

## The Central European approach to Brexit

Jakub Groszkowski

**Cooperation:** Andrzej Sadecki

The decision by the British citizens to withdraw the UK from membership of the EU in a referendum held on 23 June has opened up a debate in the countries of Central Europe on the directions of possible reforms within the EU and the future relations between the EU and the UK. These topics were discussed during a meeting of the foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group (V4) countries with their counterparts from Germany and France in Prague on 27 June. On the same day in Warsaw the consequences of Brexit were discussed by representatives of 10 states, including the ministers and deputy ministers of foreign affairs of Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. Before the meeting of the European Council on 28 June, the Prime Ministers of V4 countries held their usual meeting and issued a joint statement entitled 'Towards Union of trust and action'. According to the V4 states, a discussion at the EU27 level on how to change the functioning of the EU is essential. Slovakia, which on 1 July will take over the Presidency of the EU Council, has expressed willingness to moderate such a discussion. A meeting of the Prime Ministers of the 27 member states on the future of the Union will be held in Bratislava on 16 September.

### Commentary

- The British decision surprised and disturbed the Central European leaders. The countries in the region clearly supported the United Kingdom remaining in the EU, with a view to both the political and the economic dimension of cooperation with London. In the negotiations on the model of cooperation between Great Britain and the EU, the member states of Central Europe will pay special attention to the issues of access to the British market and the status of EU citizens living in the UK. The Czech Prime Minister stated that if London wants to keep its access to the EU market, it should permit the continued access of EU nationals to the UK labour market. Also important to the region is the future of the EU budget, given that the end of the EU's current financial framework (2014-2020) would come after the United Kingdom formally leaves the Union. At the same time, there is a search for ways how to take advantage of Brexit, for example, how to encourage entrepreneurs to move from the UK to Central Europe, who would take over the 'British' posts in EU institutions, and how to move at least some of the institutions based in the UK to the states of the region.
- In the Central European States the argument is often made that the result of the British referendum was largely due to the lack of the EU's effectiveness in dealing with the

migration crisis. These accusations are often directly laid at the door of the European Commission. The V4 states have demanded reforms to improve the EU's action, although they have not consented to any hasty moves towards closer integration. The V4 leaders have suggested measures which would favour using full potential of the single market and the 'four freedoms' (the movement of persons, capital, goods and services).

- The only forces in Central Europe to have expressed satisfaction at Brexit are far-right and anti-establishment forces on the margins of the national party scenes, who are mostly positively disposed to cooperation with Russia. Within the Visegrad Group, the only group to have begun collecting signatures for a referendum on leaving the EU is the People's Party Our Slovakia, which has about 8% popular support. In the Czech Republic, this step has been raised by members of the Dawn – National Coalition party (1.5%). Even Hungary's Jobbik (12%) has softened its Eurosceptic rhetoric, and instead of leaving the EU now calls for a renegotiation of membership.