

## Suffering from the eurocrisis and enlargement fatigue, the EU's influence on Serbia and Kosovo is on the wane.

by Blog Admin

*In recent years, the EU has had a great deal of influence on the Balkans, particularly through its close involvement in Kosovo. However, as [Philip Cunliffe](#) notes, the EU is now suffering from the effects of the economic crisis and has little appetite for enlargement. The EU's declining power in the region, and the removal of any incentives for progress toward EU accession, may mean that the Serbian government has more freedom to act independently toward Kosovo.*

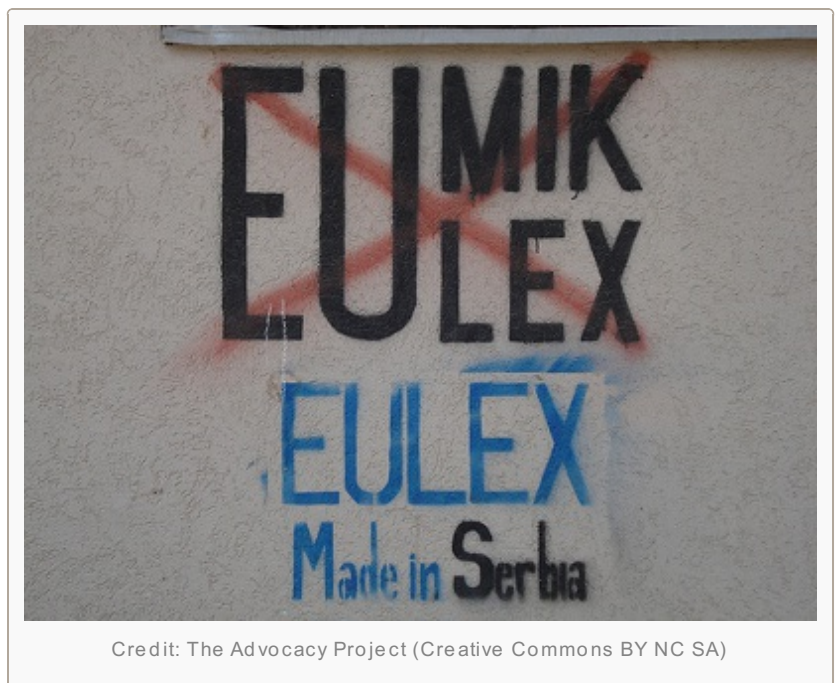


On the one hundredth anniversary of the Balkan Wars, the states of the Balkans are once again confronted with an indebted, decaying and decadent empire whose fragmentation threatens their future and the stability of their region. Yet this time round, the Balkan states, whether singly or collectively, have been less avid in seeking ways to exploit imperial decline and fragmentation.

The crisis of the European Union draws to a close a distinctive period of post-Cold War politics in the Balkans – a period defined by the paradigm of transition (from Stalinist one-party rule and command, state-led economies) and the paradigm of integration (into Euro-Atlantic institutions through NATO and EU expansion). These paradigms have now exhausted their appeal, and whatever comes next will have to take into account the impact and legacy of the ongoing crisis.

### The regional dimensions of the crisis

It is obvious to say that the crisis of the European Union has had multiple ramifications for the region – most notably, the extent to which it damages the standing of the Union as a whole. The depth and duration of the economic crisis has shattered the image of the Union as a global haven of ever-growing prosperity. The social struggles and political controversies unleashed by austerity policies have damaged the image of the Union as the realm of technocratic, post-ideological stability and gentle, persistent social improvement. What is worse, the punishing economic austerity regimens inflicted on the smaller, debt-laden economies of the Union (particularly the Mediterranean economies closest to the Balkan states), as well as the corresponding elevation of the Union's major powers over its smaller powers, has also called into question the magnetic appeal of the EU to smaller and poorer states such as those of the Balkans.



Finally, the much-vaunted 'enlargement fatigue' of the Union – already well-entrenched before the global financial crisis struck – combined with the prolonged crisis of the eurozone / Union, has eviscerated whatever lingering expansionist instincts there were in the major capitals of Europe. With the final reflex spasm of enlargement, which will likely see the accession of Croatia next year, we are witnessing the

close of a distinctive phase of the post-Cold War life of the Union, and with it a whole vision of politics both internal and external, for the states of the region.

