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The United Kingdom

Report section

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THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY JAMES KER-LINDSAY

6.1	Introduction	53
6.2	Britain and European Union enlargement	54
6.3	Britain's relationship with the Balkans	55
6.4	Current attitudes to Balkan enlargement	56
6.5	Freedom of movement and the enlargement debate	58
6.6	The Brexit debate	60
6.7	Conclusion	61

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In an episode of the classic British political comedy, *Yes Minister*, Jim Hacker, the fictional Minister of Administrative Affairs, is discussing Britain's relationship with the then European Economic Community (EEC) with his wily Permanent Secretary, Sir Humphrey Appleby. Sir Humphrey explains that for the past 500 years, Britain has had one key policy objective: to create a disunited Europe. In response, Hacker asks why, if that is the case, Britain had been pushing for more members. To which Sir Humphrey replies, "the more members it has, the more arguments it can stir up, the more futile and impotent it becomes." This sketch has become somewhat legendary for the way in which it managed to encapsulate traditional British thinking on the European Union (EU) and on enlargement. Although the rationale for encouraging expansion was primarily – though not exclusively – driven by very specific reasons, most notably the wish to prevent a further deepening of political ties within the EU, over the decades it has nevertheless benefited those countries that have been queuing up to join the Union. This in turn made London an important potential ally for aspiring members.

However, this has now changed. While the Foreign Office is still keen to stress that the United Kingdom is committed to further EU expansion, and that it remains a lead actor in the enlargement process, the reality is that the UK is no longer regarded as the champion of the dossier. With the growth of euroscepticism, and the increasingly hostile debate over immigration, Britain's political leaders have ceased to be the Union's most strident supporters of further expansion. Meanwhile, increasing talk of the possibility that the United Kingdom may yet leave the European Union has also served to weaken British influence in the region.

6.2 BRITAIN AND THE EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT

The United Kingdom has long been committed to the enlargement of the European Union.¹⁰⁹ As one of the ‘Big Three’ members of the EU, it has often been seen as the most important champion of the bloc’s expansion. This has been a direct reflection of the underlying philosophy that successive British governments have taken towards the EU. Fearful of a real or perceived wish by France and Germany to proceed towards an ever-deeper union, Britain came to see enlargement as the natural mechanism to prevent this process. As a result, the UK was at the forefront of enlargement efforts in the late 1990s, which led to the accession of eight countries of Central and Eastern Europe, along with Cyprus and Malta, in 2004. Crucially, at a popular level, enlargement enjoyed relatively strong public support. For example, a Eurobarometer survey taken in 2006, just two years after the 2004 enlargement that saw the admission of ten new members, showed that while Britain was not the strongest supporter of EU enlargement amongst the pre-enlargement EU-15, a plurality (44%) of those expressing a view favoured further expansion. This stood in marked contrast to the majorities in Germany (66%), Luxembourg (65%), France (62%), Austria (61%), and Finland (60%) who disapproved of further EU enlargement.¹¹⁰

Following on from the ‘big bang’ enlargement in 2004, London keenly supported the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Union, in 2007. It also became a strong advocate for Croatia’s membership, in July 2013; the European Union’s first foray into the Western Balkans – usually defined as the former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia but including Albania. In this case, Britain was delighted to discover that Zagreb shared many of London’s concerns about the direction of the European Union. Croatian political figures made it clear that the EU the country was joining was not the Union they had signed up to join. It was also telling that a referendum on membership, held in January 2012, saw 66% of Croatians in favour of integration from a turnout of 43%. By the time it acceded, in July 2013, support for membership was extremely low and there was little trust in EU institutions. Britain therefore identified Croatia as a potentially useful ally in its efforts to bring about fundamental reforms in the European Union or else seek to renegotiate the terms of its own EU membership.¹¹¹

Meanwhile, Britain remained a stalwart supporter of Turkish accession to the European Union. Yet again, this has in many ways been the ultimate example of the British tactic of avoiding deeper union by pursuing a wider union. In the minds of many observers, accepting Turkey would bring about a fundamental transformation of the very nature of the EU. At the moment, with a population of 77 million, Turkey would be the second largest member of the Union. By the time it would be feasibly ready to join, which would not be until the late-2020s, it will have overtaken Germany, and therefore would accede as the largest member. Moreover, many felt, and with good reason, that Turkey’s views on sovereignty and national identity were rather more akin to British views than those of the more integrationist members of the European Union. With this in mind, Britain long stood out as Turkey’s champion within the EU, with David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, telling an audience in Ankara, in 2010, that he was, “the strongest possible advocate” of Turkish membership.¹¹² While French and German politicians have over the years expressed their reservations about Turkish EU entry, although often keen not to upset Turkey by rejecting membership out of hand, British political figures from across the political spectrum would express their strongest support for Turkish accession. Rarely was anything heard in Britain about the way in which this could disrupt EU decision-making processes.

