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## Britain, 'Brexit' and the Balkans

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## **Britain, 'Brexit' and the Balkans**

James Ker-Lindsay

### **Abstract**

This article assesses the ways in which a British decision to leave the European Union (Brexit) would affect the United Kingdom's relationship with the Western Balkans. In the first instance, it shows that it would almost certainly reduce its influence over Bosnia and Herzegovina and its ability to shape the process of engagement between Serbia and Kosovo. At the same time, the UK would find that it would gain no material advantage in terms of its ability to handle other regional issues that may have a direct or indirect effect on Britain, such as illegal migration and the flow of fighters from the Balkans into Syria. Meanwhile, other forms of influence, such as the United Kingdom's major role in NATO or its permanent membership of the UN Security Council, would be diminished as a result of a 'Brexit'.

### **Introduction**

The prospect of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union has opened up discussions on the possible implications that this will have on British foreign and security policy. One area where the effects of a decision to leave the European Union would be keenly felt is the Western Balkans. Over the past two decades, the United Kingdom has been at the very forefront of efforts to stabilise the region, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo. This has brought considerable successes. However, the task is far from complete. There is still a very real risk of a return of tensions and conflict. As will be seen, the main safeguard against this is now the lure of EU membership. In this context, a very real question emerges as to how a decision to leave the EU might affect Britain's continued influence in the region? Likewise, there are a number of issues of concern in the Balkans that affect the UK, either directly or indirectly. These include illegal migration and tackling the flow of foreign fighters to Syria. Once again, how would a decision to exit the EU affect Britain's control over these issues? This article examines Britain's relationship with the Western Balkans and seeks to assess just how much a Brexit, should it come to pass, would affect the UK's standing in the region and whether other forms of influence could mitigate the effects of a British withdrawal from the EU.

### **Managing the Post-Conflict Environment**

Peace and security in the Balkans remains a key foreign policy objective for Britain. As the Foreign Office noted as recently as May 2015,

Stability in the Western Balkans matters; the region is on Europe's doorstep and instability or conflict would affect the UK, including through migration and organised crime. The UK is therefore working to reduce the risk of

conflict in the region, promote stability and reconciliation, and support reforms, as the region moves towards future EU and NATO membership.<sup>i</sup>

Since the middle of the 1990s, the United Kingdom has played an important role in stabilising and securing the Western Balkans following the end of the Yugoslav wars. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Britain not only contributed troops to the NATO and then EU-led post-conflict peacekeeping missions, it also took an active role in the civilian leadership of the Office of the High Representative (OHR). Even now, Paddy Ashdown is still widely seen as the most influential of all the international figures tasked with the role of overseeing the country's implementation of the Dayton Accords, the agreement that brought the war to an end. As High Representative from May 2002 until January 2006, he was widely credited – though not without controversy and criticism<sup>ii</sup> – with taking a particularly robust approach towards elements within the state that threatened to undermine peace and stability.<sup>iii</sup>

More recently, the United Kingdom has continued to pay considerable attention to the fragile political situation in Bosnia. William Hague, during his term as Foreign Secretary, took a particularly active interest in the country. This has continued after his departure, in July 2014. Most recently, and following a series of failed efforts by the European Union to bring about vitally necessary constitutional reform,<sup>iv</sup> the UK joined Germany in drawing up a set of proposals that have now put debate on constitutional change to one side for the meanwhile in the hope that greater attention can be focused on securing meaningful economic and social reform and development that would enhance the country's EU accession prospects.<sup>v</sup> These proposals have now been adopted by the European Union.<sup>vi</sup>

Likewise, Kosovo also represents another very important example of how Britain has been at the forefront of efforts to secure regional peace and stability. In 1999, the UK took the lead in building up international support for efforts to tackle the deteriorating conflict in the then Serbian province. This led to a seventy-eight-day NATO air campaign that saw Serbian forces ousted from Kosovo and a UN administration put in place. Moreover, at the start of the process to determine Kosovo's final status, which began under UN auspices in late 2005, it was the United Kingdom that was the first country to openly state that the eventual outcome would be full independence.<sup>vii</sup>

