THE POWER OF SMALL EU MEMBER STATES AFTER BREXIT: HOW POWERFUL IS THE VISEGRAD GROUP?

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Abstract: *The power of individual EU Member States has been changing over the past decades as a result of revisions to the voting systems and the enlargements of the European Union. The present article analyses the development of the voting power of individual Member States in the Council of the European Union before and after the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union. We use the calculation of the standardized Banzhaf power index to calculate the legislative power of the Member States. The calculations recorded in the table point to changes in the weights of national votes caused by Brexit. The article pays special attention to the Visegrad Group, which we define within the European Union as an informal group consisting of four Central European states - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Slovak Republic. The results indicate a significant growth of the voting power in Poland and more moderate growth in the other three Visegrad Group countries which contributes to the shift in the voting equilibrium within the ordinary legislative procedure of the European Union.*

Keywords: *European Union; Visegrad Group; Power Index; Banzhaf Power Index; Council of the EU; Small EU Member States*

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical definition of small states in the theory of international economic and political relations is constantly the subject of several discussions and conflicting inconsistent approaches of many scholars and experts. Several small states have become part of the deepest integration group in the world economy over the past decades. The European Union, taking into account its motto, unites the 27 Member States in diversity, which, from the point of view of the theory of international relations, needs to be divided into several clusters based on power and influence on the formation of European policies. However, the strength and influence of individual states in the formation of European policies can be viewed from two perspectives.

The first is the given representation of individual states in the negotiations of the European Parliament (EP) and the Council of the EU (Council), which is usually quantified

mainly based on the share of Europeans living in a given state. The second, however, is the political practice within the EU and beyond, which divides the Member States into real European powers, explains the formation of coalitions of states, and much more. The present article aims to quantify the nominal power of small Member States in the European policy-making process.

To calculate the real power of the individual Member States, which is statistically given by the weight of their weighted votes, we use the standardized Banzhaf power index. The index values are being calculated twice, depicting the distribution of votes before the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland's (UK) withdrawal from the EU and after. Although the weight of votes of all Member States has increased since Brexit, the voting power of some of them in the Council of the EU has decreased. To illustrate the power of small Member States in a specific case, we use a sample of the Visegrad Group that consists of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the Slovak Republic as the small EU Member States and Poland as an Eastern European regional power. In recent years, the Visegrad Group has illustrated in some respects a unified and coordinated coalition of states, which shares much of the common history and Central European culture. Unlike many other small states that have become EU members over the past two decades, the Visegrad Group may in case of coordinated voting behavior after Brexit become one of the most pivotal players in the ordinary legislative process in the Council of the EU.

ON THE THEORY OF SMALL STATES

Even though political science does not currently offer a generally accepted definition that would define a small state, no one doubts the existence of small states in the world economy. The approaches of many theorists do not agree with the strict definition of uniform criteria, which would divide the world economy into several groups of countries according to size. The definitions also differ between the international organizations. The World Bank Group (2016) defines a small country in the world economy as a country with a total population of less than 1.5 million, or it is a member of the Small States Forum of the World Bank. In comparison, the International Monetary Fund (2013) considers countries with a population of less than 1 million to be small countries of the world economy. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) favors the Commonwealth´s definition of smallness, which sets a criterion of less than 1.5 million inhabitants (2018).

International organizations base their assessment of the size of the state primarily on the population criteria. Among scholars and researchers, smallness is defined from an international perspective by a small force and low impact of the state on the international system (Keohane 1969; Rothstein 1968) or according to some basic macroeconomic indicators and their combination (Downes 1988; Hein 1985; Jalan 1982;

Kuznets 1960). The most common criteria are generally the geographical size of the state, population, and the volume of GDP or other indicators of the performance of the national economy (Tõnurist 2010). However, for all these macroeconomic indicators, different ideas about the determination of the smallness prevail, and the agreement of researchers on a single criterion is the exception rather than the rule. To introduce the different approaches to defining a small state-based on 2 or more criteria, we present a few illustrative examples.

Krejčí (2007), who confirms that the term small state has a relative character, sets for assessing a small state several criteria: (i) geographical criterion - the area of the state less than 150 thousand km^2, (ii) population criterion - population up to 15 million and possible (iii) economic criterion - share of the national economy to world GDP not exceeding 1%. In contrast, Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) define the smallness of the state through a shortage of resources and capabilities. Thorhallsson (2006) admits the definition of a small state also through the number of inhabitants working in the foreign services of the country. The definition of East (1973) is based on population, size of the economy, size of the state, and military resources as indicators for defining small states. All the researchers encounter the limits of the definitions of a small and large state, as these are very relative terms that require exact rules to be set in research.

