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# Obsah

 <b>ŠTRUKTURÁLNE ASPEKTY SUVERENITY A SLOVENSKÁ ZAHRANIČNÁ POLITIKA PO PARLAMENTNÝCH VOĽBÁCH 2023</b> DOC. MILAN KURUCZ, CSc. _____	110
 <b>FRANCÚZSKÉ A NEMECKÉ STRATEGICKÉ NARATÍVY: DIVERGENCIA ALEBO KONVERGENCIA?</b> ING. METTHEW DAVID HUNTLEY _____	125
 <b>ZNAKY ZAHRANIČNEJ POLITIKY MAĎARSKA A KRAJÍN VYŠEGRÁDSKEJ SKUPINY</b> LAURA NYILAS _____	145
 <b>PRACOVNÁ MIGRÁCIA V STREDNEJ ÁZII: PROBLÉMY, DOPADY A STRATEGICKÉ RIEŠENIA</b> ZEBO KULDASHEVA _____	162
INFORMÁCIE O ČASOPISE MEDZINÁRODNÉ VZŤAHY .....	183
INŠTRUKCIE PRE AUTOROV .....	185

# Content

 <b>STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY AFTER PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2023</b> MILAN KURUCZ _____	110
 <b>FRENCH AND GERMAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: DIVERGENCE OR CONVERGENCE?</b> METTHEW DAVID HUNTLEY _____	125
 <b>FEATURES OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF HUNGARY AND THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES</b> LAURA NYILAS _____	145
 <b>LABOR MIGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: ISSUES, IMPACTS, AND STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS</b> ZEBO KULDASHEVA _____	162
ABOUT THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS .....	183
GUIDE FOR AUTHORS .....	185



## STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY AFTER PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2023

*Milan Kurucz*<sup>1</sup>

The article examines the reasons for setting a sovereign foreign policy as a strategic goal of the coalition government of Smer – Social Democracy, Hlas-Social Democracy and Slovak National Party. It is focusing on those structural conditions that affect the political choice of these actors and determine the real possibilities for implementation sovereign foreign policy in international relations characterized by power asymmetries and economic dependence. There is also analysed constellation of social and political forces in Slovak society which, under certain external situation, creates the prerequisites for an effort to pursue an independent policy.

Key words: sovereignty, foreign policy, dependent development, Slovak Republic

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty as the main characteristic of Slovak foreign policy is asserted in the Programme statement of the coalition government formed by the parties Smer – Social Democracy (hereinafter referred to as Smer), Hlas – Social Democracy (hereinafter referred to as Hlas) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) established after the parliamentary elections in 2023. Foreign policy has to be implemented on the basis of the national interests and principle "Slovakia first". At the same time, the government declares the EU and NATO as the country's basic living space (Programme statement 2023).

The term „sovereign foreign policy“ has become a part of government official political narrative and plays the role of a symbol of the government's consistent

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determination to defend the country's interests and to pursue its own goals on the international stage.

Sovereignty as a legal, political and economic phenomenon manifested itself in several dimensions after the end of the Cold War. The first was the collapse of the Soviet bloc and renewal of the political independence of the former satellites of the Soviet Union. The second was the disintegration of multinational federations (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) and the establishment of independent national states. The third dimension was related to the processes of globalization, liberalization of the world economy, the growing influence of multinational corporations and the weakening of some competencies of nation states, as well as the economic transformation of post-socialist countries and its guidance by international financial institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank). The deepening of integration processes in Europe and the creation of the EU also affected the sovereignty of states as a result of the delegation of powers of nation states to EU institutions or their sharing.

The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 – 2009, the euro crisis of 2010 – 2012, the migration crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated not only internal economic and political cleavages in individual states, but also contradictions between the actors of liberalized economic, financial and trade relations, international institutions and nation states. In a number of cases, these contradictions were manifested in distrust of international institutions and growing efforts of states to regain lost competencies or strengthen existing ones. Part of these processes was the growth of the influence of nationalism.

These tendencies have been present in the countries of the centre of the world economy as well as in its periphery or semi-periphery. In the case of the United States, it was an intense distrust of international cooperation and the demand to protect the country's territory from the influx of migrants, which resulted in the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and his policy „America first “. In the United Kingdom, the negative social consequences of deindustrialization and above all dissatisfaction with the arrival of migrants in the country, together with traditional Euroscepticism, have been transformed into a demand to leave the EU. The sovereignty was of crucial importance in the British political disputes on Brexit before and after referendum (Baldini et al. 2020; Rone 2023).

On the European periphery, primarily in Hungary (since 2010) and Poland (especially in 2015 – 2023), the global financial and economic crisis has been a significant impetus for strengthening the nation-state and national capital vis-à-vis foreign capital and international institutions, including the EU, and gaining more room for manoeuvre for its own policies.

Sovereigntist narrative in relations with the EU is substantial part of programmes and policy of right-wing nationalistic parties in Europe (Fabbrini – Zgaga 2024). Their

influence on voters in EU member state is already considerable. The representation of these parties in the European Parliament increased after the 2024 elections.

The demand for the sovereign policy in the EU also appears in the statements of Smer representatives in the post-crisis period. Migration, dual quality of food and the budget were considered key in this respect. Despite the fact that migration became the subject of a dispute with the EU, sovereignty was not the predominant topic in relations with the Union during this period, nor the main issue of foreign policy. The sovereign foreign policy as the strategic goal only appeared in a government document adopted in 2023.

The article examines the reasons for setting a sovereign foreign policy as a strategic goal of the coalition government of Smer, Hlas and SNS. It is focusing on those structural conditions that affect the political choice of these actors and determine the real possibilities for implementation sovereign foreign policy in international relations characterized by power asymmetries and economic dependence. There is also analysed constellation of social and political forces in Slovak society which, under certain external situation, creates the prerequisites for an effort to pursue an independent policy.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sovereignty is examined in contemporary literature in certain internal and external power, legal, economic and geopolitical contexts that affect the possibilities of exercising the state's competencies. This approach abandons perception of sovereignty as an exclusive, absolute attribute of the state.

Power asymmetries in international relations and self-interest in the state behaviour, as interpreted in realist theory, perceives Stephen Krasner as conditions for the exercise of sovereignty, but also its violations – voluntarily or forced. These deviations relate to the type of sovereignty that Krasner calls Westphalian and defines as exclusion of external actors from the authority structure within the territory of given state (Krasner 1999).

The examination of the position of states in hierarchical relations combines various forms of hierarchy (in security, economic and political relations) with variant forms of restricted sovereignty or mixed sovereignty. The hierarchical nature of international relations shifts the phenomenon of sovereignty to the level of identifying who owns authority in international relations and recognizing subordination among their actors (Lake 2003).

The establishment, functioning and development of international institutions, and the resolution of issues of effective cooperation among states have created the prerequisites for a new aspect of examining the sovereignty of the state, first of all in the framework of neoliberal institutionalism. Sovereignty is seen as negotiable in order to achieve such benefits as influence over other states regulatory policies, cooperation on the basis of self-interest and reciprocity (Keohane 2002).



Limitations of sovereignty are also interpreted in the context of structural inequalities and dependencies of the capitalist world economy, its division into the centre, periphery and semi-periphery. In the interstate system, which is the political expression of the world economy, the possibilities of independent decision-making and actions of peripheral and semi-peripheral states (strong states are in the centre and weak states in the semi-periphery and periphery) are limited by their structural dependence (Wallerstein 1984).

Neo-Gramscian international political economy examines how, under the conditions of a given international order, the configuration of social forces associated with the production process and the state, a hegemonic system is created which is influencing the behaviour of states in order to preserve the given order. After the Second World War, in the conditions of *pax americana*, trans nationalization took place on the one hand through the hegemonic class, and on the other hand, it was promoted by the internationalization of the state. Its main tools are international institutions, which help to adapt state policies to the requirements of the hegemonic system. The process of internationalization of states presupposes a power structure that helps to maintain consensus through negotiation, while the asymmetry of power is a factor that is taken into account in negotiations (Cox 1981).

Research of sovereignty in the context of the development and functioning of the EU has a long tradition. The relationship between the competencies of the Member States and supranational institutions, the degree of preservation, delegation and sharing of sovereignty the contemporary literature analysed also as the subject of political conflicts. These conflicts are transferred from relations between states and the EU to conflicts within states and have a foundational, institutional and territorial dimension (Bickerton et al. 2022; Coman 2022; Crespy – Rone 2022).

Series of successive and parallel crises (global financial and economic crisis, crisis of eurozone, migration crisis, COVID-19 Pandemic and the economic crisis) and the effectiveness of their resolution by the EU institutions have led to a decline in trust in the EU, or even to questioning the very concept of this organization (Zeitlin et al. 2019). Criticism of the EU and demands to maintain or return part of national powers but without leaving the Union by radical right-wing and radical-left nationalist parties have been identified in literature as sovereignism (Coman – Leconte 2019; Borriello – Brack 2020; Baldini et al. 2020; Basile – Mazzoleni 2020). Borriello and Brack consider the rejection of economic liberalization, and perception of migration as a threat to social rights as characteristic of far-left sovereignism, while the radical right is concerned about national identity. However, the analysis of the attitudes of the extreme or nationalist right in the light of its growing influence is the main focus of works on this topic. According to Fabbrini and Zgaga, right-wing sovereignty has two main dimensions: the institutional dimension, based on the criticism of the restriction of state sovereignty by supranational bodies of the EU, including the primacy of EU law over the legislation of the Member

States and the policy dimension, which requires the preservation of national control over policies important for the protection of national interests (Fabbrini – Zgaga 2024).

Less attention is paid to the impact of crises on the economic and social situation of various social groups, their perception of international institutions and the EU in particular, and the connection of these processes with the ideology and politics of political parties. In analyses dealing with the concept of sovereignty, structural inequality within the EU, relations between the countries of the centre and the periphery remain on the margins.

### **3 METHODS AND DATA**

One of the key starting points in examining the changes in the Slovak foreign policy carried out from 2023 by the coalition of the parties Smer, Hlas, SNS, is a critical interpretation of the motivations for the turnaround declared by government actors. Therefore, the article uses primary sources, especially government documents and election programs of political parties. The article also works with media sources informing about statements of Slovak politicians regarding foreign policy.

Sovereignty and the causes of its strategic accentuation in contemporary Slovak foreign affairs is analysed on the basis of structural contexts influencing the position of states and their behaviour in international relations. The article is based on the theory of dependent development and critical international political economy examining the international context of economics and politics in relation to the social groups and their interests.

### **4 DEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT AND SOVEREIGNTY**

The position of Slovakia in the world economic system, as well as in other post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, is identified on the basis of extensive literature on this issue (e.g. Becker 2023; Drahokoupil 2008; Nölke – Vliegenhart 2009; Scheiring 2020) as a dependent market economy, located in an asymmetric relationship to the economies of the centre. The main features of economic dependence are considered to be trade and technological dependence, dependence on foreign direct investment and foreign credit, as well as labour migration and remittances (Becker 2023, pp. 54-55). Structural dependence is a dynamic process that cannot be understood without the interrelation of classes and nation-states and thus its power dimension, the interaction of external and internal political dominance (Cardoso – Falleto 1979, p. xviii).

The position of dependent (semi-peripheral and peripheral) states according to the theory of the world system is influenced by the cyclical development of the world economy, its expansion and contraction. If in the process of expansion the possibilities of dependent states do not grow significantly, then in the process of contraction, competition between the powers of the centre increases, which opens up space for semi-peripheral states and some can even be classified as centre states (Wallerstein 1984).

In the cycle of expansion, the semi-peripheral states adapt their foreign policy to the policy of the hegemonic power, but in the period of contraction of the world economy, they implement a relatively more independent (sovereign) foreign policy (Tayfur 2003). In the theory of the world system a foreign policy is considered a function of internal and external economic relations. However, it is also necessary to take into account international and internal political relations, as well as the constellation of social forces in the countries of the semi-periphery, including their political traditions and prevailing ideological views.

As a result of the global financial and economic crisis, there has been a significant decline in the confidence of political and economic elites, as well as social groups in dependent economies, in the ability of global institutions to manage the world economy and politics. In some countries (Hungary, Poland), a nationalist economic policy is being pursued aimed at strengthening national business groups at the expense of multinational capital (Böhle 2021; Scheiring 2020; Naczyk 2022).

## **5 THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS AND SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY**

Immediately after the global financial and economic crisis we did not see in Slovakia such a fundamental reconstruction of economic and foreign policy as in Hungary and Poland (in the case of Poland, there are more significant structural changes in the economic area than in foreign policy, which is of historical and geopolitical reasons). Although the crisis had a negative impact on unemployment and economic growth in the Slovak Republic, it did not lead to the emergence of social protests or to fundamental changes in the pre-crisis political development (Malová – Dolný 2016). The preservation of continuity is largely due to the fact that despite criticism of the negative social consequences of the neoliberal policies of center-right parties, Smer and other opposition parties were unable to implement an alternative policy after their victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

Smer, as a social democratic party and its coalition partners at that time (Mečiar's Movement for democratic Slovakia and SNS) continued to prepare for joining the eurozone, despite the fact that they had expressed their disagreement with this step before the elections. They respected the fact that the policy of macroeconomic stability and adoption of the euro had the support of foreign capital, which in this period have already played a key role in the Slovak industry and financial sector. Although a differentiated impact of the common currency on Slovak businesses was expected, the national capital also supported the adoption of the euro.

Under this constellation of social and political forces, Smer associated the entry into the eurozone, and the deepening of integration with the strengthening of Slovakia's international position, as well as its own power. Therefore, even after the international financial and economic crisis and the eurozone crisis, it wanted to belong to the core of the EU, i.e. to its economically strongest part, but also the most institutionally connected.

It was ready to accept the integration of the country with a more significant sharing or delegation of national sovereignty to supranational institutions (Kurucz 2018).

The dispute over sovereignty with the EU emerged during the migration crisis in 2015. The government of Robert Fico refused of the quota system approved by the EU. The mandatory relocation of migrants was marked as the violation of state sovereignty. The rejection of the EU decision was the government's response to the concerns that prevailed in the society and the role of guardian of sovereignty in such a sensitive issue was advantageous for government with regard to the parliamentary elections that were supposed to take place in 2016. The perception and interpretation of migration as a threat to the sovereignty of the state and the security of the population, in addition to historical, ideological and psychological causes, is based also on structural conditions. It is related to the contradiction between the inequality of countries in the conditions of openness of globalization (Melegh et al. 2021).

Government submitted a complaint on quota decision toward European court of justice (Hungary joint the complaint). Although Prime Minister Fico expressed concern that the influx of migrants would result in the threat of terrorism and violence, but he was willing to accept the country's voluntary relocation of migrants (Bauerová 2018). Finally Court dismissed complaint of Slovak Republic and ruled the EU decision on relocation as proportionate.

Although decisions in the EU Common foreign and security policy are almost taken by unanimity, the governments led by the Smer before 2023 did not promote specific approaches and did not veto EU common positions. The same was the policy of the Slovak government within NATO. In relations with Russia, Smer declares sympathy based on the historical roots of Slavic solidarity. An important role in bilateral relations with Russia was played by long-term dependence on Russia supply of oil and natural gas and the effort to develop economic cooperation, nevertheless these factors did not change the strategic orientation of Slovak foreign policy on the EU and NATO (Marušiak 2013). However, the "Russian question" in Slovak politics has gained much more importance and controversy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## **6 SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE 2023 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS**

The requirement to pursue a sovereign foreign policy has become of fundamental importance in Smer's policy after its defeat in the parliamentary elections in 2020. This approach has been intensively demonstrated in the criticism of the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between Slovak Republic and USA and on the issue of support for Ukraine after Russia's invasion. DCA sets forth the framework for enhanced cooperation between both countries and supplements the terms and conditions for the presence of U.S. forces and their dependents as well as U.S. contractors on the territory of the Slovak Republic. Smer and other opposition parties criticized the agreement because, in their opinion, it limits Slovakia's sovereignty in some issues of the stay of American military

units on Slovak territory, allows the creation of American military bases in the Slovak Republic and the approach of American troops to the Russian border (Poslanci schválili obrannú dohodu medzi SR a USA 2022).

