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Brexit and the Balkans: Implications for Future EU Enlargement

Extended Article

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*The UK's withdrawal from the European Union has the potential to impact EU enlargement to the Western Balkans in a multitude of ways, writes **Eamonn Butler**. He argues that, while EU leaders have reaffirmed their commitment to enlargement, accessions are likely to be pushed back several years and the remaining EU may itself seem a less attractive, although still necessary, prospect for the Balkan states.*

The third annual [Balkans Summit](#) between the Heads of Government and senior politicians from the EU's Western Balkan Candidate and Potential Candidate states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia), some EU Member States (France, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Italy) and EU institutions (European Commission, European External Action Service and EU Council) took place at the start of July 2016. The summit is part of what has become known as the [Berlin Process](#), a five-year diplomatic initiative intended to reaffirm the Western Balkan region's European integration and bring new impetus to the EU's enlargement project.

This year's summit, in Paris, was overshadowed by the UK electorate's shock decision a week earlier to leave the EU. In response to the referendum, the French and German leadership, along with the EU's own senior officials, were [keen to stress](#) that Brexit would have no bearing on the ongoing accession process and that the EU remained committed to the Balkans.

It is not surprising that such a stance was taken. The need for reassurance about future expansion of the union in the wake of the UK's decision to withdraw was intended as much for the international audience as it was for the governments of the six Balkan states. The EU had to emphasise that it remains relevant, that membership is still valuable and that, despite Brexit and the challenges that it will undoubtedly bring, it will be business as usual for its policy programmes, including enlargement – often referred to as the EU's [greatest policy success](#).

Despite the positive affirmations that came out of Paris about the EU's commitment to the Balkans, the weeks following the Brexit decision and the summit have seen concern about future EU-Balkan relations increase. Questions surround the potential impact on the speed of future enlargement, the prospect for a fall in public support for the EU among Western Balkan states, the likely loss of the UK as a key strategic player in the region and the possible increased influence of Russia.

With regard to the speed of the EU enlargement project, although the EU has stated that Brexit will have no bearing on ongoing processes, concern about a possible slowing of the pace of enlargement has been raised. Petros Fassoulas, Secretary General of European Movement International, was [quick to speak](#) of the current enlargement project slowing down to the point where not much may happen in the foreseeable future.

This is what he has called an effective 'freezing' of the policy, brought about by a protracted set of Brexit negotiations. In a post-Brexit era, the priority will be to consolidate the smaller EU and limit damage, rather than plan for a larger union, with the associated challenges and costs that would bring.

Brexit Negotiations and Enlargement

It has been suggested that a rapid British withdrawal would be best for the Balkan states, but hopes of a quick solution and the beginning of negotiations with a swift triggering of Article 50 have rapidly faded. Theresa May, the UK's new Brexit-era prime minister, has stated that her government will not be rushed into initiating Article 50 and it is [unlikely to do so](#) before the end of 2016. It could actually be much later into 2017, with the potential for negotiations to drag [well beyond 2019](#).

Such a scenario would not bode well for current candidate or potential candidate states. They are already faced with a decelerated enlargement process following Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's 2015 announcement that he would [enact a pause](#) on all new accessions until after his (first) term ends in

2019. This was intended to respond to arguments of enlargement fatigue and allow the EU to focus its attention on solidifying the wider European Neighbourhood Policy, an area that has weakened considerably since the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia crisis in 2014.

There are a number of reasons why the EU is likely to find itself preoccupied with Brexit rather than advancing its enlargement. Firstly, the scale of unknowns with Brexit and the fact that the EU has never faced such a situation before are likely to require careful management. It would be very surprising if we did not see DG NEAR (Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations) play a significant role in the Brexit negotiations. DG NEAR not only oversees the current enlargement process and neighbourhood policy, but crucially is also responsible for coordination of relations with EEA-EFTA states.

Even if the UK were not to re-join EFTA, it will still seek, as part of the Brexit negotiations, some form of relationship with the EU. This means that, parallel to negotiating the UK's extraction from the EU, negotiations will also focus on how future EU-UK relations will look. DG NEAR is best placed to support such talks. With a staff of just over 1600, any reallocation of resources to deal with Brexit would likely reduce the number of staff available to support Western Balkan enlargement. The potential outcome is that it would push any accession date well into the late 2020s at the earliest.

Euroscepticism and Brexit Contagion

The longer it takes for Balkans states to join the EU, or at the very least to see clear progression on the road to accession, the greater the risks to the value of the enlargement project and to ensuring regional public and political support for the EU. This of course is not a new revelation – it is one of the reasons why the Berlin Process was established. However, any Brexit-related impediment to the speed of enlargement will certainly have implications, particularly in terms of the potential for the growth of Euroscepticism.

All current governments and the majority of mainstream political parties across the Western Balkan region support EU membership and intend to continue with governance and economic reforms in line with EU requirements. This doesn't always fall in line with public opinion. The biggest fear is that Brexit will lead to a growth of Eurosceptic, populist, right-wing or extremist party politics and sentiment across the region, in line with what has happened in Central Europe.

At present, it is not fully clear how Brexit has impacted public perceptions of the EU, and much will depend on the fulfilment of the promises that the EU has made to the region following the UK's decision. What is clear, however, is that the Balkans still suffer from ongoing corruption problems, [economic development and investment](#) continues to lag and societal and political fallout from years of conflict remain unresolved.