Defining a small Member State on a limited sample of countries with one common variable, such as membership of the European Union, seems to require a much simpler theoretical approach. Although the assessment of the smallness of the country in a sample of 27 EU Member States does not find a clear agreement between theorists, the differences between the established criteria for defining conclusions on the size of a Member State are more moderate. Indeed, with the current EU membership base, there is space for dialogue on the division of states into large and small or even some other categories. However, if we look back to the times of post-war Europe, to the germ of modern European integration composed of the so-called Inner Six, the division of states into small and large was much simpler and clearer than it is now. The gradual expansion of the Member States over the last decades and in particular the largest enlargement in 2004, has undoubtedly changed the balance between small and large EU Member States. Undoubtedly, the change in this structure at the beginning of this century sparked a debate on the future institutional security and functioning of the EU and the impact of small Member States with a small population, (Galloway 2002; Hosli and Machover 2004; Moberg 2002) as evidenced by later efforts to adopt the Constitution of the European Union and the Lisbon Treaty.

Different definitions of a small Member State within the EU can be found for example in Gurol and Panke; Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006); Magnusdottir (2010). In addition to the primary size characteristics, small EU Member States share several other common features concerning selected economic indicators. As an example, small states tend to prefer an open-door policy as evidenced by the dependence of small EU

Member States on foreign trade (Archer and Nugent 2002; Armstrong and Read 1998; Moosung 2006).

For our chosen research on the change of power of small Member States after Brexit, we will base the assessment of the smallness of a Member State mainly on the population criterion set as the average of EU countries. Such criteria can be found used in many research papers (e.g. Panke 2010). Of the total of 446 million Europeans living in the EU after the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the criterion for assessing the size of a Member State is set at 3.7% (100/27) of the EU population equal to ca. 17.26 million Europeans. By analogy, when defining a small state before Brexit, the criterion is set at 3.57% (100/28) equal to approximately 18.32 million inhabitants (Eurostat 2020). According to such an approach, before Brexit, we can define 7 large[1] and 21 small Member States within the EU. On the contrary, after the withdrawal of the UK, the coalition of small member states changed to a ratio of 20 states to 7 large ones.[2]

Council of the European Union and the Voting Power

The Council of the EU is an integral part of the institutional structure of the current EU. Together with the EP, it represents the EU's legislative bodies, which are responsible for adopting European legislation. Historically, European integration evolved from the original Council of the European Economic Community and the later Council of the European Communities (Kreppel 2014). The members of the Council are generally considered to be primarily individual ministers from each EU27 Member States, who meet (ir)regularly according to the topic of the negotiated agenda. Compared to the EP, in the ordinary legislative process, each Member State is represented in the Council by one vote (Council of the EU 2019). Taking into account the subject matter of the negotiations, the Council decides by a simple majority, qualified majority, and consensus. In the case of a consensus, all Member States thus have the same opportunities to void and block the adoption of legislation. Similarly, in the case of a simple majority vote, all Member States have *de facto* the same nominal options for influencing the outcome of the vote, as regardless of the size of the states from Germany to Malta, one Member State equals to a single simple vote. However, the situation differs in the case of qualified majority voting (QMV).

Over the past decades, QMV within the EU has become a very complex political process, encountering strict voting criteria, as a result of which measures have been much more often rejected. The former revision of the voting system adopted in the Treaty of Nice in 2001 taking into account the expected Eastern enlargement in 2004 set qualified majority criteria for the so-called triple majority voting, which meant that the

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[1] Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Romania.
[2] Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Romania, and Netherlands.

proposal had to be adopted by more than half of the Member States with 74% of the weighted votes and, in addition, with the population of Member States in favor of exceeding 62% of the total EU population (Leech and Machover 2003; Tsebelis and Yataganas 2002). However, the weighted votes themselves did not correspond to the actual size of the states in terms of population, as a result of which such voting power was allocated disproportionally. The unfairness of the distribution of weighted votes under the Treaty of Nice can be sufficiently illustrated e.g. by the example of three selected Member States - Italy, Hungary, and Lithuania. Of the 352 EU Council weighted votes before the introduction of the new QMV rules which entered into force in 2014 following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, Italy with 29 votes was as powerful as the other three largest Member States. The low proportionality of such a division can be seen in particular in the comparison of Germany and Italy, overshadowing the population difference of more than 20 million citizens. At the same time, Hungary as well as four other 'medium-sized' Member States, had 12 out of a total of 352 votes in the EU Council. However, in comparison with Italy, the Hungarian weighted vote did not correspond proportionally to the size ratio of states on a population basis. Low proportionality can also be observed in comparison with the Netherlands, which compared to Hungary had only one additional vote, despite the country's 60% larger population. The low level of proportional distribution of votes under the Treaty of Nice was also obvious among the small Member States e.g. Lithuania, which had seven votes as well as significantly more populated Denmark, Slovak Republic, and other countries.[3]

