

'Brexit' Britain and the Western Balkans

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Abstract

For a long time membership of the European Union and NATO has been presented as the panacea to many of the economic, political and security ills confronting the Western Balkans (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). Yet, the road to EU integration has been long and arduous for those aspirant countries from the region. Britain has played a significant role in the recent history of the Western Balkans in trying to bring stability to parts of the region, during the so-called wars of Yugoslav secession and in the post-conflict aftermath and period of reconstruction and transition. Witness the efforts and achievements in the past of Lord Carrington, Lord Owen, Sir Paddy Ashdown, Sir Robert Cooper and Baroness Ashton *inter alia*. In the aftermath of the UK referendum on the EU, held on 23 June 2016, how will Britain's decision to leave the EU impact on the UK's relationship with the six states of the Western Balkans? The UK may well lose its influence within the EU, yet one positive aspect is the UK's continued commitment to NATO. Nevertheless, membership of NATO might hold less appeal to some of the citizens of the Western Balkan countries, by comparison with membership of the EU. In passing, reference will be made to Russia's growing 'soft power' influence and its increasing political leverage in the region.

Key words: Brexit, Britain, the European Union, and the Western Balkans.

Introduction

Just three days before the international conference held in Skopje on 'Europe and the Balkans', John Humphreys, the veteran BBC broadcaster on Radio 4's *Today Programme* (14 May 2018) commented that someone returning to earth from Mars would not believe the continued state of chaos over Britain leaving the European Union, nearly two years on from the 23 June 2016 referendum. The underlying theme to this paper is the continued uncertainty over the UK's future after Brexit; focusing upon its potential implications on the so-called Western Balkans. The term 'Western Balkans' used in the title of this paper has entered into everyday parlance. That does not mean to say that this is a satisfactory name to describe the region, whether geographically, politically or ideologically. By the term 'Western Balkans' this author understands the six states of: Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Albania. With the exception of Albania, these were all former republics of the SFRJ, once referred to as the Yugoslav successor states. All six countries are aspirant states of the EU. Two other 'so-called' Yugoslav successor states, Croatia and Slovenia are not included under this umbrella expression of 'Western Balkans', as these have been full members of the European Union, since 2004 and 2013 respectively. Nevertheless, they will be referred to in passing. One should perhaps ask if the six states named above truly see themselves as a 'Western Balkan' region. It should also be noted that this writer does not favour the expression 'Western Balkans', seeing this as a topological, geo-political and cultural misnomer, carrying with it a whole raft of negative connotations, as has been so well expressed by Maria Todorova (1997), Vesna Goldsworthy (1997) and Adam Burgess (1997) *inter alia*. The expression South Eastern Europe, a term that was once well understood in the not too distant past would seem more appropriate as it avoids the potentially negative connotations of 'balkanism', yet even South Eastern Europe might not serve as a truly satisfactory name for the region. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument this paper will endure with the term 'Western Balkans' out of the pragmatic reason that this has become a commonly used expression.

'Brexit', by contrast is an easier expression to define, though the uncertainties and complications arising from it will baffle even the most intelligent of observers, as demonstrated in the opening comments of this paper. As an abbreviation for 'British exit', along the lines of 'Grexit', or Greek exit from the EU, much vaunted in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, 'Brexit' has become the term used for the imminent departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, following the UK's decision in a referendum held on 23 June 2016 to leave the EU, with the 'Leave' vote representing 52 per cent of the ballot and the 'Remain' vote 48 per cent.

It is also interesting to note that in Britain, when the potential effects of Brexit are represented in the media, they are usually only seen from the perspective of how this will affect Britain, and not from the perspective of the implications that Brexit might have on the rest of the European Union and the wider Europe as a whole, except perhaps with rather disingenuous statements

from some politicians that Germany will eventually rally to Brexit for fear of losing potential car sales to the United Kingdom. The whole issue over Brexit has become deeply divisive in the UK, and rather like the educational debate over the re-introduction of Grammar Schools, or the disparities between the state school and independent school sector, it is one of those issues that is probably best avoided in polite society and after-dinner conversation. Indeed, on the 500 year anniversary of Martin Luther's German Reformation some commentators have even gone so far as to liken Brexit to the English Reformation, when England broke away from Rome; the first 'Brexit'!

