

The metaphor of sovereignty in Brexit campaign discourse and the mobilisation of national identity

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Abstract. The relevance of the study was determined by the intensification of metaphor-based political mobilisation in agitational campaigns aimed at altering a state's existing sovereignty arrangements. The purpose of the study was to demonstrate the role of linguistic strategies in political mobilisation. The methodology was based on a combination of the conceptual method for establishing the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor theory, critical metaphor analysis of campaign posters and leaflets, and normative-institutional analysis of official Central Asian discourse. As a result, it was established that the Brexit metaphorical field was organised around mutually reinforcing clusters: "Sovereignty was an object of possession", "The EU was a limitation", and "Immigrants were an unrivalled flood", whose mobilising effectiveness was confirmed by independent voter-motivation data, in which state autonomy was the single most frequently cited reason for voting Leave. Three new metaphoric frames were proposed for Central Asia: "The region was a common home", "Cooperation was a road", and "Regional cooperation was a shared dastarkhan", each grounded in documented material already in the region's own institutional and cultural discourse and each constructed to encode sovereign authority as intrinsic to national identity rather than as a transferable commodity diminished by cooperation. An isolation-orientated metaphorical field, however cognitively efficient, appears to be associated with the material costs documented in the Brexit case, whereas an integration-orientated field grounded in a population's own discursive resources can mobilise cooperation without requiring the surrender of national identity. The practical significance of the study lies in the development of a comparative matrix of metaphorical clusters and a matrix of proposed integration frames, which can be used by political communicators and policymakers in Central Asia to diagnose the discursive resources available for constructing a sovereignty-preserving narrative of regional cooperation

Keywords: linguistic strategies; cognitive frames; referendum; conceptual mapping; regional cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of political discourses in the context of regional integration leads to the collision between different models of conceptualising the notion of sovereignty, which has traditionally been understood in the context of international relations theory as a concept that exclusively relates to the state. The shift in the understanding of sovereign authority from a classical to a socially constructed concept, however, gives rise to new demands upon the analysis of political discourses.

The study of the role of linguistic strategies in the construction of sovereignty examines the relationship between the role of the state within the international arena and the reflection of that role within the political discourse. The constructions of the nature of and the value of the concept

of state sovereignty emerge within the context of role contestation within a nation, as has been described by authors such as R.K. Beasley *et al.* (2021). More generally, though, the instruments that were used by a nation to both gain and maintain its role within the international system were often insufficient in the face of the need to gain support for the alterations to that role within the domestic political communication. The findings of the study by M. Donoghue & M. Kuisma (2022), for instance, indicate that the discourse of the necessity of "taking back control" can often be utilised within other areas of policy, such as those related to welfare policy.

Furthermore, the role of visual media in the construction of concepts of sovereignty within a political discourse

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had been investigated by authors such as H.W. Lennon & L. Kilby (2020). During this investigation, the authors had concluded that political cartoons often served to banally reproduce the concepts of national identity, otherness, and belonging within the political communication. A similar form of construction of the political discourse through metaphorical language regarding the threat of external actors to the internal sovereignty of a nation had been investigated by authors such as A.S. Ross & A. Bhatia (2021), who had revealed that the campaign posters produced by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) were effective in utilising such metaphorical discourse to construct the European Union as positioned in opposition to the nation's interests. A similar discussion of the role of metaphorical language within political communication had been presented by author A. Musolff (2023), though in relation to the suggestion that metaphorical language was only decisive within political rhetoric in relation to the integration of new concepts into already established concepts within that political discourse.

The regional and postcolonial dimension of the construction of national sovereignty in Central Asia had been investigated by T. Dadabaev (2023) and S.A. Avcu (2025). T. Dadabaev had established that the relations between the neighbouring states of Central Asia were based on the notion of brotherhood and shared principles of water governance within the region. The lack of shared understanding of the notion of regional identity between the states of Central Asia results in the decline of the effectiveness of regional integration institutions within the region in a non-linear fashion. S.A. Avcu had systematised the elements of the interaction between nationalism and regionalism in the region in the context of the principle of preserving state sovereignty. A key factor identified in the study was the fear of losing state sovereignty that individual states of the region exhibit, which impacts the effectiveness of regional integration in those states. J.B. Park *et al.* (2023) had established the connection between the still-developing institutional foundations of Central Asia as a region and the region's dependence on competing external multilateralisms. The absence of an independent institutional infrastructure in the region results in the dominance of regionalism influenced by external actors. The deeper historical roots of this tension between national identity and regional belonging in Central Asia were examined by M. Laruelle (2021), who had traced the construction of national storytelling across the region back to its Soviet-era origins. M. Laruelle had established that the diversity of each state's national narrative, rather than constituting an obstacle to regional cohesion, instead reflects a genuinely hybrid and multidisciplinary process of nation-building that cannot be reduced to a single regional template.

Despite a substantial body of research, the existing scholarly literature has, as a rule, examined the mechanisms of sovereignty construction and regional integration in isolation: either through the lens of the British case without an analysis of its applicability to other regions or

through the lens of Central Asian regionalism without an assessment of the linguistic-cognitive mechanisms underlying successful or failed mobilisation. Studies of the metaphorical dimension of political mobilisation have predominantly concentrated on the analysis of individual campaigns or regions, without a comparative assessment of the systemic differences between discursive models. As a result, an integrated analytical framework linking critical metaphor analysis of Brexit campaign discourse with the justification of new integration-orientated metaphors for Central Asia through verified structural dimensions has remained insufficiently developed, which determined the subject and purpose of the study.

