

Colonialism does connect Britain, the EU and Bosnia – but Britain is not being treated like a colony



The Conservative MEP, Daniel Hannan, responding to the withdrawal agreement reached between the UK government and the EU over Brexit, indicated that the deal could leave the UK facing colonial rule of the sort imposed on Bosnia following the Yugoslav war. [Catherine Baker](#) argues that there is indeed a connection between Brexit Britain and post-Dayton Bosnia, but it is not the one identified by Hannan: rather, it lies in the sense of imperial nostalgia and the myth of British exceptionalism which has fuelled the imagination of the Leave campaign.

Daniel Hannan MEP is not the first to compare the European Union's role in international governance in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina to the exercise of colonial rule. [Writing for Conservative Home](#) on 14 November, the day Theresa May sought the approval of her cabinet on the UK's draft Withdrawal Agreement with the EU, Hannan joined other pro-Leave critics of the agreement by arguing that it would leave Britain 'facing colonial rule from Brussels, of the sort the EU imposed on Bosnia following the Yugoslav war'.

In criticising the EU's political and financial interventions in Bosnia since the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed in December 1995, Hannan might seem to put himself alongside such unlikely allies as the writers Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks, who [drew attention](#) to the EU's 'monumental neo-colonial transformation of [the Balkans] into a dependent semi-periphery', or David Chandler, who used the phrase '[empire in denial](#)' to describe international state-building in Bosnia and elsewhere.

Yet the country he compares to Bosnia is not Kosovo, where movements of Albanians and Serbs have both [resisted](#) the EU's rule of law mission, or Greece, where Marxist economists during the bailout crisis [accused](#) Brussels of pursuing 'a new type of colonialism' against the European south, but the United Kingdom, the EU's [second largest economy](#) and the country which once ruled the largest empire in the world.

While Britain's part in world history is as the agent not the subject of colonial power, and its relationship to the EU has existed in a very different balance to Bosnia's, post-Dayton Bosnia and Brexit Britain can in fact be connected into a common history of European coloniality – though not in the way Hannan suggests.

The EU's role in Bosnia

There are, to be sure, valid critiques of EU governance in Bosnia when seen through a postcolonial lens. One might cite the 'Bonn Powers' that Dayton's ad hoc Office of the High Representative (OHR) possessed to veto or dismiss elected officials for breaching the peace agreement, which were vested in the EU from 2002 to 2011 when High Representative and EU Special Representative were a 'double-hatted' role.

The EU has been responsible for military peace support operations in Bosnia since 2004, ran Bosnia's international police mission in 2003–12, launched a business development programme called the [Compact for Growth and Jobs](#) in 2014 as its response to popular discontent expressed in that year's [plenum protests](#), reformed Bosnian customs and security services in order for Bosnia to play its part in fortifying EU external borders, and sets the conditions Bosnia must meet to progress through its EU pre-accession strategy.



Dragan Čović, then Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bert Koenders, and EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini, in 2016, Credit: [EEAS \(CC BY-NC 2.0\)](#)

Insights from postcolonial studies, especially the adaptations of Edward Said's *Orientalism* that for two and a half decades [have been helping to explain](#) the importance of symbolic boundaries between 'Europe' and 'the Balkans' in south-east European collective identities, illuminate the ways that international and local officials, intellectuals and media [appeal to the idea of Europeanness](#) in making political claims. The EU and other international institutions scarcely invented hierarchical constructions of rational, liberal Europe against the backward 'Balkans', but embedded them even further into Bosnian political culture because of the EU's power to determine whether or not Bosnia had met its conditions for reform.

The linguist Danijela Majstorović, for instance, [writes](#) that discourses of Europeanisation in OHR press releases during the early 2000s (including the particularly interventionist term of the only British High Representative, Paddy Ashdown), 'represented, legitimised and coerced Europeanisation' when they issued from an institution with powers like the OHR's, reflecting 'problematic relations [...] of dominance in a sovereign country.'

The promise of integration into the EU in return for successfully implementing reforms serving the interest of neoliberal capital, Majstorović and Zoran Vučković [argue](#), stripped the Bosnian public of the democratic political agency to pursue socio-political alternatives and constrained any forms of collective political identification beyond the three ethnic identities enshrined in Dayton. While the EU itself did not draft Dayton, its influence ensured the Dayton system stayed in place.