In considering Brexit Britain and its potential impact upon the Western Balkans, this paper will be divided into the following seven areas:

1. Britain's recent role in the Western Balkans
2. The impact of migration through and from 'Eastern Europe' on British thinking
3. Potential delays in EU enlargement and their impact
4. Euroscepticism and the rise of populism
5. Alternative forms of UK influence
6. Growing Russian influence, and
7. A Rump-United Kingdom: Uncertainties over the UK's constitutional future

1. Britain's Recent Role in the Western Balkans

A key concern over the past two years has been the possible implications that Brexit might have on British Foreign and Security Policy. Nobody can deny that over a period of nearly three decades, the UK has been a key player in efforts to stabilise the Western Balkan region (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). One thinks in particular of the UK's role in Bosnia and Hercegovina and also in Kosovo, not only with reference to UNPROFOR, the Rapid Reaction Force, IFOR, SFOR and KFOR, but also in managing the post-conflict aftermath that followed the Wars of Yugoslav Transition and NATO's conflict with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia over Kosovo. Furthermore, in the post-conflict aftermath the UK would play a significant role in peace-keeping missions, civilian leadership and post-conflict reconstruction.

If before 1995, one makes reference *inter alia* to the work of Lord Carrington and Lord Owen, then in the post-Dayton period one thinks of the substantial achievements of Sir Paddy Ashdown as the High Representative in BiH (27 May 2002 – 31 June 2006), overseeing the civilian implementation of the Dayton Agreement.

Similarly, Britain played a very significant role in the Kosovo conflict of 1999 under the leadership of former-Prime Minister Tony Blair, Baron George Robertson – the tenth secretary general of NATO, and General Sir Mike Jackson, to name but a few. Indeed, it had been the late Robin Cook, Blair's Foreign Secretary who had been one of the key architects in forging

an 'ethical foreign policy', which fed into the Responsibility to Protect when human rights violations were perpetrated by sovereign nation states (Giddens, 2014).

More recently, one should consider the work of Sir Robert Cooper in 2011, in developing the EU-led dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, who was superseded by Baroness Cathy Ashton (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Indeed, Cathy Ashton was a relatively unknown figure in the UK and first appeared before a bemused British public on British television screens at the Maidan demonstrations in 2014, when the crowds were chanting her name (Giddens, 2014). She had spent much of her diplomatic career working with the European Union and over the past 45 years since the UK joined the then EEC in 1972, the representation of the EU by the British media had only ever received cursory coverage in the UK, apart from the occasional outcry that perceived damage was being done to British interests. Interestingly, Ashton was interviewed on *Newsnight* by the BBC in the week prior to this conference, expressing her concerns over how Donald Trump had rejected the nuclear deal over Iraq, which, in her own words had cost her years of her life in negotiations (BBC *Newsnight*, 9 May 2018).

With all of these developments it should be noted that increasingly the UK's influence in the Western Balkans has been interlinked with the UK's role in the European Union. This ties in with the belief that the EU should be seen as a force for good, with its democratic norms and values, to say nothing of the economic carrot that it possesses (Hudson, 2015).

As such, the EU may be seen as a panacea to many of the economic, democratic, political and security ills confronting the Western Balkans, even though the road to EU integration has been long and arduous for those six aspirant countries from the Western Balkans. Britain really matters in Europe when it comes to foreign policy because the UK has consistently been a big player. Yet, at the end of the day, surely it is better to work from within an organisation, where one can influence decisions, than to work from without where one has only limited access and leverage. The upshot is that if the UK leaves the EU, its influence across Europe, and especially in the Western Balkans will be diminished, given that the EU potentially remains the main attraction to the Western Balkan aspirant states.

One should add to this line of argument the importance of sharing intelligence and the UK's leading role with regard to European security issues. On Monday 14 May 2018, Andrew Parker, head of MI5 in an unprecedented speech in Berlin praised the quality and depth of the current European cooperation across the 28 member states on counter-terrorism, and security, recognising that the UK, partly because of its tight intelligence links with the US, possesses the most effective security services in Europe. The editorial comment in *The Guardian* (15 May 2018) put it like this: "James Bond was not just a fantasy spy; he was also a fantastical projection of Britain's power and influence in the world." For *The Guardian* the significance of Parker's speech was not about any influence he might have over other European intelligence chiefs, but rather about the message that was being sent back to UK ministers back in London. Once again, the fear is that by leaving the European Union, the UK

will lose much of the leverage and standing that it currently enjoys, and some Western Balkan states feel that they are losing a champion in London (Elgood, 2016).