The purpose of the study was to establish how linguistic strategies function as instruments of political mobilisation. Within the scope of the study, the following tasks were set: to operationalise the concept of the metaphorical field of sovereignty within the framework of critical discourse analysis; to analyse the metaphorical clusters of the Leave agitational campaign across four dimensions; and to construct a comparative matrix of the proposed integration metaphors for Central Asia according to key theoretical criteria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in the format of a comparative theoretical-empirical analysis with elements of conceptual and normative-institutional analysis. Two cases were selected for comparative analysis: the campaign communication of the Leave campaign within the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union and the contemporary political discourse of regional integration among the five Central Asian states. The selection of these two cases was justified by three criteria of analytical representativeness. First, each case realises a qualitatively distinct model of deploying the metaphor of sovereignty – an isolationist model in the case of Brexit and an integrationist model in the case of Central Asia – which creates the conditions for a substantively informative comparative analysis. Second, the British case possesses a completed observational cycle, allowing the rhetorical construction to be compared against subsequently measurable institutional and economic outcomes. The temporal scope of the study of 2015 until 2025 was determined by two considerations. The dates for the British case were determined by the starting of the Vote Leave campaign website in 2015 and the publication date of the Office for Budget Responsibility's current analysis of the consequences of Brexit in 2025. For the Central Asian case, the timeframe was determined by the formation of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia in 2018 and the publication date of the most up-to-date source materials on the topic in the years 2024 until 2025.

The study was carried out through four sequential methods. The conceptual method was applied to form the theoretical framework of the study, distinguishing metaphor as a stylistic device from metaphor as a cognitive

mechanism that structures political thought and electoral behaviour. The source base for this conceptualisation consisted of the foundational works on conceptual metaphor theory: G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981), which formulates the theory of conceptual metaphor itself, and G. Lakoff (2004), which applies this theory to political framing and formulates the conditions for effective reframing of political discourse.

Critical Metaphor Analysis, as developed by J. Charteris-Black (2011), was applied to identify and classify the metaphorical clusters in the persuasive political discourse of the Leave campaign. The corpus subjected to this analysis comprised five archived campaign leaflets and posters (23rd June Independence..., 2016; Are you British or European ..., 2016; Notice to all immigrants, 2016), the archived official Vote Leave (2015) campaign website in its entirety, one reported campaign speech analysis (Goldsmith, 2017), three documented public statements by campaign-adjacent and opposition figures (EU referendum, 2015; Michael Gove “shuddered”..., 2016; Nigel Farage says..., 2018), and three independent voter-motivation datasets (Ashcroft, 2016; British Election Study Team, 2016; Taylor, 2018), yielding a combined corpus of thirteen primary textual and visual sources supplemented by three survey-based data sources.

A textual or visual unit was coded as ‘metaphoric’ where it satisfied two conditions: first, that a concrete, physically or spatially grounded source domain (an object, a bounded space, a body, or a natural force) was mapped onto the abstract target domain of sovereignty or national belonging; second, that this mapping was either lexically marked by an identifiable linguistic expression (a verb phrase, a noun phrase, or a caption) or visually marked by a discrete pictorial element (an image, a composition, or a juxtaposition) carrying the same source-domain content. Each coded unit was assigned to one of four clusters according to the specific source domain it instantiated: units mapping sovereign authority onto an object capable of being held, lost, or recovered were coded as possession; units mapping the European Union onto a structure of physical confinement or coercive restriction were coded as constraint; units mapping the post-referendum condition onto a state of liberation or autonomous nationhood were coded as independence; and units mapping immigration onto a natural force exceeding a bounded capacity were coded as flow. Where a unit was ambiguous between two clusters, it was assigned to the cluster supported by the immediately surrounding co-text (the accompanying caption or speech segment) and only included in the final corpus once this assignment could be made unambiguously. Specifically analysed was the lexical and visual content of each source, classified by type of conceptual mapping (possession, constraint, independence, and threatening flow) and by the corresponding cognitive frame activated by that mapping.

Normative-institutional analysis was applied to examine the official discourse of Central Asian regional integration and to assess the extent to which existing institutional

language already approximates the metaphoric frames proposed in this article. This case was selected because it represents a region actively engaged in constructing a regional cooperation discourse under conditions of acute sovereignty sensitivity, making it a substantively appropriate test of whether the metaphoric frames identified in the Brexit case can be inverted to support integration rather than isolation, and because the existence of a documented, decade-long institutional record provides a sufficient body of official material against which to assess the degree of correspondence between existing rhetoric and the frames proposed here. The source base consisted of academic research on the discourse of the “Silk Road” in the foreign policies of Japan, China, and South Korea toward Central Asia (Dadabaev, 2018), an analytical article on the terminological avoidance of the concept of “integration” in the joint documents of the Consultative Meetings (Tolipov, 2024), and an authored publication by the President of Uzbekistan, reflecting the institutional rhetoric of the region (Mirziyoyev, 2025). Specifically analysed was the presence or deliberate absence of particular lexical items in official documents, as well as the institutional context in which alternative formulations were used, which made it possible to establish which of the proposed metaphoric frames constitute an extension of already existing institutional language and which represent an original theoretical proposal. This stage of analysis served to identify the discursive resources already available within Central Asian institutional communication, that is, to establish, prior to any classificatory work, which lexical and rhetorical elements existed in the region’s own official language and could therefore serve as the raw material from which the proposed metaphoric frames might be constructed or to which they might be compared.

The discursive resources identified through this normative-institutional analysis were subsequently organised through matrix analysis, applied to systematise the dispersed material into two analytical matrixes structured around consistent comparative parameters. Matrix analysis was applied to construct two analytical matrixes. The first matrix was built as a comparative matrix of the metaphorical field of sovereignty in the discourse of the Leave campaign, structured around four parameters: metaphorical cluster, conceptual mapping, documented instances, and the cognitive frame activated. Classification by the parameter of documentation was carried out according to a criterion of verifiability: only clusters for which a documented textual or visual instance was identified in archival or journalistic sources were included in the table. The second matrix was built as a comparative matrix of the proposed metaphorical field for Central Asian regional integration, structured around four parameters: the proposed metaphor, source material, theoretical justification, and proposed cognitive entailments. Whereas the normative-institutional analysis had identified which discursive resources existed and in what institutional context, the matrix analysis converted this

dispersed evidence into a systematic classification, carried out according to a criterion of prior institutional formulation: metaphors extending an already documented official formulation were classified separately from metaphors introduced as original theoretical proposals justified by structural or cultural evidence. The source base for both matrix consisted of the combined set of sources used in the preceding methods. A limitation of this study was its reliance on documented campaign artefacts and official statements, which do not capture real-time public reception of these frames.