The latest revision of the QMV rules established by the Treaty of Lisbon makes the adoption of legislation conditional on the fulfillment of two criteria: (i) 55% of Member States vote in favor (in practice this means 15 out of 27) and (ii) these Member States must represent 65% share of the total EU population. On the other hand, a blocking minority of countries must consist of at least 4 Member States, with a population of at least 35% of the EU population (Treaty of Lisbon 2007). Before the United Kingdom's withdrawal, the Member States criterion was met when voting 16 out of 28 Member States in favor. The currently valid criterion 15 of the 27 Member States under the present Treaty provisions cannot go lower than that. In practice, this means that in case of withdrawal of another state, still, 15 Member States will be necessary for the adoption of legislation by QMV (Besselink, Swider, and Michel 2019). In some special cases, when the EU Council votes on a proposal not submitted by the European Commission or the High Representative, a 72% majority (20 out of 27 Member States) representing 65% of the EU population is required for a proposal to be adopted (Council of the EU 2019).

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[3]To see the exact distribution of votes see Treaty of Nice. Distribution of votes includes all the Member States of 2004 and 2007 enlargements equaling total Council votes to 345. Croatia, as the last acceding country increased the Council votes to 352.

Qualified majority voting is also known as the 'standard voting method' in the Council. In recent decades, it has become the most widely used method of voting in the EU´s standard decision-making procedure, which reflects the adoption of legislation in the interests of most Member States and *de facto* Europeans, and allows legislation to be blocked in support of countries with at least a third of EU population (Council of the EU 2020). Concerning the former qualified majority voting mechanism, the Treaty of Lisbon abolished the fixed weightings of national votes set out in the Treaty of Nice and introduced a weighted voting mechanism based on the share of the country's population in the total EU population. Qualified majority voting of the EU Council is governed by article 16 of the Treaty on European Union and article 238 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The new model of a qualified minority, the achievement of which is easier according to the newly established criteria, increases the statistical probability of the adoption of legislation up to six times. The number of possible country coalitions to pass the 65% population threshold rose from 2% (Treaty of Nice 74% criterion) to 12% making the Council of the EU six times more decisive (Dings 2014). Unlike the previous system of weighted votes in the EU Council, which had favored mainly medium-sized and smaller states, the Lisbon Treaty´s new system significantly favored mainly the largest EU Member States. Before the entry into force of the new system of weighted votes in 2014, the countries of the so-called 'Big Four' (Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy) each with 29 votes, combined for a total of 116 votes out of a total of 352 EU Council Member States votes, representing less than 33% of all votes. New rules in force since 2014 increased the weight of the Big Four votes to around 54%. Together with the other two largest Member States, Spain and Poland, large states kept more than 70% of the voting power.

On the contrary, the remaining 22 smaller Member States under the Treaty of Nice weighted votes distribution amounted for a total of 182 out of 352 votes (51.7%) and since 2014, only less than 30%. The Lisbon Treaty has therefore definitively emphasized the power of the largest Member States to influence the decision-making process to the detriment of the smallest Member States. Thus, since the entry of the new mechanism of weighted votes into force, there have been no fixed weights of Member States' votes. Therefore, the demographic changes in the Member States, the possible enlargement of the EU membership base, or the withdrawal of the state, as in the case of the UK, will be automatically reflected in the change in the weights of Member States' votes in qualified majority voting (Felsenthal and Machover 2013).

During the negotiations on the Lisbon Treaty itself, several other proposed models for the distribution of votes within the qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU also emerged. Poland most strongly rejected the distribution of votes solely based on population. According to the Treaty of Nice, Poland had 27 votes in the Council qualified majority voting, only two votes less than the countries of the Big Four. However, the new model of weighted votes has significantly widened the differences in

the weights of the votes of Poland and the larger Member States, as e.g. Germany's weighted voice has more than doubled since 2014. Poland, therefore, proposed in the negotiations a distribution of votes using the square root method (Penrose method), which would reduce the differences between large and small Member States. Poland was originally supported by Spain, a weighted vote of which suffered a similar fate, and the Czech Republic (Kaczynski 2007). Later on, however, the latter two countries withdrew their objections and Poland approved the new qualified majority voting rules while receiving several concessions on other negotiating issues and the possibility of postponing the activation of the revised voting system to 2017 (Kirpsza 2020).

