

The Primacy of Politics? Arms Imports and Political Relations of the Visegrád Countries 1999–2020¹

Part 2

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International commerce can be determined by the political climate between the exporter and the importer. Arms transfers are a much complex process, where beyond economic factors, alliance ties, security perception and defence planning are also considered. Still, they might not be independent of political relations. This paper aims to capture the arms supplier–recipient relations between the Visegrád countries and Russia, the United States and Germany from 1999 to 2020. More specifically, how do the two factors affect each other: are good political relations necessary for arms deals? Or do arms deals facilitate a friendly political climate? Our conclusion is as follows. On the one hand, a cooperative political climate increases the probability of arms deals, but they are not a necessity, as mutual benefits and security perceptions can override the current political climate. On the other hand, however, arms transfers can deepen cooperation or alleviate the existing differences between the parties.

Keywords: arms trade, Visegrád Countries, bilateral relations, security policy, the United States, the Russian Federation, Germany

In the first part of our article, we have analysed the correlation between arms imports of the Visegrád countries and their bilateral political relations with the United States and the Russian Federation between 1999 and 2020. Based on the political economy theory developed mainly by Brian M. Pollins, that trade relations and political relations are interlinked, we assume that cooperative relations facilitate the increase of arms imports (hypothesis 1), whereas bilateral tensions decrease them (hypothesis 2). In addition, since arms trade is also an integral element of defence diplomacy, we also intend to analyse, whether an increased volume of arms imports results in better political relations (hypothesis 3). Previously, we concluded that the overall picture is rather mixed: there is no firm evidence that supports the argument that the current state of political relations

¹ The research was supported by the ÚNKP-20-3-I-NKE-26 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund. The author would also like to thank Lieutenant General (Ret.) Zoltán Szenes for the interview and Rodrigo Guajardo (former Head of R&D Department, FAMAE) for the additional advice.

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is the predominant factor in arms import choices. In some cases, financial and defence policy aspects seem more determinant. In the following section, we investigate the three hypotheses in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Arms imports and relations with the Federal Republic of Germany

Germany exported significantly fewer arms to the Visegrád countries compared to Russia and the U.S. In the past 30 years, only Poland and Hungary imported German major conventional weapons (MCWs). Because of the lack of German arms exports to Slovakia, we do not examine its relations with Germany.³

The 1990s were the ‘golden years’ of Polish–German relations. It seemed that troubled historical experiences had been overcome; Germany as a ‘civilian power’ significantly contributed to the improvement of the Polish economy and proved to be an indispensable partner in the accession to the EU.⁴ In addition, military cooperation was also flourishing, which entailed German military aid in 1991 and 1996 (MiG-23 and Su-22 aircraft, Mi-24D combat helicopters).⁵ From 1993 Germany and Poland signed a series of agreements on military cooperation, which included training and partnerships between the land, naval and air forces and the joint establishment of the Multinational Corps North-East (MNC NE).⁶ In 2000 the relations were better than ever before.⁷

The friendly climate of the relations was followed by German arms exports. In 2002–2003, Germany granted Poland a second significant military aid worth at least 300 million USD, including second hand 128 Leopard 2A4 main battle tanks accompanying repair units, bridges, communication systems and several other armoured vehicles.⁸ In addition, 23 former East German but NATO-compatible MiG-29 combat aircraft were sold to Poland

³ Although the Slovakian Ministry of Defence signed a cooperation agreement with the German Diehl Munitionssysteme for the modernisation of the RM-70 rocket launcher system, which was Slovakia’s first cooperative project with a NATO member state, Slovakia did not procure any Western MCW until 2015 (see Yudit Kiss: *Arms Industry Transformation and Integration. The Choices of East Central Europe*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oxford University Press, 2014. 257). However, in March 2022, Rheinmetall announced that it will build a facility to produce Lynx infantry fighting vehicles, as such, the Slovakian Army will be equipped with 152 Lynx KF41s for 1.7 billion euros (see European Security and Defence: *Slovakian LYNX IFV Facility to be Built*. 11 March 2022).