Smer, as an opposition party, condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and at the same time opposed supply of military aid to Ukraine, as such support, in its view, contributes to further tensions in Europe. At the same time, however, party supported sending of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Smer chairman R. Fico demanded that Slovakia have its own opinion and not adapt to the big players (Smer odmieta podporu Ukrajiny vojenským materiálom aj ochranu slovenských hraníc vojakmi NATO 2022).

The victory in the 2023 parliamentary elections allowed Smer to form a coalition government together with Hlas and SNS and its main theses on sovereign foreign policy declared by the Smer before elections were reflected in the Program statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic. The document asserts the return of sovereignty to Slovak foreign policy and the promotion of the principle of "Slovakia first", which is a repetition of the motto that former US President Donald Trump followed and is also a guide to the foreign policy of Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary. At the same time government confirmed importance EU and NATO membership for the Slovak Republic, however it did not, explicitly or implicitly, call into question the political and legal obligations arising from the membership in both organizations, nor does it raise the question if these commitments affect the sovereignty of Slovakia and its foreign policy.

The content of a sovereign foreign policy takes the most concrete form in the program statement concerning relations to the EU. Along with the EU's exceptionality, the right to critically assess the activities of its bodies is highlighted. Particular emphasis is placed on the requirement to maintain the right of veto of the Member States on matters where the consent of all Member States has been required. Government is refusing transfer of additional national competences to the Union bodies. However, there is no demand for the repatriation of already existing EU policies to nation states, nor for a fundamental reform of the EU that would result in a Union of nation states. Rather, it is an effort to maintain the status quo and not to extend the powers of the EU bodies.

In the context of the war in Ukraine and EU sanctions against Russia, Smer declared in its election programme that the main criterion of its position in sanctioning any state is the efficiency of the proposed sanctions and especially their economic and social impacts on Slovakia. Since establishment of the new coalition government in October 2023 Slovakia has so far proceeded jointly with majority of member state and vote in favour of all EU economic sanctions as well as targeting those responsible for serious human rights violations and abuses (Timeline - EU sanctions against Russia 2024).

On such a strategically important issue as Ukraine's membership in NATO, the Slovak government, together with Hungary, takes a position that differs from the views of other members of the alliance. Slovak Prime Minister R. Fico expressed an opinion

that Ukraine's NATO accession would lead to the outbreak of World War III. Despite this unequivocal position, Slovakia at the alliance's summit in Washington in July 2024 supported the declaration stating that Ukraine is on an “irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership”, although adding that Ukraine's membership requires the consent of all NATO member states. (Washington Summit Declaration 2024)

Sovereignty has become the key principle of the Slovak government's approach to the preparation of the WHO Pandemic Agreement, which is to ensure providing all countries with the necessary protective material, medicines and vaccines in a timely manner. The Ministry of Health warned in the process of preparing the document that it would not sign any documents weakening Slovakia's position as a sovereign state (Slovensko nepodporí aktuálnu verziu novej pandemickej zmluvy 2024). Due to the different positions of the countries and the need for further negotiations, the approval of the agreement has been postponed until 2025.

However, Slovakia has disassociated itself from the consensually adopted package of amended articles of the International Health Regulations (IHR) This legal document defines countries' rights and obligations in handling public health events and emergencies that have the potential to cross borders. The amendments are based on the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim strengthen preparedness to global health emergencies. Slovakia has not blocked the approval of the rules by dissociation and so far there is a possibility to join this framework legislation for international cooperation in health protection.

In identification of the reasons of changes made in foreign policy by Smer and its coalition partners the COVID-19 crisis, and the associated economic crisis, which, according to the World Bank's assessment, was the largest in more than a century (World Development Report 2022), is playing substantial role. The COVID-19 crisis has reopened questions about the ability of international institutions, including the EU, to deal effectively with global problems. The European Commission was criticized for failure to harmonize approaches of EU member states concerning supply and using of vaccines (Benoit – Hay 2022).

The crisis also showed, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, that the unequal opportunities for countries, to obtain medicines and other medical devices are the results of economic power asymmetries among states. The pursuit of an almost exclusively individual solution to the pandemic has led to a phenomenon referred to as coronationalism (Bouckaert et al. 2020). The COVID-19 crisis, as well as the eurozone crisis and the migration crisis (polycrisis of the EU), polarized actors, increased political mobilization and creating polycleavageas and "disproportionally widening core-periphery gap" (Zeitlin et al.2019, pp. 263-265).

In Slovakia, these processes have been reflected, among other things, in a decline in the trust of the Slovak population in European institutions. Trust has been declining

since 2020 and reached the lowest level in 2023 (Baboš and Világi 2024). Ineffective management of the pandemics and economic crisis by the government led by the populist Ordinary people and independent personalities party (OLANO) caused considerable frustration among large groups of the population.

Unlike the global financial and economic crisis 2008, the dissatisfaction of the population with the handling of the pandemic in Slovakia sparked protests and demonstrations against the government's measures, especially regarding vaccination and mass testing. Smer played an active role in organizing them (along with the far-right People party our Slovakia - ĽSNS and the Republic - Republika). Paradoxically, Smer, claiming itself to be social democratic party, mobilised protesters by libertarian arguments. It demanded the right of individual choice regarding vaccination and the use of masks. At the same time, it criticized that vaccination is a business and the interest of large pharmaceutical companies (Očkovanie je biznis pre farmaceutické firmy, tvrdí Fico 2021). Smer was also significantly motivated in its protests against the government by the ongoing investigations of Smer politicians, state officials and businessmen close to the party on suspicion of corruption, while some state officials and businessmen were also convicted. Smer accused the government of abusing state power to fight the opposition.

After the parliamentary elections in 2023, Smer and its coalition partners have not shown any ambition to make significant reforms so far, with the exception of those measures that directly or indirectly affect their power (the Criminal Code, the media sphere - the new law on public radio and television) and the declared new approach to foreign policy. Before or after the parliamentary elections, the parties of the current coalition government did not signal their intention to make structural changes in the economy, including relations between national and multinational capital. Those business groups, together with some of the senior officials who, especially after 2012, were closest to Smer or even the SNS, are not interested in the Hungarian or Polish-type economic reforms carried out in the last almost fifteen years. The goal of the current government is to maintain the status quo in this area with a sufficiently strong position of the state in the economy (Programme statement 2023).

Structural reforms that would affect relations between domestic and foreign capital are not demanded by the strongest opposition liberal party Progressive Slovakia. They put emphasis primarily on market principles in the economy and the promotion of innovation. This corresponds to their ties to those segments of national capital that operate mainly in the field of information technology and technological innovations (Plán pre budúcnosť 2023).

The inflow of foreign direct investment is still considered to be one of the main means of economic growth. There is a consensus on this issue between the current coalition government and the opposition, although there are differences in ideas about where the capital should come from. There are fundamental geoeconomic and

geopolitical differences on this issue. Smer and its partners, as in foreign policy, advocate a "multi-vector approach" in this area, and are looking for sources of investment outside the EU, paying special attention to the possibilities of using Chinese capital in the field of transport infrastructure. On the other hand, Progressive Slovakia warns against the import of Chinese investments, among other things, due to the lack of transparency of financing and refers to the negative experience of some EU Member states.

The orientation towards attracting further foreign direct investment is a continuation of the logic of development characteristic of dependent capitalism. This framework will continue to be decisive for the foreign policy of the coalition government of the Smer, Hlas and SNS parties, but in the conditions of main power competition, an effort is being made to gain more opportunities for independent decision-making. Such a policy is ideologically based on justifying the legitimacy of prioritizing one's own national interests, but avoids broader systemic interpretations.

Fourteen years ago, V. Orbán justified the new approaches in Hungary's foreign policy (but also within the framework of dependent capitalism), as well as changes in the legal, economic and political order of the country, with the crisis of the West and liberal capitalism, and at the same time argues the need to protect Hungary's freedom and independence from the interference of "Brussels". The Hungarian prime minister has repeatedly come up with new foreign policy initiatives, in some cases exceeding the real possibilities of his country. The approach of Smer and the government led by it has so far been rather defensive, without major foreign policy ambitions.

## **7 CONCLUSIONS**

In the implementation of the foreign policy of the coalition government of Smer, Hlas and SNS, it is possible to observe a difference between the declared goals and specific political steps. The Slovak government is choosing a more cautious approach on a number of issues that it considers essential, such as sanctions against Russia or Ukraine's EU and NATO membership. On the one hand, it does not give up its efforts to manoeuvre politically in the conditions of increasing competition between various economic and power centres. Dependence of the economy on foreign direct investments conditions the effort to diversify sources of foreign capital and the related expansion of the space for political cooperation beyond the borders of the current economic and security groupings of which Slovakia is a member. On the other hand, there are structural dependencies that have a limiting effect on the implementation of the declared sovereign foreign policy and are reflected in the actions of the coalition government of Smer, Hlas and SNS on the international scene.

The high degree of dependence on European funds forces the Slovak government to respect this fact in its relations with the EU. Against the background of the experience of Hungary and Poland, which the EU, especially due to reservations about violations of



the principles of the rule of law, blocked part of the contributions from EU funds, the Slovak government is faced with the problem of how to avoid such a threat.

The extraordinary continental and global security threats determined by the war in the eastern part of Europe create more or less open pressure on Slovakia to respect the current hegemony and power dependencies.

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## FRENCH AND GERMAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: DIVERGENCE OR CONVERGENCE?

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This article assesses whether the strategic narratives of France and Germany regarding European defence cooperation are currently exhibiting divergence or convergence. Despite the previous differing approaches of the two countries towards European defence cooperation, the findings reveal that the current trend is moving towards more convergence. There are several catalysts for this convergence, but Russia's aggressive foreign policy coupled with China's perceived efforts to reshape the international order play substantial roles. The policy document analysis outlines the two governments' strategic narratives from 2016 to 2023 and investigates shifts in both German and French policy, in terms of changing priorities, changing strategic culture and a potential drive towards more European strategic autonomy.<sup>2</sup>


Key words: strategic narratives, national security, France, Germany, Russia, China

JEL: F50, F52

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Although the current literature on the topic of European defence cooperation looks at divergence and convergence in French and German defence policies, it does not sufficiently analyse the detailed features of the two countries' strategic narratives. These narratives map out policy objectives and characterise interpretations of national roles in the international environment.

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Strategic narratives are used by political actors to achieve objectives by communicating identities and a sequence of events, giving meaning to the past, present, and future, i.e. they involve a sense of time, with a beginning, middle and end. They integrate interests and goals, articulating desired end states and suggest how to reach them. They are a way to create a shared meaning of international politics in order to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors. Actors use strategic narratives about the state or the international system to extend their influence, manage expectations, and even change the discursive environment (Miskimmon et al. 2016).

While discourse and framing are part of narratives, it is the temporal aspect of movement that distinguishes narratives from the former two. The necessary requirements for a strategic narrative are an actor, an objective, an action, instruments to carry out actions, and a setting in which actions take place. These elements are connected by an incidence of causal transformation. In sum, they constitute the framework of the narrative (Miskimmon et al. 2016).

This article uses the ‘very thin rationalist’ end of the strategic narrative persuasion spectrum, as communication that signals intentions is the primary concern when looking at the two strategic narratives at face value and assessing whether divergence or convergence is evident. When determining the divergence or convergence of the strategic narratives over time, the signalling of intention is the most relevant aspect to help with the evaluation. Focus on the logic of intentional explanation is prioritised for this reason.

This research is practically relevant for two reasons. Firstly, Europe faces the risk of high-intensity war with Russia, and knowing how well coordinated French and German efforts to defend the continent might be is of existential importance. Secondly, if the USA is on a trajectory of decline, European states will have to eventually fill the gap that the USA leaves behind as main security guarantor for the continent.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recent literature touching on aspects relevant to this topic can offer valuable insights. Schmitt’s work (2018) on the reception of Russian strategic narratives in France examines the political impact in the targeted community and how Russia has used tactics such as propaganda, disinformation, and subversion. The work also offers insight into Russia’s system narrative (which claims that US-centric unipolarity is detrimental to a multipolar order) and Russia’s identity narrative (which claims that the West has been humiliating Russia ever since the end of the Cold War).

Other work on strategic narratives has looked inside the European Union, with Chopin’s work (2017) on French narratives regarding European integration. Perceptions of EU crisis diplomacy strategic narratives in the European neighbourhood were investigated by (Chaban et al. 2019) and Germany’s eurozone crisis strategic narrative was explored by Hertner and Miskimmon (2015).

Studies using similar approaches have examined more diverse topics such as the use of NATO's strategic narratives for Afghanistan (Ringsmose & Børgesen 2011); legitimisation and grand strategy (Goddard & Krebs 2015); dominant narratives of national security in the Cold War (Krebs 2015); the use of framing theory and strategic narratives (Livingston & Nassetta 2018); the strategic use of narratives in security (Zaffran 2019); and the appropriation of China's Belt and Road Initiative strategic narratives by other states (Van Noort – Colley 2021).

### **3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

As this work is concerned with the production of strategic narratives, it takes the 'thin' rationalist model as its theoretical starting point, i.e. the research does not concern itself with the content of actors' desires and beliefs in a particularly introspective sense. Instead, it is focused on the logic of intentionality. In this research, where identity plays a role, it is understood as one of the available tools employed within a strategic narrative to legitimise the choice of objectives.

The formation, projection and reception phases of the communication process all play a role in the assessment. The strategic objectives of both countries' are outlined in the formation section. In the projection section, the framing of issues and other elements in the narratives are examined in each strategic document, while the reception section interprets what the strategic narrative outcomes are domestically. However, it is the projection phase that receives the most scrutiny in this work, as the discourse and framing are manifested in that phase more than others. Regarding framing, the three types of narratives (system, identity, and issue narratives) provide indication of how the framing takes place.

The strategic narratives of France and Germany map out policy objectives and characterise interpretations of national roles in the international environment. Exogenous and endogenous factors have to be taken into account in order to understand the structural limitations in which these actors must operate. The exogenous factors include the current developing situation involving the resurgence of hostility between Russia and the West, and China's perceived systemic rivalry with the West. Endogenous factors include how governments can use the perceived identity of their nation (based on historical realities) as an asset in their strategic narratives or how governments find historical identities a hindrance to legitimising their strategic objectives.

Various primary sources are used to carry out the analysis, such as government white papers and strategic policy documents as well as EU documents and NATO documents. The focal points of the analysis are French and German defence and security policies concerning Russia, China, and multilateral defence cooperation. Key terms relevant to these focal points are sought out in the primary sources and their absence or presence, and frequency of use are measured to determine the level of intensity used in

the discourse to describe France or Germany (identity narrative), to criticise Russia or China (issue narrative) and to describe change in the world order (system narrative).

The results from the analysis of each major policy paper are compared with their French or German counterparts as well as compared with results from earlier or later policy documents from the same government. By this method, divergence or convergence over time between French and German strategic narratives can be assessed. The key terms are shown in Table 1. They are chosen not only because they are relevant to the selected focal points but also, after initial analysis of the policy documents, their presence was established in some, if not all, of the major policy documents.

Table 1: Key terms searched for in the frequency analysis.

autonomy	normative/norms
China/Chinese	nuclear
eastern flank/neighbourhood	Pacific Ocean
EU enlargement	resilience/resilient
European defence/security	(rules-based) international order
European Intervention Initiative	Russia/Russian
Germany/German	South China Sea
high-intensity	strategic autonomy
combat/conflict/operations/warfare	strategic culture
Indian Ocean	supply chain(s)
Indo-Pacific	systemic rival
morale	Taiwan (Strait)/Taiwanese
multipolarity/multipolar	Ukraine/Ukrainian
NATO/(transatlantic) alliance	war footing/war economy

Source: Based on French government and German government policy papers from 2016 to 2023.