Even after Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, in February 2008, the UK continued to play a pivotal role in Kosovo. Along with the US and France, it was at the forefront of efforts to secure widespread recognition of Kosovo's statehood.<sup>viii</sup> As a result, Kosovo is now recognised by over 100 members of the United Nations and has succeeded in joining a range of international organisations, including the IMF, World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the International Olympic Committee. At the same time, the UK, albeit indirectly, has also had an inordinately strong role in efforts to bring about a normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The EU-led dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, which began in March 2011, was initially led by Sir Robert Cooper, before being handled directly by Baroness Ashton.<sup>ix</sup> In addition, Britain has been, along with Germany, at the forefront of efforts to stress to Serbia that its path towards EU accession will continue to be conditioned on its ongoing willingness to engage with Pristina.<sup>x</sup> As a result, agreements have now been reached between the two sides on a

host of key issues, including the status of the Serbian population in Kosovo, Kosovo's participation in regional initiatives and the opening up of bilateral trade.

As Bosnia and Kosovo have both shown, Britain has been a major factor in securing and stabilising the Western Balkans for the past twenty years. And yet, in both cases, that influence has become increasingly interlinked with the UK's place within the European Union. In both instances, it is now the lure of EU membership, more than anything else, which serves to underpin British efforts to build stability and foster further reconciliation. By committing the countries of the region to peaceful neighbourly relations, the European Union provides the crucial rationale for them to moderate their positions towards one another and has opened the way for the peace and stabilisation initiatives outlined above. Such efforts have also been enhanced by the fact that across the region EU membership remains a popular goal amongst the public at large. Even in the most Eurosceptic country in the region, Serbia, a recent opinion poll shows support for EU membership at 59 per cent.<sup>xi</sup>

In this context, it needs to be recognised that it is Britain's place as a senior partner in the EU that now gives London a powerful voice to affect change in the Western Balkans. In the case of Bosnia, it is hard enough for the European Union to bend local leaders to its will in the current environment. It is all but impossible to see how the UK, acting outside of the EU, could possibly hope to exert any meaningful influence over the local parties. Similarly, in the case of Kosovo, Britain would find that its standing in the broader scope of the problem would be greatly diminished if it were to leave the EU. To be sure, it seems likely that it would retain a degree of leverage over Pristina by virtue of its vital support for Kosovo's independence. However, even this cannot be taken for granted should Britain leave the EU.<sup>xii</sup> Meanwhile, almost all influence that Britain may have in Serbia would certainly be lost under such circumstances. It is the pull of EU accession that has done more than anything to transform the way in which Belgrade engages with Kosovo.<sup>xiii</sup> Without being able to offer the possibility of facilitating membership – or perhaps more correctly, having lost its ability to block that path – Britain's leverage would all but evaporate.

### **Managing Illegal Migration and Other Issues**

As well as the concerns over the ongoing post-conflict stabilisation of the region, there are a range of other issues in the region that give cause for concern. Once again, Britain's place in the EU, and its consequent ability to shape the further expansion of the Union, is understood to be an invaluable asset by policy makers. As the December 2014 Balance of Competences Report on EU Enlargement noted,<sup>xiv</sup>

The [British] Government also believes that enlargement provides the UK with powerful levers to drive change in aspirant countries. On issues of concern to the UK, such as the rule of law and tackling organised crime, corruption and illegal migration, the enlargement process provides – through conditionality and assistance programmes – effective tools to encourage co-operation and progress.

Perhaps the most high profile of these 'issues of concern' at the moment is the question of illegal migration. This is an area that involves the Balkans in two distinct

ways. In the first instance, there is the question of attempts by the inhabitants of the Western Balkan states to enter the EU. This particular issue came to widespread international attention in early 2015, when over 50,000 people left Kosovo and made their way through Serbia to the Hungarian border and the European Union.<sup>xv</sup> Secondly, and more recently, we have witnessed the images of refugees fleeing the war in Syria and making their way up from Greece, through Macedonia and Serbia on their way to Northern and Western Europe.<sup>xvi</sup> Both of these waves of migration have received considerable attention in Britain and served to further strengthen Eurosceptic calls for the UK to leave the EU and, in doing so, 'take back its borders'.