¹⁰⁹ *The Future of EU Enlargement*, European Union Committee, House of Lords, Tenth Report of Session 2012-13.

¹¹⁰ Special Eurobarometer, “Attitudes towards European Union Enlargement”, July 2006, p.3.

¹¹¹ British diplomat, comments to the author, May 2013. However, despite this belief that Croatia may be a useful ally, it was noticeable that Zagreb did not support David Cameron’s high-profile opposition to the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker to the post of president of the European Commission.

¹¹² Speech by David Cameron, in Ankara, 27 July 2010, available at: Number 10 website, www.number10.gov.uk (last accessed on: 17 February 2015).

6.3 BRITAIN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BALKANS

Against this backdrop of general support for EU enlargement, the United Kingdom has always favoured expansion into the Balkans. However, it has never stood out as an advocate for the region as a whole in the same way as, for example, Greece and Austria. This is in large part down to history. Traditionally, the UK does not have strong ties to the region. Certainly, there have been periods of British interest in the Balkans. The Commemorations of the start of the First World War are a testament to this. However, such involvement has been relatively limited. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the Balkans barely registered on the British geopolitical radar. At a time of decolonisation and the Cold War, the United Kingdom's political focus lay elsewhere.

The collapse of Yugoslavia and the bitter civil wars that ensued forced the UK to take a stronger interest in developments in the Balkans. However, even then, the willingness to get involved remained lukewarm. It was not until the election of Tony Blair as Prime Minister, in 1997, that the United Kingdom adopted a more clearly interventionist approach towards the Balkans. This was seen most clearly in the decision to take the lead over military intervention in Kosovo, in 1999. But even this did not translate into any fundamental reorientation of British foreign policy. Very quickly British attention turned elsewhere, most notably to Afghanistan and Iraq. Even now, apart from a couple of key examples that will be explored in the next section, there is relatively little high-level interest in the Balkans, certainly when compared with much of the rest of the world. As one official put it, Britain has never regarded the Balkans as its 'backyard' in the same way that other EU members have.¹¹³

Additionally, there have been few cultural links to the Balkans. Historically, immigrants came from Ireland and other parts of the Commonwealth. Of course, there were some from the Balkans, such as those who fled Yugoslavia under Tito. However, they tended to be quite small in number. And although many tens of thousands of refugees arrived in Britain during and immediately after the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the Balkan community in the United Kingdom is still not particularly large, especially compared to other communities. Since 2004, the size of the immigrant communities from the Balkans, such as they were, have become relatively smaller following the influx of many new immigrants from Poland, Slovakia and the other new members states. At present, according to the most recent census, the total population of those born in the Balkans and now living in the UK stands at around 65,000.¹¹⁴ This hardly compares to, for example, 694,000 from India; 579,000 from Poland; 274,000 from Germany; 191,000 Nigeria; and 177,000 from the United States. To this extent, there was never a powerful constituency in Britain to push the case for membership of the Balkan states. Nor was there any overarching interest in pressing the case for enlargement into the Balkans in order to placate a domestic audience.

Lastly, there have been no underlying economic factors driving Britain towards supporting the region. Despite strong efforts from the Foreign Office to try to encourage British investment in the Balkans,¹¹⁵

¹¹³ British official, comments to the author, July 2014.

¹¹⁴ "Of the 28,000 Kosovan-born residents in 2011, 70% arrived during the period 1997-2003. This peak is associated with the war in Kosovo (1997-1999); this is likely to have been responsible for the high number of Albanian-born residents arriving in the same period, since the conflict affected neighbouring Albania: of the 13,000 Albanian-born residents in 2011, 35% (5,000) arrived during the period 1997-2000...The break up of the former Yugoslavia after 1992 resulted in a number of conflicts in the Balkan region. This included the Bosnian war (1992-95) which resulted in a peak in arrivals in 1991-1996, accounting for 66% of the 8,000 Bosnian-born residents in England and Wales in 2011. Of the 8,000 Croatian-born residents in 2011, 33% arrived in the period 1997-2000; 19% of the 9,000 residents born in Serbia and Montenegro arrived in the same period." *Immigration Patterns of Non-UK Born Populations in England and Wales in 2011*, Office for National Statistics, 17 December 2013, pp.17 and 18.