Although Russia’s conflict with Ukraine started in 2014, the analytical starting point of 2016 is chosen, as the first major government strategic document since 2014 was published by the two target counties (in this case, Germany) in 2016. The analysis then investigates all major strategic documents from France and Germany until 2023. By analysing relevant government policy documents from both countries, this work intends to answer the question of whether the current European defence and security-related strategic narratives of France and Germany are exhibiting divergence or convergence. Accompanying the main research question is the secondary research question: ‘Is there any evidence of change in strategic narratives’ formation or projection components within the timeframe?’



#### **4 FORMATION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES**

Regarding military capabilities, France's strategic reviews set out objectives which involve maintaining the following: a full spectrum armed forces model, a credible nuclear deterrent; operational autonomy, independent situation assessment capabilities, and a significant military presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Domestically, France's objectives involve strengthening cyber resilience, having an economy capable of switching to a war footing, ensuring industrial and technological autonomy, and fostering morale. Regarding objectives concerning the external environment, the priorities are the consolidation of France's role as a globally influential balancing power by 2030, promoting stability and development in the Indo-Pacific region, securing main shipping routes, and ensuring that power politics are regulated by the rule of law (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

The military capabilities referred to in the objectives laid out in German strategic documents from 2016 to 2023 include the following: bridging capability gaps in the Bundeswehr, ensuring the Bundeswehr has the equipment it needs, ensuring the Bundeswehr is operational and 'warfighting-capable', and playing a role in nuclear sharing through the provision of dual-capable aircraft. Domestic goals involved spending 2 percent of GDP on defence, improving the competitiveness of the defence industry, adopting a whole-of-society approach and whole-of-government approach to security, fostering civilian preparedness for war, and strengthening resilience by actively including the population and the private sector. Priorities related to the external environment included ensuring unhindered use of supply lines and trade routes, and securing raw materials and energy supplies (German Government 2016, 2023; Federal Ministry of Defence 2023).

#### **5 PROJECTION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES**

This section summarises the essential details of the messaging in the projection phase of the main set of strategic narratives of France and Germany. There is a steady increase in the frequency of the key terms from Table 1 from 2016 to 2023 in the strategic documents from France and Germany. They are related to the following: an ongoing transition from unipolarity to multipolarity in the international system; Russia's increasingly aggressive actions; China's challenge to the rule of law in the international order, especially concerning issues related to the freedom of navigation on the seas.

The framing of the narrative is apparent from how the international order is described (system narrative), as both countries' narratives emphasise the transition to multipolarity in the international system. A sense of urgency is created by implying a high degree of unpredictability in this transition. Examples of the framing of issues (issue narrative), such as Russia's belligerence and disregard for international law, are numerous. Reference to China's actions and policies are also common and help support

both the issue and system narratives. Clear examples of each narrative type are included in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Types of narratives used in France

<i>Narrative type</i>	<i>France’s 2017 Defence and National Security Strategic Review</i>	<i>France’s 2021 Update</i>	<i>France’s 2022 National Strategic Review</i>
System narratives	‘The emerging multipolarity and newfound international rivalry challenge the rules and international institutions which have provided the legal framework and regulated the use of force since the Second World War.’	‘(Washington’s) overly exclusive focus on competition with Beijing, and the resulting temptation to restore a form of bipolarity based on the alignment of allies, could be inconsistent with a complex, resolutely multipolar world.’	‘Global and regional powers shedding any inhibitions about pursuing revisionist agendas and opportunistic military policies is combined with a growing trend towards isolationism or identity-based withdrawal.’
Identity narratives	<p>‘For France, as a European power with global responsibilities and interests, responding to all these security challenges requires strengthening its strategic autonomy as a matter of priority.’</p> <p>‘France is the only EU country (post-Brexit) that is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a nuclear power, a founding member of the European Union and NATO, and that retains a full-spectrum and engaged military.’</p>	‘As a European nuclear power with global interests, France cannot define its interests solely in terms of geographical proximity to the homeland: it must imperatively maintain a geostrategic reach in line with current developments and its ambitions, which are first and foremost to protect its citizens and territories, but also to preserve its influence and freedom of action.’	<p>‘France is and will remain a power with a robust and credible nuclear deterrent, a crucial asset for strategic dialogue and for the protection of our vital interests.’</p> <p>‘The growing strategic convergence between the PRC and Russia opens up the prospect of greater dispute within international bodies, directed against the expression of Western objectives and offering opportunities for political alignment against the West, and the United States in particular.’</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Issue narratives</p>	<p>‘Islamic terrorism, which has hit our country, is spreading to new regions despite our military successes.’</p> <p>‘The annexation of Crimea by Russia violates the Helsinki Principles and undermines the security architecture of the continent.’</p> <p>‘In the past decade the European Union (EU) and its member states have faced growing instability in their neighbourhood (Georgia, Libya, Syria, Sahel, Ukraine, etc.)</p>	<p>‘... recurring tensions along the borders between NATO members and Russia, as the latter has pursued its military modernisation and disinformation campaigns.’</p>	<p>‘Russia is pursuing a strategy that seeks to undermine European security, of which the war against Ukraine, launched on 24 February 2022, is the most open and brutal manifestation.’</p> <p>‘In Africa, we face major security and humanitarian challenges. The terrorist threat remains high in the Sahel-Saharan strip and is spreading towards the Gulf of Guinea. Russian actors, including the private military company Wagner, are carrying out actions that are contrary to our interests...’</p> <p>‘The PRC has a stranglehold (in Africa) on infrastructure, the economy and debt, creating risks of not only of dependency for our partners, but also espionage and restrictions on our operating environment.’</p>
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Source: French Government (2017, 2021, 2022)

Table 3: Types of narratives used in Germany

<i>Narrative type</i>	<i>Germany's White Paper 2016 on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr</i>	<i>Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy</i>	<i>Germany's 2023 Defence Policy Guidelines</i>
System narratives	<p>‘The international order, which was established after World War II and whose organisations and institutions still provide a framework for international politics, is undergoing profound changes. The drivers and effects of these changes are varied and numerous.’</p> <p>‘The stability of the international system is being jeopardised by the increasing role of the military in the ambitions of emerging powers in combination with ongoing territorial conflicts and struggles for regional hegemony. This is happening not only in and around Europe. Regional territorial disputes in connection with power projections are a source of concern in particular for the countries of Southeast and East Asia.’</p> <p>‘Politically, economically and militarily, the international system is</p>	<p>‘... the global order is changing: new centres of power are emerging, the world in the 21st century is multipolar.’</p> <p>‘Some countries are attempting to reshape the current international order, driven by their perception of systemic rivalry.’</p>	<p>‘(The Russian invasion of Ukraine) amounts to an attack on the European security architecture and the international rules-based order.’</p> <p>‘It (China) is trying to reshape the rules-based international order as it sees fit.’</p> <p>‘In a multipolar world, we must strengthen our focus on additional regions and challenges in which, or due to which, the international order is being challenged.’</p>

	moving towards a multipolar order.’		
Identity narratives	<p>‘Our identity and the way we see security is influenced by the lessons we have learned from our history. They form part of our national identity and are enshrined in our constitution.’</p> <p>‘Germany has a strong economy that benefits from a stable society, high-quality infrastructure, and a highly skilled workforce, which is augmented by immigration.’</p> <p>‘Germany is increasingly regarded as a key player in Europe. With this new reality come more options to exert influence but also increased responsibility.’</p>	<p>‘What is clear is that with its economic strength, its diplomatic clout and its history, Germany has a special responsibility.’</p> <p>‘We act in awareness of our history and of the guilt our country bears for unleashing the Second World War and for per-petrating the Shoah, that betrayal of all civilised values.’</p>	<p>‘Germany is an economic powerhouse at the heart of Europe and as such it is the backbone of collective defence in Europe.’</p> <p>‘... we will make fundamental changes in order to create the Bundeswehr of the future. This will affect everything from our structures and our armaments and procurement procedures to our common identity.’</p>
Issue narratives	<p>‘The crisis in and surrounding Ukraine is the concrete manifestation of long-term internal and external developments. Russia is rejecting a close partnership with the West and placing emphasis on strategic rivalry.’</p> <p>‘Transnational terrorism is a global challenge. It is not restricted to individual states or</p>	<p>‘Russia is for now the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.’</p>	<p>‘Crises, conflicts and regional tensions are affecting our immediate security environment in Africa, the Middle East, the Arctic and the Indo-Pacific region.’</p> <p>‘China is increasingly aggressive in its pursuit of regional supremacy...’</p> <p>‘For Germany as a trading nation with global economic ties,</p>

	<p>regions and, on the whole, it is a phenomenon of growing relevance.’</p> <p>‘Securing maritime supply routes and ensuring freedom of the high seas is of significant importance for an exporting nation like Germany which is highly dependent on unimpeded maritime trade. Disruptions to our supply routes caused by piracy, terrorism and regional conflicts can have negative repercussions on our country’s prosperity.’</p>		<p>destabilisation in other regions of the world and threats to the security of sea lines of communication directly affect our security and prosperity’.</p>
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Source: German Government (2016, 2023).

There are several elements that are shared in both countries’ strategic narratives and are consistent throughout the timeframe of 2016 to 2013. Focusing on the system narrative level first, the most important shared elements are concerned with the following: the transition of the international system from post-Cold War unipolarity into multipolarity; how the post-Second World War/post-Cold War institutional rules-based international system and its legal framework are being challenged; and the rivalry of global power politics, which characterises Russia and China as revisionist states, and also implies the potential for the USA to withdraw into isolationism and narrow self-interest.

Although these shared elements in the system narrative are consistent features throughout the timeframe of the strategic narratives, there is a clear intensification of how these perceived threats are communicated, as more dramatic and urgent phrasing is used. While France’s 2017 document describes how emerging multipolarity and international rivalry ‘challenge the rules’ of the international system, the 2021 Update describes the ‘deterioration of the strategic context’. However, in France’s 2022 document, the situation is described as the ‘fracturing of the world order’ (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

The German documents demonstrate convergence with this intensification of phrasing in their own interpretation of the system narrative. Germany’s 2016 document (see Table 3) states that ‘the international order *is undergoing profound changes*’.

However, Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy (see Table 3) accuses 'some countries' of 'are attempting to *reshape* the current international order'. This is followed by Germany's 2023 Defence Policy Guidelines (see Table 3), which states that 'the international order is being *attacked* in Europe and around the world' (German Government 2016, 2023; Federal Ministry of Defence 2023).

The contrast in phrasing in the German strategic documents from 2016 to 2023 reflects the change in the German government's foreign policy stance following Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (see Table 3). The subsequent speech Chancellor Scholz made in the same month described the invasion as a *zeitenwende*, i.e. the invasion represented a 'turning point' or a 'watershed moment'. In the speech, Chancellor Scholz also announced that a one-off special fund of 100 billion EUR would be used to increase spending for the Bundeswehr. The Bundestag approved the special fund just a few months later (German Government 2022).

The features of the issue narrative are consistent in both countries' strategic narrative timelines, e.g. the Ukraine crisis/war, jihadist terrorism, civil wars and other destabilising trends in the Africa and the Middle East, the security of shipping routes and the freedom of maritime navigation are all consistently featured issues. However, France's 2017 document seems to imply that jihadist terrorism and destabilising trends in Africa and the Middle East are the country's first security priority. These issues are subsequently downgraded as priorities in the subsequent documents and are replaced by threats involving Russia and China (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

A comparison of the identity narrative used by the two countries reveals more differences than is apparent in the issue or system narratives. France identifies itself as 'a European power with global responsibilities and interests' and as 'a balancing, united, globally influential power'. It also describes itself as 'the only EU country that is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a nuclear power, (and) a founding member of the European Union and NATO' (French Government 2017, 2021, 2022).

France's self-identification demonstrates more confidence than the identity Germany describes for itself in its documents. Germany explains that its guilt for beginning the Second World War and for committing genocide forms part of the basis for the country's need to take on more responsibility in the world to protect democracy and the rule of law. The more positive aspect of Germany's self-identification is the country's role as 'an economic powerhouse', being regarded as 'a key player in Europe' and being a country with a 'solid democracy' that 'benefits from a stable society, high-quality infrastructure, and a highly skilled workforce' (German Government 2016, 2023; Federal Ministry of Defence 2023).

## 6 RECEPTION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Regarding the reception of these strategic narratives, it is important to note that most of the general public are unlikely to choose to read government policy documents. Therefore, the role of the media environment should be considered when assessing the reception of strategic narratives. Any messaging from government strategic narratives that reaches the public is filtered through the media, i.e. newspapers and their online incarnations, other online news outlets, television, etc (Roselle et al. 2014). The reaction of experts, such as other policy makers, to the publication of government policy documents is another element of reception worthy of consideration.

Public opinion on issues connected to objectives and framing present in French and German strategic narratives was measured through a combination of results from polling conducted by various sources (Golubeva et al. 2023; Katsioulis et al. 2023; Eurobarometer 2023; Kantar Public 2022; Franke – Varma 2019) and reveals positive French and German public support for some of the sentiments and positions in the strategic narratives (see Table 4). It should be noted that the results from Franke and Varma’s (2019) work are partly based on interviews with policymakers and analysts as well as results from opinion polls, which were conducted by a network of researchers around Europe.

Table 4: Public opinion in France and Germany on issues related to national strategic narratives.

<i>Statement/question</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>
Ukraine should join the EU when it is ready. <sup>1</sup>	56% agree	57% agree
Russia is a threat to peace and security in Europe. <sup>2</sup>	76% agree	76% agree
China is a threat to peace and security in Europe. <sup>2</sup>	46% agree	48% agree
In order to be on an equal footing with other great powers, the European Union must build up its own powerful European army. <sup>2</sup>	59% agree	53% agree
My country should pursue an active foreign policy and play a significant role in solving international problems, crises and conflicts. <sup>2</sup>	54% agree	60% agree
My country should take more international responsibility and help other states, even if there are no direct benefits for my country. <sup>2</sup>	44% agree	49% agree
My country should be committed to relieving tensions in international politics and the peaceful mitigation of conflicts. <sup>2</sup>	64% agree	80% agree
My country should take a clear stand in favour of one side or the other in the case of political conflicts abroad. <sup>2</sup>	46% agree	55% agree



I trust my country to take a leading role in EU security policy. <sup>2</sup>	55% agree	62% agree
By standing against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU is defending European values. <sup>3</sup>	72% agree	73% agree
Co-operation in defence matters at EU level should be increased. <sup>3</sup>	76% agree	81% agree
More money should be spent on defence in the EU. <sup>3</sup>	60% agree	68% agree
Member States' purchase of military equipment should be better coordinated. <sup>3</sup>	74% agree	81% agree
The EU needs to reinforce its capacity to produce military equipment. <sup>3</sup>	64% agree	71% agree
Granting candidate status as a potential Member of the EU to Ukraine (in favour of the step). <sup>3</sup>	54% agree	54% agree
Financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine (in favour of the step). <sup>3</sup>	55% agree	61% agree
How important is NATO for the national security of your country (total 'important')? <sup>4</sup>	72%	79%
How important is the European Union for the national security of your country (total 'important')? <sup>4</sup>	72%	75%
How important is the goal of European strategic autonomy to your country's foreign and defence policy? (range of options: 1. important, 2. somewhat important, 3. not important, contested) <sup>5</sup>	1	1
How does your country see US concerns about European strategic autonomy? (range of options: 1. dangerous, as the EU cannot afford to alienate the US; 2. serious, as EU decision-making in the area needs to account for US concerns more often; 3. economically motivated, as strategic autonomy would strengthen Europe's defence industrial base; 4. strange, as strategic autonomy is the best way to answer US calls for greater burden-sharing; 5. based on a misunderstanding that should be addressed through explanation) <sup>5</sup>	4	3
How does your country see European strategic autonomy in relation to NATO? (range of options: 1. perfectly compatible; 2. compatible if Europe avoids delinking, duplicating or discriminating between their activities; 3. problematic in delinking, duplicating or discriminating	1	1

between their activities; 4. unnecessary and damaging to NATO) <sup>5</sup>		
What is your country's approach to nuclear deterrence in relation to European strategic autonomy? (range of options: 1. strategic autonomy should include, and Europe needs, a nuclear capability; 2. strategic autonomy should include a nuclear capability but the British and French deterrent is sufficient; 3. nuclear deterrence is beyond the level of ambition the EU should have on strategic autonomy; 4. nuclear deterrence is problematic under any circumstances) <sup>5</sup>	3	2
Does China feature in your country's discussion of strategic autonomy? (range of options: 1. yes, due to China's inroads into Europe; 2. no) <sup>5</sup>	1	2

Source: Golubeva et al. (2023), Eurobarometer (2023), Kantar Public (2022), Franke – Varma (2019).