2. The Impact of Migration through and from 'Eastern Europe' on British Thinking

Waves of migration, most notably through the Balkan Route gained considerable attention in the United Kingdom in 2015 and 2016. This built upon fears of massive immigration caused partly by the seven-year-long conflict in Syria in addition to conflicts taking place further afield. Perhaps, a key factor in the anti-immigration hysteria that was being whipped up by populist parties, such as UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) was also the entry into the European Union of Poland in 2004, and Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Indeed, figures published in May 2018 have shown that at 831,000 born in Poland, this was the highest number of non-UK born people living in Britain, whose total population now stands at 66.57 million (World Population Review, 2018). Whilst the Office for National Statistics is quoted in *The Guardian* as claiming that the number of Romanians and Bulgarians in the UK has risen to 413,000 and that this has been an 80 per cent increase since 2014, following the removal of restrictions on their rights to work in the UK in 2014 (The Guardian, 11 October 2017). *The Guardian* surmises that the number of people coming into the UK from Bulgaria and Romania may also have reflected on the outcomes of the EU referendum in 2016. And, in another article, Jamie Grierson comments that Romania has become the second most common non-British nationality in the UK (The Guardian, 24 May 2018). This has all fed into the growing Euroscepticism and calls for the UK to leave the EU and 'take back its borders'. Yet, these claims denied the fact that few migrants and refugees were actually making their way to the UK, as the target destination was Germany. Furthermore, how can Britain's borders be strengthened by leaving the EU? Surely, the UK already has massive control over its borders by the fact that it is not a Schengen country. The logic might well be that by leaving the Union any incentives for EU partners to cooperate any further with the UK on the issue of migration would simply be removed.

So how would this fear of increased immigration to the UK impact upon the six Western Balkan Countries? The populist response in the UK would be that were the six states to join the EU, they would naturally have the rights to social mobility which would entail being able to work and settle in the UK. In other words, this would raise the spectre of yet more immigration into the UK. However, by contrast the reality is that the impact of the Western Balkan states joining the EU would have only a minimum effect on the UK, given the small size of these countries. The entire population of the six Western Balkan countries seeking EU accession is about 17 million, a fraction of the size of the Polish population alone, which currently stands at 38 million, or that of Romania and Bulgaria at approximately 30 million.

Nevertheless, it still has to be borne in mind that from a populist perspective the fears of a massive increase in population was one of the main fears that drove the Brexit campaign in

2016, and all clarity had been muddied by confusing the wave of immigrants moving into Europe along the Balkan Route throughout 2015/16 stoked by a mistaken belief that yet more migrants would come to Britain from the six Western Balkan states were they to enter a newly enlarged European Union, as had happened when Poland, Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU.

3. Potential Delays in EU Enlargement and Their Impact

The current candidate and potential candidate states in the Western Balkans have already been faced with delays on entry into the EU until after 2019, following a deceleration in the enlargement process and attention being focused on the wider European Neighbourhood policy (Mirel, 2018). However, in 2016 the Berlin Process ushered in a five-year diplomatic initiative to bring new impetus to the enlargement process. In a press conference on 9 November 2017 Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission said: "I really think that Serbia and Montenegro will be members of the EU before 2025."

Meanwhile, Macedonia's accession is dependent upon resolving the name dispute with Greece, which rumbles on at the time of writing.

But, the real fear over European enlargement is that the EU will be too preoccupied with Brexit rather than advancing the Union's enlargement. Some academics, such as Eamonn Butler see Europe's DGNEAR (Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations) as being best placed to support the future of EU-UK relations, as the UK seeks to negotiate some form of relationship with the EU, since the launch of article 50. Yet, this could cause even further delays in the enlargement process, causing further disillusionment with the Euro-Atlantic project in the Western Balkan states.