¹¹⁵ International official, comments to the author, October 2014.

the region is all but ignored by British businesses. Apart from their main markets in the European Union, British companies have long looked towards further flung familiar territory, such as the members of the Commonwealth. This is clearly seen in trade statistics. Not a single Balkan country features in the top 50 of UK export markets or sources of imports.¹¹⁶ This lack of commercial interest in the region is also supported by anecdotal evidence. For example, one new ambassador from the region decided to focus on building trade ties between his country and Britain. However, he was quickly informed by a leading banker with a strong interest in the Balkans that this would be an all but pointless task. British businesses just were not that interested in the area.¹¹⁷ This difficulty in drumming up commercial interest has also been experienced by other ambassadors from the region based in London.¹¹⁸

6.4 CURRENT ATTITUDES TO BALKAN ENLARGEMENT

Where there has been a strong and specific British interest in the accession of the Balkans, it has been narrowly focused on Bosnia-Herzegovina and the interrelated accession paths of Serbia and Kosovo. In the case of Bosnia, British involvement has been driven by a number of factors. In part, it seems to be fostered by guilt for not having played a greater part during the conflict in the 1990s.¹¹⁹ Related to this, it is also prompted by the fact that Britain has played an enormous role supporting the reconstruction and stabilisation of the state following the end of the war in 1995. Britain was not only active in peacekeeping, it has also been at the forefront of many other efforts to try to build functioning institutions and promote reconciliation. This was seen most obviously during the period when Paddy Ashdown, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, served as the High Representative. Since 2010, Britain has paid particularly close attention to the country as a result of the strong personal interest in the situation shown by the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague. However, British interest in Bosnia has continued even after Hague's departure from the Foreign Office. In November 2014, Britain and Germany joined forces to unveil a 'New Strategic Approach' to reinvigorate Bosnia's EU accession process.¹²⁰ This in many ways served to cement Britain's reputation as the most engaged EU member in Bosnia.¹²¹ And yet, at the same time, the attention given to Bosnia has been declining. For example, the Department for International Development (DFID) ceased operations in the country in February 2011.¹²²

As for Serbia and Kosovo, British interest is a product of its close involvement in the situation in Kosovo from 1999 onwards. As noted, the United Kingdom led the call for NATO air strikes against Serbia. Thereafter, in 2006, as the UN talks to decide Kosovo's future status began, Britain was the first major state involved in the process as part of the six nation Contact Group – comprising Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the United States – to openly assert that it believed that there was no alternative to independence. Since then, and following the declaration of independence, in February 2008, London has become, along with the United States, and somewhat later, Germany, one of the key patrons of an independent Kosovo. To this end, it has not only taken strong steps to press for

¹¹⁶ *UK's Top 50 Export Markets and Import Sources for 2013*, Office for National Statistics, 10 July 2014, available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/uktrade/uk-trade/may-2014/rtd-publication-tables-uk-trade--may-2014.xls> (last accessed on: 16 July 2014).

¹¹⁷ Ambassador of a Western Balkan state, comments to the author, April, 2014.

¹¹⁸ Ambassador of a Western Balkan state, comments to the author, September 2014.

¹¹⁹ British official, comments to the author, October 2014.

¹²⁰ "Speech: Bosnia & Herzegovina - a new strategic approach", Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 5 November 2014, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bosnia-herzegovina-a-new-strategic-approach> (last accessed on: 12 February 2015).

¹²¹ EU official, comments to the author, 2012.

¹²² "The DFID Bosnia and Herzegovina office is now closed", Bosnia and Herzegovina, DFID, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/world/organisations/dfid-bosnia-herzegovina> (last accessed on: 3 October 2014). Although, as pointed out, 15% of all EU money spent in the country comes from the UK.

