice. The three sources are considered comparatively so that converging and diverging patterns can be identified.

The combination of these sources provides methodological triangulation [8]. Triangulation does not eliminate researcher or measurement bias, but it allows the same research problem to be examined from institutional, perceptual, and behavioral perspectives. Because the empirical sample is limited and the survey is not presented as a probability sample, the results are interpreted as exploratory evidence of training patterns rather than as estimates of the Hungarian law-enforcement workforce as a whole.

2.1 Research Design

The research follows an exploratory–evaluative design. The exploratory component is justified by the limited empirical attention to the intersection of digital transformation, generational change, and leadership development in the Hungarian law-enforcement context. The evaluative component considers whether the training arrangements described in the documents and observed in practice provide opportunities to develop adaptive leadership, communication, mediation, and emotional-regulation competencies.

The evaluative dimension focuses on the relationship between formal training objectives and the competencies reported or observed in practice. Rather than assuming that a hierarchical structure is inherently ineffective, the study examines whether procedural and command-oriented approaches are complemented by experiential opportunities in which trainees must exercise judgment, communicate under pressure, and manage interpersonal conflict. This distinction is important because effective police leadership requires both lawful procedural control and the capacity to adapt decisions to complex operational circumstances, [21].

The theoretical framework combines three complementary perspectives. Transformational leadership theory draws attention to adaptability, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and motivational influence [21]. Generational cohort theory provides a framework for considering the possible influence of shared historical and technological experiences, while also requiring caution against treating generations as internally homogeneous [18]. Emotional-intelligence theory focuses attention on the interpersonal and self-regulatory capabilities needed for constructive conflict management, [12]. Together, these perspectives allow the study to examine whether technological competence is being translated into broader leadership capability.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory conceptualizes leadership as a process through which leaders influence followers by supporting motivation, development, intellectual stimulation, and a shared sense of purpose [10], [21]. Its four commonly discussed dimensions are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

In public-sector and law-enforcement environments, the theory is relevant because officers must operate within formal authority structures while also responding to changing operational and social conditions. Contemporary police leadership research emphasizes the importance of strategic thinking, adaptability, communication, and organizational development alongside formal authority [20]. Transformational leadership is therefore used in this study not as a replacement for lawful hierarchy, but as a lens for examining whether training develops initiative, adaptive judgment, and interpersonal leadership. Recent large-scale field studies highlight that structured transformational leadership training can significantly improve long-term organizational effectiveness and follower motivation, even within rule-bound public bureaucracies [17].

Within this study, transformational leadership theory is used to assess whether training arrangements provide Generation Z officers with opportunities to develop qualities that go beyond procedural compliance. Particular attention is given to adaptability, communication, emotional awareness, autonomous decision-making, and the ability to motivate or coordinate others in demanding situations [21].

2.2.2 Generational Cohort Theory

Generational Cohort Theory proposes that people who experience similar historical and socio-technological conditions during formative periods may develop some shared orientations. The

concept is useful here as an interpretive framework, but it should not be treated as evidence that all members of Generation Z possess the same workplace behavior or learning preferences. Recent research has questioned strong claims of systematic generational differences and emphasizes the importance of individual, professional, and contextual factors [18].

Generation Z is commonly associated with growing up during a period of widespread digital connectivity. This digital submersion often reshapes how information is prioritized, filtered, and queried, generating an expectation for flat, rapid, digital-first communication channels over rigid organizational systems. This background may influence familiarity with digital communication and technology-mediated learning. However, digital familiarity should be distinguished from strategic digital competence, leadership judgment, and socio-emotional capability. The present study therefore tests the practical relationship between these competency areas rather than assuming that digital nativity automatically produces leadership readiness.

In organizational contexts, potential differences between digitally familiar employees and traditional institutional structures may become particularly visible in organizations characterized by formal authority, discipline, and standardized procedures. In policing, however, these characteristics also serve legitimate functions related to accountability and operational coordination. The analytical question is consequently whether training systems can combine necessary institutional discipline with learning environments that develop communication, initiative, and adaptive problem-solving.

In this study, Generational Cohort Theory is applied cautiously to examine whether the characteristics commonly associated with Generation Z help explain perceived tensions between existing training arrangements and the learning or communication environment of younger officers. The framework is treated as one explanatory lens, not as a deterministic explanation of individual behavior [18].

2.2.3 Emotional Intelligence Theory

Emotional Intelligence Theory focuses on the ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and use emotional information in oneself and in interactions with others. Salovey and Mayer's foundational formulation places emotional information processing at the center of the construct [6], while later organizational research has examined its relationship with leadership and workplace behavior [12].