RESULTS

The foundational premise of this analysis was established through the theories of metaphor developed by G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981). These linguists demonstrated that metaphor was not just an aspect of language and speech but was actually a foundational concept of human cognition. Furthermore, G. Lakoff & M. Johnson argued that the human conceptual system as a whole, which was responsible for both thought and action, was actually metaphorical in its nature. Concepts like “Argument was War”, for instance, indicate the way that individuals understand the concept of argument and its elements. The political significance of these findings was developed by G. Lakoff (2004). G. Lakoff’s analysis suggests that political debates can be understood as contests over which cognitive frames were established for the audience. A frame, according to G. Lakoff, was a cognitive understanding of the world that creates a dismissal of any information that does not support that frame for the individuals that hold that frame. Therefore, if a politician was able to successfully install a frame in the minds of the audience members, the politician does not have to win the debate and argue the points for the audience to believe in the politician’s viewpoints. J. Charteris-Black (2011) expanded upon G. Lakoff’s theories through the development of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA). According to J. Charteris-Black, metaphors used in political rhetoric work to convey three main ideas to the audience for political purposes: the legitimisation of a political worldview, the creation of political myths to support that political worldview, and the activation of specific emotions within the audience that have an impact upon the attitudes and behaviours of those audience members during the election and beyond.

The concept of a metaphorical field, as applied in the article, refers to the group of metaphors that share the same target domain and that help to define the concept of a political idea for the people. In the case of the Brexit referendum of 2016, the target domain was the concept of sovereignty. The metaphorical field constructed by Vote Leave (2015) encompassed concepts from the domains of possession, constraint, health, and disaster, all of which helped to suggest the relationship of the U.K. to the European Union.

The most pervasive and analytically significant metaphorical cluster in the Vote Leave campaign organised

itself around the conceptual mapping “Sovereignty was a Possessed Object”. This mapping positioned political authority not as a distributed, institutionally negotiated property of governance but as a discrete, transferable entity that had been taken from the British people and could be physically recovered. The internal report produced from research, obtained by journalist P. Goldsmith (2017) and analysed by UK in a Changing Europe, recorded the word “control” 37 times and the phrase “take back control” five times, alongside direct voter statements such as “We’ve lost control – because of Europe”. The slogan therefore instantiated this conceptual mapping with remarkable cognitive efficiency precisely because it crystallised pre-existing possessive schemas already in public discourse. The verb phrase “take back” presupposes both that the speaker was supposed to be the owner of something prior to the establishment of a grievance against the speaker. The slogan was derived from focus groups of voters, who mentioned the concepts of control, borders, and laws in the context of discussing European Union (EU) membership. Thus, the speaker of the slogan indicates that the slogan has an origin in the minds of the voters themselves and that it was developed to maximise its emotional and motivational power over those voters.

According to a L. Ashcroft (2016) exit poll conducted on the day of the referendum among 12,369 voters who had just cast their ballots, those who voted Leave most frequently identified “the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK” as their primary reason for voting as they did. The British Election Study Internet Panel, which collected data across multiple waves including a pre-referendum wave, reported that sovereignty and immigration were the two most frequently cited motivations among Leave-leaning respondents (British Election Study Team, 2016). These figures establish that the “Sovereignty was a possessed object” frame was not merely rhetorical; it mapped onto genuine voter cognition.

Thus, the metaphorical field of sovereignty constructed by the Vote Leave campaign around the conceptual mapping of “Sovereignty was a Possessed Object” demonstrates a key pattern: the most effective political metaphors were not imposed on the electorate from the outside but crystallise possessive schemes already in the mass consciousness. The slogan “take back control” gained mobilising power precisely because its linguistic form came directly from the language of focus groups, rather than from the rhetorical ingenuity of the campaign. Empirical data from the Lord Ashcroft Polls and the British Election Study confirm that this frame did not remain a purely discursive phenomenon: it directly correlated with the declared motives of voters, the vast majority of whom explained their decision in terms of the categories of regaining control and national self-determination. This allows qualifying the metaphor of possession not as a stylistic device but as a cognitive mechanism that structured the real electoral decision.

The second of the major metaphors that was constructed within the text was that of the European Union as a structure that the Leave campaign's discourse constructed as a form of physical confinement from which Britain needed to be liberated. This was both logically and systematically entailed by the first metaphor of Britain's sovereignty being taken from the nation altogether – within this discursive logic, the structure through which sovereign authority was said to have been taken was represented as a cage, a chain, or a prison. The lexical items attested in campaign materials and speeches included “chained to a failing project”, “trapped”, “shackles of Brussels”, and “breaking free”. The metaphor of constraint was particularly effective at generating emotional responses because it framed the status quo, continued EU membership, as an ongoing condition of unfreedom, which required no future act of aggression to be objectionable. The possessive logic of the sovereignty frame extended into identity-based formulations as well. A leaflet distributed by the pressure group Better Off Out posed the binary question, “Are you British or European?” (2016), constructing British and European identity as mutually exclusive categories rather than as compatible or overlapping affiliations, an entailment consistent with the zero-sum logic of the possession metaphor identified above. This leaflet performed a distinct discursive function within the broader metaphorical field: where “take back control” supplied the grievance structure and the constraint cluster supplied the urgency, the British/European binary supplied the identity register through which that grievance and urgency were rendered personal rather than constitutional. By framing British and European identity as a forced choice rather than as a layered or compatible affiliation, the leaflet constructed national identity itself as a possession under the same threat of dispossession that structured the sovereignty-as-object mapping: just as control had been “taken” by Europe, the implicit claim was that British identity was similarly at risk of dilution or replacement should the audience fail to assert it through the binary choice presented. This identity-based extension of the possession schema was analytically significant because it demonstrates that the metaphorical field did not remain confined to the formal register of constitutional sovereign authority; it was actively translated into the register of personal belonging, which was a considerably more emotionally accessible domain for a mass electorate than questions of parliamentary competence or trade jurisdiction.