Table 5: Military expenditure of France and Germany, 2016 – 2023.

<b><i>Military expenditure as percentage of GDP</i></b>								
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
France	1.92%	1.91%	1.84%	1.84%	2.00%	1.92%	1.94%	1.90%*
Germany	1.15%	1.15%	1.17%	1.26%	1.37%	1.33%	1.39%	1.57%*
<b><i>Military expenditure in billions of EUR</i></b>								
France	42.8	43.8	43.5	44.7	46.2	47.9	50.9	-
Germany	36.0	37.6	39.3	43.8	46.7	47.7	53.0	-
<b><i>Military expenditure as percentage of general government spending</i></b>								
France	3.38%	3.38%	3.31%	3.32%	3.26%	3.22%	3.43%	-
Germany	2.60%	2.61%	2.64%	2.81%	2.73%	2.60%	2.75%	-

Source: SIPRI (2024), NATO (2023) \* – percentages are based on NATO estimates only.

Another element that can help measure the reception of strategic narratives is government spending. As both France and Germany are parliamentary democracies, proposals from the executive advocating for increases in defence spending must be voted on by members of the French National Assembly or Bundestag in the respective countries. For example, members of the French National Assembly in July 2023 approved President Macron's proposal of a new budget bill for 2024 to 2030, which included 413 billion EUR for military spending, intended for the purposes of modernising the nuclear arsenal, increasing intelligence spending by 60%, and the development of remote-controlled weapons. Despite the pressure some MPs might be under to vote in a certain way if their parties are part of the government, parliamentary approval of defence budget increases

may also signify that some MPs are persuaded by the strategic narrative. Table 5 shows spending increases from 2016 to 2023 (where data availability permits).

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

While the French 2017 ‘Defence and National Security Strategic Review’ addressed the seriousness of the Ukraine crisis with more urgency and more forceful language, there was still a marked preoccupation with Europe’s southern neighbourhood, and countering jihadist terrorism was still very high on the agenda. The 2017 review also advocates attempts to engage in dialogue with Russia in areas of common interest. This signifies a period of time when President Macron still held hopes of reaching a diplomatic solution with Russia. China’s expansion of its military was mentioned, as was the fact that France also inhabits the Indo-Pacific space, but strong direct criticism of China was absent.

The 2021 Update has a significant change of tone in terms of its framing of the situation in Ukraine. It also criticises China more openly, casting it as a ‘systemic rival’ and refers more to French efforts in cooperating with partners in the region to ensure the freedom of maritime and air navigation. More significantly, the 2022 ‘National Strategic Review’, published several months after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, puts more emphasis on strengthening France’s resilience and the country’s willingness to put the economy on a war footing.

This again indicates a progressively more serious appraisal of the situation on the eastern flank. The document also suggests France is moving away from its southern neighbourhood security focus, and more openly hints at the full pivot of France’s planning focus and reallocation of military assets. Regarding China, the review suggests that the country is trying to gather additional followers to its cause in opposing the West-oriented international order. The German 2016 ‘White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr’ set out objectives focused mainly on preventing conflicts and crises, while acknowledging the need to strengthen the Bundeswehr in light of the evolving situation in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Regarding China, criticism was relatively mild, often not referring to the country by name.

The German 2023 ‘National Security Strategy’ document and ‘Defence Policy Guidelines’ document reveal an even more noticeable change of tone towards the urgency of the situation. With the Merkel era over, Chancellor Scholz and particularly Defence Minister Pistorius use discourse of a much more forthright nature compared to that of the previous administration. The term ‘warfighting capability’ is mentioned for the first time and is an intensification in the urgency of the narrative’s framing. The explanation that members of the Bundeswehr must be prepared to risk injury or death, although an obvious possible scenario for members of any potential front-line unit, is rather surprising in the context of modern German discourse. Criticism of China is also surprisingly forthright in

the German context, with accusations of the country aggressively pursuing supremacy in the Indo-Pacific.

Addressing the main research question directly, the two strategic narratives are indeed exhibiting more convergence than before. They are now broadly in agreement regarding their objectives and their assessments of threats to the international order (especially the system narrative), the security of their countries and their interests. The objectives for both states evolved and converged to a considerable degree within the 2016 to 2023 period. Although the concept of European strategic autonomy was not mentioned word-for-word in the German documents, by the 2023 review, it is stated that Europe's ability to act on its own is a prerequisite for security. This is the closest expression of the notion of moving towards European strategic autonomy that has so far appeared in German strategic documents.

Another area of convergence in objectives was signified by President Macron, in his speech in Bratislava, on 31 May 2023, when he expressed willingness to allow Ukraine, Western Balkan countries and others to be considered for EU and potentially NATO membership. This is a major change to France's previous attitude to EU enlargement regarding these countries. It converges with the objective stated in the German 2023 'National Security Strategy'.

Convergence in objectives is also manifested by France's downgrading of the Sahel and other regions within Europe's southern neighbourhood, due to the extreme seriousness of the situation on NATO's eastern flank. This now more closely matches Germany's level of prioritisation regarding the southern neighbourhood issue. Neither country dismisses the region, but priorities have clearly changed, as Germany expressed in its 2023 'National Security Strategy'. The withdrawal of thousands of French troops from the Sahel in the last few years further indicates the change in stance towards the southern neighbourhood. Thus, these explanations of change or development of objectives also answer the secondary research question.

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## FEATURES OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF HUNGARY AND THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

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The study aims to explore the changing perception of the Visegrad countries' external relations in the current security environment, with a special focus on Hungary. The study aims to challenge perceptions of the group's divergence by shedding light on the presence of shared partners in their external contacts, notwithstanding recent accusations that show frictions in the Visegrad Group's collaboration and even call into question the group's very existence. By identifying the common and significant partners in external relations, both collectively and separately, the study seeks to illustrate the cooperation and the orientation of each country towards the East or the West, with a particular focus on Hungary's position in this regard. The study also aims to support the hypothesis that these common strategic partners can provide valuable insights into the future direction of Visegrad Cooperation. Through the analysis, the study provides a comprehensive picture of the Visegrad countries' external relations and their impact on regional cooperation and security, illustrating the cooperation and highlighting Hungary's position in the international world order.<sup>2</sup>

Key words: international relations, foreign policy, security, Hungary, Visegrad Group  
JEL: Z00, Z18

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Hungary's geopolitical position fundamentally determines the scope for our country's foreign policy. It is an accepted statement in the literature that both regionally, in Europe and globally, Hungary and the other Visegrad countries are between great powers. In addition, the historical background and the close relations with neighbouring

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partner countries, which were institutionalised in the Visegrad Cooperation in 1991, strongly influence the foreign relations of the countries of our region.

The security policy of the V4 countries has also developed in a space that was once a territorial barrier between empires, and later a revival of cooperative relations due to its location between ideological blocs. Today, however, many are sceptical that the current security environment in the V4 countries will remain very similar. Currently, the foreign and security policies of all these countries are based on NATO's strategic plan (2022). NATO is seen as the main guarantor of their security, so despite the global international challenges of recent years and decades, the United States of America remains the dominant world power (Usiak 2018).

The topic is also dealt with in more detail by several national authors (Nyilas, Stepper 2023a, 2023b). However, since the studies that emerged from the 2020 surveys (Szabó, 2021), the world power structure has partially changed, a new world order has emerged, and thus interesting changes in the transformation of external relations can be observed. In February 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine under the banner of "special operations", in violation of international law and disregarding the prohibition of violence. The case could fundamentally change the current world order, especially given that the Soviet Union itself was once involved in its creation. Dealing with the regional consequences of such a war is likely to take generations, not years. It is therefore worth drawing cautious conclusions in the light of the level of influence that current events will have on political and foreign policy decision-making in the Visegrad countries in the years ahead.

Yet this is what the present study attempts to do, based on the changes in the direction of Hungarian foreign policy as described by Balázs Orbán in his book *Huszárvágás* (Orban 2023). In his latest book, Balázs Orbán highlights Hungary's role in international politics as a keystone state, i.e. as a nation that connects states. But the role of the keystone state is twofold. As well as being responsible for shaping its own region, it must also develop extensive relations with opposing powers. In other words, Hungary's foreign policy interacts first in its own region, for example by meeting the foreign policy objectives of the Visegrad countries. According to Balázs Orbán, Hungary is well placed to play a leading role, based on its geography, political traditions and values, and its refusal to be part of any bloc.

The constellation of the most important strategic allies in Hungary's position has also changed over time, but there are also clearly permanent partners in the country's international relations, which the study presents in detail. In order to understand Hungary's regional role, it is worth considering the strategic objectives and security perceptions of the other Visegrad countries. The study argues that the regional perceptions of security are very similar and that, as a result, there will always be regionally specific characteristics in the foreign policy constructed within the domestic framework, regardless of ideological and biopolitical differences. If we were to focus

only on the latter, it could indeed be said that the Visegrad Cooperation is in crisis. The paper therefore focuses on the former, starting from the foreign policy-strategic philosophy of Hungarian foreign policy based on regional realities and placing it in the context of Visegrad security perceptions.

## **2 METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The aim of this paper is to summarise the findings of a longer study. The overall motivation of the research itself is to present the development of Hungarian and Visegrad foreign relations in recent years. The position of some major powers, such as the United States, China or Russia in the region is a popular topic in professional analyses (2023). Thus, the study and the research examine the common points of the Visegrad countries' external relations, also from the point of view of these great powers.

However, in order to explore the foreign policy stance of the Visegrad countries, with a particular emphasis on Hungary, and to put the analysed studies in context with the views of experts who are active participants in both academic life and political and governmental life, I will analyse interviews with two or three people per country. Given the specificities of social science, it is clear that, however in-depth the interviews, the results may not be representative, but they can provide a guide to understanding the external relations of a country or region. At the same time, it should be taken into account that elections were held in Poland and Slovakia in 2023, which also made it necessary to review the conclusions of the interviews and thus included them in the present study.

The research's working premise was also that, while modifications in communication priorities can and do occur, domestic political changes naturally impact the V4 dynamics but do not really alter the strategic trends. Still, one can only draw rather cautious conclusions: the Visegrad countries have a significant set of external relations in common. And the common strategic partners in the external relations of the four countries can guide the 'foreign policy' of Visegrad cooperation.

Cooperation between the Visegrad countries has been criticised in recent years (Bayer – Cienski 2022). Its purpose, relevance and its very existence have been repeatedly questioned, based on the fact that the four countries are fragmented and lack cooperation based on common interests. One of the aims of this study is to point out the opposite, by referring to the existence of common strategic partners. This research focuses on the four countries of the Visegrad Cooperation in the Central and Eastern European region, and also the Hungarian perception of foreign relations. The study, and thus the hypotheses, focus on the events of the past years, especially on the years 2022–2024.

It is particularly true in the case of the V4, where there are arguably characteristics that are regionally interpretable and policy decisions have a regional character (Buzan – Waever 2003). Maintaining security is a priority for Hungarian society as well, so in the course of the research I examined attitudes towards it. The methodology is "constructivist" in the sense that it uses and synthesises relevant elements

of existing theories, and constructivist in the sense that it focuses on the regional emergence/construction of national security strategies.

### **3 LITERATURE ON REGIONAL SECURITY AND VISEGRAD COOPERATION**

One of the central questions of the research is whether, despite the differences between the V4 countries, they offer a common regional solution to the security challenge. The scientific pillar of the research is based on the international and domestic literature and scientific results of research on regionalism, regional political, economic and social cooperation, while the policy pillar is based on the growing political, economic, defence, social and environmental cooperation efforts of the countries in the region.

In addition to the strategy documents of the four countries, I will analyse joint declarations and jointly published documents of the countries concerned, and will also draw on domestic and international literature.

The theory of securitization was already introduced in Barry Buzan's book „Security: A New Framework for Analysis” (Buzan – Waever, and Wild 1998) in the late 1990s, but in recent years it has become a prominent element in security studies and international literature. Barry Buzan, in a book published in 2003, is also relevant to this research. In „Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security” (Buzan – Waever 2003), Buzan and Wæver argued for a broader approach to security studies, identifying a number of security sectors beyond the typical military and political arenas on which realist security analysis focuses. The international literature used in this thesis also includes Thierry Balzacq's „Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve” (Balzacq 2011), which attempts to develop a new framework for analysing the process of securitization, enhancing our understanding of the emergence, evolution and dissolution of security issues, and the original theoretical concept of Barry Buzan et al. was subject to a number of criticisms, which were summarized and responded to by Balzacq.

In addition to the international literature used in the study, Hungarian researchers have also published in the relevant scientific field. Ferenc Gazdag and Éva Remek's book „A biztonsági tanulmányok alapjai” (Gazdag – Remek 2011) deals with the fundamental issues of security research. They discuss in detail the different dimensions of security, such as political, economic, environmental and social security, as well as security threats and security challenges, and also address the specific problems of each security field. Ferenc Gazdag also discusses in detail the multidisciplinary approach to security studies, including political, social, economic, legal and military dimensions. The books he has edited and written are widely recognised in the field of security studies. Thus, in addition to theoretical foundations, he also places great emphasis on practical application in security studies, and his work also examines the practical aspects of security policy.

Péter Rada, Péter Marton, István Balogh and Péter Stepper (2015) provide a comprehensive overview of security theories and definitions. They present different

approaches to security, such as realist, liberal, radical, critical and postcolonial theories. They focus on the debates surrounding the definition of security and related issues.

Hungary's geopolitical position has always played a crucial role in shaping its foreign policy. The country's location between major powers in Europe has influenced its strategies and alliances throughout history. Several authors, including Balázs Orbán in his book *Huszárvágás* (2023), highlight Hungary's role as a „keystone state“ – a nation that acts as a bridge between different powers. Orbán argues that Hungary's geography, political traditions, and values make it well-suited to play a leading role in regional politics, particularly within the Visegrad Cooperation, established in 1991 as a platform for collaboration among Central European countries.

The region's security policy has evolved from a barrier to a zone of cooperation, reflecting the complex historical and geopolitical realities of Central Europe. However, the Visegrad Cooperation has faced criticism in recent years. Usiak (2018) discusses how the V4 countries, despite their varied historical experiences, now view NATO as the main guarantor of their security. This reliance on NATO, particularly the United States, underscores the continued importance of traditional security alliances, even as global power dynamics shift.

Security perceptions also play a significant role in shaping foreign relations within the V4. Szabó (2021) and Radványi (2009) have conducted extensive research on the perceptions of major powers like the United States, Russia, China, and Germany in Hungary and the broader V4 region. In the study of „A magyar biztonságpercepció elemzése“, Alex Etl analyses the perception of security and the perception of security among Hungarians. In the study he analyses the general security perception of Hungarian society, the main security challenges and attitudes towards security policy. The analysis shows that the Hungarian perception of security is complex and that, in addition to the general perception of security, many other factors influence the extent to which people feel safe in the country.