Kosovo's wider recognition on the international stage, but has also been keen to see an enhancement of Kosovo's EU integration prospects.¹²³

At the same time, London has also been active in trying to reduce Serbia's resistance to an independent Kosovo. In this endeavour, it has often been willing to use the prospect of EU membership as both a carrot and a stick against Belgrade. For example, when Serbia proposed taking Kosovo's declaration of independence before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), London reacted by suggesting that such a move could threaten its EU accession prospects;¹²⁴ although it soon backed down when it realised that such intimidation attempts could have a very negative impact. Thereafter, Britain also took a strong position on the importance of Serbia's normalisation of relations with Kosovo as a crucial element of its accession process. It has also strongly supported the efforts of the External Action Service, firstly under Robert Cooper and then Catherine Ashton (both British), to secure a series of agreements enhancing day-to-day cooperation between Belgrade and in Pristina. To this extent, London's role in the case of Serbia's EU accession process is largely the product of its policies regarding Kosovo.

However, beyond this focus on the very specific cases of Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo, the United Kingdom has tended not to take the lead on pressing the case for further EU enlargement as regards the other countries in the region; those are Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Albania. While Britain certainly takes steps to enhance their accession prospects – for instance through financing a number of activities aimed at enhancing various sectors, such as 'judicial reform and media freedom', and the programme of seconding British officials to prospective members¹²⁵ – the United Kingdom has certainly not emerged as a real advocate for their membership in the same way as Greece (and to a certain extent Britain) pushed for Cyprus in 2004 and Germany championed, for example, Poland in 2004. For instance, in the case of FYROM, while the UK led the way in calling for it to be given candidate status during its presidency in 2005,¹²⁶ it has not emerged as a particular advocate for its EU membership since then. In particular, it has not done anything to try and break the deadlock between Skopje and Athens over the name issue.

Elsewhere, it appears to have adopted a more sceptical and cautious approach towards enlargement. Perhaps the most obvious example of this was London's decision, in December 2013, to align with four other EU member states – the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Denmark – in blocking Albania's candidacy for EU membership. Although this decision was subsequently reversed at the European Council in June 2014, when Albania did in fact become a formal candidate country, it nevertheless came as quite a surprise to many observers. The feeling in Albania had been that Britain was one of the few countries they could rely on.¹²⁷ In part, this change is a reflection of the fact that Britain, like most of the rest of the European Union, increasingly believes that it is vital that new members are able to meet the demands of membership. Few want to see a repeat of the problems presented by Romania and Bulgaria. Also, Britain has consistently raised concerns over organised crime in Albania.¹²⁸ However, in many ways, the decision over Albania also appears to be indicative of a more fundamental transformation in the relationship between Britain and the EU that is reshaping British policy towards enlargement.

¹²³ "Promoting stability throughout the Western Balkans", UK government, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/promoting-stability-throughout-the-western-balkans--2> (last accessed on: 16 July 2014).

¹²⁴ "ICJ move direct challenge to EU", B92, 3 August 2008.

¹²⁵ British official, comments to the author, October 2014.

¹²⁶ British official, comments to the author, August 2014.

¹²⁷ British official, comments to the author, June 2014.

¹²⁸ British official, comments to the author, August 2014.

6.5 FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE ENLARGEMENT DEBATE

Within the corridors of the Foreign Office there is still a commitment to enlargement.¹²⁹ However, there is no doubt that mainstream political support for enlargement has declined. This is primarily due to the growing focus on immigration in British political debate; a development that has seen freedom of movement within the EU conflated, deliberately or otherwise, with the arrival of people from outside the European Union.

In 2004, Britain was one of the few EU member states that decided to waive the seven-year transitional restrictions on freedom of movement on the ten new members. However, in the case of Romania and Bulgaria, it was noticeable that the United Kingdom decided to join other EU members and impose transitional restrictions on both countries. Seven-year controls were also introduced when Croatia joined the Union, in 2013. This change in policy over transition periods was driven by the large-scale immigration that occurred after 2004 that far exceeded expectations. As a result, British public opinion – coupled with a media that is dominated by newspapers that take a distinctly Eurosceptic line – has become increasingly concerned about the demographic implications of further EU expansion. Indeed, a December 2013 poll showed that British voters identified limits on new arrivals from elsewhere in the Union as the single most important issue that would need to be tackled in any UK effort to reform its relationship with the EU.¹³⁰ It is this growing focus on freedom of movement that has largely led to the massive surge in support for the arch-Eurosceptic and anti-immigration United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). In May 2014, it received the most support of any British party in European Parliament elections. Just a few months later, in October and November 2014, it won its first ever UK parliamentary seats in bye-elections held after the defection of two Conservative MPs.¹³¹