However, in both cases, it is hard to see how Britain's borders would in fact be strengthened by exiting the EU. Regarding mass migration from Kosovo, although the numbers were significant the problem was quickly addressed. The European Union, and Germany in particular,<sup>xvii</sup> made it clear that any applications for asylum by anyone from Kosovo would be rejected and that the claimants would summarily be deported back. The message soon got through. Almost overnight, the problem eased dramatically. But even at its height, it posed no significant challenge to Britain. Few if any wanted to make their way to the UK, where the community of people born in Kosovo is a mere 28,000.<sup>xviii</sup> Instead, the main target destination was Germany,<sup>xix</sup> where the Kosovo born population is estimated to be 200,000-300,000.<sup>xx</sup> As for stemming the number of refugees from Syria making their way through the Western Balkans, the simple fact is that Britain's decision to leave the EU would make almost no difference. The UK already has massive control over its borders by virtue of the fact that it is not a part of Schengen. Given that leaving the EU will not mean the end of the Schengen area, people will still be able to make it through a borderless Europe to Calais. Rather, leaving the EU will simply remove incentives for EU partners to cooperate with the UK on the issue of migration.<sup>xxi</sup>

Then there are the other issues in the Western Balkans that touch upon the UK in one way or another, such as corruption, organised crime and growing religious radicalisation in the region. In the latter case, there are real concerns at the numbers from Kosovo and Bosnia,<sup>xxii</sup> in particular, who are going to fight, mainly with ISIS, in Syria.<sup>xxiii</sup> The implications of this are likely to be felt in many ways, not least of all in terms of the danger returning fighters pose to the internal stability of the countries. On all these issues, co-operation with EU partners through the pooling of intelligence is vital if these issues are to be tackled effectively. So too is the influence that the UK can bring to bear on state authorities by virtue of its EU membership. Meanwhile, other new challenges are emerging. For instance, there are growing concerns about increasing Russian influence in the region. In the view of many observers, the best defence against this is to offer the Western Balkans a clear roadmap towards EU accession.<sup>xxiv</sup> Needless to say, Britain would not be in a position to press the agenda from outside of the Union. Indeed, all things considered, it is hard to see how a decision to exit the EU could in any way enhance Britain's ability to influence regional policies and debates on any of these matters. Even if one was to take a very sceptical view, the very best one could say is that Brexit would be 'influence neutral'.

Of course, the counter argument is that continued membership also carries a price in the Western Balkans context. It would mean an increase in the number of new arrivals from these states under the freedom of movement. This position has gained significant traction in public and political debate over the past few years. The demographic

effects of further enlargement have been noted in negative terms by politicians from across the political spectrum.<sup>xxv</sup> However, such concerns are overplayed. For a start, the numbers of people potentially able to move to Britain will be very small relative to previous rounds of enlargement. The entire population of the six Western Balkan states queuing to join the EU is approximately 17 million. Compare this to the 30 million inhabitants of Romania and Bulgaria, which joined in 2007 and gained full access to Britain in 2014. In other words, the period of enlargement leading to major demographic changes is now over. Moreover, the pull factor is minimal.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Balkans community in Britain is tiny. In the 2011 census, the entire population of people born in Albania was 13,000. Meanwhile, those born in the rest of the Western Balkans – Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia – amounted to approximately 25,000.<sup>xxvii</sup> Compare this to the 579,000 from Poland, 274,000 from Germany, and even 177,000 from the United States. Finally, while the actual numbers coming to the UK are likely to be small, there will be the possibility of transitional restrictions. For all these reasons, one has to ask whether the ‘benefits’ to the UK of preventing freedom of movement from the Western Balkans are really offset by the costs that would come in terms of limiting British influence in other areas.

Indeed, this is already being seen. The mere debate in Britain over its relationship with the EU, especially as it is linked with freedom of movement, is already starting to have a negative effect on the UK’s standing and influence in the Western Balkans. Speaking with officials from the region, it is already more than obvious that Britain is no longer seen as the champion of enlargement that it once was.<sup>xxviii</sup> While the Foreign Office remains a strong proponent of enlargement,<sup>xxix</sup> and British officials in the region go to great lengths to emphasise Britain’s commitment to further EU expansion,<sup>xxx</sup> this is simply not mirrored by British politicians, who now rarely if ever speak out in favour of enlargement. In contrast, Germany’s influence in the region has soared. So much so, that it is now seen as a far more important centre of power than Brussels for Balkan states seeking to join the European Union.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **Alternative Forms of Influence**