⁴ Rafał Ulatowski: Polish–German Relations between 1989–2016: Bandwagoning and Its Limits. In András Hettyey (ed.): *Germany and Central Europe: Drifting Apart?* Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2020. 83, 85–86.

⁵ SIPRI: *SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, Trade Registers*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2022.

⁶ Daniel Kawa: Polish–German Military Cooperation After Joining NATO. *Polish Political Science*, 34 (2005). 72–73.

⁷ Józef M. Fiszer: The 1991 Polish–German Treaty: Origin, Aims, and Implementation. Successes, Failures, and Prospects in the Context of the Migration Crisis in Europe. In Karina Paulina Marczuk (ed.): *Good Neighbourhood Treaties of Poland. Political, Security and Social Relations*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 49.

⁸ SIPRI (2022): op. cit.

for a symbolic price of 1 euro per machine, along with about 500 air-to-air missiles.⁹ The Leopards were received by the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade, which were subordinated to the 7th German Armoured Division as part of NATO rapid reaction forces.¹⁰

However, the optimism of the 1990s faded away, because after the NATO and EU accession Poland had not been particularly dependent on the mediator role of Germany anymore. Besides, disagreements arose in major international issues. First, before the EU accession, Poland supported the U.S. War on Iraq, whereas Germany opposed it along with France. Second, whereas from 2005, Germany has treated the Nord Stream pipeline as a purely commercial project, Poland has regarded the dependence on Russian gas as a security threat. Third, the matter of Second World War reparations and the reform of the EU also caused political debates.¹¹

During the governments of Prime Minister Donald Tusk (2007–2015), relations got back on track once again.¹² In the euro crisis, the Polish Foreign Minister, Jarosław Sikorski, even expressed the need for a stronger Germany.¹³ At the beginning of the Ukrainian Crisis, Poland also cooperated with Germany and France in the Weimar Triangle.¹⁴ The Polish–German military cooperation and the arms transfers continued in 2013, when Poland imported 14 Leopard 2A4s and 105 in 2A5 version with 18 armoured recovery vehicles as part of a 180-million-euro deal, as well as 35 used M-113 APCs¹⁵ and diesel engines.¹⁶ The cooperation among military units in the form of common training and exercises has been broadened to increase the readiness of the NATO Response Force.¹⁷

In 2015, as the PiS-led government came to power, the political relations deteriorated. Poland, along with the other V4 countries, did not support mandatory EU refugee quotas, which were pushed by Germany; moreover, in other EU policies, there have been disagreements, including energy and the rule of law.¹⁸ Perhaps one of the most important friction is the policy toward Russia and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which is seriously opposed by Poland along with the U.S. Poland was also excluded from the Normandy Format, which caused great disappointment.¹⁹ According to the 2020 EU Coalition Explorer, Germany is even more willing to cooperate with its smaller neighbours, like the Netherlands or Austria, than with Poland.²⁰ Despite these developments, the German–Polish defence cooperation has continued. The Polish Leopards are being upgraded by the German Rheinmetall for around 700 million euros; Polish companies are

⁹ Lukáš Dyčka – Miroslav Mareš: The Development and Future of Fighter Planes Acquisition in Countries of the Visegrad Group. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 25, no. 4 (2012). 538; SIPRI (2022): op. cit.

¹⁰ Kawa (2005): op. cit. 73.

¹¹ Ulatowski (2020): op. cit. 83–84.

¹² Fiszer (2019): op. cit. 52–53.

¹³ Ulatowski (2020): op. cit. 84.

¹⁴ Jennifer Yoder: Good Neighbourliness in a Tense Neighbourhood: German–Polish Relations, 1990 to the Ukraine Crisis. *German Politics*, 27, no. 4 (2018). 567.

¹⁵ Armoured personal carrier.

¹⁶ SIPRI (2022): op. cit.