The Remain campaign, officially titled Britain Stronger in Europe, advocated for continued UK membership in the European Union (EU referendum, 2015). Its economic arguments, by contrast, offered a defence of the status quo, couched in probabilistic predictions about future outcomes, a discursive strategy that G. Lakoff (2004) has identified as systematically disadvantageous in competition with an established system of discontent. The cluster of captivity was reinforced by the Remain campaign's

own rhetoric. The Remain campaign's characterisation of economic warnings reframed factual warnings as instruments of coercive control, effectively positioning Remain as the party of constraint and Leave as the party of liberation (Office for Budget Responsibility, n.d.). This rhetorical struggle, which transformed opponents' arguments into evidence in favour of the system of captivity, illustrates what J. Charteris-Black (2011) has described as the myth-making function of political metaphor: constructing a narrative in which one's own side represents freedom and the other represents oppression, regardless of the underlying political essence.

The third cluster, deployed primarily by United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Nigel Farage's Leave. The EU, rather than the official Vote Leave campaign, extended the metaphorical field of sovereignty into the domain of immigration through the mapping “immigrants were an overwhelming flood”. The “Breaking Point” billboard depicted a photograph of refugees with the caption “breaking point” and “the EU has failed us all” (Michael Gove “shuddered” ..., 2016). The poster instantiated the threshold-and-rupture entailments of the flood metaphor: a natural force has overwhelmed the containing structures, and the system was depicted as having reached its breaking point. The flood metaphor was not confined to the “Breaking Point” billboard. A Better Off Out leaflet posed the question, “Is Britain getting too crowded?” (Notice to all immigrants, 2016), employing the same density-and-capacity entailments, a bounded national space approaching its physical limit, that structured the more visually explicit “Breaking Point” imagery.

Farage defended the poster by stating that “the point of that poster was to say that Europe isn't working” and that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to admit Syrian refugees represented “one of the biggest political failures of modern times” (Michael Gove “shuddered”..., 2016). In a later interview, Farage credited the poster with having “won us the referendum because it kept us focused on the danger of open borders” (Nigel Farage says..., 2018). The poster was condemned across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, its appearance in the final week of campaigning secured extensive media coverage, amplifying the sovereignty-as-possession and constraint-as-EU frames through an affective register of national vulnerability. The independence frame extended into campaign leaflet material distributed by Leave.EU, one of which was titled “23rd June Independence Day” (2016) and urged supporters to “leave the EU. Join the fight”.

The metaphorical field of sovereign authority constructed during the 2016 referendum campaign drew together three distinct conceptual clusters, each grounded in a separate source domain yet jointly orientated toward the same target concept of sovereignty. Table 1 summarises this metaphorical field as it had been attested in the documented record of the Vote Leave and Leave EU campaigns (Table 1).

Table 1. Metaphorical field of sovereignty in vote leave campaign discourse

Metaphorical cluster	Conceptual mapping (CMT)	Attested instances	Cognitive frame activated
Sovereignty was a possessed object	Abstract political authority; tangible, transferable commodity	“Take back control” and “We’ve lost control – because of Europe”	Loss/Recovery Grievance schema presupposing prior ownership and illegitimate dispossession, generating a restitutive rather than aspirational motivation for action
Eu was constraint	EU membership: a coercive restriction on national decision-making	“Break free of the EU”; “Vassal state...”; “Breaking Point” billboard; “the EU has failed us all”	Imprisonment/Freedom Reversal of the constraint -versus- protection axis, recasting the opponent’s risk-based argumentation as evidence of an existing condition of unfreedom
Immigrants were an overwhelming flood	Migration was a natural force exceeding structural capacity		Crisis/Threshold Threshold-and-rupture schema that displaces deliberative reasoning in favour of an urgency response to perceived imminent systemic failure

Source: compiled by the authors based on G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981), G. Lakoff (2004), J. Charteris-Black (2011), Vote Leave (2015), 23rd June Independence Day (2016), L. Ashcroft (2016), British Election Study Team (2016), Michael Gove “shuddered” at UKIP migrants poster (2016), Notice to all immigrants: Regarding the “Vote Leave” campaign (2016), Are you British or European? (2016), P. Goldsmith (2017), V. Prabhakaran *et al.* (2021)

The analysis of the data presented in Table 1 allows to identify the general architecture of the metaphorical field of sovereignty that underpinned the Vote Leave campaign. All three clusters, despite their different source areas, relied on a common deep structure: the presence of a lost good, a guilty external agent, and an accessible path to recovery through a single political act. This structural uniformity explains why the metaphors operated not as separate rhetorical devices but as a mutually reinforcing system: the activation of one metaphor (e.g., loss of control) automatically prepared the cognitive ground for the adoption of a related one (e.g., the image of the EU as a prison or a threatening flow). It was also noticeable that the rhetorical power of these metaphors, as constructed within the campaign’s own discourse, did not appear to depend primarily on their factual accuracy but on their capacity to transform complex institutional issues into direct, personally tangible states of loss, limitation, and threat. It was this property, and not the substantive validity of the arguments, that determined their mobilisation effectiveness, which was confirmed by the very fact of the integration of thematically opposite plots (economic, migration, and constitutional) into a single emotionally coherent narrative structure.