While EU membership conditionality goals promote reform across these issues, for some, the reforms are not fast or far-reaching enough. If they slow further because the EU has 'taken its eye off the ball' due to Brexit, then that could lead public support for the union to fall. In some countries, such as Serbia, support for the EU has already been waning. Brexit may simply compound that.

The suggestion that speeding up the enlargement process and bringing in new members as a way to consolidate the reforms that the region needs to make, while at the same time counteracting the loss of the UK, is unlikely to hold any sway among observers. As Romania and Bulgaria have shown, EU membership does not necessarily guarantee a swift end to the challenges of transition. At the same time, replacing the UK, a net contributor to the EU budget, with a group of countries that would place further strain on EU finances, is unlikely to be welcomed.

Losing the UK as an Insider Ally

Brexit also creates a dilemma for the Balkans, because it removes a strong 'insider' ally. The UK has played an important strategic role as a champion for reform of the region and integration into Europe. Much of this influence and the associated financial development aid provided by the UK have been directed through or in coordination with EU channels.

Despite a more cautious position from the Cameron government towards future enlargement and the somewhat xenophobic rhetoric that emerged during the referendum campaign, the UK is generally regarded as an honest, fair and measured [voice of support](#) for the Balkans inside the EU. It is also considered a stalwart advocate of the values and norms that represent the EU. In this sense, an EU without the UK may appear less attractive and lead to questions about what a future EU will represent or whether its normative values are really that aspirational.

Removing the UK from the EU leaves Germany, and to some extent, the less influential Central European EU members, as the primary advocates for the region. However, this does not necessarily mean that the UK's interest or engagement with the Balkans will permanently end. The UK's concerns about regional stability and the need for improved political governance and economic growth will undoubtedly continue. The Balkans will also remain a key issue for UK security, regardless of whether it is a member of the EU or not.

The question will be how effective it can be in supporting the region from a position outside of the EU. The assumption might be that the UK will be less influential. However, depending on how the UK frames its foreign policy, we could actually see its renewed engagement with the region via the Council of Europe, OSCE, the United Nations or even NATO. These organisations have generally operated in the region in coordination with the EU rather than independently of it, so it would be interesting to see if the UK would seek to use its position within these bodies as a way to retain some degree of direction over EU policy towards the Balkans.

External influence within the Balkan region is something that is constantly raised by commentators and speculation of the influence of Russia is a favourite topic. Brexit has provided renewed impetus for discussion about whether a declining or less relevant EU and the possible removal of the UK as a significant player in the region provides greater opportunities for Russia.

Pro-Russian parties, particularly those in Serbia, such as the Serbian Radical Party and the Dveri Movement, were quick to announce the death of the EU following the UK vote and that this justified greater engagement with Russia. Such rhetoric was always to be expected from these parties, but doesn't necessarily reflect reality. Beyond the moves by Russia in the late 2000s to diversify and strengthen its energy portfolio in the Balkan region, it has become more preoccupied with its own economic woes, the Ukrainian crisis and its involvement in Syria to seriously seek to widen its influence in the Balkans.

Furthermore, regardless of the predictions of the EU's demise with Brexit, the economic ties are simply too strong for the region to take any courtship from Russia seriously. In 2015, 76 per cent of the Western Balkans' [total trade](#) was with the EU28, compared with only 5.2 per cent with Russia, its second biggest trading partner. Within the EU28, the UK is a minor export market compared with Italy, Germany and Central Europe. These markets are unlikely to change because of Brexit.

The UK's Uncertain Constitutional Future

One of the biggest challenges that Brexit could create for the Western Balkan states and their accession to the EU might still emerge in a different way. The very real potential for constitutional crisis in the UK, with the possibility of another Scottish independence referendum and the breakup of the UK, could have longer-term implications for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans.

A UK outside the EU still has scope to play a role in the region, but the dissolution of the UK would certainly be more impactful on the Balkans by removing the UK from the equation altogether. This would be a more permanent removal of the UK as an ally and supporter of the Western Balkans in Europe.

An independent Scotland and England/rUK would also have much less influence on the international stage. Furthermore, Scotland's recent vote to remain in the EU was a resounding rejection of Brexit. While it is still not clear what the future of Scotland may be, and although circumstances guiding its engagement with the EU would be different from that of the current Candidate and Potential Candidate states, any

scenario where an independent Scotland leapfrogs the Western Balkans to become a full EU member could be seen as a lack of confidence in the Balkans' ability to meet the EU's membership conditions.

At present, the real impact that Brexit has for the Balkans is in creating uncertainty and amplifying the unknown. So far, the EU has made the correct noises and the Paris Balkans summit was the first of the many necessary steps that will be needed to support the region in the wake of Brexit. The EU needs to follow through on its rhetoric and ensure that any attempt to deal with Brexit does not lessen the support needed for the Balkans to continue to make the reforms necessary for their European integration ambitions.

If it can do this, then the EU may be able to overcome or limit the challenges Brexit could create. Regardless of recent events, the UK will likely continue to support the integration of the region into European structures and institutions, so the impetus is squarely placed on the remaining EU to ensure that the implications of Brexit for the Western Balkans are few and far between.

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