Against this backdrop, all the political parties have become increasingly hard-line on the subject of immigration, and consequently on the prospect of further enlargement. This has been particularly evident in the ruling Conservative Party, which has found itself under increasing pressure to appeal to those people that are seen to be its traditionally core supporters, many of whom are either sympathetic to UKIP's policies or have formally defected to the party. As a result, a seismic shift appears to have taken place. Whereas in the past, enlargement was seen as the best way in which to stave off efforts at greater EU centralisation, this is now offset by the political costs of arrivals from these new member states.¹³² Enlargement can only continue if it is done in such a way that it limits the freedom of movement of citizens of acceding countries. This necessarily affects the Western Balkans. As David Cameron stated: "As we contemplate countries like Serbia and Albania one day joining the EU we must find a way to slow down access to each other's labour markets until we can be sure this will not cause vast migrations [...] I look forward to finding a way to continue with enlargement but in a way that regains the trust and support of our peoples."¹³³

¹²⁹ British official, comments to the author, October 2014. "EU Enlargement", House of Lords Hansard (Daily record of Parliament), *Written Answers*, Tuesday 17 June 2014.

¹³⁰ "EU referendum: the red lines for swing voters", YouGov, 18 December 2013.

¹³¹ Both cited immigration as a major concern that had driven their decisions. "It's time for change", Douglas Carswell Blog, 28 August 2014; "Why I am leaving the Conservative party and joining UKIP", Mark Reckless, 27 September 2014, available at: <http://markreckless.com/2014/09/27/why-i-am-leaving-the-conservative-party-and-joining-ukip/> (last accessed on: 29 September 2014).

¹³² "How the Tory right turned against EU enlargement", *The Guardian*, 21 December 2013; "Once Tories' answer to EU fears, enlargement is now their problem", *The Observer*, 30 December 2013.

¹³³ "UK no longer advocates for EU enlargement", *Euractiv*, 21 December 2013. Members of the government are now making it ever more clear that there can no longer be an unfettered right of freedom of movement and that some measures will have to be introduced. For instance, it has been suggested that in the future controls could be put in place. One idea that has been floated, for example, is that the freedom of movement from any new member would be limited until such time as the per capita income of the new entrant reaches a certain proportion of the EU average per capita income.

The immigration issue has become so politically sensitive that other parties now have to take an increasingly tough line on the issue. For example, despite strongly endorsing Britain's place in the EU in a speech before British business leaders, in November 2012, Ed Miliband, the former leader of the Labour Party, nevertheless stated that, "while enlarging the EU was good for Britain's strategic interest, frankly, the way that we handled immigration without transitional controls increased scepticism here in Britain."¹³⁴ Since then, the link between immigration and future enlargement has become even more explicit. On New Year's Day 2014, one television station sent a camera crew to Luton Airport (which handles a lot of flights to central and eastern Europe) to interview Keith Vaz, the Labour Party MP who chairs the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, about the expected influx of Bulgarians and Romanians. There were precious few to be seen. However, he was unrepentant. Although there may not have been a sudden deluge of immigrants from the two Eastern Balkan countries, he nevertheless pointed out that FYROM, Montenegro and Serbia were all queuing up to join the European Union and would be the next new members. Britain would need to be prepared for that and the matter of further immigration would need to be put to the British people.¹³⁵ While there is little to suggest that the Labour Party is becoming overtly Eurosceptic, it appears that in trying to maintain a broadly pro-EU position, it has to be seen to be acknowledging voters' concerns. EU enlargement becomes a very convenient target.