Brexit and the EU Decision-Making Process

The forty-seven-year membership of the UK in the EU was marked by several specificities. The UK itself is in the history of modern European integration linked to building an intergovernmental alternative to the European Communities of the Inner Six. Together with neighboring Ireland and Denmark, founding members of EFTA, the UK became part of the first enlargement of the European Communities. However, the UK's bid for membership became part of Harold Macmillan's foreign policy, issuing the first application to join the European Economic Community in August 1961. After a double veto on the enlargement of the European Communities to the UK by French President Charles de Gaulle in 1963 and 1967, the French blocking position was finally eased following the election of G. Pompidou as the new French President. The United Kingdom thus definitively began its accession negotiations in 1969, led by the British Prime Ministers Harold Wilson and Edward Heath (Troitino, Kerikmäe, and Chochia 2018), and in 1973, unlike the other acceding states, it definitively became a member of the European Communities without a referendum being held. The first British referendum on EU membership was held on 5 June 1975 as a reference of the Labor Party's manifesto concerning the first renegotiation of the UK's membership in the EEC (Butler and Kitzinger 1996). A two-thirds majority of the Brits participating in the advisory referendum on continued membership confirmed the future of UK membership. Four decades later, a British Conservative´s election manifesto interpreted by David Cameron also mentions, in the event of an election victory, the holding of another advisory referendum, which would, over time provide the overview of public temper on UK´s future membership in the EU. After the Conservatives´ unexpected majority win in the UK general election, David Cameron as the new Prime Minister began the renegotiation of the UK membership in the EU and sooner or later, in February 2016 confirmed the date of the in/out referendum on 23 June 2016 (Riedel 2018). The referendum with its recommended character coincided with the referendum that was held 40 years ago but differed in its outcome, which launched a whole new unprecedented chapter in the history of the European integration project.

During the membership of the EU and its predecessors, the UK was one of the most important political players (not only) on the European political scene. Apart from the UK's position in the highest level of international relations, the existence of the British Commonwealth, and the world's fifth-largest economy, the UK has in many ways become one of the most influential policy shapers of the EU. Policy areas in which the United Kingdom has strongly promoted its interests include, but are not limited to:

- Budgetary matters including Multiannual Financial Framework;
- Economic policy choices (liberalization, regulation, harmonization, and approximation);
- Global free trade;
- Influence of the non-Eurozone Member States *vis-á-vis* the Eurozone countries;
- Internal market consolidation; and
- Security, foreign affairs, and defense policies (Besselink, Swider, and Michel 2019).

The impact of the UK on European policy over the past decades can be illustrated by the example of the UK's representation in the two EU legislative bodies. Going back to the 1970s, the UK's position is equivalent to the other three founding states of the EC, each equal to 81 out of a total of 410 MEPs (at the time of 9 Member States) - equally significant is the representation at the end of its EU membership - 73 out of a total of 751 MEPs (at the time of 28 Member States). Equally important is the illustration of the weight of the British power in the EU Council negotiations. Until 2014, in the EU Council negotiations, the UK had the same weighted vote as the other most populous Member States (Germany, France, and Italy) (Besselink, Swider, and Michel 2019). Following the change in the voting system introduced by the Lisbon Treaty after 2014, the weight of the British vote in the qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU has stabilized, reflecting a population of 12.6%.

The UK has supported the vast majority of measures in the Council over the past decades, e.g., in 2004-2016 it has supported more than 97% of the adopted measures. Nevertheless, it has become the most frequent veto player among all Member States and, in addition, it has a relatively high absence score as well (Hix, Hagemann, and Frantescu 2016). Apart from that, the outgoing country was in many respects the most important coalition partner among the large Member States for some smaller Member States. Such Member States, such as Sweden, the Netherlands, or Denmark (ECFR 2018) will therefore have to find new opportunities to build successful coalitions, as the states themselves need a major European player to build a majority or blocking coalition.

Taking into account the above-mentioned areas in which the UK has most strongly promoted its interests, it can be expected that Brexit will influence, in addition to future EU budgets, issues such as defense, foreign policy, and further political integration.

Table 1: Representation of the UK in the European Parliament and Share of Votes of the Council of the European Union (Source: Author´s own work 2021)

	1979-1984	1984-1989	1989-1994	1994-1999	1999-2004	2004-2009	2009-2014	2014-2019	2019-2020
Number of MEPs	81	81	81	87	87	78	72	73	73
	1973-1981	1981-1986	1986-1995	1995-04/2004	05/2004-11/2004	12/2004-2007	2007-2013	2014-2016	2016-2020
Share of EU Council Votes	17,2%	15,9%	13,2%	11.5%	8,1%	9%	8,4%	12,6%	12,9%

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH AND THE LITERATURE REVIEW ON CALCULATION OF THE VOTING POWER

In practice, it is possible to use several existing models and formulas to calculate the real voting power of individual states or other entities within the collective decision-making process. The Shapley-Shubik Index, the Penrose-Banzhaf Index, and the model proposed by Steunenberg, Schmidtchen, and Koboldt have become the most frequently used in the scientific literature on international relations and voting mechanisms within existing international groupings. All these power indices have even already been implied in the past in the analysis of the voting mechanism of the Council of the European Union.