¹⁷ Defence24: “Revolution” in the Cooperation Between the Polish Army and the Bundeswehr. 23 January 2015.

¹⁸ Ulatowski (2020): op. cit. 84–85.

¹⁹ Yoder (2018): op. cit. 567.

²⁰ Piotr Buras: The Provincial German–Polish Relationship. *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 06 October 2020.

also participating in the project.²¹ Although, Poland and Germany are willing to cooperate pragmatically in security issues, Poland regards the United States as its main security guarantor. This phenomenon is also underpinned by the EU Coalition Explorer: Poland is not willing to cooperate in foreign policy with Germany, but in defence, Germany is seen as a main European partner along with the Baltic states.²² We assume that whenever possible, Poland is more willing to import American than German arms, as the recent Polish arms procurements show.

The German–Hungarian relations took a similar path. The German–Hungarian relations were generally close between 1990 and 2004, based on strong economic relations: Hungary’s contribution to the German reunification and Germany’s support in the Euro-Atlantic integration. In 1993 and 1995, Germany exported for favourable prices former East German military equipment, including trainer aircraft and combat helicopters.²³ Defence cooperation has been intense since the 1990s in logistics, officer training, stabilisation and peacekeeping missions. Although in the early 2000s, plans arose among the Hungarian defence planners to procure German battle tanks, it was out of the question due to economic constraints and favour for light equipment.²⁴ Except for the Gripen aircraft, accompanying armament and some U.S. armoured vehicles for Afghanistan, Hungary did not procure any new MCW until 2016, when the defence expenditure was increased again, and the new Zrínyi 2026 Defence and Military Development Program was announced. In 2017–2018, Hungary purchased 20 H145M armed light helicopters. In December 2019, another agreement was signed with Germany for the acquisition of 24 PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers, 44 highly advanced Leopard 2 A7+ battle tanks, additional 12 Leopard 2A4s, components, simulators, armoured recovery and support vehicles for 1.76 billion euros.²⁵ Hungary became Germany’s main recipient in 2019, even outpacing Germany’s traditional clients, like Egypt and the U.S. Furthermore, in 2020, 280 pieces of the most advanced Lynx KF41 IFV²⁶ were also bought for more than 2 billion euros, of which 172 will be built in Hungary by a joint venture company led by Rheinmetall AG.²⁷ As a consequence of these imports, the German–Hungarian military and defence industrial cooperation was given new momentum in the form of mutual bilateral visits and agreements, establishing joint ventures for maintenance, production of radars and further

²¹ Michał Jarocki: German Industry Cooperating with Central and Eastern Europe. *European Security and Defence*, 19 January 2021.

²² Claire Busse et al.: EU Coalition Explorer. *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 08 July 2020.

²³ András Hettyey: *Hegemónia helyett. Magyar–német kapcsolatok 1990–2002 között*. Budapest, L’Harmattan, 2019. 98–105.

²⁴ Interview with Lieutenant General (Ret.) Zoltán Szenes, 09 April 2021; József Barát: Fegyvervásárlás kontroll nélkül. 168, 09 December 2019.

²⁵ SIPRI (2022): op. cit.; Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie: *Bericht der Bundesregierung über ihre Exportpolitik für konventionelle Rüstungsgüter im ersten Halbjahr 2019*. November 2019. 24.

²⁶ Infantry fighting vehicle.

²⁷ Jarocki (2021): op. cit.

armoured vehicles.²⁸ Contrary to the other CEE countries, where military modernisation is rather based on U.S. arms imports, Hungary distinctively favours German equipment.²⁹