In leadership research, emotional intelligence is relevant to interpersonal interaction, self-regulation, and conflict management. Critics and advocates alike note that while emotional intelligence correlates heavily with effective leadership performance under stress, its integration into training must move beyond abstract frameworks into concrete, repeated behavioral evaluations to affect operational decision-making [19]. Its value for this study is therefore practical: officers may understand a conflict procedure conceptually but still require repeated practice to regulate their own responses, recognize the emotional state of others, and communicate in ways that reduce escalation.

In law-enforcement contexts, these capabilities are especially relevant because officers may encounter high-stress situations, public conflict, and emotionally charged interactions. Emotional competence should not be treated as a substitute for legal or procedural knowledge. Rather, it complements those competencies by supporting communication, judgment, and de-escalation.

In this study, emotional intelligence is used to evaluate whether training arrangements provide practical opportunities to develop self-regulation, empathy, communication, and constructive responses to conflict. The framework therefore helps explain why theoretical exposure to conflict management may not necessarily translate into consistent operational behavior, [12].

2.3 Empirical Context, Sampling, and Participant Profile

The empirical investigation was conducted over a four-week period from **October 15 to November 12, 2025**, within the institutional framework of Hungarian law enforcement training facilities in Budapest. The sample targets the emerging cohort of law enforcement professionals transitioning into an increasingly digitalized environment.

A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was employed to isolate the target population, resulting in exactly ***N* = 53 valid participants**. The sample consisted of **police trainees (*n* = 31;**

58.5%) in their final year of specialized institutional instruction and **early-career operational officers (*n* = 22; 41.5%)** who had been deployed active-duty for less than 24 months.

Demographically, all participants fit the parameters of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), with a mean age of 22.4 years. The gender distribution of the respondents was 64.2% male (*n* = 34) and 35.8% female (*n* = 19). This localized, non-representative setup matches the exploratory, non-generalizable baseline of the study.

2.4 Survey Instrument and Operational Variable Measurement

The quantitative data were captured via a structured, self-administered digital questionnaire designed to operationalize four core research constructs. The instrument comprised 15 closed-ended items scored on a standard **5-point Likert scale** (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*), alongside selected demographic control metrics. The variables were operationalized and clustered into specific item sets as follows:

- **Digital Competence (DC; 4 items):** Measured self-reported efficacy in managing digital data logs, navigating the integrated national law enforcement system (*Robotzsaru*), and utilizing digital dispatch tools.
    - *Sample Item (DC_2):* "I feel confident utilizing complex digital policing databases and data tracking systems to handle daily case dockets."
- **Leadership Readiness (LR; 4 items):** Evaluated perceived preparedness to guide tactical units, exercise situational authority, and execute independent decision-making under uncertainty.
    - *Sample Item (LR_1):* "I feel fully prepared to step into a formal leadership role and direct a team during an unpredictable or high-pressure operational scenario."
- **Conflict-Management Confidence (CC; 4 items):** Measured the self-perceived capacity to de-escalate interpersonal standoffs, resolve internal structural frictions, and handle verbal hostility.
    - *Sample Item (CC_3):* "I am confident in my ability to apply structured, non-coercive negotiation models when managing tense public face-offs."
- **Exposure to Mediation-Oriented Training (EM; 3 items):** Documented the frequency and self-perceived practical depth of interactive conflict mediation models encountered during institutional training.
    - *Sample Item (EM_1):* "My institutional curriculum provided sufficient practical, scenario-based simulation loops focused specifically on peer mediation."

2.5 Corpus of Document Analysis

To map the formal training framework, a systematic documentary content audit was performed on a core corpus of regulatory, training, and strategic artifacts active within the **2022–2026** institutional cycle. Documents were selected based on three rigid inclusion criteria: (1) formal endorsement by the Hungarian Ministry of Interior or the National Police Headquarters (*ORFK*), (2) explicit inclusion of competencies tied to digital modernization or personnel training, and (3) operational governance over the target training cohort.

The finalized analytical corpus comprised:

1. *The Hungarian National Police Strategic Modernisation Plan (Digital Policing 2022–2026 Directive)* [ORFK Institutional Text].
2. *The Official Curriculum and Module Syllabi for Higher Law Enforcement Officers (Vols. I & II, 2024 Edition)* [National University of Public Service, Faculty of Public Governance and International Studies].
3. *ORFK Directive 14/2023 on Standardized Protocols for Internal Conflict Resolution and Command Hierarchy Conduct*.

2.6 Observation Protocol and Criteria

Qualitative behavioral data were derived from **4 distinct non-participant observation sessions** conducted during practical training cycles at a metropolitan training facility in Budapest.

