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THE EUROPEAN UNION AND BREXIT: ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *The article aims to analyze Brexit from the perspective of the Visegrad Group countries in the context of the future of the European Union. Addressing this issue is important from the point of view of assessing the role of the EU for the Visegrad countries. The main thesis of the research is that Brexit will not lead to a reform of the EU in the coming years, which is what some of the Visegrad Group countries are trying to do. The article is provocative, because, during the migration crisis, the Visegrad Group was shown as a brake on the European integration process. After Brexit, it was considered that some of EU Member States could follow Great Britain and leave the EU. The article complements the scientific achievements in this field, as it presents the view from the country of Central and Eastern Europe.*

Keywords: *Brexit; V4; European Union; Visegrad Group; Covid-19*

INTRODUCTION

In the post-war history of integration processes in Europe, the outcome of the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum was an unprecedented event. Until 23 June 2016, the European Union was considered a stable, predictable, and, most importantly, attractive entity for both its Member States and countries aspiring to membership. The decision of the British people and the subsequent negotiation process has created great uncertainty in Europe, not so much in terms of whether the EU will survive or not, but to what extent Brexit will affect the security of the remaining Member States. This is because it should be assumed that the European Union is - according to the supporters of the theory of realism in international relations - an instrument in the hands of its Member States, serving them first and foremost, and only later integration itself. It should not, therefore, be assumed that the EU is the greatest good for all the Member States. It is, of course, the greatest good that Europe has given to Europe, but it is not an infallible and irreplaceable entity. Only five years after the UK's referendum, it is

also difficult to put forward any unequivocal theses as to whether - for the time being - the single event of the UK leaving the European Union will intensify the process of deepening disintegration, trigger a collapse, or perhaps - on the contrary - will be an impulse and a generator of changes that will ultimately prove to be a salvation for European integration.

The direction in which the European Union will be heading after Brexit is of particular importance for countries that have joined the organization relatively recently. Examples include Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, known in political science as the Visegrad Group (V4). On the one hand, these countries have gained a lot from their membership in the European Union, while on the other hand, in the light of the ongoing disintegration processes, they may lose a lot, not to mention the case of the collapse of the European Union, which some scholars of contemporary international relations write about (Kearns 2018). Indeed, one should not be indifferent to theses about the potentially negative consequences of Brexit. For many years, both the European Union and its Member States did not take seriously the possibility of a country leaving the EU, even despite the appearance of Article 50 in the Lisbon Treaty, allowing such a step. As a consequence, on 23 June 2016, everyone from the European Union as an organization, through its Member States, to the United Kingdom itself, was taken by surprise. The effects of this surprise could be seen in the chaotic negotiations to regulate the British exit from the EU. The EU institutions and the Member States should therefore draw specific lessons from the British case and prepare for possible similar events.

This article aims to present the future of the European Union after Brexit from the perspective of the Visegrad Group. The thesis of the study is that no thorough reform of the EU should be expected in the coming years. This is due both to the weakness of EU institutions and passivity and uncertainty among the Member States as to further consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Visegrad countries are no exception in this regard, although due to their specificities and the contesting attitude of some of them, they may want to shape the intergovernmental formula of cooperation more.

BREXIT: A PROBLEM FOR EUROPE AND THE VISEGRAD GROUP?

Despite the fact indicated in the introduction of this article and refer to the element of surprise related to Brexit, in fact for experts analyzing international relations this surprise should not be there. While trying to analyze the British beginnings in continental Europe, it is not difficult to notice drastic differences between the British and continental approaches to the implementation and evaluation of European integration. For the continental Member States of the then European Communities, European integration was a tool of consolidation and cooperation, with a slight hint of political Messianism and an opportunity to build a major political project in post-war Europe.