Even the very idea of European integration and enlargement has been argued, by postcolonial scholars such as [Dušan Bjelić](#) and [Piro Rexhepi](#), to disavow the colonial pasts from which today's ideas of 'Europe' emerged. Casting the European Union as a wholly new phase in Europe's history, Bjelić suggests, permits its leaders and the publics who identify with it to disavow the overtly racist discourses of civilisational superiority with which 'European' culture was imagined when possession of an empire was the making of a 'European' power. It is in investigating this form of exceptionalism and disavowal where deeper connections between the EU, Brexit and post-Dayton Bosnia truly start to emerge.

Brexit and colonialism

Nostalgia for Britain's imperial past has, indeed, characterised most of the Leave side's enthusiastic imaginations of the prosperity post-Brexit Britain could supposedly enjoy. Speculations about replacing the EU with the USA as Britain's main trading partner or creating a common 'CANZUK' free trade and movement area connecting Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK, depend on imagining a 21st-century Britannia that commands as much diplomatic and economic power as when it ruled an empire, and whose prospective allies need her much more than she needs them. CANZUK advocates' [arguments](#) that the British public would favour migrants from these white-majority settler-colonial countries, which they imagine as culturally closer than the eastern peripheries of the EU, expose the core of whiteness they place at the centre of British national identity even though they are positing a closeness which is supposedly independent of race.

The intellectual debt this geopolitical fantasy owes to ideas of federalising the white settler empire at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Duncan Bell and Srđan Vučetić suggest in a [forthcoming article](#), exposes how deeply the idea of the 'Anglosphere' is and always has been racialised – and shows what boundaries CANZUK advocates are setting around the sovereign political community who, in Leave discourse, are entitled to and exercising their right to 'take back' political control.

Exaggerated visions of Britain's importance in the world have not only informed Leave campaigners' promises about post-Brexit trade but even, as Gary Younge [suggests](#), the government's negotiating strategy since June 2016 – a miscalculation that Britain could lay down the terms of the deal to Brussels, and an absence of any script for what to do when that turned out not to be true. For Nadine El-Enany, Brexit is '[not only an expression of nostalgia for empire, but the fruit of empire](#)' – a policy that could never have come about if Britain had confronted the racism that still structures its present, thanks to its imperial past.

What is at stake in [positioning Britain as the subject of colonial rule](#), not the power that exercised it, in rhetoric that seeks to persuade readers who identify with glorious myths of British sovereignty that accepting the draft Withdrawal Agreement would amount to colonial domination?

Bosnia has, in fact, already served Hannan as an example of what he perceives as the anti-democratic nature of the EU on several occasions – including a [speech](#) to the European Parliament in February 2014 using the same anecdote about a conversation with the High Representative ('the colonial governor, so to speak') as evidence of the 'eternal gulf' separating 'the Brussels official' from 'the democrat'. His stance on Bosnia and the EU dates back to at least 2002, when he used Ashdown's dismissal of the federal finance minister Nikola Grabovac to [ask](#) in the European Parliament 'whether democratic standards will really be fostered in the new country when an unelected foreigner wields such arbitrary power in this manner'.

Hannan's comments suggesting Britain would now be treated the same way as Bosnia came after other Leave politicians who had aligned themselves with [nostalgia for a so-called 'Global' \(instead of 'European'\) Britain](#) had described the backstop deal as subjugation ill befitting Britain's standing in the world. Almost a year earlier, Boris Johnson (then still foreign secretary) [had argued](#) that accepting all the EU's regulations during a transitional period after Brexit would leave Britain as a 'vassal state'. He [repeated the phrase](#) while the Cabinet were debating the Withdrawal Agreement.

The leader of another Leave faction, Jacob Rees-Mogg, alluded to an explicitly racialised motif of humiliation in [stating](#) that signing the agreement would leave Britain 'not a vassal state but a slave state' – a remark that the Labour MP David Lammy immediately [criticised](#) on Twitter as 'trivialising the abuses of slavery', based on an 'ignorant nostalgia for Britain's Imperial past'. Slaves, in the 'Rule Britannia' myth of sovereignty, are the very thing that Britons shall not be – a framework in which it is more shameful to be enslaved than to acquire generations of wealth from the sale, oppression and labour of human beings who were.