The total observation time accumulated to **5.5 hours** of live training instruction. The specific sessions observed were:

- *Session 1 (October 19, 2025; 07:30–09:00):* Command hand-off simulation and morning operational briefing.
- *Session 2 (October 26, 2025; 14:00–15:30):* Digital dispatch routing coordination and communications simulator lab.
- *Session 3 (November 02, 2025; 08:00–09:00):* Peer-to-peer conflict management and command escalation scenario drills.
- *Session 4 (November 09, 2025; 11:00–12:30):* Interactive administrative leadership and tactical resource management exercise.

Observations were performed by a passive, overt researcher guided by a standardized, structured observation checklist. The guiding observation criteria focused on: (a) peer communication loops, (b) latency and confidence in digital terminal workflows, (c) reliance on formal hierarchy versus autonomous problem-solving when handling stress injections, and (d) the deployment of emotional self-regulation techniques during conflict simulations. Observations were recorded via structured raw field notes and subsequently mapped against the core thematic constructs using open coding matrix techniques [14].

2.7 Ethical Considerations and Data Protection

This study was executed in strict adherence to international research guidelines and Hungarian institutional safeguards. Institutional permission was formally obtained via an **Ethics Review Exemption granted by the National Police Headquarters (ORFK) Research Ethics Committee (Protocol Reference Number: #ORFK-ETH-2025-044)** following an expedited review.

Prior to administering the digital instrument, all participants were presented with an explicit, digital *Informed Consent Form* indicating that participation was strictly voluntary, anonymous, and entirely decoupled from their institutional performance evaluations or grades. To secure comprehensive data protection, no personally identifiable information (PII) or biometric markers were requested. All raw telemetry data were stripped of IP signatures, aggregated onto password-encrypted local storage volumes, and will be permanently deleted upon the conclusion of the journal peer-review retention cycle.

2.8 Methodological Triangulation Framework

To maximize analytical depth, this study explicitly operationalizes a **methodological triangulation model** that cross-checks institutional frameworks (documents), subjective worker perceptions (surveys), and real-time operational behaviors (observations). Rather than viewing these data sources as isolated indicators, they are synthesized to expose system gaps.

The convergence and divergence parameters are mapped as follows:

- **Convergence Strategy:** Where survey perceptions align with real-time behaviors (e.g., high reported digital confidence matching high observed digital terminal proficiency), the trend is categorized as an established operational trait.
- **Divergence Strategy:** Where institutional intents clash with observed realities (e.g., document curricula mandating mediation training, but survey confidence reading low and observations showing a total collapse of negotiation tactics under stress), the divergence is treated as a core structural training deficit. This dual approach ensures a balanced, verifiable interpretation of the empirical reality.

3 RESULTS

The results are derived from the integration of document analysis, survey responses, and observational data from selected Hungarian law-enforcement training contexts. The findings are organized around three dimensions: digital competence, leadership readiness, and conflict-management capability. These dimensions correspond to the study's research problem and theoretical framework.

3.1 Quantitative Indicator Overview

To provide transparent reporting of the selected indicators discussed below, Table 1 reports the exact distribution of responses for all 53 participants (N = 53).

Table 1. Selected survey indicator frequencies and exact percentages (N = 53)

Construct / Individual Survey Indicator	**Strongly Disagree (*n* / %)**	**Disagree (*n* / %)**	**Neutral (*n* / %)**	**Agree (*n* / %)**	**Strongly Agree (*n* / %)**	**Total Positive (Agree + SA)**
Digital Competence (DC)						
DC_1: Confidence with digital system logs	2 / 3.8%	3 / 5.7%	7 / 13.2%	24 / 45.3%	17 / 32.1%	**41 / 77.4%**
DC_2: Database and docket navigation	1 / 1.9%	4 / 7.5%	8 / 15.1%	22 / 41.5%	18 / 34.0%	**40 / 75.5%**
Leadership Readiness (LR)						
LR_1: Ready for high-pressure formal lead	5 / 9.4%	18 / 34.0%	8 / 15.1%	16/30.2%	6 / 11.3%	**22 / 41.5%**
LR_2: Prepared for autonomous choice	4 / 7.5%	15 / 28.3%	11/20.8%	17/ 32.1%	6 / 11.3%	**23 / 43.4%**
Conflict Management (CC)						
CC_1: Confidence in structured mediation	6 / 11.3%	16 / 30.2%	7 / 13.2%	19 / 35.8%	5 / 9.4%	**24 / 45.3%**
CC_2: De-escalation capability under stress	4 / 7.5%	19 / 35.8%	9 / 17.0%	16/ 30.2%	5 / 9.4%	**21 / 39.6%**

3.2 Digital Competence and Technological Adaptation

The analysis indicates a high level of reported digital competence. Exactly **77.4% (*n* = 41)** of respondents reported positive confidence (Agree or Strongly Agree) in navigating administrative communication, data handling, and operational coordination systems (see Table 1, indicator *DC_1*). This outcome aligns with the baseline expectation that officers entering the law enforcement arena during an era of deep technological immersion possess strong baseline familiarity with digital tools.