### **Imperial weakness?**

In the interim, the question is raised as to the political will and material capacity of the Union to continue to play an imperial role in the Balkans. A premonition of imperial retreat may have been witnessed in the Union's cutting of funding to its so-called rule-of-law of mission in Kosovo, Eulex, and the dissolution of the International Civilian Office in September 2012. This slackening of the protectorate might prompt Kosovo's political elite into taking initiatives independent of Brussels, particularly given that they are under pressure from the increasingly influential Vetëvendosje! opposition movement in parliament, goading them into giving content to their otherwise empty proclamations of independence.

The tightness of the Union's grip over the region is usually justified by reference to the necessity of a firm hand to ensure the reduction of nationalist conflict, in order to stave off the possibility of further disintegration. Yet the Union has played a key role in precipitating such conflict – both in the early days of the collapse of Yugoslavia (helping to instigate war with its recognition of secessionist states), while also impeding conflict settlements in its confused responses to the wars of Yugoslav secession. The Union's need to influence and shape politics throughout the region as a whole mean that it has by default established strategic and political circuits that interconnect all international relations in the region with internal and inter-ethnic relations and tensions, radiating from Bosnia-Herzegovina through Serbia-Kosovo down to Macedonia.

### **Impact on Serbian foreign policy**

Serbia's claims to sovereignty over Kosovo and Kosovo's struggle to establish itself as an independent state mean that the knots of Balkan politics are arguably [tangled](#) the most tightly in the case of Serbia and its relations with Kosovo. What is more, the recent electoral [victory](#) of Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić and his Progressive Party in Serbia's general elections earlier this year brings to an end a decade of Democratic Party hegemony in Serbian public life, with its liberal, pro-Western, technocratic vision of post-Milošević politics and foreign affairs. All of these circumstances conspire to make Serbian foreign policy of particular interest and importance across the next few years.

One way in which the crisis has been felt in Serbian foreign policy is the new government's recent statements – such as president Tomislav Nikolić's speech to his party congress on 29 September – that it will not be 'rushing' to join the Union or immediately pushing for the release of an accession date from Brussels. Discussion of Serbia establishing its own 'conditions' to join the Union has also been mooted. This is mostly empty bombast that simply makes a virtue of necessity, as the Serbian government would be unlikely to get such conditions even if it was able to articulate what it wanted.

However, in making this claim, the new government is also signalling that the influence of Brussels over decision-making in Belgrade has waned: the Serbian political class knows that Brussels cannot offer any imminent progress towards accession. For the moment, the government is spinning its own lack of external opportunity as indicative of Belgrade's clear-sighted commitment to pursuing the national interest, in contrast to the self-effacement of the previous government led by the Democratic Party. But the impulse to this new, more circumspect attitude comes from Brussels, not Belgrade.

Where the halt to enlargement might be felt more is in relations with Kosovo. With no offers that Brussels can make to either the Kosovars or Serbs by way of accession, the Serbian government has an incentive to take a more intransigent stance vis-à-vis Pristina – the latter still facing barriers to its full international recognition by virtue of its clash with Belgrade. On the other hand, Serbia may yet offer to close down or relax its global campaign against recognition of Kosovo in return for extracting concessions from Pristina. The current Serbian Prime Minister, Ivica Dačić, is also one of the Serbian political figures most closely associated with the idea of (re)partition and / or territorial exchange between Serbia and Kosovo as a solution to the stand-off – a prospect that has consistently drawn the ire of Western leaders and policymakers.

All of which is to say two things: first, not to assume that the loosening of Union influence over the

region will necessarily allow explosive nationalist forces to decompress; and second and more ambitiously, that the slackening of the Union's grip may result in opportunities for local political leaders to strike agreements hitherto impeded by political and diplomatic restrictions imposed from Brussels.

*Many of the ideas in this piece were inspired by the discussion at an LSE Ideas workshop on the 'Balkans in 2020' held in January 2012. The author is grateful to all the participants of the workshop for stimulating the ideas behind the arguments in this piece. Responsibility for these arguments, and any errors of judgement, are his alone.*

*Dr Phillip Cunliffe will be speaking at the LSEE lecture "The Balkans Beyond the European Union: The Case of Serbian Foreign Policy" on Tuesday, 27 November. [Click here for more details.](#)*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*



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