The mobilising efficacy of the Brexit metaphorical field cannot be attributed to any one slogan or visual artefact. Rather, as J. Charteris-Black (2011) explains of such fields in general, the field’s power derived from the interaction of several different metaphorical clusters within the same ideological structure. Each of the clusters (clusters of possession, captivity and flood) contributed to the power of the others through their use of the same general structure and concept: that Britain was losing something valuable to an external entity and that its recovery was possible through the exit of that external entity. The reason these specific themes (control, sovereignty, immigration, and borders) proved emotionally persuasive for Leave supporters, rather than other available themes such as trade regulation or institutional procedure, lies in the structural property they share: each maps an abstract, institutionally mediated

political relationship onto a concrete, bodily, or spatially bounded experience that requires no specialised knowledge to process emotionally. A voter does not need to understand the legislative competence of the European Parliament to feel the force of “taking back control”; they need only possess the ordinary human experience of having something taken and wanting it returned. The same holds for borders and immigration: a voter does not need to evaluate net migration statistics to respond to the image of a bounded space approaching its physical capacity, because the flood and threshold schema draws on a pre-linguistic, embodied understanding of containment and overflow. This was precisely the mechanism G. Lakoff (2004) identifies as central to political framing: effective frames bypass deliberative, fact-based reasoning by activating schemas that were already cognitively available to the audience, and the four themes identified in this study (control, sovereignty, immigration, and borders) were rhetorically effective specifically because each could be mapped onto such a pre-existing embodied schema (possession, captivity, identity, and flood, respectively) without requiring the audience to first acquire new factual or institutional knowledge.

The legitimating function of this mobilisation extended beyond the immediate act of voting. Because the metaphorical field constructed the referendum outcome not as a policy choice subject to revision in light of subsequent evidence, but as the restitution of something rightfully owned, it supplied a durable legitimating frame for the management decisions and policy course that followed the vote: any subsequent government action consistent with exit could be represented as fulfilling a moral debt of restitution, while any action that appeared to compromise on the terms of exit could be represented as a renewed act of dispossession. This explains why the post-referendum economic evidence reviewed below, despite its consistency and source authority, proved insufficient to revise public support for the underlying frame: a possession-and-recovery schema, once activated, evaluates subsequent decisions according to whether they honour the restitution rather

than according to their independent economic merit. The same mechanism carries a direct implication for the comparative argument of this article: where an integration-orientated metaphorical field was successfully established prior to a formal decision point for Central Asia, it would be expected to perform the same legitimating function in reverse, evaluating subsequent integration or isolation decisions according to whether they honour shared belonging rather than according to whether they recover a contested possession.

The cognitive-affective mechanism described by G. Lakoff (2004) worked as follows: the activation of the frame that “sovereignty was a possessed object” leads to the feeling of indignation at a grievance – the frame that the “EU was captivity” creates a sense of urgency regarding that feeling of indignation. Consequently, abstract arguments regarding the competence of Parliament to pass legislation on a certain topic were replaced with emotionally charged arguments about the personal stake that each individual has in the outcome of that debate.

The empirical record of voter motivation confirms the affective reach of this structure. Independent surveys conducted at the time of the referendum identified sovereignty and immigration as the two most frequently cited reasons for voting Leave, with sovereign authority alone accounting for approximately 45 per cent of the Leave vote in the exit poll. Among those who intended to vote Leave pre-referendum data showed “sovereignty/EU bureaucracy” and “immigration” were each cited by approximately 26 per cent of respondents (Taylor, 2018). These figures indicate that the metaphorical field of state autonomy, as constructed by the Leave campaign, succeeded in organising voter cognition around a coherent set of grievance frames.

The post-referendum record provides an empirical basis for assessing claims encoded in the Brexit metaphorical field, in particular the claim that national sovereignty, once “returned”, will lead to improved outcomes for the British polity. The reviewed evidence indicates a consistent pattern across several macroeconomic measures. The Office for Budget Responsibility (n.d.), in its October 2021 Economic and Fiscal Review, estimated that Brexit would reduce the UK’s long-term productivity by 4 per cent compared to remaining in the EU, with the Trade and Cooperation Agreement resulting in a roughly 15 per cent reduction in both imports and exports compared to the counterfactual. These findings were analytically significant not for their political valence but for what they reveal about the relationship between metaphorical language and material outcomes. The metaphor of “Sovereignty was an object owned”, by constructing the restoration of state autonomy as an event with immediate positive consequences for the national organism, has generated expectations that institutional and economic experience has not borne out. The idea of the organism metaphor has run into the empirical constraint that isolation from an integrated single market entails measurable costs in productivity, trade intensity and foreign direct investment.

The Brexit case can accordingly be considered an illustrative case of isolationist political metaphors within this analysis. The results of the study suggest that metaphors that organise sovereignty around the structure of possession-captivity-liberation, while demonstrably effective in mobilising electoral behaviour, encode a model of national self-sufficiency that does not correspond to the structural conditions of the 21st-century political economy. The implications for Central Asian political discourse were straightforward: the cognitive accessibility of the Brexit model as a template for asserting state autonomy may be interpreted as a discursive consideration relevant to regional political communication, and the construction of alternative, integration-compatible metaphorical frames was accordingly a task that has both theoretical and practical dimensions.