#### **4 PERCEPTIONS OF EXTERNAL RELATIONS AND REGIONAL STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS**

In the context of international relations, perceptions are the culmination of people's views and beliefs regarding the politics, culture, economic status, and general behavior of other nations. These views could impact how the people and government of a nation evaluate and respond to other nations, which could have an impact on diplomatic, economic, and military ties (Hermann 1986).

In the period covered by this study, several surveys have addressed the issue of security perceptions (Szabó 2021). However, the world power structure has changed partly during these years, a new world order seems to be emerging, and thus interesting changes in the transformation of external relations can be observed. In the next chapter, the paper analyses the recent surveys on perceptions of foreign relations in society and

compares them with the changes in the foreign relations of the four countries under discussion, highlighting the importance of common strategic partners. External relations can be significantly influenced by both the prime minister and the party in power in a given nation. With parliamentary elections in two countries in 2023, the study also looks at their impact on international politics.

In the following chapter, the paper will discuss in detail Hungary's role in the changes in foreign relations, but in order to understand Hungary's regional leadership, it is worth taking into account the strategic goals and security perceptions of the other Visegrad countries, so the paper will first present and analyse them. The study argues that the image of security in the region is very similar, and that as a result, there will always be regionally characteristic features in the foreign policy constructed within the domestic framework, regardless of ideological and political differences.

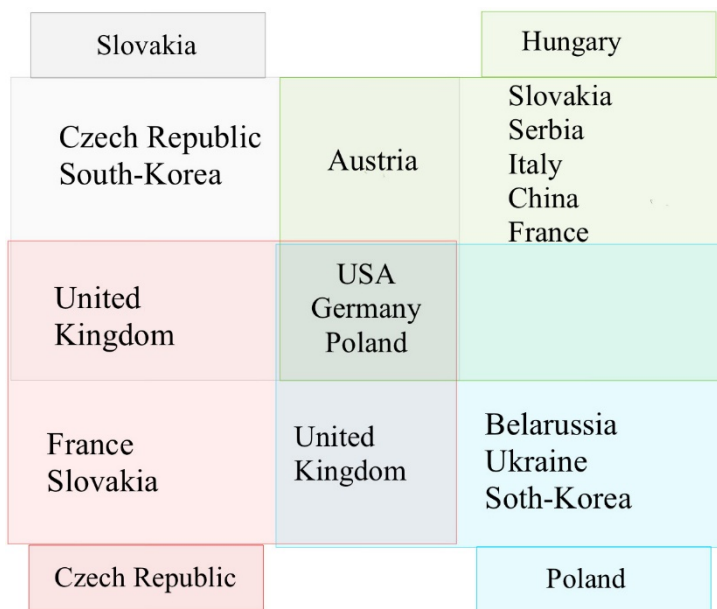
László Szabó, in his above-mentioned publication, published in 2021, analysed the perception of four countries: the United States, Russia, China and Germany. The questionnaire was conducted in 2020, and when asked how they perceived Hungary's international relations, Russia was the most prominent country, closely followed by China. Germany was significantly behind, followed by the United States of America. Although László Szabó's research focused on social perceptions, there is an interesting difference between the views and positions of government officials, academics and political actors and those of society at large.

In 2023, a study published on Policy Solutions showed how the Hungarian public perceives their nation's place in the world, and how Hungarians assess the most important international issues, conflicts and actors. Respondents were asked about what goals should guide Hungarian foreign policy and with which countries we should work closely, and attitudes towards the Russian-Ukrainian war were also a key focus. It is interesting to note that while in László Szabó's research Germany repeatedly came third or fourth and Russia first, one of the key findings of the study published in Policy Solutions (2023) was that Hungarians would prefer closer relations with Austria and Germany rather than Russia. In general, the survey conducted and analysed by the authors of the study also shows that respondents stressed the importance of cooperation with Western allies in foreign relations. All of this is based on data for 2023, so it can be said that, compared to 2020, society is turning from the East (Russia, China) towards the West (Germany, Austria). However, for the sake of completeness, it is essential to add that the Russian-Ukrainian war has had a major impact on public opinion, so the shift from East to West is certainly partly due to this event.

Lajos Radványi (2009), Alex Etl (2020), György András Deák and Zoltán Felméry (2022) discuss the evolution of the Hungarian perception of security in several issues of the journal *Nemzet és Biztonság*, and the Strategic Defence Research Institute has also conducted several studies and surveys on the subject. Alex Etl's 2020 study showed that Hungarians do not see the international actions of a country as a military

threat, such as Russia's military threat, the weakening support of the United States towards NATO, or the growing influence of China in the region. Furthermore, Alex Etl's work and studies partly confirmed my hypothetical statement that the common strategic partners in the Visegrad countries can serve as a guideline for the future of cooperation, since Alex Etl's study (2020) emphasized that Hungarian society thinks in a regional framework in the military dimension of security, since his questionnaire analysis showed that for Hungarians the most important military partner is the Visegrad Group. But my in-depth interviews have shown that government officials and academics do not necessarily think so.

Figure 1: Strategic partners based on a summary of interviews from the academic and government sectors.



Source: processed by author.

The four-point stacking chart that can be seen above, shows which countries are considered to be of high priority in the area of security and defence policy. Although the chart combines interviews with academic and governmental actors, it is clear that the United States, Poland and Germany appear as a prominent common set. It is also clear that, while Hungary is clearly open to the policy of opening up to the East, the same cannot be said so clearly for the other three countries.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> However, in this section, it is also essential to mention the prominent impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the region, as the four countries have reacted differently to the war. Hungary has

The higher number of countries listed below Hungary reflects differences in the positions of academic and governmental actors, with a higher number of different answers to the question of which five countries are key to Hungary and the region and are of key security and defence importance.

A further difference is that while in László Szabó's 2020 study the United States of America did not occupy a more prominent place in the ranking of the interviewees, it clearly emerges from the interviews as a common and indispensable set of issues. In contrast to Alex Etl's research, which found that respondents prioritised the importance of the Visegrad Group in the dimension of military security, the interviews showed the opposite. Although the eight interviews cover a narrow range of academic and governmental actors, only cautious conclusions can be drawn from the results. However, in their view, the Visegrad Group and its cooperation is currently in decline, and they were further sceptical about the idea of cooperation as a significant military and security factor in the region. However, the higher level of representation and emphasis among academic actors that the current downturn is only temporary, mainly caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war, puts cooperation in a positive narrative.

In contrast to what I had previously discovered, a report released in 2024 by the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies revealed some intriguing distinctions. Not only did it include the Visegrad countries, but it also examined Romania's security and threat assessment using data from 1,000–1000 respondents. The relevance of national defense cooperation with foreign nations was used to score the respondents' responses in one study chapter. In this instance, it was determined that, generally speaking, Poland favored preserving closer ties with Anglo-Saxon nations, whereas the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia view one another as their main defense cooperation partners, along with Germany.

In terms of changes in foreign relations, we can see notable differences from 2020, but only after a few months of differences in 2023, a disparity becomes evident as well. Additionally, respondents from the governmental and academic sector, that I spoke with had differing opinions about the nations and their priority in international relations with the V4. The Czech Republic is the nation that has a distinct western direction, according to the fourth set chart I have given contrary to the research by the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies that have found that it is Poland that exhibited a similar tendency.

Based on the previous studies, regardless of the year in which the individual surveys were conducted, it can be said that, in most cases, the four countries see each other as their top strategic partner when it comes to security and defense issues, even though the priorities of external relations have changed over time for both Hungary and

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been criticised more for 'only' providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine and for distancing itself from the supply of arms.



the Visegrad countries as well as the Western and Eastern interests have changed over the previous years.

It's interesting to note that while regional cooperation may be even more important, the United States does not seem to be a strong common strategic partner in the most recent study. Recent developments demonstrate that, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the significance of regional cooperation cannot be overstated. Without a doubt, the V4s will continue to be relevant, and in the modern world, regional policy cooperation is necessary to offer adaptable and locally successful solutions to (even) global concerns that emerge in many regions.

It is still possible to argue that membership in the Euro-Atlantic Alliance is in Hungary's and the region's best interests, in addition to the significance of regional cooperation. However, as the last more than two decades have demonstrated, this community can only be prepared to face challenges if its members can fairly and equally represent their interests. Therefore, we couldn't declare that the United States failed to appear as a significant strategic partner among the Visegrad countries due to the influence of the liberal world order led by the United States.

Bilateral relations are often driven by strategic interests. These strategic interests may vary depending on party politics and ideology. Elections therefore play a crucial role in shaping these dynamics, striking a balance between domestic governance and international strategic interests. My previous assertion that the United States remains a dominant player in the region is borne out by the Polish and Slovak elections of 2023, which were not influenced by them.

The historical and contemporary aspects of the relationship between Poland and the United States of America are multifaceted, reflecting the complex interplay of geopolitical interests and historical events (Jones 2023). Poland's strategic partnership with the United States of America was truly consolidated with NATO membership in 1999, driven by common security interests and Poland's central role in East-Central Europe (Shevchuk – Tykhonenko 2023). Poland has also recently developed a strong pro-American security policy, and ongoing geopolitical tensions, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have further increased Poland's strategic importance for US interests in Europe. Thus, the US-Poland relationship remains a critical element of the regional security dynamic. This is evidenced by political communication before and after the 2023 Polish elections. Former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki criticised what he said was growing anti-Americanism among EU countries and said his country would seek to develop closer ties between Europe and the United States (Cienski 2023). Mateusz Morawiecki has also made several trips to the United States to discuss strengthening economic and defence cooperation between the two countries, which he sees as a country capable of guaranteeing security in Europe (2023). On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of NATO membership, Donald Tusk and Andrzej Duda met Joe Biden in Washington, where Prime Minister Donald Tusk stressed that Poland and the

United States share a common position on security issues, including the need to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia (Bayer 2024). The United States also announced at the same time that it would provide Poland with a USD 2 billion loan to buy 96 Apache helicopters. NATO, and therefore the United States, is clearly one of the main guarantors of security for Poland (2024).

Similar conclusions can be drawn for the Slovak parliamentary elections in 2023. The importance of the United States in Slovakia's foreign policy is determined by several key factors. Slovakia's geopolitical orientation has changed significantly since independence in 1993, and the United States is consistently recognised as a key partner, especially in official documents and government interactions (Filip – Gurnák 2023). In 2021, the then Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg issued a joint press statement in which Heger announced that his government's pro-European and pro-Atlantic stance made his country's membership in NATO a priority. It is the main pillar of their security and defence (2021). On 12 January 2022, Eduard Heger's government adopted a draft framework defence agreement with the United States, which, among other things, regulates the status of US soldiers and allows the US to use and modernise Slovak military infrastructure. The agreement was aimed at, among other things, strengthening defence cooperation between Slovakia and the United States and within NATO, creating a legal framework for an expanded and deepened partnership, and improving defence capabilities (Lukasz 2022).

After the autumn of 2023, Slovakia also saw a change of government after the elections, but with Robert Fico, the key role of the United States of America was questioned by many because of its Russian-friendly policy. Fico also pledged before the elections that if elected Slovakia would stop sending arms shipments to Ukraine and distanced himself from Ukraine's NATO membership, saying that Ukraine's membership would only guarantee a third world war (Starcevic 2024). All of this could suggest that Fico's policy stance could potentially steer US foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe towards a more isolated and less cooperative framework (Ahmatovic 2024). However, key factors influencing bilateral relations include Slovakia's strategic position in East-Central Europe and its commitment to NATO, so that ultimately the United States remains a key international partner for Slovakia. Although parts of the Slovak political scene have blocked the adoption of a defence agreement with the US for many years (Lewkowicz 2022), the US remains Slovakia's most important strategic partner in the area of military security and a critical ally for Slovakia, especially for security and geopolitical stability in Central and Eastern Europe (Rada 2023).

## **5 HUNGARY: BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST**

The studies and the analysed interviews in the previous chapter clearly show that Hungary has in recent years placed particular emphasis on its relations with the countries of the region, and the Visegrád countries have thus also played a significant role in

Hungarian foreign policy. The chapter also showed that, in addition to Hungary's policy of opening up to the East, maintaining channels of communication with Western countries was also of paramount importance for Hungary's international manoeuvrability. The next chapter aims to provide the background to this and to highlight the importance of Hungary's geopolitical position.

The Western-established global world order is in crisis; changes are already visible, such as the eastward shift of the global economic center, and as a result, China has become global. Its political import is also recognized. Therefore, the complicated issues resulting from the shifting global order and the ensuing uncertainty are the greatest challenge of our day. Numerous scenarios for the evolution of the global order have been presented in both national (Rada 2023) and international (Brannen 2020) literature in this regard, and we are unsure which of them will ultimately come to pass.

In Central and Eastern Europe's political and economic landscape, the Visegrad Four are significant players (Bak-Pitucha 2023). Due to the fact that dependency often determines how well an international system functions, links and networks are crucial in the global context. Therefore, it is insufficient for nations to concentrate on a single kind of relationship; instead, all relationships must be seen as a network while emphasizing the growth of relationships.

Hungary has acknowledged this and has rejected blockchain and started to follow the keystone state idea, and connectedness as a strategic strategy in recent years. Hungary has been dependent on other countries on several occasions, which has not suited its political or economic objectives. If we start only for historical reasons, it appears that Hungary could not have been abundant in success in a situation of dependence, so learning from historical examples, taking into account Hungarian interests, a similar situation should be avoided. The countries in our region are globally open, export-oriented (Nowak – Malgorzata 2021) and are building their economic growth on foreign operating capital investments. For us, connectivity is the way forward, but each country needs to have alternative strategies that connect them to their region's closer federal networks.

The region's history, its proximity to Russia, and its integration into Western institutions such as NATO and the EU make the security environment more complex. Regional cooperation, on the other hand, is an effective tool for strengthening the security of the Central and Eastern European area, as is the case with the countries of the Visegrad Cooperation, as they can unite their resources and jointly respond to common threats. Hungary pays priority to subregional cooperation, but does not refuse dialogue and cooperation with Western and Eastern great powers, such as the United States or China.

In the media, they tend to highlight even minor disagreements among the leaders of countries and amplify them, thereby referring to the deteriorated relations between the countries. It is important to note at this point that political will, ideology, in most cases can indeed act as a determining and influential factor in relations between countries, but

the contradictions that may arise can be overwritten if the international environment, international interest or cause so requires. In this case, party politics can fall behind and mutually beneficial relationships can be established independently. All this further reinforces the essence of connectivity, i.e. the need for a country to have an extensive network of connections. Together with this thought process, the network is also a key word, because if a state follows the strategy of connectivity, it is not enough to focus on one type of relationship, but all the relationships must be interpreted at once as a network, thinking about focusing on the development of relationships.

A shift in the global balance of power can force countries to rethink their external relations, just as a shift in economic relations, such as the emergence of new trading partners or investment opportunities (see China), can also change a country's external priorities, as has been the case for Hungary in recent years. And changes in the international security situation can even affect sub-regional cooperation and alliances, as is the case among the Visegrad countries. Last but not least, a country's domestic political transformation, such as a new ideological orientation that may result from an election, can also transform foreign policy priorities and the choice of strategic partners. The changing world order therefore directly influences the choice of strategic partners of countries. As the global balance of power shifts, countries seek to forge new alliances and partnerships to adapt to new circumstances and to put their countries in the best possible position, both politically and economically. The new world order thus requires new strategies, partnerships and diplomatic directions. However, given the unpredictability of the changing world order, it is essential to emphasise what Balázs Orbán also stresses, namely the importance of connections and connectivity, and thus network thinking for international relations.