Prior to these major arms deals, from 2010, German–Hungarian relations reached the lowest point compared to the earlier decades. Whereas in 2010–2015, differing views on media, sectoral taxes on multinational companies, judiciary reforms were the main issues; after 2015, the clash over migration policy became the main issue. In political statements, under ‘strategic cooperation’, almost exclusively economic relations were emphasised. However, open criticism against Hungary was carefully avoided by the Merkel-led governments, as Germany has rather expressed its concerns through the EU institutions.³⁰ Simultaneous with the arms deals, Germany quickly appeared in the Hungarian political statements as a strategic partner in defence.³¹ In the new Hungarian National Security Strategy published in April 2020, Germany is mentioned in the first place as a bilateral partner in security and defence, outplacing even the U.S.³² However, after the arms transfers, the same trend continued in political relations. Hungary, along with Poland, vetoed the EU’s budget-and-recovery package at the end of 2020; this was criticised by German politicians in the European People’s Party (which Hungary finally left in March 2021). Still, open criticism was averted by the German Government, except when the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has recently outraged as Hungary blocked the EU declaration which condemned China on its policy towards Hong Kong.³³ This suggests that defence cooperation and arms transfers are resilient to the German–Hungarian bilateral political clash of views.

The examination of the Czech Republic is nearly negligible, as the only German MCWs were 15 Dingo APCs in 2008, which was part of the Czech–German military cooperation in Afghanistan.³⁴ However, around 2020, the Czech Republic intended to procure 210 Lynx KF41 IFVs for 2 billion euros, but due to the economic difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the plans have been postponed. British BAE Systems and American General Dynamics were also among the bidders, but Rheinmetall will likely be the winner.³⁵ This would not be surprising, because defence cooperation with Germany is at a very high level. In 2017, the Czech 4th Rapid Deployment Brigade was integrated into the Bundeswehr. The Czech Defence Strategy adopted in 2017 also emphasises defence

²⁸ Balázs Trautmann: Modern, gumikerekes harcjármű fejlesztése és gyártása kezdődhet meg. *Honvédelem.hu*, 16 December 2020; Péter Snoj: Tovább erősödnek a magyar–német kapcsolatok. *Honvédelem.hu*, 22 March 2019; Portfolio: *Hadiipari üzem jön létre Nyírteleken*. 05 February 2021.

²⁹ Krisztina Budavári: *A magyar védelmi ipar helyzete és fejlődési lehetőségei*. Magyar Hadtudományi Társaság – Hungarian Association of Military Science, 2020. 147.

³⁰ András Hettyey: From a Community of Feelings to Estrangement: Hungary and Germany since 1990. In András Hettyey (ed.): *Germany and Central Europe: Drifting Apart?* Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2020. 134–135.

³¹ Magyar Hírlap: Szijjártó: Németország hazánk stratégiai szövetségese és a legfontosabb gazdasági partnere. 04 November 2019.

³² Government Resolution 1163/2020 (IV.21.) on Hungary’s National Security Strategy, Article 110.

³³ Hans von der Burchard – Jacopo Barigazzi: Germany Slams Hungary for Blocking EU Criticism of China on Hong Kong. *Politico*, 10 May 2010; Lili Bayer: EU Leaders Back Deal to End Budget Blockade by Hungary and Poland. *Politico*, 10 December 2020.

³⁴ SIPRI (2022): op. cit.

³⁵ Jarocki (2021): op. cit.

cooperation with Germany. Still, the willingness to import German arms is rather based on pragmatic cooperation, not on particularly flourishing political relations. Although in 2015 a bilateral strategic dialogue was announced, Germany's migration policy did not find support from the Czech Government.³⁶

To conclude, friendly political relations did seem to give a stable ground for arms transfers in the case of Poland prior to the German arms transfers of 2002 and 2013. This assumption is utterly contradicted by Hungary as tensions were apparent in the relations before the German arms deals were signed in 2017–2020. The second hypothesis is irrelevant to Hungary, as the lack of any MCW import (except aircraft) was caused by the neglect of defence affairs and budgetary cuts. Poland's German arms imports disappeared simultaneously with the deteriorating political relations, but no convincing evidence underpins this simultaneity.