The five Central Asian republics share a distinctive discursive challenge that has no direct parallel in the Brexit context. Whereas the Vote Leave campaign’s discourse constructed continued EU membership as a form of constraint in order to support withdrawal from an existing supranational arrangement, the governments of Central Asia were engaged in the opposite project: building regional cooperation from a baseline of post-Soviet fragmentation, while ensuring that the discourse of integration does not trigger the sovereignty anxieties that proved mobilising in the British case. The analytical literature on the Consultative Meetings of Heads of State of Central Asia (CMHS) documents a deliberate rhetorical strategy of “consolidation without integration”. All joint statements produced at the CMHS consistently emphasised equality, mutual respect, the voluntary nature of commitments, and respect for different modes of development, codifying Central Asia as “a pluralistic, diverse yet egalitarian space” (Tolipov, 2024). This presentation was analytically revealing: the institutional actors most directly involved in Central Asian regionalism appear to have developed discursive practices that diverge from the Brexit-style frame of possession and release, although a fully articulated positive metaphorical field has not yet emerged at the level of mass political communication that could support these practices at the level of mass political communication.

G. Lakoff (2004) has established principles that were directly relevant to the construction of an alternative metaphorical field for Central Asia. The first: negating an opponent’s frame only reinforces it. This suggests that attempting to argue directly against the possession-and-recovery framing associated with the Leave campaign’s discourse was unlikely to produce an effective alternative argument. An entirely new set of arguments, built independently of and not in opposition to the arguments of the Brexit movement, must be constructed. This establishes the first of the conditions for the construction of an alternative metaphorical field for the nations of Central Asia: that the alternative metaphorical field must activate positive frames cognitively, independently of and in opposition to the grievance-based metaphorical field of the Central Asian nations.

Second, G. Lakoff (2004) argues that the frames that succeed in promoting a particular view of the world were those that cohere with a general morality and set of concepts; in his words, while the facts of an issue do matter enormously, the facts must be framed in terms of their moral importance for the frames to be successful, and any frame that does not cohere with the values of the system that emerges from those facts will fail as a frame despite its availability. The concept of frames thus creates a second condition for successful frames in the discussion of Central Asia: the frames should cohere with the principle of sovereign equality of nations that has already been established in the discourse of the CMHS to date; frames that imply a zero-sum relationship between national and resource equality would be expected, according to G. Lakoff's criteria, to be less effective for the success of communicative frames.

Finally, G. Lakoff (2004) argues that reframing only works if one finds an idea that the audience already believes

unconsciously, making it conscious, rather than introducing the idea of something entirely unfamiliar to the audience. Thus, another condition for reframing arguments was that the domains used in the proposed metaphors must be domains that were experienced and understood by the populations of each of the five republics. Based on these three conditions for effective reframing, as discussed by G. Lakoff, and upon the limited but existing discourse of regional cooperation found in the statements of the nations of Central Asia, three new metaphors were proposed that can extend existing discussions of Central Asia's integration of its indigenous nationalities into a systematic argument for integration of those nations into the region as a whole.

Having derived the three conditions that any effective integration frame must satisfy, the article turns to the construction of the frames themselves (Table 2). Each metaphor was grounded in statements from the Central Asian countries or from academic literature on the topic of integration itself.

Table 2. Proposed metaphorical field for Central Asian integration discourse

New proposed metaphor	Source material/Documented basis	Theoretical justification	Proposed cognitive entailments
A region was a common home	"in the same boat as equal partners"; "borders that once divided us have turned into bridges of friendship and cooperation"; "shared destiny"; "sovereign equality, mutual support and shared responsibility for the future of the region"	Extends existing navigational and kinship-based imagery already in official discourse into an explicit home/dwelling domain, which more directly encodes both shared space and individual autonomy	Domestic security; voluntary association; enhancement rather than erosion of individual identity through shared habitation
Cooperation was a road/path	Silk Road frame documented in external foreign policy discourse toward Central Asia; "regional interconnectedness"; explicit avoidance of the term "integration" across all CMHS joint documents since 2018	Proposes redeploying an externally used frame as an internal discursive resource, directional without being teleological, avoiding implication of sovereignty surrender	Movement and progress without a fixed destination; connectivity without loss of autonomous starting point
Regional cooperation was a shared dastarkhan	The dastarkhan was a documented hospitality practice common to all five republics, in which refusal of the offered share was considered a breach of social obligation	Satisfies the third condition directly: the source domain was not imported from an external tradition but was already part of the lived, daily experience of the regional population	Participation as moral obligation rather than optional courtesy; coexistence of distinct national dishes on a single shared surface; equality of those seated at the table regardless of status

Source: compiled by the authors based on G. Lakoff & M. Johnson (1981), G. Lakoff (2004), J. Charteris-Black (2011), T. Dadabaev (2018), F. Tolipov (2024), S. Mirziyoyev (2025)

The pattern that emerges across the three proposed frames illustrates, at the level of discourse construction, a principle consistent with what the reviewed evidence indicates at the level of material outcome: the documented case suggests that isolation was not associated with measurable progress, whereas integration, when it was permitted to retain rather than erase national distinctiveness, appears more likely to support it. The power of the metaphors that were constructed in relation to Brexit had a material outcome in the economic records of the nation after the decision to leave; the same analytical approach can be applied to propose that an alternative construction of these metaphors may more accurately reflect the cooperative dimension of regional alignment. The metaphors indicate that cooperation was only possible through the preservation of distinct national identities; a home was only a home due to the individuals that live within it, roads only become

connecting roads due to the existence of the distinct destinations that it connects, and a dastarkhan becomes sustenance for a nation due to the variety of its dishes. Thus, if frames exist that were capable of motivating a population towards isolation despite the documented economic costs reviewed above, it may be argued that frames of an opposite construction could similarly support integration without requiring the abandonment of national identity.