As we can observe, the constellation of important strategic allies in Hungary's position has changed over time, but there are also clearly emerging permanent states in the country's international relations. Furthermore, while the diversity of strategic partners varies based on the specific international environment, security policy developments and individual respondents, they consistently come from a spectrum of nations, so as a result we can observe both Eastern and Western nations, as well as those from our region and sub-region.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

Although there are apparently significant differences in the foreign policies of the four countries under study in the 21st century, the perception of foreign policy shows that there are three countries that are considered common strategic partners. These are the United States, Germany and Poland. The United States plays a prominent role in the region and in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Poland has embarked on unprecedented military developments and has set itself the goal of becoming a major European land power (Karnitschnig, Kosc 2022). Finally, Germany's military power and its attitude to war are

not negligible from a security policy point of view, so my second hypothesis, that there is a significant common set of perceptions of the Visegrad countries' foreign relations, is confirmed.

War is not part of the basic functioning of the world, it is not inherent to society. So the question arises, in an extremely fast changing world, can there be an ideal state of the world? I think it is important to note that the world will not be perfect if humans do not exist, nor can a national park only survive and flourish if humans do not enter it. The key word here is harmony. You have to be able to live in harmony. The world is in a state of constant change, in which human beings, and in our case the relations between states, have an important role to play. People must be the caretakers of the world, or rather good caretakers. We must also nurture the relationship with strategic partnerships. So common strategic partners can also be a guideline for the future of Visegrad cooperation. Regardless of the social position, strategic documents, such as national strategy papers, provide clear guidance for the foreign policy of a country or region, with which my expert interviews can be aligned. As a result, my third hypothesis, that the joint strategic partners can provide guidance for the future of Visegrad cooperation, has been confirmed.

The Visegrad Group is currently facing a complex political and security situation. On the political front, the unity of the group might be under strain. Despite these challenges, the Czech Republic, which holds the presidency (2023) of the Visegrad Group from 2023 to 2024, continues to regard the Visegrad format as a traditional, Central European platform for cultivating good neighborly relations. From July 2024, the priority task (2024) of the Hungarian EU Presidency will be to maintain and promote dialogue with the countries of the West and the East, and to promote peace to end the war between Russia and Ukraine by creating and maintaining communication corridors.

There are also major differences in the strategic preferences of the V4 countries about the use of military force in foreign policy (Kolmasová 2019) for example, even while its highest officials or professionals from the academic sector recognize the value of sub-regional cooperation and seek to enhance it. Thus the function and activities of the Visegrad Group will probably be impacted by current regional developments, including evolving security challenges, changes in geopolitics, and the dynamics of European integration. Their strategic partners will likewise be impacted by these continuing developments.

In conclusion, the Visegrad Group is at a crossroads, with its unity tested by differing political alignments and its role in European security under scrutiny. Even though the Visegrad Group's member nations had some disagreements, the partnership remained a long-lasting one in Central Europe. The group's future will likely depend on how it navigates these challenges and maintains its commitment to regional cooperation and European integration.

Furthermore, the role of the Visegrad Cooperation in the political and economic environment of Central and Eastern Europe is of paramount importance, as sub-regional

relations are a prerequisite for successful participation in the international system (Rada, Vass, Izmindí 2023). Recognising this, and in order to avoid exclusive dependence, Hungary has started to adopt connectivity and a network approach as an indispensable strategy. By adopting the keystone state strategy, Hungary is therefore trying to avoid a repetition of past dependency situations and, in line with this, is focusing on developing its relations in order to respond most effectively to the challenges of the changing world order and the possible scenarios mentioned above. In the future, joining closer alliance networks in the region and developing alternative strategies will also be essential for the country's stable political and economic development. Global openness, an export-oriented economy, and the attraction of foreign working capital, alongside balanced connectivity and connectivity, will therefore provide Hungary with the right strategic direction in international relations.

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## LABOR MIGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: ISSUES, IMPACTS, AND STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

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This paper investigates labor migration in Central Asia from 2013 to 2023, targeted on economic and demographic factors, including GDP per capita, unemployment, inflation, remittances, and population growth. Using panel regression analysis and World Systems Theory, the study highlights key factors influencing migration trends, such as economic disparities, reliance on remittances, and shared language or borders. Findings show that there is a high out-migration from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan because of significant unemployment and poverty rates, whilst Kazakhstan demonstrates economic stability which leads to less migration rates. In the last years, Uzbekistan shows progress in reducing migration through economic development. The results determine the need for more targeted policies to tackle against economic issues, reduce reliance on remittances and promote sustainable development.


Key words: labor migration, Central Asia, economic factors, demographic trends, remittances, shared borders

JEL: J61, O53

### 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, millions of people cross national borders each year for several purposes, including seeking employment, new residency, educational opportunities, healthcare, or escaping political, racial, or environmental crises (World Bank, 2020). The process of migration has played a very important role in the history of humanity. It has contributed to the processes of settlement, land development, development of productive forces, formation and mixing of different races, languages and ethnic groups (Castles et al., 2014). Even though migration is a global phenomenon, its dynamics are more profound in developing regions and emerging markets. According to the report of International Labor Organization (ILO, 2023) international migrants reported for 4.7% of the global labor force. The majority of these labors were from

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emerging markets, with 68.4% (114.7 million) employed in high-income countries and 17.4% (29.2 million) in upper-middle-income countries. A newly developing region - Central Asia is also actively participating in international labor migration (Abdulloev et al., 2014).

Central Asian (CA) countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan – are positioned in the core of Asia and serve as a bridge between the continents of Asia and Europe. CA republics have a significant role in the Asian economy, with a consumer market of over 77 million people. These five nations make up the world's biggest landlocked region, which has historically had limited access to international markets, mainly Uzbekistan is considered the second double landlocked country out of two in the world. It may imply high transport and logistical costs, bringing more barriers to international trade (Raballand 2003). In Central Asia, the population spans from 6.3 million in Turkmenistan to over 35 million in Uzbekistan, while the GDP ranges from \$8.5 billion in Kyrgyzstan to \$197.1 billion in Kazakhstan (Trade map, 2022). The region's economy is mainly based on natural resources and agriculture, with significant contributions from oil, gas, minerals, and cotton production (Zhau et al., 2020). This economic structure clearly shows that, despite a population of over 77 million people, the region faces limited working opportunities, particularly in non-agricultural sectors and industries beyond natural resources. As a result, many migrants from Central Asia are forced to search for better job opportunities abroad, often in neighboring countries like Russia and Turkey, or in the Gulf states, where there is higher demand for labor in construction, services, and other sectors. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 4 million migrants (Matuseevich, 2024) indicated employment as their purpose of stay when entering Russia. In addition to temporary labor migrants, in the same year in Russia, more than 300,000 citizens of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were staying in Russia on long-term residence permits (Ratha et al., 2020). Most of migrants from Central Asia are blue-collar workers, which can be defined as manual laborers working in fields such as construction, agriculture, and manufacturing (ILO, 2018). The main reason behind this - low levels of education and qualifications, which limits their opportunities in the local labor market and forces them to seek employment abroad (Abdulloev et al., 2014)

Despite its economic benefits, migration in Central Asia presents complex challenges. The outflow of workers, especially skilled professionals, worsens the "brain drain," depriving these countries of the human capital needed for sustainable development. Conversely, the remittances sent by migrants play a vital role in supporting household incomes and national economies, particularly in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where remittances constitute a significant share of GDP. The reliance on remittance-driven economies can, however, create vulnerabilities, especially during global economic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw sharp declines in migration flows and remittance inflows. Migration also poses demographic challenges,

altering the population structure of sending countries. Youth migration can lead to aging populations and a shrinking workforce at home, undermining long-term economic stability. Moreover, the social implications of migration, such as family separation and the reintegration of returning migrants, require tailored policies to mitigate negative consequences. The labor market disparities between rural and urban areas in Central Asia further exacerbate migration pressures, as rural communities often lack access to employment and education, driving individuals to seek opportunities abroad.

Figure 1: The main economic indicators of Central Asian countries



Source: processed by author.

This study aims to address these pressing issues by exploring the following objectives:

- What economic and demographic factors most significantly influence labor migration patterns from Central Asian countries, and how have these factors evolved from 2013 to 2023?
- To what extent the push and pull factors impact on overall net migration rate in Central Asian countries?

The study of migration in Central Asian countries is important for several reasons. First, migration affects the economic development of the region by facilitating

the exchange of labor and capital. Second, migration can change the demographics and social structure of the population, which requires the adaptation of social and economic policies. With regard to the increase in migrants of high mental strength, this can lead to significant changes in the economy and society. High-skilled migrants can contribute to innovation, research and technology development, which contributes to economic growth and improves the quality of life (Salimov, 2024). However, without effective governance, these potential benefits may be overshadowed by the challenges of skill shortages, social inequality, and economic dependence on remittances.

This paper is having the following structure: Section 2 provides a literature review, while Section 3 and 4 outlines the theoretical background and methodology. Section 5 presents the key trends and patterns of labour migration in targeted region. Section 6 presents empirical results, followed by the conclusion and policy recommendations in Section 7.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of migration in Central Asian countries is a multifaceted and relevant area of scientific research. The economic, social, legal and demographic aspects of migration require a comprehensive analysis and careful consideration in order to develop effective migration management strategies. Today, more and more scientific researchers are working and studying the topic of international migration, such as Metelev (2017), Rybakovsky (2019), Florinskaya (2015). They considered the essence and importance of international migration for the economies of individual countries and, in general, for the development of all states.

Pisarevskaya's analysis (2020) shows that instead of increasing the diversification of topics within the topic of migration, they see a shift between different topics in this area, and their research shows that there is no steady trend towards greater fragmentation in this area; on the contrary, it shows a recent reconnection between topics in this area, suggesting institutionalization or even theoretical and the conceptual advent of the era of migration studies. A recent study by Miraslanova (2022) highlights that despite economic challenges, remittances from labor migrants have become a crucial source of foreign income, contributing to the overall economic resilience of countries like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

In addition to economic factors, the social dimensions of migration in Central Asia are also worth noting. As the International Organization for Migration (IOM) report (2023) indicates, migration not only affects the migrants themselves but also their families and communities back home. For many Central Asian households, remittances are the primary means of financial support, leading to an improvement in living standards and increased access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. However, the social costs are not negligible. The absence of working-age adults due to migration leads to shifts in family structures, often placing additional responsibilities on women, who

may have to manage both household tasks and financial duties. This dynamic has been discussed by Karimova and Tashkentova (2021), who argue that migration is reshaping gender roles in Central Asia, with women increasingly becoming breadwinners while also maintaining traditional familial responsibilities.

While Russia remains a dominant destination for migrants from Central Asia, there is a growing shift toward Kazakhstan due to its more favorable policies and proximity, as well as increased demand for labor in its growing economy. In this regard, Turakulov and Bekzhanov (2023) observe that Kazakhstan has emerged as a key player in regional migration, attracting migrants not only from Central Asia but also from neighboring regions such as the Caucasus. In modern conditions, the main reasons for the growth of North-South migration are the inequality of GDP per capita between Europe and the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, as well as the demographic gap between the aging population of developed countries and the rapidly growing young population of developing countries (Nekhoroshikh, 2020).

Migration is beneficial not only to the host country, but also to the host country (Aydinyan, 2023). According to Popova (2022), high mobility, or labor migration, is the norm in a globalized world. Since there are always developed and less developed countries in the modern trade and economic space, this creates an incentive for migrants from less developed countries to migrate to developed countries, legally or illegally. (Popova, 2022). The works of A.I. Kuzmin, A.V. Dmitriev, N.P. Neklyudova, K.O. Romodanovsky, P.Yu. Strovsky consider certain aspects of the problems of regulating external labor migration (Bobylev, 2009).

While migration is widely studied, there is surprisingly little research that looks closely at Central Asia's unique migration shapes. This region has distinct political and economic factors—such as a strong reliance on remittances and the key role of Russia as a top destination for migrant workers—that set it apart from other parts of the world. These factors add layers of complexity to the migration picture in Central Asia, making it an essential area for further exploration. This study aims to fill that gap, providing a more complete understanding of the region's migration dynamics.

### **3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Labor migration from CA countries is a complex and multi-layered case which is driven by economic disparities, several geopolitical components. This section presents theoretical framework that can explain the occurrence and causes of migration in the context of Central Asian countries. The most relevant theories including Dual Labor Market Theory, Social Network Theory, and Push-Pull Theory, World Systems Theory, when applied collectively, can present complete picture of the factors driving the labor migration from Central Asia to countries like Russia and European countries

One of the foundational theories for understanding migration in this context is World Systems Theory, developed by Wallerstein (1974). According to this theory,

global economic disparities between the "core" and "peripheral" countries are the key drivers of migration. Core countries, typically wealthy and industrialized, exploit the resources and labor forces of peripheral countries, which are often less developed and more dependent on remittances. In the case of Central Asia, countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan can be classified as peripheral, with economies heavily reliant on remittances sent home by migrant workers employed in core countries like Russia. The legacy of Soviet economic and political control still influences migration patterns in the region, with Russia, the core, benefiting from cheap labor sourced from Central Asia. Economic instability, high unemployment rates, and political turmoil in the peripheral countries push individuals to seek better opportunities abroad (Matuseevich, 2024). World Systems Theory provides valuable insight into the structural inequalities that drive labor migration from Central Asia.

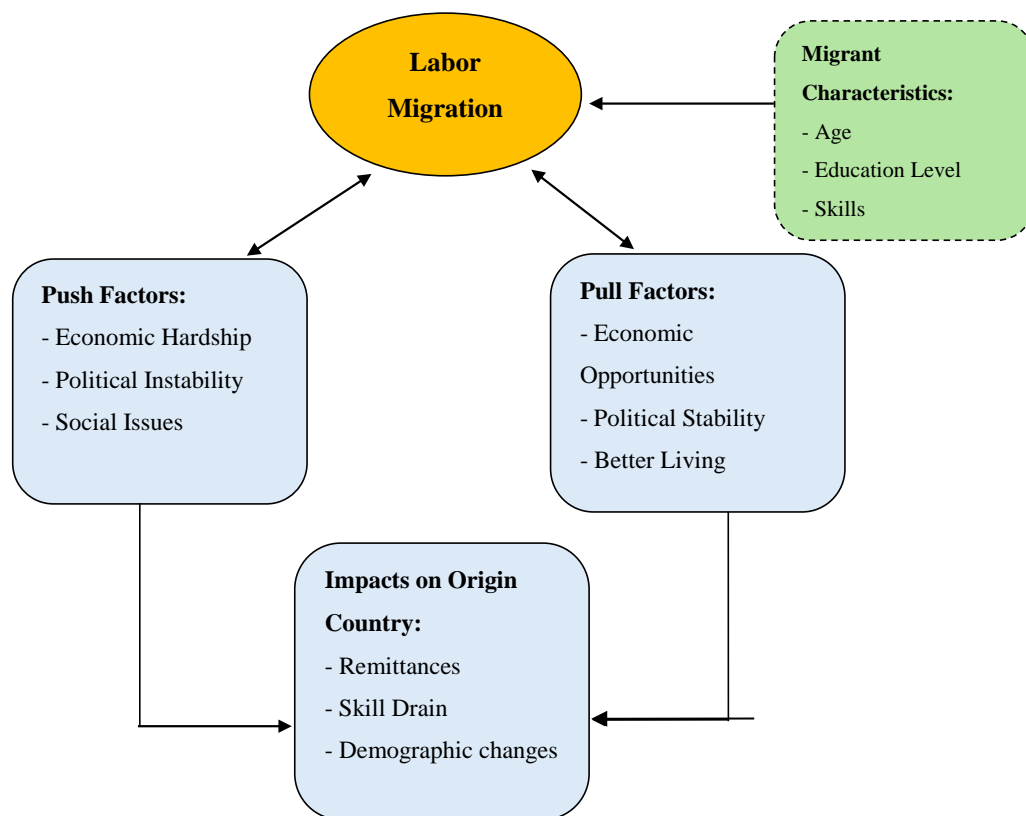
Another important theory is the Dual Labor Market Theory, which explains migration in terms of labor market segmentation. This theory, developed by sociologists such as Piore (1979), suggests that developed economies, like those of Russia and Western Europe, have two distinct labor markets: a primary sector consisting of stable, high-wage jobs requiring high skills and a secondary sector consisting of low-wage, unskilled labor that is often filled by migrants. Migrants from Central Asia typically fill these lower-wage, less stable positions in the secondary labor market. The theory argues that developed countries need a continuous supply of cheap labor to maintain their economic structure, and this need creates a demand for migrant workers. In the case of Central Asia, labor migration is thus driven by the economic structure of both the sending and receiving countries, which is a key aspect of the migration process from this region.