The British, on the other hand, from the very beginning of the discussion on European integration were 'next door'. Even well before joining the Communities on 1 January 1973, Winston Churchill spoke of Britain as the liaison between the United States and Europe. Later, already in conditions of membership, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was building an independent position of the British state, in great contrast to the perception of the integration process by the countries of continental Europe, which resulted, among other things, in the so-called UK rebate. Let us also note that the moment the Iron Lady took office raised British Euroscepticism to a much higher level. Indeed, since 1979 British membership of the European Communities, or more simply the so-called 'European question', has become one of the hottest topics in British domestic politics (Gowland *et. al*/ 2010). It was under her rule that the 'British logic of integration', based on the rejection of non-economic areas of cooperation and the construction of supranational political structures, was shaped and later strengthened - lasting until 1997 (the Labour Party won the elections and Tony Blair became Prime Minister). In turn, already in the terms of membership of the European Union, a sympathetic Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that he was in favor of integration, but on British principles. Fundamental to these principles was the British view of European integration as a process. While for continental states the key action was to deepen it, which by its very nature results in increasing interference by European institutions in national legal systems, for the British one of the priority actions was to block it. This was because, for London, European integration was purely a tool to achieve a specific goal, which, however, had its limitations. One of them was the social dimension, illustrated, *inter alia*, by the scale of acceptance of ordinary Britons for deepening integration within the European Union and the consequences not so much for the residents of London, Manchester, or Liverpool, but Corby, Coalville, or Belton. Thus, when analyzing the British dimension of EU membership, it is impossible not to get the impression that it focused mainly on those areas that brought London the greatest profits. This refers to the common market and the resulting profit and loss account for the British economy. The political relations were only an enclosure of a strongly instrumental treatment of the EU, with a lack of strong commitment to the idea of creating something more - and of a political nature than just a common market for the benefit of London.

The United Kingdom was the country that paved the way related to the practical application of Article 50. It should be noted that its content makes it the member state that initiates the process related to leaving the European Union, and not the other way round. Advocates of the theory of realism see international relations as a billiard field where the balls are states that move along the tracks of their national interests. In the context of Brexit, the UK was not only that ball but also became the rule maker in this integrationist game. The British have consumed the proverbial 'forbidden fruit' of Article

50 and broken the taboo that European integration is a one-way process. Thus, they paved the way for the other Member States to their possible exits.

For it must be remembered that the European Union of the 1990s and the European Union of 2021 are two completely different entities, and this is not about the aspect of international legal subjectivity, which was granted by the Treaty of Lisbon. The scratch on the glass of attractiveness, boundless trust, and treating it as the biblical 'Promised Land' is getting bigger and clearer. The European Union is increasingly perceived as an ineffective organization, acting in the interests only of the strongest Member States, interfering in matters dedicated exclusively to the Member States. This, in turn, means that despite the continuing benefits of the integration process, national egoisms are beginning to revive in some EU Member States. Let us note that countries such as Poland, Hungary, or Italy are not far from changing their attitude towards EU membership, or at least changing the official narrative at the political level. The UK has shown how to talk to the EU and how to do it on its terms, and ultimately how to leave it, without looking at EU institutions and Member States' capitals. It is, of course, difficult to assume that in the next few years Warsaw, Budapest, or Rome can replicate the British path to international independence, but they will be the focus of most observers of the European integration process.

A particular group of countries that may draw on the British experience in the future (not necessarily in the context of a desire to leave the EU, but in the way European politics is practiced) is the so-called new Member States, i.e. those that joined the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013. The Visegrad countries occupy a special place in this group. These countries have a different perception of Brexit itself and its consequences than the UK and the so-called old Member States. The difference in the perception of the causes of Brexit by Western European countries and Central European countries, which include the 'Member States' of the Visegrad Group, is due to at least several factors. The first is the different post-war historical experiences. While the UK enjoyed the benefits of the Marshall Plan, countries such as Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia remained dependent on the Soviet Union, which precluded pro-development integration. The second determinant is the 'seniority' of EU membership.

While the UK until 2016 had experienced everything that the European integration process entails, the Visegrad countries are still learning the rules of the organization. The third determinant is the level of development of the UK versus the Visegrad countries. Until its membership, the UK economy was one of the largest in the European Union, while the Visegrad economies still had to (and still have to) catch up with the European leaders. This last conditionality boils down to an important reason why the Visegrad four decided to join the EU - a broadly understood security concept.