The measure of each index is in practice to measure the strength of individual players in a voting game through index values, which often reveal unexpected power distribution that is not obvious from the first sight based on the set criteria and the voting system. The first mentioned Shapley-Shubik index was first published as part of a short paper by the authors in the American Political Science Review in 1954. The paper immediately became one of the most cited articles in social science literature, making the index one of the most recognized indices describing the power of states or other bodies in collective decision-making (Straffin 1988). A specific feature of the methodology of the index is the assumption that voting takes place gradually - votes are cast one by one (Shapley and Shubik 1954), but in practice, it has become used by researchers in evaluating power within the EU Council or UN Security Council.

Another accepted model for calculating the power of individual players in the collective decision-making process has become the Banzhaf power index, also known as the Penrose-Banzhaf index. In 1965, Professor Banzhaf explicitly limited the usability of the Shapley-Shubik index and formalized his calculation of players' strength in collective decision-making (Banzhaf 1965). In quantifying the power index, Banzhaf followed up on the previous work of L. Penrose, who in 1946, in his work 'The Elementary Statistics of Majority Voting', introduced the so-called square-root method for the distribution of

voting rights in proportion to the square root of the population of individual countries (Penrose 1946). The Banzhaf power index is generally defined by the different probabilities of a change in the voting result within a set of players or entities that do not have the same number of votes.

With the two theoretical approaches mentioned above, it should be noted that the use of both methods of calculating the distribution of forces within a set of players originally took place mainly on a set of members of national legislative bodies, voting of judges, executives, or shareholders in companies or a wide sample of the constituents of a voting system (Straffin 1988). Unlike earlier theorists, Steunenberg, Schmidtchen, and Koboldt (1999) specified their model for calculating the distribution of power on the evaluation of the distribution of power between decision-making bodies in the European Union, thus limiting the use of the model to other statistical files. The model of this trio is also referred to only as of the generalization of the Banzhaf index, which allows the addition of further information associated with individual players (voters) (Varela and Prado-Dominguez 2012). However, Felsenthal and Machover (2001) also emphasize that the practical possibility of applying these additional variables is very problematic and that a perfectly symmetric case that yields the Banzhaf power index seems to be a fortunate exception.

The use of the Shapley-Shubik and Penrose-Banzhaf indices to quantify the distribution of power within today's EU and its predecessors can be found in several studies. Some scholars used these indices to present the real power of states in the European policy-making process before Maastricht in the Councils of the previous European Communities (Brams and Affuso 1976; Rapoport and Cohen 1986).

Later studies focus on the distribution of power after individual EU enlargements, especially after the Eastern Enlargement, and at the same time on the distribution of power according to the Lisbon Treaty, which changed the weighted vote distribution from the original fixed number of votes to the current distribution based on the share of EU population (Varela and Prado-Dominguez 2012; Leech 2002; Pajala and Widgren 2004).

For this research, we decided to use a standardized Banzhaf power index. We calculated the values of the Banzhaf power index using our algorithm coded in the Python programming language. The algorithm for calculating the Banzhaf index of all EU member states works with two variables, which result from the vote of the Council of the EU by the system of qualified majority. To capture the change in the power of individual EU Member States to influence the adoption of European legislation in the EU Council, we, therefore, coded two algorithms that record the state of the EU and the distribution of the total EU population to the individual Member States before the withdrawal of the UK (until 31 January 2020) and after (from February 2020). The official weights of the votes of the Member States determined based on the share of the national population in the total EU population were drawn from the data of the EU

Council voting calculator, which provides apart from the current distribution of votes in the EU Council (EU27) also the former distribution of votes before Brexit (EU28).

To calculate the voting power of individual EU Member States in both periods, i.e. before and after Brexit, we used the following Banzhaf power formula, where (c_i) equals the number of times voter (i) is critical and the sum of (c_k) equals the sum of times all voters are critical:

$$B_i = \frac{c_i}{\sum_{k=1}^{n} c_k}$$

The resulting calculation of the normalized Banzhaf index can be interpreted as a percentage of times that a voter can change the outcome of the vote which is one of the possible ways of quantifying the voting power of voters. A critical voter is defined as a voter who, by changing its vote in voting procedure *ceteris paribus*, decides on the change of the status of adoption/non-adoption of legislation, act, or decision which is the subject of voting. Banzhaf power index formula and the other indices mentioned earlier basically calculate power indices based on counting winning coalitions.