4 Euroscepticism and the Rise of Populism

Indeed, there is a strong argument that the longer it takes for the Western Balkan states to join the EU the less support there would be for the EU in the region, and once again Brexit is having a considerable impact upon this issue. The biggest fear is that the impact of Brexit will lead to a growth of Eurosceptic, populist, right-wing or extremist parties and sentiments across the region (Butler) not unlike what has been happening in Central Europe over the past two years, exacerbated by the impact of the Balkan Route. Witness Poland's ultra-conservative, nationalist government or Victor Orban's brand of illiberal democracy in Hungary. But, as Nathalie Nougayrède, writing in *The Guardian* (23 May 2018) has commented, it would be simplistic and disingenuous to ascribe all of Europe's woes to its eastern part. So, this is not just some return to an East-West divide and to some extent unfolding events in the West are just as disconcerting as those in the East. Witness Italy's recent elections, bringing anti-immigration populists and far-right extremists to the fore, with Matteo Salvini, Italy's new

hardline interior minister refusing to allow NGO-funded refugee rescue ships to dock in Italian ports (*The Guardian*, 22 June 2018) and Germany with a rickety coalition government, where the far-right Freedom Party holds three key ministries.

In some countries, such as Serbia, support for the EU has already declined to 40 per cent in public opinion polls. This compares with 84% support in Kosovo (Gallup, 12 July 2017). Whilst the impact of Brexit on the EU could simply compound the situation in Serbia, this has been play down by Serbian politicians, who advocate that: "Serbia's EU path does not depend on Brexit" (Tanjug, 29 March 2017).

5. Alternative Forms of UK Influence

There is another potential impact on the Western Balkan states that may be caused when the UK leaves the EU, and that is that the Western Balkan states might lose a strong ally, given that the UK has played such an important role in South Eastern Europe in the recent past. This raises the question; how effective will the UK be in supporting the region if it is outside the EU? At first sight there are some positives. The UK is still an active member of NATO and the OSCE, and the UK could well use its position within these two inter-governmental organizations to maintain some degree of influence in the region. Certainly, organizations such as NATO and the OSCE provide Britain with a certain degree of influence on the European stage, though it might be argued that neither of these organizations would offer a truly meaningful alternative to the EU as a means of exerting leverage in the region. Furthermore, Britain's continued role on the UN Security Council is currently open to debate, following the current UK government's lack of investment in the British armed forces in a period of continued financial austerity (*The Sunday Times*, 24 June 2018).

Take NATO as an example. This organization focuses on security, whilst by contrast the EU covers a broad range of social, political and economic fields; issues which have a stronger appeal to Western Balkan states than NATO. Furthermore, from a Western Balkan perspective, the UK's role in NATO, as opposed to its role in the EU might carry significantly less weight, given that for example in a country, such as Serbia, 73 per cent of the population have declared themselves in opinion polls to be against NATO (Tanjug, June 2015). The upshot is that if the UK were only to operate within NATO it would lose any leverage or influence over Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo, the very three Western Balkan states in which the UK, up until now, has had provided so much support and influence.

6. Growing Russian Influence

Factor in Russia. Obviously there has been growing influence of Putin's resurgent Russia in South Eastern Europe over the last few years. This has partially been due to soft power politics, such as culture and especially Slavonic and Orthodox ties in some parts of the region,

amongst Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins. Otherwise, Russia has been exercising economic leverage particularly in the fields of energy (gas and oil). At the same time, in the West there have been growing concerns over Russian leverage and soft power politics in the Western Balkans. One way of resolving this issue, from a Western perspective would be to offer a clear road map for aspirant states from the Western Balkans with regard to EU enlargement and accession. Obviously, Britain would not be in a position to press the agenda on EU enlargement if it were to be outside the European Union. So once again, British influence would be neutralised because of the impact of Brexit. This also comes at a time when the UK's relations with Russia are at their lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War. The process has been gradual, whilst many commentators have dated this back to Russia's gradual resurgence under Putin, since January 2000 (Lucas, 2008 and 2014), and especially with the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, others pre-date this. Arkady Ostrovsky, dates it to the bombing of Belgrade in 1999 (Ostrovsky, 2018), whilst this author looks more to the rush for Priština airport between coalition and Russian troops, in 1999 (Hudson, 2014).