The UK, unlike the Visegrad countries, has for decades regarded itself as a self-sufficient state capable of acting independently in international relations in a way that enables it to exert concrete influence on other actors. From the perspective of political

realism, we can conclude that it is a strategically secure state, regardless of the circumstances in its environment. The V4 states, on the other hand, were looking for this security. Recalling the euphoria with which Poland entered the European Union on 1 May 2004, one could have the impression that this event put an end to all of Poland's problems and difficulties as a political actor in Europe. Society was convinced that joining this European family would provide it with the necessary political, economic, social, military, and other security and that the level of prosperity would significantly increase. Before 2004, for Poland and the other Visegrad countries, the European Union was Weber's ideal type of international cooperation that would bring development and security to these countries. To simplify the conclusion, one can say that while the V4 countries wanted to join the EU, the UK rather had to join the European Communities if it wanted to 'watch over' the development of continental Europe.

So why should Brexit be considered a problem for this part of Europe?

The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union in the opinion of the Visegrad countries weakened and undermined the stability of the European security system at all levels: political, economic, social, and military. Hence, Brexit was not only incomprehensible for the Visegrad countries, but also came as a great surprise, generating changes in their foreign policy strategy. Poland was such a country in 2016. It will suffice at this point to quote a passage from the expose of Witold Waszczykowski, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, who at the beginning of 2016 said:

We will maintain dialogue and regular consultations at various levels with our most important European partners - first and foremost with the United Kingdom, with which we share not only an understanding of many important elements of the European agenda but also a similar approach to European security problems. The shared perception of European issues was confirmed during my recent visit to the UK (Information 2016).

As can be seen from this passage, the UK was to be the main cooperation partner in European politics for Poland governed by the right-wing bloc centered around Law and Justice. Importantly, this was not a temporary shift in foreign policy proposed by politicians originating from this party, but the idea and logic of the underlying European policy (Chojan 2016). Moreover, not only for Poland but also, for example, for the Czech Republic and Hungary at a certain point in their history of EU membership, the UK - as a proponent of the intergovernmental method of cooperation within the EU - was considered supportive of their aspirations to limit the deepening of the integration process. Hence, Brexit not only took away from them a state occasionally thinking like Warsaw, Prague, or Budapest but also strengthened the influence of Germany and France, states whose policies were often contested in all three capitals. The United Kingdom, as the largest country contesting the need to deepen the integration process, constituted a strong lobby for the Visegrad countries, but also a kind of balance against

an over-enthusiastic (or even unreflective) approach to the shape and future of the EU. Indeed, many Euro-enthusiasts underestimated the existence of a 'second, more contesting' group of the Member States and their opposition to the Euro-enthusiasts. Back in 2006, Stefan Meller, Minister of Foreign Affairs in the first government of Law and Justice in 2005-2006, wrote that "the euphoric Euro-enthusiasm, justified to some extent at the time when the issue of EU membership was being decided (...) if continued today, would certainly pose a threat. First of all, it would weaken the will and possibilities of effective participation in the international competition" (Meller 2006). In light of this statement and attempts to translate it into post-2016 events, Brexit represented a weakening of international competition in the form of a counterbalance to the influence of Berlin and Paris. In my opinion, the difficulties and weaknesses that the European Union has been struggling with basically since the fiasco of the Constitutional Treaty of 2004 are not only due to the fact of the admission of 13 new states at that time and the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, but also to the lack of the so-called critical Europeanism and the skillful balancing between the expectations and the possibilities for the influence of European institutions both in internal EU politics and in external relations. These issues were very often pointed out (e.g. in the context of the migration crisis) by both the Visegrad countries and the United Kingdom, considering them as a systemic problem in the integration process.