Several research studies point out the limits of calculations of the power of EU member states using the formula of the Banzhaf or Shapley-Shubik power index. Such studies are offered by Turnovec, Mercik, and Mazurkiewicz (2004); Kurz (2020); Kirsch and Langner (2010); and Johnston (1978). Despite these limitations, the above-mentioned indices represent the two best-known and most widely used indices in the scientific literature (not only) for defining the power of the individual Member States of international organizations and various other groupings. The calculations of these indices themselves have only limited formal informative value in building strategic coalitions within the EU decision-making process. In practice, the vote of the EU Council is influenced by a wide range of different factors, which can often bring surprising results. Despite the apparent simplicity of the Banzhaf index chosen, it must be noted that the number of possible coalitions in the EU Council before the UK's accession to the EU was almost 270 million. The calculation of the power index itself is therefore very limited and ideal to perform by designing an algorithm in the programming language, as performed in our research.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DATA PRESENTATION

The formal closure of the Brexit procedure on 31 January 2020 reduced the EU's population from a total of more than 513 million to around 446 million. The withdrawal of the UK from the EU equals a population decrease of 66 million Britons, representing almost 13% of those called Europeans based on the EU membership (Eurostat 2020). As a result, of course, there has been an automatic redistribution of Member States' power in both legislative bodies of the EU. Following the UK´s withdrawal, the EP reduced its number of seats by 46 British members, and the remaining 27 originally British seats were redistributed among the remaining 27 Member States (European Parliament 2020).

Brexit has also affected the proportional distribution of Member States' votes in the EU Council qualified majority voting system. Firstly, in general, the weight of the votes of all Member States has increased compared to the pre-Brexit period. Taking into account the nominal power of the Member States given in the case of 27 states by one vote with different weights, which states use in a qualified majority voting in the EU Council, the power index measured by Banzhaf power index formula increased power of 19 of the 27 Member States. On the other hand, there has been a decline in the voting power in the remaining 8 Member States smaller than Croatia (Table 2).

The gains or losses of power of individual Member States were not directly proportional. In relative terms, Spain and Poland (23.4% and 27.7% increase) could be considered the biggest winners as they recorded a larger relative increase in voting power than the so-called Big Four Member States. Based on the calculation, Ireland and Croatia can be described as the most neutral states, which did neither gain nor lose any significant voting power. In general, the calculation showed a strong correlation between the population and the change of the voting power of individual EU Member States, as the largest increase in voting power was recorded by the largest countries and, conversely, the largest weakening is evident in the smallest Member States with the population of less than 2 million.

Taking into account the small Member States based on the established criterion for distinguishing between large and small Member States within the EU, there was an increase in voting power in 12 out of 20 cases compared to the pre-Brexit period. On the contrary, in the 8 remaining smallest Member States, there was an additional weakening of power in the EU Council qualified majority voting. All of the changes in the distribution of the voting power of individual Member States since the power distribution granted by the Treaty of Nice contributed to weakening the position of small Member States in the Council of the EU voting by a qualified majority system. The position of these small Member States in the negotiations is thus in some cases based mainly on the criterion of several states rather than on the criterion of population.

In practice, the coalitions composed mostly of small and smallest EU Member States more often decide to adopt or block the adoption of legislation through the number of states criterion, which is generally easier for small states to achieve.

Table 2: Population Share and Power Indices of EU Member States Before and After Brexit (Source: Author´s work based on population statistics available at Eurostat and the results of the algorithm coded in Python)