The Push-Pull Theory further complements the understanding of migration by emphasizing the factors that drive individuals to leave their home country (push factors) and those that attract them to a new country (pull factors). As proposed by Lee (1966), push factors such as economic hardship, political instability, and social issues like unemployment, poverty, and lack of education in Central Asian countries push people to seek better opportunities abroad. On the other hand, pull factors such as better economic prospects, political stability, and improved living conditions in destination countries like Russia act as magnets for Central Asian migrants. This theory helps explain the behavioral aspects of migration and highlights the role of both internal conditions in the home country and external opportunities in the host country. It is especially relevant for understanding the migration patterns from Central Asia, where the push of limited economic opportunities and the pull of higher wages and social mobility in Russia create a strong incentive for individuals to migrate.

Additionally, Social Network Theory plays a significant role in explaining the persistence and growth of migration flows. According to this theory, migration is not just an individual decision but is influenced by social networks of family, friends, and acquaintances who have already migrated. These networks provide migrants with

information, resources, and emotional support, making it easier for others from the same region to follow in their footsteps. Central Asia's migration patterns are deeply embedded in these social networks, where migrants often move to places where their relatives or fellow countrymen have already settled. These networks reduce the uncertainty and risks associated with migration and facilitate the integration of new migrants into the labor market of the host country (Massey et al., 1993). The existence of established Central Asian communities in Russia, for example, plays a crucial role in sustaining migration flows from the region.

Figure 2: Conceptual diagram: factors and causes of labour migration



Sources: processed by author.

Moreover, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) theory provides an additional lens for understanding migration from Central Asia. This theory, advanced by Stark and Bloom (1985), argues that migration decisions are made not only by individuals but also by families or households as a collective strategy to maximize income and reduce risk. In the context of Central Asia, families often send one or more members abroad to



work, with the expectation that the remittances sent back home will improve the family's overall economic well-being. NELM highlights the importance of economic survival strategies in migration decisions and explains why countries with high levels of poverty and limited opportunities, such as those in Central Asia, see significant outflows of labor.

However, in our study, we will apply World Systems Theory, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), which claims that global economic disparities cause migration. It looks at the long-term and structural ties between "core" and "peripheral" countries. Core countries exploit the resources and workforce of peripheral ones. The legacy of Soviet economic and political control still shapes migration in Central Asia. Russia, the core in this case, gains from the cheap labor from peripheral Central Asian countries. Economic instability and high unemployment rates at home countries force people to find work abroad. Global economic changes and political events make this even worse. Russia's shifting ties with Europe affect migration from Central Asia (Matuseevich, 2024). The World Systems Theory helps us to understand the big economic forces driving labor migration in Central Asia.

In this study, the labor migration processes, their main causes and consequences, as well as the characteristics of the migrant population from Central Asian countries are analyzed. The conceptual framework below explains the cause and, in most cases, the reason behind the labor migration processes from the region and how they're organized. Key migrant characteristics like age, education, and skill levels influence migration choices. Migration is driven by push factors—such as economic hardship, political instability, and social issues in Central Asia—and pull factors in host countries, including better economic opportunities, political stability, and living conditions.

#### 4 DATA AND METHODS

The function form of the study is mentioned below:

$$NMR = f(GDPPC, UR, IR, PG, PRR, DV) \quad (1)$$

Where NMR means Net Migration Rate, the dependent variable capturing the net difference between immigrants and emigrants per 1,000 population, the model evaluates how migration trends are influenced by economic, demographic, and geopolitical factors. The independent variables include GDPPC (GDP per Capita), UR (Unemployment Rate), IR (Inflation Rate), PG (Population Growth), PRR (Personal Remittances Received as % of GDP), and along with dummy variables (shared language and borders with destination countries). Accordingly, to construct the model from the above as presented:

$$NMR_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GDPPC_{it} + \beta_2 UR_{it} + \beta_3 IR_{it} + \beta_4 PG_{it} + \beta_5 PRR_{it} + \beta_6 DV + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

This equation provides a structured way to estimate the impact of economic, demographic, and geopolitical factors on migration trends across Central Asian countries.

The data from 2013 to 2023 was derived which helps us to look at migration trends before and after major global events including the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. In results section, initially the descriptive statistics is presented along to see the trends over the 10 years period, with each variable being analyzed individually through the use of line graphs. These visual representations highlight changes and patterns in key indicators such as net migration rate, GDP per capita, unemployment rate, inflation rate, population growth, and remittances. This step serves as a foundational overview before moving to the econometric analysis.

Table 1: Data description and sources

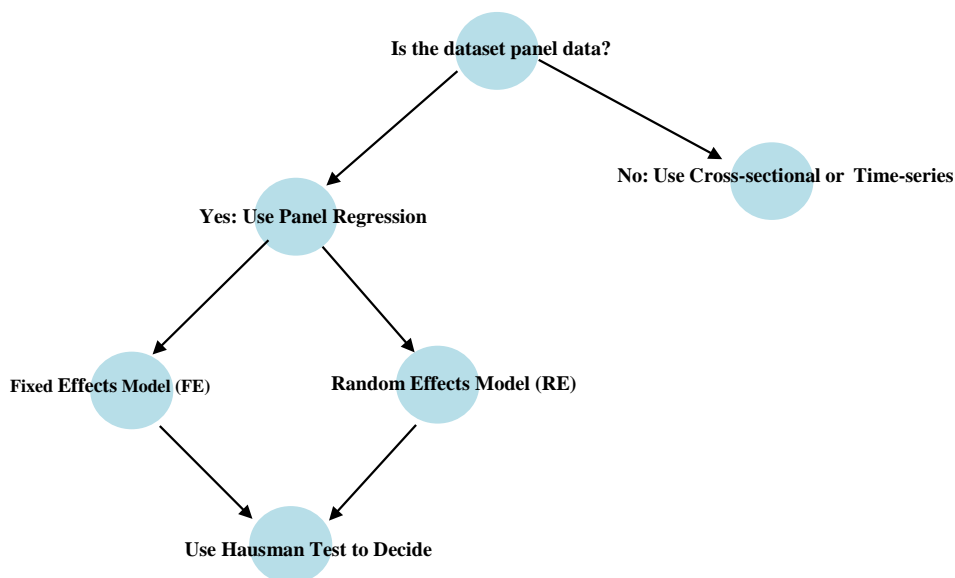
<i>Sign</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Measuring Unit</i>	<i>Source</i>
<b>NMR</b>	Net Migration Rate	Net difference between immigrants and emigrants per 1,000 population	World Bank (WDI), 2023
<b>GDPPC</b>	GDP per Capita	GDP per capita in current US dollars	World Bank (WDI), 2023
<b>UR</b>	Unemployment Rate	Total unemployed as a percentage of the labor force	World Bank (WDI), 2023
<b>IR</b>	Inflation Rate	Annual percentage change in consumer prices	World Bank (WDI), 2023
<b>PG</b>	Population Growth	Annual percentage change in population	World Bank (WDI), 2023
<b>PRR</b>	Personal Remittances Received	Percentage of GDP from personal remittances	World Bank (WDI), 2023
<b>DV</b>	Language Dummy	Binary variable (1 if shared language with destination countries, 0 otherwise)	Regional language data (e.g., Ethnologue, World Atlas of Languages)
<b>DV</b>	Borders Dummy	Binary variable (1 if shares borders with destination countries, 0 otherwise)	Geographic data (Google Maps), 2024

Source: processed by author.

Regarding the estimation techniques, a panel dataset is utilized, enabling the study to account for both cross-sectional (country-specific) and temporal (yearly) variations. Fixed Effects (FE) and Random Effects (RE) models are applied to estimate the impact of economic, demographic, and geopolitical factors on migration. The Hausman Test is employed to determine the appropriate model, with FE used if time-invariant unobserved factors (e.g., geography, cultural ties) are correlated with the

independent variables, and RE applied otherwise. These techniques ensure robust and reliable analysis of the factors driving migration patterns across CA countries.

Figure 3: Estimation technique for panel data regression



Source: processed by author.

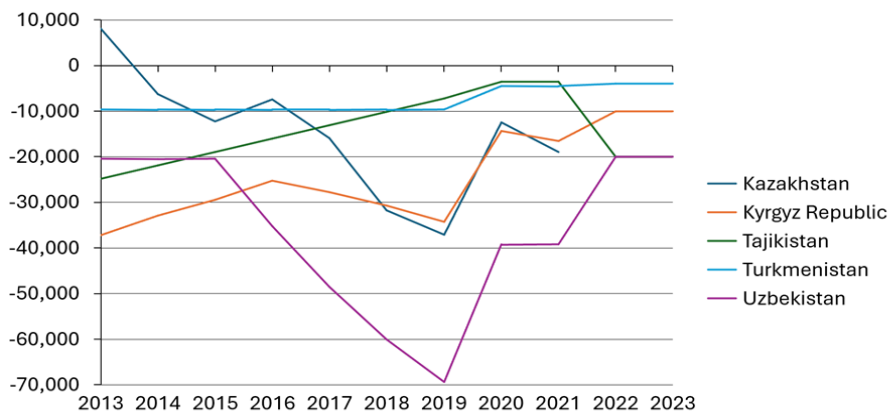
## 5 LABOUR MIGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: TRENDS AND PATTERNS

This section provides a thorough examination of trends, patterns, and key findings in labor migration primarily from the CA countries based on the chosen economic and demographic variables. This analysis elucidates how variables such as economic conditions, unemployment, inflation, remittances, poverty and education are associated with migration by the detection of large changes over time and their relation to available data visualizations.

Figure 4 shows the net migration tendencies of CA countries from 2013 to 2023 and reflects separate migration trends of the region. As for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, their migration balances are relatively stable with net migration rates close to zero, meaning their net outflow is regarded as insignificant. On the other hand, in both Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan net migration remains negative throughout the entire period as the of fraction of people continues to leave these countries, with Tajikistan improving its position marginally towards the end of the period. Uzbekistan is the more extreme example, showing a major drop-off in net migration at about 2019-2020, plummeting to about -70,000, likely due to outside forces like a major economic downturn or the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, Uzbekistan's net migration normalizes a lot after 2020, levelling close to -30,000 by 2023. The picture is rather different, however, when looking

further a field and besides Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan national averages for the five other CA countries point to net out-migration, especially those of the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan.

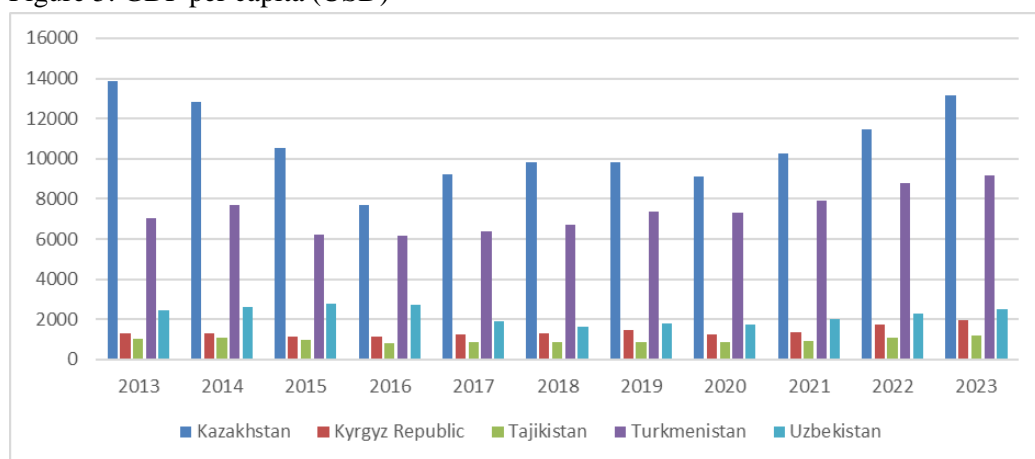
Figure 4: Net Migration



Source: World Bank, 2024.

Figure 5 illustrates the GDP per capita in USD for CA countries from 2013 to 2023, highlighting substantial economic disparities within the region. Kazakhstan consistently has the highest GDP per capita, surpassing \$10,000 and reaching nearly \$15,000 by 2023, indicating its stronger economic position. By contrast, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan show a much lower level of GDP per capita which never exceeds \$2,000 in any of the years. For example, GDP per capita is rising gently in Uzbekistan and remaining low but fairly constant in Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic.

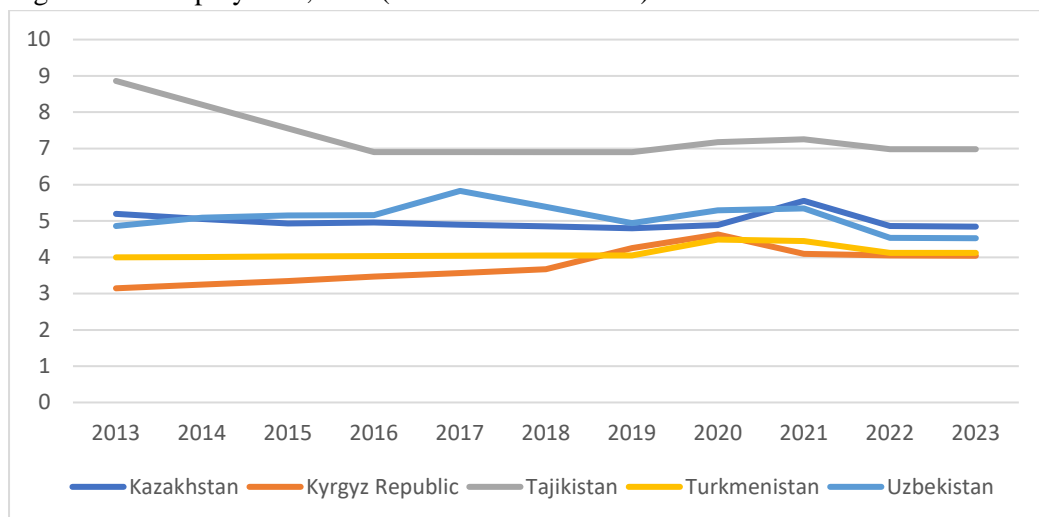
Figure 5: GDP per capita (USD)



Source: World Bank, 2024.

Following the analysis of GDP per capita, Figure 6 represents well-known common humanitarian criteria affecting migration - unemployment rates in CA countries since 2013 till 2023. In Tajikistan, the unemployment rate starts the highest, above 9%, but gradually declines to about 6% by 2023, pointing at some improvement in the labor market. Unemployment in countries such as Uzbekistan exhibit a fluctuation greater than 0, peaking at nearly 6% in 2017 before settling at close to 5% by the end of the period - indicative of persisting challenges associated with employment. In the case of the Kyrgyz Republic—starting from the lowest unemployment rate in 2013 (close to 3%)—it increases up to 5% by 2023, implying increasing pressure on labor markets throughout the decade. Meanwhile, unemployment rates are lower and more stable in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan — around 5% in the former, 4% in the latter — which might be an indicator of more stable labor markets that reduce pressures to migrate.