WEAKNESSES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND BREXIT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES

The period of EU membership of the Visegrad Group countries is a time of great turbulence in international relations. The financial crisis of 2007-2011, the migration crisis of 2015-2019 as well as the not fully tested solutions of the Lisbon Treaty has undermined the foundations of the European Union in internal and external politics. In fact, since the aforementioned Constitutional Treaty, discussions on disintegration are more frequent (Majone 2014; Cianciara 2015; Vollard 2014) than on the development of the European integration process. Many of the EU's current problems, which also led to Brexit, are attributed to the Lisbon Treaty, which was supposed to become a new opening for European integration but generated more problems than its creators could have expected. Already at the stage of agreeing its contents, discrepancies between the 'old' and 'new' EU Member States emerged, with Poland and the Czech Republic taking a particularly contesting stance. Writing about the Lisbon Treaty, Jacek Pawlicki stated that it "has further exposed all the sins of the EU (...) There is no miracle, Europe is neither stronger nor does it still speak with one voice, and institutions work as they did - not better at all" (Pawlicki 2010). The internal weakness of the European Union, which increases disintegration tendencies, boils down, *inter alia*, to transparency in decision-making by EU institutions. Among other things, this was discussed at the Bratislava

summit in September 2016 - the first informal meeting without the UK. In turn, with the British parliament rejecting Prime Minister May's plan for the second time, Slovak politicians said that the Brexit chaos is proof that the EU and its institutions should be reformed. In an attempt to save the UK's membership in the European Union, David Cameron pointed out three main weaknesses/challenges in the organization, which he believed should become its impulse for changes. To give the EU a chance to reflect and take initiative in 2013, he spoke about the problems of the Eurozone, which were the aftermath of the difficult times of the financial crisis. Another weakness/challenge he identified was the deteriorating international competitiveness of the European Union. He felt that the EU as an organization was stagnant and there was no progression in sight. However, he failed to appreciate that it was the internal frictions (also generated by the UK) between the EU Member States that were reflected in the international perception of the Union as a whole, the coherence of its foreign policy, and, above all, its effectiveness. This coherence should have been brought about by the aforementioned Treaty of Lisbon. However, this has not happened. Instead, the EU's great weakness is above all a lack of political will to strengthen it in the world. The Treaty of Lisbon has led to the creation of new organizational units responsible for external relations, thus deepening their bureaucracy, but this has had little effect on the effectiveness of the EU's international policy. For example, in the first years of the Lisbon Treaty, it was questioned whether, for example, the European External Action Service could represent a new opening in the political integration of the EU (Chojan 2012). By now we know that the breakthrough has not happened. The EU fails to implement the documents it has adopted, as exemplified by the so-called Lisbon Strategy, which was supposed to make the EU economy the most competitive in the world. Professor Józef M. Fiszer rightly wrote that:

The world not only loses itself in European 'summitology', but also does not believe in a Union that speaks with one voice, and the world's superpowers do business with the individual Member States of the European Union rather than with the Union as a whole, of which Russia is a vivid example. This leads to a polarization of the EU Member States and a feeling that their sovereignty is under threat (Fiszer 2014).

As a third weakness/challenge for the EU, David Cameron identified the gap between the organization and the citizens. The then British Prime Minister referred to the lack of democratic accountability and consent, which was felt in the UK. Many authors have written that the European Union has lost the spirit handed down by the Founding Fathers, based first on people and only later on the economy and the entire EU-administrative apparatus. According to some experts, only "building a European civil society will be a guarantee for further development of the European Union and a safe Europe free of conflicts and wars" (Fiszer 2011). Its construction can only be possible in a

situation of ensuring peace, security, and prosperity. A document that attempts to diagnose and outline these issues is the 2016 European Union Global Strategy (EUGS). This strategy is EU-centric, i.e. it focuses primarily on the interests of the European Union itself, its Member States, and, importantly, its citizens. Leaders of the Visegrad Group countries have repeatedly drawn attention to the need to listen to the voice of European citizens and to take action to improve their welfare and security. In a joint statement by leaders of June 2016, they stated: "We can never succeed unless we create a genuine Union of trust (...) Our citizens must see the Union stand firm on issues of common internal and external security interest" (Joint Statement of the Heads of Governments of the Visegrad Group Countries: Towards Union of Trust and Action 2016).