EU Member State	Banzhaf Power Index (Standardized)		Δ	% Δ	Share of Total EU Population in %	
	Pre-Brexit	Post-Brexit			Pre-Brexit	Post-Brexit
Germany	10,2648	12,0275	1,7627	17,17	16,12	18,54
France	8,4513	9,9563	1,5050	17,81	13,1	14,98
Italy	7,8152	9,1072	1,2920	16,53	11,92	13,65
Spain	6,1827	7,6298	1,4471	23,41	9,09	10,49
Poland	5,0468	6,4423	1,3955	27,65	7,4	8,49
Romania	3,7135	3,9593	0,2458	6,62	3,8	4,34
Netherlands	3,4906	3,7299	0,2393	6,86	3,37	3,89
Belgium	2,9000	3,0370	0,1370	4,72	2,22	2,56
Greece	2,8347	2,9536	0,1189	4,20	2,09	2,4
Czechia	2,8099	2,9249	0,1149	4,09	2,04	2,35
Portugal	2,7879	2,8984	0,1105	3,96	2	2,3
Sweden	2,7788	2,8957	0,1169	4,21	1,98	2,29
Hungary	2,7413	2,8377	0,0964	3,52	1,91	2,18
Austria	2,6390	2,7311	0,0921	3,49	1,71	1,98
Bulgaria	2,4674	2,5070	0,0395	1,60	1,37	1,56
Denmark	2,3427	2,3678	0,0251	1,07	1,13	1,3
Finland	2,3120	2,3320	0,0200	0,87	1,07	1,23
Slovakia	2,3079	2,3251	0,0172	0,74	1,06	1,22
Ireland	2,2456	2,2607	0,0151	0,67	0,94	1,1
Croatia	2,1737	2,1593	-0,0144	-0,66	0,8	0,91
Lithuania	2,0454	2,0054	-0,0400	-1,96	0,55	0,62
Slovenia	1,9703	1,9229	-0,0475	-2,41	0,4	0,47
Latvia	1,9580	1,9039	-0,0540	-2,76	0,38	0,43
Estonia	1,8979	1,8315	-0,0664	-3,50	0,26	0,3
Cyprus	1,8504	1,7788	-0,0716	-3,87	0,17	0,2
Luxembourg	1,8254	1,7458	-0,0796	-4,36	0,12	0,14
Malta	1,8096	1,7293	-0,0803	-4,44	0,09	0,11
UK	8,3372	0,0000	-8,3372	-100	12,9	NA

Following the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, the share of Europeans living in the small Member States has changed to around 25.6%. Therefore, unsurprisingly, there has also been a change in the voting power of small Member States.

According to the calculation of the standardized Banzhaf index, before Brexit, small Member States (the Netherlands and the states smaller by population) had around 50.2% of total voting power as far as the qualified majority voting of the EU Council is considered. Following the reduction of the EU membership base to 27, the twenty small states (Belgium and smaller) together hold approximately 47.1% of the voting power.

In case of the absence of a revision of the treaties governing the EU Council's voting mechanism soon, small Member States remain weakened in the qualified majority voting. In that case, there is the only possible way that would lead to a further strengthening of the power of the small Member States, which is the enlargement of the Union to another small state, e.g. from the Western Balkans region. In practice, the less populous this state would be, the greater the growth of the power of the small Member States and *vice versa*.

An integral part of promoting the interests of individual Member States at the European level is the coalitions building, crucial for increasing the combined strength of states. The Visegrad Group has long been considered within the EU in some respects to be a consistent group of Central European states. According to an overview of existing coalitions revealed by the regularly published EU Coalition Explorer, first published in 2016, the Visegrad coalition is the only major coalition of Eastern enlargement countries based on the coordination of positions and interests. Based on the votes held by the EU Council, EU Coalition Explorer points to several important trends arising from the votes of the EU Member States. The Visegrad Group, unlike the other states of the Eastern and later enlargements of the EU, represents the only coalition of states that have shown in practice in recent years coordination within the European collective decision-making process. Most of the other 'new' Member States, with the exception of Romania remain, so to speak, on the periphery of European integration in terms of the legislative process and the formation of European coalitions (ECFR 2018). Like the Visegrad Group, other coalitions composed in most cases from the original and older Member States, also demonstrate the coordinated manners in the adoption of legislation and common positions. An example is the established coalitions of the Benelux countries or the Nordic Council, creating together with Austria the so-called Affluent Seven or the Southern Seven coalition, which apart from the large southern EU Member States also includes Malta, Portugal, Cyprus, and Greece.

According to the EU Coalition Explorer, most of the small Member States let on the periphery of the EU decision-making process, are in practice very rarely the ones deciding to accept/reject the proposed European legislation. On the other hand, according to the Explorer´s research, all Visegrad countries are to be found among the top 5 strategic partners of each other. In practice, therefore, this fact underlines the strong cohesion of the Visegrad Group on some political issues over the past years as these are the states that are most contacted with each other, share the most interests, and are most responsive to each other.

Since 1991, the Visegrad cooperation itself has gone through several irregularly alternating phases of different intensities of cooperation. The last phase of more active coordination of national positions began in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century. The reason for the start of joint coordination is considered to be the outbreak of the so-called migration crisis, or an unprecedented influx of migrants and asylum seekers in the Single market area (Nič 2016). However, the group of four is not united on all European policies and it is far from united on the issue of the future of European integration. A decline in democratic principles and the poor functioning of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland, which has been the subject of several negotiations between European leaders and institutions, has several times shown a sufficient impact on the potential termination of Visegrad cooperation at the EU level.