Finally, even the Liberal Democrats, the party that has most consistently maintained an openly pro-European line, has also become more cautious. Officially, it supports further EU enlargement as a policy. As the party stated in its 2014 European Parliament election manifesto, "Liberal Democrats support further enlargement of the European Union to candidate countries. Membership of the European Union continues to hold out the best hope for lasting peace and stability in the Western Balkans." However, in reality, it too is far less committed to enlargement than it once was. It will maintain the rhetoric about enlargement as a longer-term goal, but certainly will do nothing to press the case in the short term.¹³⁶

Of course, there is very little rationale in this debate. The entire combined population of the seven Balkan countries lining up for membership is less than 18 million. This is considerably less than the 22 million in Romania, which joined in 2007. Also, there are very good reasons to argue that when these countries do join the EU, Britain will not be their natural destination of choice. For most of the region, Germany is a much more likely option. Britain actually tends to be relatively low in the list of preferred destinations for the Balkan countries.¹³⁷ Also, it is important to note that while there is general opposition to the idea of further immigration from new member states, there are those who do still see the need for expansion, such as the pro-immigration business lobby that can grasp the advantages of bringing in new members with young, able and educated workforces.¹³⁸ Such pressure could grow in the event that large numbers of people from the earlier enlargements decide to return to the countries of origin.

In the meantime, the focus on immigration has had very important immediate consequences in the region. While the rest of the European Union has introduced visa liberalisation for almost all of the Balkans (Kosovo is the exception), the United Kingdom has kept strict limits in place. Indeed, it has

¹³⁴ "One Nation in Europe – Ed Miliband", Labour Party website, 12 November 2012, available at: <http://www.labour.org.uk/one-nation-in-europe> (last accessed on 21 July 2014).

¹³⁵ "Migrant Numbers 'Should Be Decided By People'", *Sky News*, 1 January 2014.

¹³⁶ Senior Liberal Democrat figure, correspondence with the author, July 2014.

¹³⁷ A 2009 report showed that the most popular destination, in order, were Germany, USA, Switzerland, Italy, Australia/New Zealand, France, Austria, Greece, Sweden, Canada and then UK. "The Impact of Migration", *Gallup Balkan Monitor*, 2009, p.3.

¹³⁸ British ambassador to a Western Balkans state, comments to author, June 2014.

become notoriously difficult and expensive to obtain a British visa.¹³⁹ This would appear to be having a very negative effect on how the countries of the region see the UK.¹⁴⁰ As one observer put it, the immigration policy, “isn’t in accordance with the rhetoric on enlargement.”¹⁴¹

6.6 THE BREXIT DEBATE

In addition to freedom of movement, another factor that is shaping the discussion about the United Kingdom and enlargement is the question of British membership of the European Union. Over the course of the past few years, attention has increasingly turned to the possibility that the UK may in fact leave the EU. Although on balance this may seem to be unlikely, the mere fact that the argument has gained such prominence suggests that it cannot be discounted entirely. As a result, there is a growing concern amongst observers that the European Union, realising that Britain may be on its way out, is taking less notice of its views.¹⁴² It would seem likely that this applies as much to enlargement as to any other issues, perhaps even more so given that it seems strange to pay attention to the views of Britain on new members when it wants to leave the ‘club’.

At the same time, the debate is also being followed in the Balkans. This is having a negative impact on Britain’s influence and standing. It seems that these states increasingly question whether it is worth engaging actively with the United Kingdom when their invariably meagre diplomatic and political resources would be better used engaging with countries that can help them to join the EU. Even the discussions about a possible British exit from the European Union may well have contributed to a growing sense amongst political elites engaged in the accession process in these countries that Germany is now the main actor they should focus on.¹⁴³ This impression will no doubt have been cemented by the fact that Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, appears to want Germany to become the champion of the Balkan expansion.¹⁴⁴ There is also a sense that aligning with Britain may actually be counterproductive inasmuch as it is far better to be seen as a good European.¹⁴⁵

Meanwhile, at a popular level, a rather more mixed picture emerges. On the one hand, the possibility of the UK leaving the EU appears to have received little widespread attention in the region, certainly when compared to the greater level of attention given to the immigration debate. As one British official put it, the media and ordinary citizens appear to have little awareness about the internal politics of the United Kingdom.¹⁴⁶ However, it has not gone completely unnoticed. As elsewhere in Europe, there are many Eurosceptics in the Balkans who oppose membership of the European Union; even if their place in mainstream politics tends to be rather limited.¹⁴⁷ Amongst these political parties and organisations opposed to EU membership, there is in fact a lot of admiration for Britain “for standing up to

¹³⁹ As pointed out, it is now more expensive to get a six month visa for the UK than a 10-year one for the United States. This has had an enormous impact on how people in the region view Britain. International official, comment to the author, October 2014.

¹⁴⁰ United Kingdom MEP, comments to the author, July 2014.