Certainly, from a British perspective things do not look too good, in the light of the poisoning of Alexander Litvinienko by polonium in London in November 2006 and the Skripal Affair, involving the use of the Soviet chemical nerve agent Novichok, in Salisbury in April 2018. However, as Eamon Butler has pointed out, things are not necessarily so bad for the EU, given that in 2015, 76 per cent of the total trade of the Western Balkans was with the EU 28, compared with only 5.2 per cent with Russia (Butler, 2016).

Also, with regards to exports, the UK is only a minor export market for the Western Balkans, compared with Italy, Germany and Central Europe. The upshot being that from an economic perspective alone, Brexit will not impact on exports from the Western Balkans. Britain's significance in the region is dependent more upon politics and security.

7. A Rump-United Kingdom: Uncertainties Over the UK's Constitutional Future

There is another aspect of the Brexit debate which could damage British influence even further and it is that as a result of Brexit, Britain could be weakened constitutionally from within. The upshot is that if the UK were to lose Scotland, following another independence referendum, the UK could emerge as a rump state. This is a real concern, given the fact that the Scottish vote during the June 2016 referendum on the EU returned 62 per cent in favour of remaining in the EU and only 38 per cent in favour of Brexit, with all 32 council areas backing remain (BBC News, 24 June 2016). The UK risks not only leaving the EU, but also losing Scotland in the process. Consider as well the ripple effect of events in Catalonia over the last nine months. Scotland, withdrawing from the UK could have a major impact on the rest of Europe and beyond. Alongside the idea of Catalonia breaking away from Spain, there could be a further ripple effect which could, with time impact upon Bosnia and Hercegovina and even the Republic of Macedonia.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that in the recent past, the United Kingdom has played a significant role in the Western Balkans, especially in BiH, Serbia and Kosovo. It has advocated that the UK could continue to play such a role were it to remain within the European Union rather than leave. The argument being that one can have far more influence by remaining within an institution and reforming it from within, rather than opting to leave and have little or no influence at all. Certainly, the UK has been a major player in the past, alongside Germany and France and it would be sad to see Britain lose this role. The UK has also been a major player within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, being able to influence the United States and serve as gateway for American-EU relations. It might well be that Britain is not only losing its key status within the EU, but also within NATO, if not indeed on the world stage. All of these issues will impact upon the Western Balkans.

As for Europe, Brexit is no longer the key issue. For Emmanuel Macron, the French President, and Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor migration and Eurozone financial stability are even more urgent than Brexit. Yet, for Merkel it would seem that: "Her formidable command of German politics has been corroded by time and the backlash against her generous response to the refugee crisis" (*The Guardian*, 21 June 2018).

Two years after the referendum, British opinion remains deeply divided. On the weekend that marked the commemoration of the 2016 Brexit Referendum and saw the completion of this paper, more than a 100,000 people in favour of remaining in the EU, marched down Whitehall to demand a second referendum (*The Observer*, 23 June 2018). At the same time, Siemens, BMW and Airbus had all expressed their concerns at the current British government's progress, aims and objectives in the Brexit negotiations with the EU. In the meantime, business leaders, represented by the CBI (Confederation for British Industry), the Institute of Directors, the British Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses, launched an unprecedented attack on the Government's handling of Brexit, arguing that time is running out to save British jobs. Whilst, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has remained silent on the issue, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson is alleged to have said: "F... business" - Strange times, indeed.

In the meantime, the biggest irony of all is that the UK government will be hosting the fifth Western Balkans Summit in London as part of the Berlin Process. According to the official government web site, the summit will focus on three important aims: increasing economic stability in the Western Balkans; strengthening regional security and facilitating political co-operation between the six Western Balkan states. The UK.gov web site adds: "The UK wants a strong, stable and prosperous Western Balkans region. By hosting the summit in London, we demonstrate our continued interest and involvement in the stability of the region *beyond our exit from the EU*" [This author's italics].

A cynic might well add that the plucky British Brexiteer Buccaneers are already planning a raft of future trade deals in the Western Balkans in the aftermath of leaving the EU. Meanwhile, Britain stands on the edge of the precipice. One can only be optimistic and pray.

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