Nevertheless, there is no complete consensus among the Visegrad countries on the future shape of the European Union, as clearly resounded in 2016 during the Economic Forum in Krynica. While Jaroslaw Kaczynski and Viktor Orban openly spoke about the need for a moral counter-revolution in the EU during the 2016 Krynica Economic Forum, Bohuslav Sobotka and Robert Fico drew attention to completely different emphases, such as the increase in prosperity in the V4 countries achieved through EU membership.

All the issues raised by David Cameron can be considered components of the intra-EU crisis. The overcoming of the crisis is not helped by the policy of some Member States, who are aiming to nationalize their internal and foreign policies to a greater extent, taking the Visegrad Group countries as an example. Some of them (Poland and Hungary) openly contest the need to 'communitise' the EU's foreign and security policy. For it is difficult to imagine that Poland and Hungary - countries distrustful and reluctant towards the process of deepening European integration - will change their methods of achieving goals in foreign and security policy. The British approach to security policy and its implications for Central and Eastern Europe, also in the context of the Visegrad Group countries, is of particular importance here. The UK is well aware of the characteristics of the security environment, which includes, among others, the hybrid threat from the Russian Federation, international terrorism, threats to cybersecurity, or uncontrolled migration of people, which was one of the 'fuels' of the Brexit supporters' campaign. The attitude of the British people to the policies of the Russian Federation deserves special emphasis. The UK National Security Strategy of November 2015 states that Russia has become more aggressive, authoritarian, and nationalistic, increasingly defining itself in opposition to the West (National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015. A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom, 2015).

British realism in the context of the security environment was primarily premised on limiting the Russian Federation's ability to influence the Central and Eastern European region. As one expert argues in the XX century, the British authorities realized the importance of Central and Eastern Europe for the security of Europe and the world. It was in their interest to have sovereign states in the region, which would be an

effective buffer separating Germany from Russia (Jureńczuk 2020). Thus, it would seem that the absence of the British in the EU would generate harm for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Visegrad Group. However, London clearly articulated that it is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and not the European Union that is for the British the mainstay of the so-called 'hard security', which in turn is in line with the policies of the Visegrad countries.

An important factor demonstrating British commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been London's attitude to defense initiatives within the European Union. The UK had long thwarted EU efforts to develop its capabilities for fear of duplication with NATO. It saw initiatives to create a European army as detrimental to itself and international security in general. British distrust of EU defense initiatives was often based on a twofold nature, i.e. the belief that they threatened national sovereignty and were unlikely to work in any case. The same is true for some Visegrad states, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, which see the essence of their security policy in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The desire to take security policy out of the hands of the EU has been apparent before, for example in the context of the US-Poland-Czech anti-missile shield, planned during the governments of G.W. Bush in the United States and Law and Justice in Poland.

SCENARIOS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AFTER BREXIT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

Many experts and analysts are wondering what the development of the European Union after Brexit might look like. This is no different in Central Europe. All theories presented as something certain should be considered as political fiction rather than real politics. Nevertheless, it is worth attempting to determine potential scenarios for the development of the European Union, also from the perspective of the Visegrad countries.

Brexit as the Beginning of the End of the Lisbon European Union

It is an open secret that some of the Visegrad countries are not happy with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty (although they agreed to it) because, on the one hand, they grant too much power to the EU institutions and, on the other hand, they restrict the freedom of the Member States.

The fundamental question that should therefore be put to the EU's political elite is what lessons have been learned from the Brexit referendum, the negotiations, and, ultimately, UK's final exit from the EU? Is the Lisbon EU not too far away from the Nice EU, which the V4 countries joined in 2004? While the post-Lisbon EU is heading in the direction of creeping federalism, Brexit, for example, for Hungary and Poland, may

become a fuel for expanding Euroscepticism and strengthening rhetoric based on sovereignty and, to put it bluntly, renationalizing their foreign policies, but not only theirs. These trends may also be reinforced by Italy's stance, and their outcome will be reflected in proposals for treaty reforms that strengthen the intergovernmental formula for cooperation. The seed of such tendencies was the Morawiecki-Orban-Salvini meeting in April 2021 in Budapest.