The contrast between the attested Brexit metaphorical field and the metaphorical field proposed here for Central Asia illuminates the broader theoretical argument of this article. The concept of sovereignty in the Brexit debate was constructed as a concept of something that had been lost and which had to be taken back from the European Union. There was a zero-sum concept at play: the gaining of state autonomy from the EU represented the losing of sovereignty to the EU. The metaphorical field proposed here

for Central Asia was constructed in such a way that sovereign authority was understood as a concept that cannot be diminished through the establishment of cooperative relationships with others. The home cannot become less one's own because others' neighbouring homes were becoming well-off. Roads cannot erase the starting point of a journey just by establishing a direction of travel. These were the cognitive entailments of the metaphorical field proposed here for Central Asia; the construction of an integration metaphorical field was proposed as a discursive resource that may address potential vulnerabilities such rhetoric could pose to regional stability. Explains that one of the major challenges for constructing affirmative political frames was to make them as cognitively and emotionally efficient as the frames of grievances against the political adversary. In the same way that the framework of sovereignty as a concept that can be lost to external partners like the European Union has proven to be effective in motivating regional political actors, the construction of an integration metaphorical field was proposed as a means of countering the threat that such rhetoric poses to the region's stability. Currently, such a metaphorical field has not been developed within the region of Central Asia in the literature that exists on the topic.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study demonstrate that the construction of sovereignty within agitational political discourse was a differentiated process, wherein the cognitive structure of the discourse, the institutional setting in which it emerges, and the ability to construct alternative discourses all interact in a way that any deficit in any component element will undermine the effectiveness of the others. The analysis conducted on these case studies demonstrates that the power of the metaphoric constructions within political agitation was determined not by the rhetoric of the agitators alone, but by the cognitive structure of the agitated population, the institutional structure of the nation in question, and the extent to which the population was receptive to the cognitive structure of the agitation – factors that differ between the isolationist movement of Brexit and the integration elements of the Central Asian countries analysed.

The results of this study were correlated with the conceptual conclusions of M.M. Anber (2023) and K. Chahbane & H. Zrizi (2023), who established those conceptual metaphors in political discourse function not as rhetorical embellishment but as a structuring mechanism through which complex political realities were rendered intelligible and emotionally actionable for mass audiences. The analysis conducted extended the applicability of this approach: the metaphorical clusters identified in Vote Leave and Leave.EU corpus operates exactly as M.M. Anber and K. Chahbane & H. Zrizi's framework predicts, transforming an abstract constitutional question into a directly graspable narrative of loss and recovery. At the same time, in contrast to these authors' largely descriptive emphasis on metaphor identification, the results of the study extended the argument further: the comparative matrix

developed in this article did not merely catalogue metaphorical clusters but evaluated their differential cognitive entailments against a documented record of subsequent material outcomes, a dimension largely absent from the reviewed conceptual literature. This extension finds further support in V. Prabhakaran *et al.*'s (2021) large-scale, topic-agnostic computational study, which demonstrated that metaphor density in political discourse correlates measurably with topic salience and audience engagement independently of the specific political content involved, a finding that corroborates the study's claim that the mobilising power of the Brexit metaphorical field derived from its structural properties rather than from the factual accuracy of its underlying claims.

The results of this study can be correlated with the conclusions of E. Gibson-Morgan (2024), who established that the Brexit referendum led to the development of several different conceptions of the sovereignty of the United Kingdom and its relationship to the EU through the process of role contestation. The analysis conducted in this study helps to confirm and clarify the conclusions of the researchers: the "Sovereignty was a possessed object" cluster indicates one of the conceptions of sovereign authority that was proposed by the U.K. and its leaders after the Brexit referendum and that such conceptions were made of both the nation as a trading state with the EU and its historical sovereignty as a nation. However, the results of this study also indicate that such role-contestation within the U.K. and its leaders after the referendum was actually resolved by the use of the metaphor before the referendum itself, which helps to explain the lack of negative impacts that such role-contestation had upon the underlying concept of the value of the state autonomy of the U.K. These conclusions were in agreement with the findings of E. Bescotti & J.-W. Matlack (2024), who established through theoretical analysis of the concept of sovereignty within practice theory that the concept was one that was constructed in a nation through the practices of its people, supporting its consideration as a concept that could be replaced with another metaphor within the Central Asian nation. This practice-theoretic account directly supports the study's central claim regarding Central Asia: if sovereign authority was constituted by practice rather than fixed by law, then the metaphors through which a population was encouraged to practise and understand sovereignty become a legitimate object of deliberate discursive intervention, rather than a given that political communication must simply describe. This was precisely the warrant on which the study's proposed "Home, Road, Dastarkhan" frames rest: because sovereign authority in the Central Asian republics is, on E. Bescotti & J.-W. Matlack's account, still being actively constructed through ongoing practice rather than settled by historical precedent, it remains open to being practised through an integration-compatible metaphor rather than through the possession-based, zero-sum metaphor that the Brexit case demonstrates can otherwise dominate such discourse.

The significance of another of the conclusions of the researchers that relates to the topic of Brexit and its aftermath was the conclusion of M. Keating (2022), who determined that the “take back control” slogan that was utilised during the referendum led to the development of different and often competing territorial claims to the concept of sovereignty within the United Kingdom. The analysis of the “Sovereignty was a possessed object” metaphor helped to reveal that such a metaphor was developed at the level of the U.K. as a nation, and that it does not relate to the claims to sovereign authority that developed within each of the nations within the U.K. However, it does help to explain those territorial claims in relation to the inherent susceptibility of the idea of possession to different and mutually exclusive claims to that possession. The alternative metaphors for sovereignty within the Central Asian nation, however, were not associated with such risks. The conclusions of the researcher that were similar to those of this study were those of D. MacShane (2021), who determined that the lack of a suitable alternative concept to the concept of “take back control” has led to the continued undermining of the U.K.’s diplomatic relationships with the remainder of the European Union.