The third hypothesis cannot be firmly confirmed by Poland: certainly, the German military aid in the early 1990s, in 2002 and further exports in 2013 did help to increase mutual trust, but they did not have a long-term impact, as after 2002 and 2013 political tensions quickly came to the foreground. The same is true for the Hungarian procurements. However, defence cooperation and arms transfers did likely help sustain pragmatic cooperation. By Hungary and Poland, the political dialogue was extended with defence affairs and visits of defence ministers were facilitated.³⁷

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to investigate the correlation of political relations and arms imports by the Visegrád countries since 1999. Our research has led us to the following conclusions:

- Cooperative political relations without doubt facilitated the U.S. arms exports to all V4 countries and the German exports to Poland. Here it should be outlined that joining NATO was not a solely factor, as German military aid was already transferred before 1999. By imports from Russia in the 2000s, economic considerations were more determinant, and the German–Hungarian arms deals in 2017–2020 were made entirely in a conflictive climate.
- The assumption that conflictive relations decrease arms imports seems the least convincing. Russian arms exports did decrease around 1999, but in the 2000s, there was still a modest increase. Nevertheless, constant distrust could have been a decisive reason why Poland bought the least Russian arms. As to the decrease of American and German exports, there is no firm evidence, as budgetary cuts seriously limited military modernisations of the Visegrád countries. Buying MCWs, in general, is a very costly business, especially for small countries, like Hungary or Slovakia.

³⁶ Jana Urbanovská – Zdeněk Kříž: Germany and the Czech Republic: An Asymmetric Relationship in Search of a Strategy. In András Hettyey (ed.): *Germany and Central Europe: Drifting Apart?* Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2020. 109–111.

³⁷ Bundesministerium der Verteidigung: *AKK wirbt in Mittel- und Osteuropa für eine Post-COVID-Ordnung*. 20 July 2020.

- Finally, arms transfers as part of defence diplomacy undoubtedly contributed to improving relations with the U.S., but they rather helped to sustain pragmatic cooperation with Russia in the 2000s, or they could counter-balance conflictive relations, particularly by the German–Hungarian relations recently.

In general, cooperative diplomatic-political climate increases the probability of arms deals, but they are not a necessity.

First, arms deals, which serve mutual interests, like military cooperation or favourable economic conditions, can override current political relations. This may give a convincing explanation for the German–Hungarian arms deals, from which Hungarian military modernisation and the German defence industry have benefited. It should be underlined that large scale procurements, which include highly sophisticated offensive weapon systems, like fighter jets, battle tanks or IFVs establish closer ties between the supplier and the recipient. Once a new weapon system has been imported, the following imports will likely come from the same supplier, regardless of the current political relations, because it is very costly to change the existing weapon system. Consequently, as part of long-term defence planning, defence cooperation is usually much more resilient to changes in political relations.³⁸ This explains Poland's continuing defence industrial cooperation with Germany despite the conflictive relations. (Obviously, when a country's economic power is strong enough, political considerations can easily prevail on security or economic concerns.) Second, security perception can also be much more decisive than current political relations, especially if the recipient feels threatened. This better explains Poland's, the Czech Republic and Slovakia's choice for U.S. aircraft or helicopters because they perceive the U.S. as a credible security guarantor. Therefore, arms transfers signify a willingness for political alignment based on security or economic interests, not necessarily on political sympathy.

The quality and scale of the imported MCWs also signify a certain degree of relations: it may not be accidental that among the V4, only Poland has a real deep relation with the U.S. and acquired high-tech weapon systems in a larger amount. The other three could not achieve this level of partnership with the U.S., how much they desired.

Nevertheless, the causality of political relations and arms transfers is a two-way phenomenon. Whereas political preferences for a foreign supplier can be decisive, arms transfers can also deepen cooperation between the parties. Political relations themselves do not explain arms transfer decision and vice versa. It is important to note that the relation between two elements is very situation-dependent; the broader strategic context, like alliances and economic conditions, should also be considered. Further studies on the connection between arms transfers and political relations by other geographical regions are suggested to elucidate the above-highlighted results.

³⁸ Interview with Lieutenant General (Ret.) Zoltán Szenes, 09 April 2021.

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