Evoking post-conflict Bosnia as a warning of what global status would await Britain if the backstop is agreed not only, as Jasmin Mujanović [wrote on Twitter](#), trivialised the memory of the 100,000 people who lost their lives in the Bosnian war. The argument's very internal logic requires disavowing the colonial past of Britain and other European powers while expecting the reader to sympathise with the unjustness of colonial rule.

Genuine parallels?

The threat of Britain ending up in the same ‘colonial’ relationship to the EU as Bosnia touches the emotions of imperial nostalgia because it implies a massive national fall from grace in the global hierarchy of which countries control their own destiny and which countries exist to have their destinies controlled. Such racialised hierarchies of power and entitlement have been translated, since the formal decolonisation of European empires, into the centre–periphery relations which inform Western Europe’s dealings with the Global South but also the East, [and South](#), of Europe itself. In British imaginations, Britain does not deserve Bosnia’s fate.

Neither, of course, did Bosnia – and the diplomatic context that determined how the Bosnian war could be ended was itself shaped by British foreign policy, when the government of John Major and Douglas Hurd insisted the war was a matter of ‘ethnic hatreds’ which the international community ought to contain, rather than forestalling Radovan Karadžić and Slobodan Milošević’s pincer movement against the Sarajevo government and its citizens while they still could.

Hannan’s story about talking to the ‘High Commissioner’ (in fact ‘High Representative’) in Bosnia joins both men in an attitude of offhand detachment (the High Representative joking that if the Serbs and Muslims both thought he was biased against him, he must be doing something right; Hannan replying that if everyone was unhappy, he must have been doing something wrong). A similar indifference [could be said](#) to characterise the attitudes of both the Leave campaign and the government to the stakes of the Good Friday Agreement and the everyday realities of [peace and \(in\)security](#) at the Irish border. So detached a style of politics and peacebuilding has its origins in the entitlement with which colonial Great Powers took it upon themselves in past peace congresses to determine state borders and resolve competing national claims. Britain not only sat alongside continental European powers at these tables, but presumed to lead.

Where Britain’s prospects after Brexit might resemble post-Dayton Bosnia, above all without a deal, is in a much more everyday domain – the shock that travel restrictions, extended shortages of food and medicines, and permanent damage to standards of living might inflict on people’s sense of what used to be ‘normal’, and the sense of ‘stuckness’ that pervades Bosnian society two decades after Dayton, unable to weaken the entrenched ethno-political interests that hold the Dayton constitution in place and trapped in what Stef Jansen, Vanja Čelebičić and Čarna Brković [have called](#) the EU’s ‘waiting room’.

Yet an even more important, immediate parallel between Brexit Britain and post-Dayton Bosnia lies in the psychological blow struck to 3.7 million citizens of other EU countries living in the UK, forced to watch their sense of belonging in what had become their home country removed overnight and left in doubt over whether they would even be allowed to stay – amid the racist and xenophobic abuse that the Brexit referendum [appeared to legitimise](#), persuading the perpetrators of a [statistically significant rise in hate crime](#) that it was now acceptable to tell speakers of foreign languages, people of colour, and Muslims to ‘go home’. The sense of licence and impunity that the Leave campaign and referendum victory released has [troubling echoes](#) of, even though its circumstances are not identical to, the atmosphere before the Yugoslav wars began.

Bosnia and the UK are not, and have never been, in the same structural position vis-à-vis the EU, and critiques of the EU’s ‘neo-colonial’ treatment of Bosnia and other countries on its internal and external periphery cannot simply be mapped on to the UK, a country that had the ability to influence EU policy in South-East Europe – and that won more concessions from the EU than any other member state. Instead, the true hinge of coloniality connecting Brexit Britain and post-Dayton Bosnia is the sense of imperial nostalgia and the myth of British exceptionalism which has always fuelled the imagination of the Leave campaign.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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