However, observational evidence exposes a clear boundary between functional and strategic digital integration. In the communication simulator lab (Session 2), trainees executed digital terminal dockets and automated reporting steps rapidly, yet their capacity to exploit these digital streams for adaptive threat profiling or collaborative field decision-making was noticeably constrained. The data inputs were treated as rigid administrative tasks rather than fluid operational assets.

This indicates that simple technological exposure does not automatically foster high-level strategic application. The core implication for police educators is that digital tasks should not be evaluated as isolated operational mechanics; rather, technology usage must be directly embedded within broader tactical choices and conflict scenarios [3].

3.3 Leadership Readiness Among Generation Z Officers

The empirical findings reveal a moderate and heavily fragmented level of reported leadership readiness among the Gen Z cohort. Only **41.5% (*n* = 22)** of the surveyed sample reported feeling fully prepared to step into formal leadership or assume commanding control in highly volatile or conflict-dense operational environments (indicator *LR_1*).

The document analysis helps explain this deficit. The analyzed *Official Curriculum and Module Syllabi* place an intense structural weight on legal procedural compliance, administrative rigidity, and linear rank hierarchies. While these facets are foundational for ensuring legal accountability and tracking institutional oversight within police forces, they leave little educational space for training adaptive, non-linear command capabilities.

This structural pattern was verified during field observations. In Session 1 (Operational Briefing), exercises were strictly instructor-directed, leaving trainees minimal latitude to experience independent, calculated risk-taking. When the instructor retains all decisive control, trainees are denied the crucial learning loops associated with the individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation core to transformational leadership models. Leadership readiness is thus restricted by the passive design of the learning ecosystem rather than an absence of innate capacity.

3.4 Conflict Management and Mediation Competencies

The most severe competency gap isolated in this study relates to conflict management and mediation. Only **45.3% (*n* = 24)** of respondents expressed confidence in their ability to operationalize structured mediation techniques during active field encounters (indicator *CC_1*). Furthermore, confidence dropped to **39.6% (*n* = 21)** when evaluating real-time de-escalation efficiency under intense public stress (indicator *CC_2*).

This trend was confirmed during behavioral monitoring. In Session 3 (Conflict Escalation Drills), trainees frequently bypassed non-coercive mediation options, defaulting almost instantly to aggressive command presence or formal procedural warnings when confronted with non-compliant behavior. Structured negotiation lines and mediation formats were rarely deployed as persistent tools.

From an emotional-intelligence perspective, this highlights a critical breakdown between theoretical knowledge and practical behavior. While the *ORFK Directive 14/2023* mandates the integration of emotional de-escalation models into the institutional framework, the lack of repeated simulation loops leaves officers under-equipped to master emotional regulation and empathetic listening under pressure. Emotional intelligence and mediation are behavioral habits that require practical training loops to mature, [12].

3.5 Triangulation Analysis: Synthesis of Evidence

By combining the three data vectors, the overarching triangulation framework uncovers a highly unified narrative of structural imbalance.

- **Areas of Convergence:** Survey data showing high digital confidence (77.4%) directly converged with field observations showing rapid digital terminal manipulation. Similarly, low survey confidence in conflict mediation (45.3%) directly converged with observations showing an immediate breakdown of negotiation techniques during stress injections.
- **Areas of Divergence:** The document analysis (*ORFK Directive 14/2023*) explicitly mandates the development of emotional intelligence and mediation capabilities. However, both the survey data and the training observations show that this policy goal is not being achieved in practice. The curriculum leaves these human-centric skills secondary to technical and procedural tasks.

This triangulated pattern suggests a possible integration gap within the selected training contexts. Participants reported relatively high digital confidence, whereas the analysed training materials appeared to treat technical instruction, leadership development, and conflict management as separate domains.

4 DISCUSSION

The central finding of this study reveals an operational mismatch between strong digital competence and weaker leadership and conflict-management readiness within the emerging generation of Hungarian police officers. This systemic imbalance should not be translated as a generational flaw unique to Generation Z. A more precise interpretation points to a training-design mechanism: digital competence can be achieved via persistent, functional technical exposure, whereas leadership, adaptive command, and mediation require active, reflective experiential training loops.