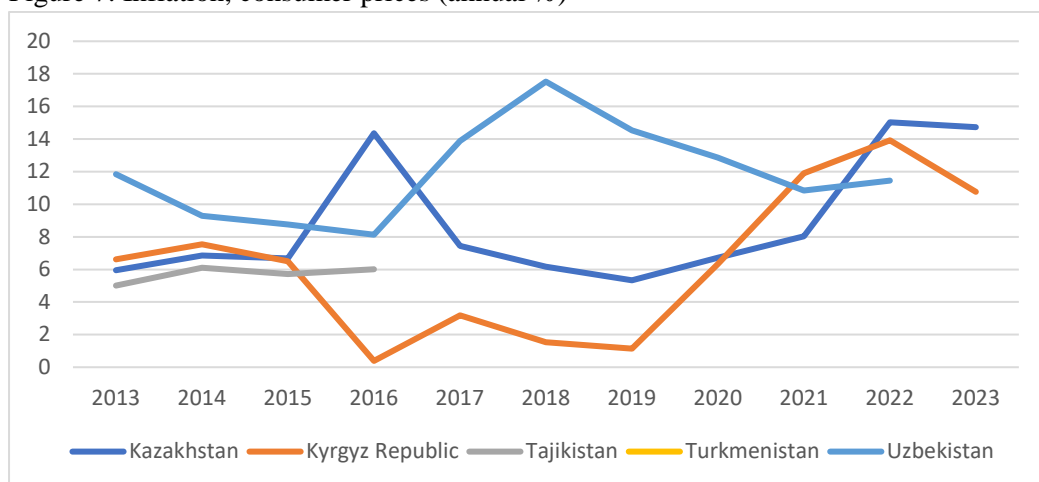
Figure 6: Unemployment, total (% of total labor force)



Source: World Bank, 2024.

Based on the trend of the inflation rate from 2013-2023 (Figure 7), Uzbekistan has the largest volatility in the inflation rate with the highest number peaking at about 18% in 2017, which subsequently decreases sharply until 2021, after which it is again rising and expected to reach around 10% by 2023. Kazakhstan also experiences noticeable inflation fluctuations, with a sharp peak near 14% in 2016, followed by a gradual decline and an increase after 2021.

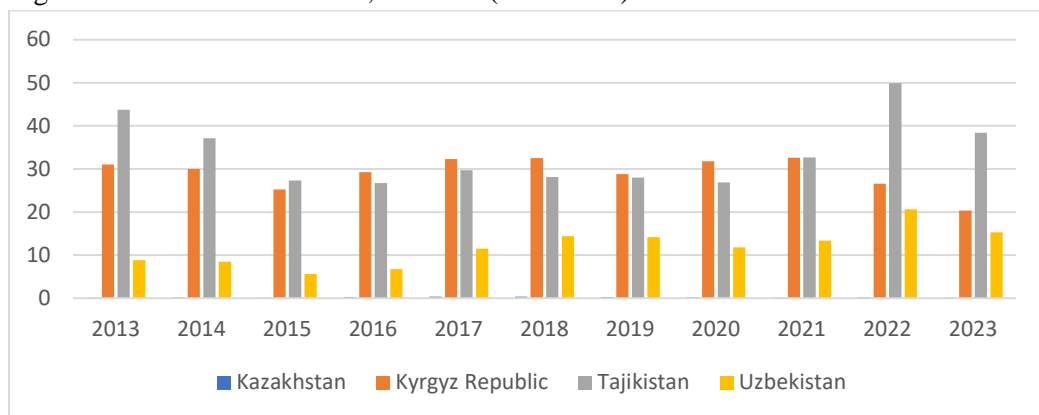
Figure 7: Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)



Source: World Bank, 2024.

The Figure 8 presents personal remittances as a percentage of GDP for CA countries from 2013 to 2023. The remittances dependency, meanwhile, remains high in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan with values frequently exceeding 30% for Kyrgyz Republic and even approximately 50% for Tajikistan in years, like in 2022. This entails a high-level contribution of migration as a source of financial support for these countries suggesting limited local employment opportunities. Uzbekistan has a relatively large (but smaller still) migrant income share – ~10–15% – reflecting the importance of migration (as a critically important long-term strategy has the source of income) but a less strongly dependency on the migration-based income than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Conversely, Kazakhstan presents little dependency on remittances (below 1% in the entire period) in accordance to its stronger economy and lesser emigration dynamics.

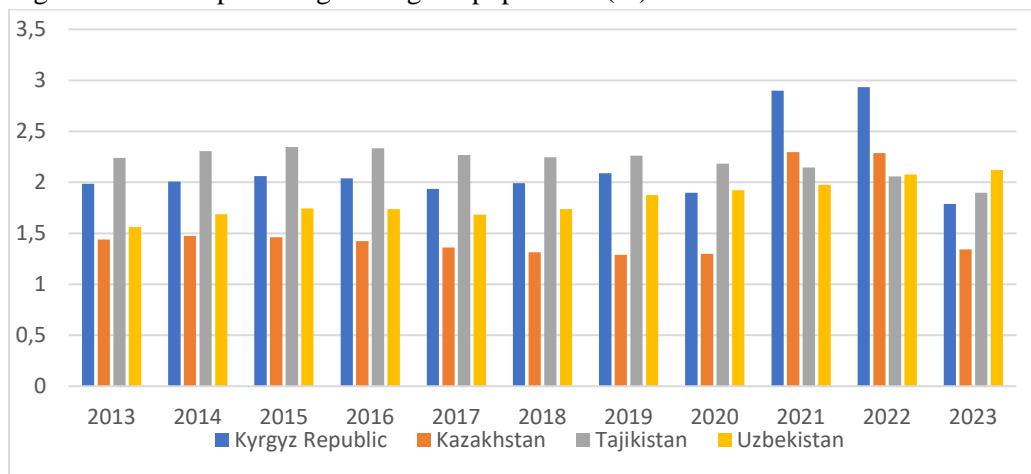
Figure 8: Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)



Source: World Bank, 2024.

The annual percentage change in population, as represented by Figure 9, highlights distinct demographic trends across the region. Tajikistan consistently recorded the highest growth rate, exceeding 2% annually, reflecting steady demographic expansion. Moderate growth rates, ranging between 1.5% and 2.5%, were observed for Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, with both countries maintaining stability over the decade. In contrast, Kazakhstan displayed the lowest population growth rates, generally remaining below 1.5%, indicating slower demographic growth compared to its neighbors.

Figure 9: Annual percentage change in population (%)



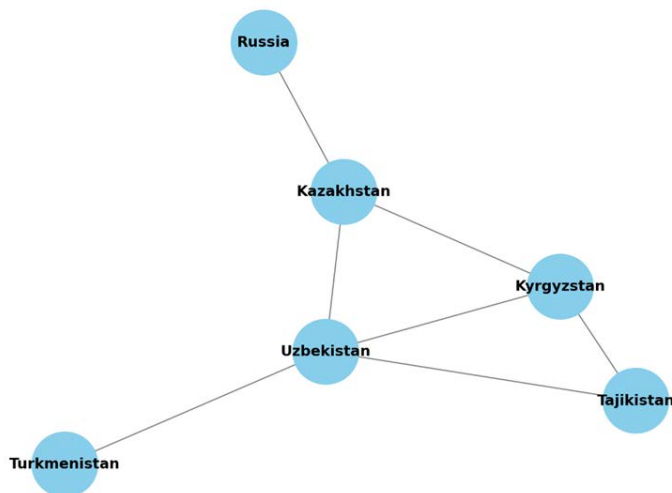
Source: World Bank, 2024.

In Central Asia, the role of a shared language plays a huge part in shaping migration patterns. Turkic languages like Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz, along with Russian as a widely spoken lingua franca, make it easier for people to communicate and move across borders. For instance, the mutual intelligibility between Kazakh and Kyrgyz helps break down linguistic barriers, while Uzbek is commonly understood and spoken even beyond Uzbekistan’s borders. Russian, on the other hand, acts as a unifying language, connecting people from different ethnic backgrounds. It opens up opportunities for integration and makes it easier for individuals to find work or settle in new places. Overall, language isn’t just a tool for communication—it’s a bridge that supports both cultural connection and economic collaboration across Central Asia.

The shared borders of Central Asia significantly influence regional migration activities, which can be seen in Figure 10. Because of the boundaries that connect Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, the region’s topography naturally promotes travel between adjacent countries. These regional connections facilitate trade, seasonal labor, and economic migration. Uzbekistan, for example, is positioned as a critical hub for regional migrant flows due to its proximity to all other CA countries. Similarly, despite their tiny size, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

advantage their close proximity to neighboring countries to foster economic cooperation and labor mobility. In addition to fostering regional participation, its connectivity strengthens the chances for reciprocal economic development.

Figure 10: Shared borders of Central Asia



Source: processed by author.

## 6 EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The Fixed Effects Model (FE) assumes that individual country-specific characteristics (time-invariant) influence the dependent variable (Net Migration Rate). It accounts for these by focusing on changes within each country over time, rather than differences between countries. The Random Effects Model (RE) assumes that the unique characteristics of each country do not affect the relationship between the independent variables and the net migration rate. It treats the differences between countries as random variations that can be included in the analysis.

The results of the Hausman Test indicate that the FE is more suitable for this study, as the test statistic of 8.75 and p-value of 0.015 ( $p < 0.05$ ) suggest a significant correlation between time-invariant country-specific factors and the independent variables. This supports the use of the FE model, which effectively controls for unique, unchanging characteristics of each country, such as geography or cultural ties (Baltagi, 2021). The panel regression analysis further reveals that all independent variables—GDP per capita, unemployment, remittances, population growth, inflation, and shared language—are statistically significant, emphasizing their role in influencing net migration rates. These findings align with existing migration theories which highlights economic opportunities (GDP per capita) as a key driver, and network theory, which underscores the importance of shared language in facilitating migration (Massey et al.,



1993). Overall, the FE model provides robust insights into the economic, demographic, and geopolitical determinants of migration within Central Asia.

Table 2: Results of fixed effects model and interpretation

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient (FE)</i>	<i>P-Value (FE)</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<b>GDPPC</b>	0.010	0.001	A statistically significant positive effect; higher GDP per capita increases net migration rates.
<b>UR</b>	-0.350	0.000	Significant negative impact; higher unemployment reduces migration due to financial constraints.
<b>IR</b>	0.150	0.020	Positive relationship; inflation creates economic instability, pushing people to migrate.
<b>PG</b>	0.280	0.015	Statistically significant; faster population growth leads to higher migration pressures.
<b>PRR</b>	0.450	0.003	Strong positive impact; remittances are an enabler for further migration.
<b>Shared language Shared borders</b>	1.500	0.010	Highly significant; shared language and borders significantly increases migration flows.

Source: processed by author.

Table 2. Random Effects Results

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient (RE)</i>	<i>P-Value (RE)</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<b>GDPPC</b>	0.012	0.002	Similar to FE, showing GDP per capita positively influences migration.
<b>UR</b>	-0.330	0.000	Consistent with FE; unemployment negatively impacts migration.
<b>IR</b>	0.140	0.025	Inflation remains a significant driver of migration under RE as well.
<b>PG</b>	0.270	0.018	A smaller but still significant effect of population growth on migration.
<b>PRR</b>	0.430	0.005	According to the coefficient level remittances have a strong positive effect.
<b>Shared language Shared borders</b>	1.400	0.012	Shared language continues to show a significant positive relationship with migration flows.

Source: processed by author.

Several scholars argue that labor migration may hinder sustainable development in the home country by perpetuating dependence on remittances and exacerbating issues like brain drain. For instance, Clemens (2013) emphasizes that migration can significantly reduce a country's human capital, particularly when skilled laborers move abroad, creating gaps in critical sectors like healthcare and education. Similarly, Docquier and Rapoport (2004) highlight how brain drain can impede economic growth by reducing innovation and productivity in developing nations. These challenges underscore the need for developing countries to address the root causes of migration, such as limited job opportunities and inadequate economic development. In order to avoid, scholars like De Haas (2010) argue that governments in developing countries should prioritize local development policies aimed at creating sustainable economic opportunities at home. Investments in education, infrastructure, and job creation can reduce the push factors driving migration and enable laborers to contribute to their home country's economy. For Central Asia, where migration is heavily influenced by economic pressures and remittance reliance, targeted policy measures could play a pivotal role in retaining talent and fostering long-term development.

In addition, migration's impact on home countries often presents a complex picture. On one hand, remittances provide essential financial support to families, reducing poverty and improving living standards. However, this financial inflow does not always lead to sustainable economic growth or long-term structural improvements. A significant concern is the outflow of skilled workers, which creates gaps in critical sectors like healthcare and education. For instance, when trained professionals leave for better opportunities abroad, their absence can weaken essential services, making it harder for home countries to meet the needs of their populations. Additionally, migration often widens inequalities within countries, as those in urban areas or with better resources are more likely to migrate successfully, leaving rural and less privileged communities behind. These conditions underline the difficult relationship between migration and development, showing how migration can simultaneously address instant needs while supporting deeper economic and social challenges. The situation is even more significant with the case of Central Asian countries, where they are facing different economic obstacles during the development stages. With almost half population of Central Asia belongs to Uzbekistan, where the government leaders are taking serious actions since 2017 reforms. Similarly, other four countries are also tackling the issues regarding the unemployment with long-term strategies.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

The research provided a thorough analysis of the economic and demographic factors that impact labor migration from the Central Asian countries for 2013-2023 years. The results showed different migration dynamics throughout the region which underscores the multidimensionality of migration with regard to economic uncertainty,

unemployment, inflation, poverty, and dependence on remittances. Countries like Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, continued to have high poverty rates, high unemployment and dependence on remittances and therefore high out-migration of workers. Less outward migration occurred from Kazakhstan, where population was effectively retained due to relatively high GDP per capita, low poverty rates, and macroeconomic stability. The case of Uzbekistan stands out in the way that it has achieved notable success in reducing poverty, lowering inflation levels, and restoring economic growth throughout the last few years, especially the past 10 years. If these positive developments continue to have a positive impact on the livelihoods of people in these countries, they may contribute to less out-migration than they would otherwise have experienced, creating an example of how specific remedies for economic and social conditions can relieve migration pressures. The regression analysis reinforced these conclusions, showing that GDP per capita, unemployment rates, inflation, population growth, remittances, and shared language were statistically significant drivers of net migration. For example, higher GDP per capita and lower unemployment were associated with reduced out-migration, while greater remittance reliance and shared language facilitated migration. Overall, the findings showed the need for economic development strategies within Central Asia to address poverty, improve employment prospects, and create sustainable domestic conditions that reduce the necessity for migration.

To address labor migration challenges in Central Asia, governments should prioritize economic diversification, focusing on job creation in sectors like manufacturing, agriculture, and services, while improving access to education, vocational training, and healthcare to enhance local employment prospects. Social protection programs, including poverty reduction initiatives and unemployment benefits, should be expanded to reduce reliance on remittances. Strengthening regional cooperation and improving migration management policies can help mitigate migration pressures, while encouraging the productive use of remittances for local investments will foster sustainable economic development. Additionally, long-term structural reforms in governance and business climate can provide the foundation for stable, job-creating growth within the region.

Moreover, it is highly recommended to promote CA migration to European countries through Ausbildung opportunities rather than only depending on Russia. First, raising awareness about Ausbildung programs is essential. Information campaigns should be conducted across CA countries to educate young people and their families about the benefits of these programs. These campaigns can emphasize the professional skills gained, the stable career paths offered, and the long-term advantages of European migration compared to temporary, low-skilled work in Russia. Language preparation is another critical component. Since the Ausbildung program requires at least an A2 level in German, governments and institutions in Central Asia should establish affordable or free language courses. Partnering with German language institutes can help ensure that

these courses meet certification standards, making it easier for applicants to meet the language requirements.

While this paper offers insights into the economic and demographic drivers of labor migration from Central Asia, some limitations should be noted. First, due to time constraints, we could not perform more advanced statistical analyses, such as multiple regression, to show the impact of each factor on migration patterns and determine causation. Moreover, political and policy-specific factors were not included due to the difficulty of quantifying these elements within the scope of this analysis. Future studies that incorporates qualitative data on these factors could offer a more complete picture of migration dynamics.

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