The data collected in Table 2 suggest that the UK´s withdrawal has strengthened the voting power of all four Central European countries of the Visegrad Group. In contrast to Poland, which in relative terms received the largest increase in voting power (by more than 27.5%), the increases in the three small Member States were much more moderate - the Czech Republic - almost 4.1%; Hungary - 3.5%, and the Slovak Republic by less than 1%. In general, however, it can be concluded that none of the Visegrad states lost its position as a result of the UK´s withdrawal from the EU; on the contrary, the group strengthened its position within the distribution of forces between the EU27.

Following Brexit, the Visegrad Group increased its share of the EU population from 12.41% to 14.24%. In terms of assessing the total power of the V4 states, calculated using the Banzhaf power index, we can assess that the Visegrad Group´s voting power strengthened from the original 12.91% to 14.53%, which in relative terms represents a power increase of more than 12.5%. Although the three small Visegrad states - the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the Slovak Republic combine only for two-thirds of Poland's population, in terms of power in the Council qualified majority voting, they reach a greater combined power than Poland itself (ca. 8,1% combined power to 6,44% power of Poland). The increase in voting power of the four Central European states may thus seem small. However, within the ordinary EU legislative process, which includes the position of the Council, the current power to influence the outcome of qualified majority voting by more than 14.5% can be considered very critical. The position of the Visegrad Group in the negotiations of the Council results mainly from the weight of the votes of Poland, which have since 2015 very close partnership with Hungary. This partnership is also confirmed by the votes in the Council and the EU Coalition Explorer 2018. However, alternative partnerships within the Visegrad Group are somewhat more moderate. There is only a strong consensus in the European negotiations on some specific policy issues.

The additional neutralization of the coordinated action of the Visegrad Group was brought about by the dissenting ideas of four Central European states on the protection of democratic principles and the rule of law, the Polish and Hungarian disruption of

which became one of the biggest issues related to non-compliance with the EU's founding treaties. The disobedient Member States did not receive the support of two other Visegrad neighbors - Czechia and the Slovak Republic - on the issue of blocking the adoption of the future EU budget for the next seven years, including the EU Recovery Fund, to condition the use of these resources by a functioning democracy and the rule of law. However, in comparison with many other small EU Member States, the Visegrad Group may in case of coordinated voting behavior after Brexit become one of the most pivotal players in matters of the ordinary legislative process in the Council of the European Union.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in addition to migration policy and the protection of democratic principles and the rule of law, has been one of the most serious issues concerning the European Union and the European integration over the past decade. The British referendum itself in June 2016 began the non-precedent process of a Member State's withdrawal from the EU. In recent years, we have constantly witnessed the endless bilateral negotiations of the negotiators, the aim of which was to close this historic break-up for both parties as advantageously as possible. Even though the deal on future relations was already reached by the end of 2020, it must not be forgotten that the withdrawal of one of the largest Member States has had and continues to have far-reaching consequences for both parties.

According to the former weight of UK's vote in the Council of the European Union voting, based on almost 13% of the EU's total population, the British Isles had a qualified majority voting power of ca. 8.34% according to the Banzhaf standardized index for qualified majority voting. Therefore, after Germany and France, the UK was the most influential player in the EU decision-making process. With the withdrawal, however, the UK voting power was very unproportionally distributed among the remaining 27 Member States, making large Member States even more powerful in collective voting and, conversely, small Member States suffering additional weakening of negotiating positions in the qualified majority voting.

In the case of the eight smallest countries: Croatia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta, despite an increase in the share of countries´ population in the total EU population (*de facto* an increase in weighted votes in qualified majority voting), the relative power of these countries to influence the outcome of the ordinary legislative process in the Council of the EU decreased. Of the total UK power, almost 95% was additionally distributed in increments for the 7 largest Member States: Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Romania, and the Netherlands.

As in practice, most EU Council decisions are taken by a qualified majority, the calculation of the Banzhaf power index as a standardized index used for quantifying the power of states in qualified majority voting can be considered the most accurate indicator.

The system of distribution of votes and *de facto* decision-making power between the individual Member States, introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon that entered into force in 2014, remains in force and no active negotiations are currently taking place to revise it. While some well-established coalitions of countries that have been considered the UK's strongest coalition partner in recent years now have to look for new opportunities to advance their interests within the EU, some existing coalitions have gained additional potential as a result of the UK's withdrawal. The Visegrad Group is such an example.

Four Central European states - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Slovak Republic - gained additional power in the negotiations of the Council of the EU by reducing the membership base. Compared to the pre-Brexit period, the Visegrad Group increased its power index in relative terms by more than 12.5%. The UK´s withdrawal triggered a chain reaction, the consequences of which affect Europeans, businesses, and the national economies of the rest of the Member States, including the Visegrad states. However, in addition to these consequences, a unified and strengthened Visegrad Group at the European level can in case of collectively coordinated cooperation undoubtedly lead to the promotion of a greater number of interests.

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