Table 2. Summary of integrated empirical findings (N = 53)

Core Competency Dimension	Quantitative Reality (n / %)	Observed Tactical Behavior	Curricular Status (Document Corpus)	Triangulation Assessment
Digital Competence	**41 / 77.4%** *High Confidence*	High input speed; weak strategic leverage of digital tools.	Heavily prioritized in modern strategic plans (2022–2026).	**Strong Functional Baseline:** Skills are technically advanced but strategically isolated.
Leadership Readiness	**22 / 41.5%** *Moderate Readiness*	Over-reliance on instructor direction; low independent choice.	High focus on rank hierarchy and procedural legal accountability.	**Autonomy Deficit:** Rigid structures suppress transformational leadership opportunities.
Conflict Management	**24 / 45.3%** *Weak Confidence*	Immediate escalation to command authority; low mediation use.	Mandated on paper, but lacks practical execution frameworks.	**Execution Gap:** Theoretical concepts fail to translate into active behavioral habits.

As visualized in the empirical matrix (Table 2), where training models remain predominantly instructor-driven, trainees are insulated from making independent decisions and experiencing the immediate interpersonal consequences of their choices. Conversely, when scenario-based simulation learning is integrated, it forces the cross-functional synthesis of digital tracking, field command, active communication, and conflict mediation within a single exercise block. This provides a direct path for translating baseline technological capacity into active leadership performance.

This multi-method pattern matches the core theoretical framework of this study. Transformational leadership demands the execution of individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and proactive inspiration [21]. These attributes cannot be extracted from an officer's screen proficiency; they require face-to-face interpersonal friction and decision-making practice. Furthermore, OECD international skills reports continuously demonstrate that as public sectors undergo sweeping digital transitions, the objective demand for high-level soft skills—specifically emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and complex problem-solving—becomes increasingly important [22].

Similarly, emotional-intelligence theory demonstrates that conflict resolution hinges on an officer's internal capacity to track emotional data streams, execute self-regulation, and deploy strategic empathy under duress, [12]. Given that these traits are behavioral, they cannot be mastered via passive lecture formats or static policy documents.

This reality places the Hungarian case within the broader context of European law enforcement modernization. Frontline policing structures across the European Union face a dual pressure: they must adapt to technological digitalization while simultaneously engineering agile, socio-emotionally competent leadership pipelines to manage a changing workforce [15], [20]. While the empirical baseline of this study is exploratory and cannot be used to label the Hungarian National Police as categorically more rigid or less adaptive than parallel European forces, the findings suggest that digital-training exposure may be more visible than leadership-development opportunities in the selected training settings.

To bridge this operational gap, police training must shift toward a model of integrated competency development. Law enforcement academies can easily retain strict legal accountability and procedural control while integrating multi-layered tactical simulations, mediation clinics, and emotional-regulation tracking. Digital tracking terminals should be intentionally woven directly into these live scenario drills. This ensures that technology is leveraged as a tool for leadership and conflict management rather than remaining a separate administrative task.

5 CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges of preparing Generation Z for leadership and conflict-management roles in Hungarian law enforcement in the context of digital policing and generational change. The findings show a clear difference between relatively high reported digital competence (77.4%) and lower reported leadership readiness (41.5%) and conflict-management confidence (45.3%). Document and observational evidence suggests that this difference is related to the way competencies are practiced within training environments rather than to an inherent lack of capacity among younger officers.

Theoretically, the study shows the value of combining transformational leadership, generational cohort, and emotional-intelligence perspectives. At the same time, the findings support a cautious use of generational categories. Generation Z should not be treated as a homogeneous group, and generational membership should not be used as a substitute for analysis of professional experience, institutional culture, individual capability, or training exposure [11], [18]. The theoretical contribution is therefore integrative rather than deterministic.

Practically, Hungarian law-enforcement training institutions could strengthen leadership development through scenario-based learning, structured mediation and negotiation exercises, autonomous decision-making tasks, and systematic feedback on communication and emotional regulation. Digital systems should be incorporated into these scenarios so that officers practice using information and technology while simultaneously making leadership and conflict-management decisions.

The study has important limitations. The empirical basis is relatively small (N = 53), the survey is descriptive and non-probability based, and the observations were conducted in selected training settings. The study therefore cannot establish causal effects or generalize its percentages to all Hungarian law-enforcement personnel. Future research should use larger and more diverse samples, validated competency measures, longitudinal designs, and comparative research across

European police systems. Such studies could test whether the training reforms identified here produce measurable improvements in leadership performance and conflict-management outcomes.

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