Brexit as Stagnation and Uncertainty

The second possible scenario is that of stagnation, that is to say, of no change in the logic of European policy and the EU institutions coming into conflict with some of the Member States, including the Visegrad countries, for example in the area of the rule of law, as is the case with Poland and Hungary. The Lisbon European Union is interfering very strongly in the internal policies of Member States.

The buckle that binds and protects the integration process from disintegration will be, on the one hand, the European Reconstruction Fund, established to combat the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, whose great beneficiaries will be the V4 countries led by Poland, and on the other hand, the possibility of enlarging the EU with new countries from the Western Balkans. The thesis that Brexit may lead to the stagnation of the integration process or even throw it into an undefined dimension is confirmed, for example, in the document presented by the European Commission in 2017. The White Paper on the future of the EU contained 5 scenarios for its development, covering loosening integration, a multi-speed EU, as well a federation.

European Commission officials have said they see its contents as 'the birth certificate of the EU of 27'. Meanwhile, as we look at the outcome of the post-Brexit changes so far, they are not even at the stage of planning a new family, let alone issuing birth certificates. What has happened in the EU is that, with the significant participation of the V4 countries, the concept of a multi-speed Europe has been strengthened, and its further development will not be beneficial in particular to countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

This scenario assumes the establishment of groups of states that could form 'coalitions of the willing' to cooperate more closely in certain areas, such as defense policy, internal security, taxation, or social affairs, and thus carry out a sectoral deepening of European integration. While deepening integration is not a major problem for the Slovaks, it is for the other three countries. It is hard to deny at this point that there will not be another 'exit' from the multi-speed EU.

Brexit as an Inspiration for Change

It seems that the V4 countries agree on the need to introduce systemic changes in the European Union. They differ, however, in their conceptualization and expectations, especially in the national dimension. Paradoxically, of all the V4 states, Slovakia is closest to the EU mainstream and furthest from the Visegrad contestation. Nevertheless, voices about the need for reform and change were also heard from Bratislava. Speaking about the changing scenario, one should go back to D. Cameron's statement in 2013. He drew attention to the fundamental problems of the European Union, but he considered them not from the point of view of the EU as an international organization, but from the perspective of a member state and the consequences related to further 'drifting' of the integration process. Reversing the process of European integration in this context referred to the need for its modification in terms of the expectations of the member state, while Article 50 TEU was the legal instrument for its practical implementation. It, therefore, seems that while Brexit will inspire changes in the way the EU functions, it will be forced from the perspective of the strength of Article 50 TEU, rather than a rational desire for changes in European institutions. The Union, wishing to at least maintain its position - under this scenario - cannot allow another 'exit'. It is an open question and an issue for another academic study to change the treaty norms in a way that would allow the EU institutions to exclude Member States - e.g. following the example of Article 6 of the UN Charter. From the perspective of 2021, however, this seems to be a political dream rather than a political reality. Nevertheless, in 1993 when the Maastricht Treaty came into force, no one thought about Article 50, which has been in force since 2009.

CONCLUSION

It is extremely difficult to write about the European Union after Brexit just one year after its formal entry into force. However, it is worth discussing and reflecting on possible scenarios. And the fact of having an unruly member state does not always have to mean that the integration process is hampered. Just as having the Visegrad countries with experience of the Soviet occupation and difficult history in its ranks allows the European Union to look at European issues with more distance and sensitivity, it is also important to have such 'politically difficult' countries as the United Kingdom in its structure. David Cameron, to win the elections in the UK, started to play a very dangerous game driven by the wave of Euroscepticism and anti-EU sentiments among the British people, which ultimately outgrew him and ended up in the biggest institutional crisis in the post-war history of European integration.

Looking at the pace at which EU leaders are attempting to change the EU and considering the international and economic conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is difficult to expect thorough and drastic reforms. It seems, therefore, that

the scenario of stagnation of the European project is the most realistic and, paradoxically, the safest for the difficult post-Covid times. And even the Visegrad countries, so skeptical for some and realistic for others, are not able to present an alternative or even a proposal to modify the European project. Over the last 5 years, none of the four Visegrad capitals has presented its vision of the development of European integration. Pointing out changes and blaming Germany and France is unfortunately not enough. 🌐

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