¹⁴¹ International official, comments to the author, October 2014.

¹⁴² “Lobbyists fear loss of British sway in EU”, *Financial Times*, 6 March 2013.

¹⁴³ International official, comments to the author, October 2014; Former ambassador from a Balkan state, comments to the author, July 2014. As the diplomat noted, “Germany is now seen as the most important country, full stop. United States comes second.”

¹⁴⁴ “Merkel to organise Western Balkans conference in August”, *Euractiv*, 13 June 2014. However, other countries, such as Greece and Italy, are still seen by some as key actors. In contrast, Britain is not. Serbian official, comments to the author, July 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Serbian official, comments to the author, July 2014.

¹⁴⁶ British official, comments to the author, October 2014.

¹⁴⁷ For more on Eurosceptic parties in the region see Stratulat, Corina (ed.) (2014), “EU integration and party politics in the Balkans”, *EPC Issue Paper*, No.77.

‘Europe’.¹⁴⁸ As one regional diplomat stated, “You would not believe how popular Nigel Farage [the leader of UKIP] is in parts of the Balkans.”¹⁴⁹ To these groups, Britain is increasingly seen as an ally in the campaign to keep them out of the EU.

6.3 CONCLUSION

Traditionally, the United Kingdom has been a staunch supporter of European Union enlargement. Over the past three decades, Britain has seen the continued expansion of the European Union as the best defence against efforts to pursue more political integration. To this extent, successive British governments have taken a strong interest in helping new member states join the European Union. Even if Britain has tended only to pay close attention to a small number of countries, namely Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo, the wish to see the EU expand has necessarily had a positive effect on other countries in the Balkans.

However, there can be little doubt that the UK’s overall attitude towards enlargement, and its ability to shape the Union’s policies in this area, has undergone a profound transformation over the course of the Conservative-led period of coalition governments, and particularly since the latter half of 2013. The increasingly shrill immigration debate in Britain, coupled with rising Euroscepticism and growing support for UKIP, has meant that the British government has been faced with an increasingly unpalatable political choice. While further EU enlargement would help to maintain the continued battle to minimise political union within the EU, it also means the arrival of more people to British shores. The fact that there is no appetite within the EU to allow for restrictions on freedom of movement means that this matter has become an either/or issue: either more expansion and more new immigrants, or less future enlargement and less new arrivals. It seems as though, under prevailing political conditions, London has opted for the latter. While the Foreign Office remains absolutely adamant that Britain remains one of the strongest supporters of enlargement, and is still a driving force behind enlargement, this is not how it is perceived beyond the United Kingdom, or even amongst pro-Europeans within Britain.¹⁵⁰ The discussions over immigration have presented a very negative picture about British support for further enlargement within the Balkans. Even amongst Britain’s European partners, there is a clear sense that the UK is no longer the force behind enlargement that it once was.¹⁵¹ As a British official working for an international organisation in the region noted, he had long since ceased arguing that “Britain was the biggest supporter of enlargement.”¹⁵² As a result, the countries of the region are starting to turn their attention elsewhere in the search for support for their EU membership aspirations. Germany, in particular, has now emerged as the crucial actor.

The question is whether Britain might be able to regain a leadership role on questions of enlargement and new members. It is quite possible. It is important to recognise that there are other trends emerging that could well force Britain to rethink its growing distance from the region. Most notably, the rising concerns about Russia mean that many EU members now believe that a return to the enlargement agenda, which has been off the EU radar for the past six or seven years, is crucial. This seems, for example, to be a key element shaping German thinking.¹⁵³ At present, however, such views have yet to be articulated openly in Britain. For the meanwhile, the growing distance between the UK and the EU, and the widespread worries in Britain about the impact of further immigration appear to be at the

¹⁴⁸ Serbian official, comments to the author, July 2014.

¹⁴⁹ International official, comment to the author, October 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Senior Liberal Democrat, comments to the author, July 2014.

¹⁵¹ Senior official, EU member state, comments to the author, August 2014.

¹⁵² British official, comments to the author, October 2014.

¹⁵³ “Merkel to organise Western Balkans conference in August”, *Euractiv*, 13 June 2014.

forefront of the debate about enlargement. However, it is clear that this cannot happen until the United Kingdom makes a firm decision on its own membership of the European Union, and politicians are willing to make a positive case for EU enlargement; freedom of movement and all.