The results of the study were also correlated with the findings of L. Suckert (2023) and S. Mohindar (2025). S. Mohindar established that the concerns regarding immigration continued to be felt even after the Brexit referendum took place, indicating that the metaphorical field identified within the Brexit movement continued to have power even after 23 June 2016. Furthermore, L. Suckert’s concept of “economic nostalgia” revealed that the desire of the Brexit movement to associate with the country’s pre-industrial economy was one of the main motivations for the movement’s participants, supporting the findings of the study regarding the significance of the “take back control” movement related to the economy. These findings corresponded with the analysis conducted for the study, which identified the applicability of both findings within the metaphorical clusters identified within Section 3 of this paper. Furthermore, the analysis conducted for the study revealed new findings regarding the ability of each of these concepts to relate to the manner in which such metaphors were constructed within the Brexit movement.

In analysing the cross-national applicability of such enemy-construction metaphors, studies by J. Roch (2021), F.L. Janodet (2020), and A. Vogiatzis (2025) helped to reveal the applicability of such findings outside of the context of the Brexit movement. J. Roch found that other populist political movements constructed the European Union in the same manner within other nations across Europe. Furthermore, F.L. Janodet established through his study of other European nations the similarity within the construction of metaphors of the European Union used within those countries. Finally, A. Vogiatzis established the use of such metaphors on social media platforms within those same countries, indicating the cross-media applicability of such findings. Each of these findings was extended in

the analysis conducted for the study, which recognised the cross-national and cross-media applicability of the metaphors identified within this paper. However, the findings of J. Roch, F.L. Janodet, and A. Vogiatzis relate to the construction of metaphors within already integrated European Union nations, whereas the study identified that some nations in Central Asia were constructing positive metaphors for an integration process that has yet to be established and opposed within their nations, indicating a different opportunity within those nations than exists within the cross-national movements that have been examined in each of these studies.

The mobilising power of the Brexit metaphorical field was also established through analysis of the leaflets and posters that were created during this period. These advertisements incorporated the metaphors of possession, constraint, and flood, as well as elements of persuasion beyond the use of metaphor alone, such as imperative grammatical constructions and direct addressing of the reader. These findings were in agreement with the findings of T. Harasym (2024) regarding the study of persuasiveness within British political discourse, wherein she found that persuasiveness was rarely achieved through the use of a single rhetorical device within British politics and government but often emerges through the combination of metaphors with devices like modality, repetition, and direct address of the reader.

The argument that the lack of an integration metaphorical field within Central Asia was corroborated by the analyses of regionalism by S. Mayer (2021) and A. Tskhay & F.C. Buranelli (2020). S. Mayer indicated that the regionalism that developed within Central Asia was established from outside the region and without the effort of the countries that exist within the region itself. The existence of such a form of regionalism outside of Central Asia indicates the lack of a discourse that developed within the region itself of Central Asia – one of the elements that should be filled by the establishment of a metaphorical field that was related to the region’s discussions of integration. Furthermore, A. Tskhay & F.C. Buranelli’s discussions of the concept of “balancing regionalism” within Central Asia, wherein the region works with both Russia and China to balance the power between the two without creating the same level of zero-sum diplomacy between the two nations as witnessed in the Brexit negotiations, corroborates the findings of the study. While A. Tskhay & F.C. Buranelli discussed the diplomatic solutions to the issues that emerged within Central Asia, the metaphorical field that was proposed within this study would provide the means of addressing those same issues within the region’s discussions of their regional policy.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study demonstrate that the metaphorical construction of sovereignty in campaigning political discourse was indeed differentiated. The Brexit movement was based on the following elements: “Sovereignty was an

object of possession”, “The EU was a limitation”, and “Immigrants were an unrivalled flood”. These three frames mobilised national identity by activating, respectively, a grievance schema of loss and recovery, a schema of imprisonment and overdue liberation, and a schema of imminent threat to a bounded national space; together, they converted an abstract constitutional question into a narrative in which the nation itself was cast as dispossessed, confined, and endangered, with the act of voting Leave offered as the singular means of restoring control, securing freedom, and averting crisis. These elements were effective because of how they were linked to each other. The study confirmed that these statements were a driving force for Brexit voters: state autonomy and immigration were cited as the dominant reasons for voting for Brexit in the British Election Survey, and voting Leave was the most common reason for voting Leave. A systemic pattern emerged: there was no direct correspondence between a metaphor’s rhetorical power and the material outcome it justifies. The Brexit field encoded sovereign authority as a finite, transferable possession in a zero-sum relationship with the EU; the empirical record shows its promised gains did not materialise. The proposed Central Asian field, “Region was a common home”, “Cooperation was a road”, and “Regional cooperation was a shared dastarkhan”, was constructed to encode the inverse logic: sovereignty as intrinsic to national identity and undiminished by cooperation since it was not framed as a transferable commodity. Rather than mobilising national identity through dispossession and confinement, these proposed frames were designed to mobilise it through belonging, shared direction, and shared sustenance, offering Central Asian political communication a discursive alternative through which regional cooperation can be understood as compatible with, rather than a threat to, the identity of each republic.

It was also established through the discussion of these concepts that the construction of such a field was a discursive and institutional problem, rather than simply a rhetorical problem. Even the construction of such a field was necessary to create a mechanism by which the two concepts can be united, but that does not ensure their conceptual reconciliation unless the cognitive structure proposed actually integrates with the nation’s concept of itself and its identity. Thus, the alignment of these two concepts was ensured through the development of G. Lakoff’s concept of conceptual metaphor, indicating that the political outcomes of a nation were based upon the conceptual structure that was presented to its citizens for consideration, not through the consideration of the arguments and evidence for each possible outcome. “Brexit”, therefore, demonstrates the outcome of a nation whose citizens were provided with a conceptual structure that considered integration a threat to its national identity. The metaphors that were proposed for the Central Asian nations, though, were constructed through the concepts that those nations themselves employ in their own structures and institutions, indicating that integration was a condition of national sovereignty, rather than the loss of that sovereignty through closer regional alignment.

Future research should empirically test the proposed frames through survey or focus-group methods across the five republics.

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