Of course, there are those who would argue that any UK decision to leave the EU would to a degree be mitigated by other factors. One obvious example is its continued membership of NATO. In part this is true. It does give Britain a certain degree of influence. However, across the range of areas surveyed here, it is clear that NATO would not provide a truly meaningful alternative to the EU as a mechanism for exerting leverage over the region. This is for several reasons. Perhaps most importantly, NATO focuses on security, whereas the European Union covers a broad range of social, political and economic fields. Consequently, there is simply not the degree of conditionality required for NATO as there is for the EU.<sup>xxxii</sup> While Britain would retain some significance in very specific areas, its ability to shape the wider situation would be limited. Crucially, this reduction in influence would be most keenly felt in the case of Serbia, where there is little obvious desire for NATO membership.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Working solely within the confines of NATO, Britain would lose its leverage over Belgrade on Bosnia and Kosovo. For these reasons, while continued British membership of NATO would certainly provide a useful mechanism for continued engagement with many of the countries of the Western Balkans, it could not replace the influence the UK derives from its membership of the EU.

Another potential area of continued influence is the United Kingdom's permanent membership of the UN Security Council. Although this gives Britain a degree of influence to shape the agenda, its effects would be dramatically diminished if the UK were to leave the European Union. Even now, its significance is rather questionable. Perhaps the clearest evidence for this comes from the recent British effort to introduce a Security Council resolution commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica. Although Britain pushed hard for this, the text proved unacceptable to Serbia. In the end, and following a request from Belgrade,<sup>xxxiv</sup> Russia vetoed what it termed a 'politically motivated' resolution.<sup>xxxv</sup> As a result, relations between Britain and Serbia suffered a significant setback.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Not only that, the essentially pro-Western Serbian Government was left in the position of owing Moscow yet another favour (after Russia's veto of efforts to pass a Security Council resolution granting Kosovo independence, in 2007). Even with its membership of the EU, and the leverage that one would have expected that this would have provided, the UK was not able to secure Serbia's support for the resolution. It seems unlikely that the outcome would have been any different if Britain had not been in the EU.

## **Conclusion**

For Britain, the Western Balkans remains primarily a security challenge. As a recent British government report put it, 'For the western Balkans, the evidence suggested that, although the economic benefits to the UK and EU of further enlargement will probably be modest, the benefits in terms of Europe's security and stability are compelling.'<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, it is also now more than apparent that the single most important factor shaping the security environment in the region is the prospect of EU accession. To this extent, it seems increasingly clear that if the UK wishes to remain a significant actor in the region, it is likely to be unable to do so outside of the context of the European Union. This is particularly obvious in the case of Serbia and Kosovo. The success of the EU-dialogue has been the result of the UK working with its EU partners (most notably Germany) to influence and pressure on the sides. However, none of this would have been possible without the lure of accession. Likewise, while Bosnia remains highly dysfunctional, the only realistic hope that things will improve rests in the country's wish to pursue EU membership. Here again, the UK has been at the forefront of efforts to stabilise the country and find a constructive way past the current constitutional impasse. In both cases, it is hard to see how Britain could hope to exert a leading role without being a highly influential member of the European Union. Of course, Britain could still be part of such initiatives outside of the Union. However, its ability to shape the debate in a fundamental way would be diminished.

As for other 'issues of concern', Brexit seems to offer no distinct advantages. In the case of migration from and through the Western Balkans, Britain's decision to leave the European Union would have next to no real beneficial effect. Actual and potential migrants from the region have shown little real interest in the UK and seem unlikely to do so in the future. As for stemming the flow of migrants and refugees from elsewhere, this is an issue that requires cooperation between EU partners, rather than exerting leverage over the states of South East Europe. Certainly, Britain would not find its ability to protect its borders strengthened by a departure from the EU. Meanwhile, the UK's ability to work with the its current EU partners and the

countries of the region on other questions – such as corruption, organised crime and the flow of fighters to Syria – would be diminished.

Of course, this is not to say that Britain's influence would disappear altogether in the event that it does decide to leave the European Union. It is clear that it will still retain pockets of leverage. Its place in NATO will give it a little significance, even if its permanent membership of the UN Security Council would seem unlikely to do so. However, where it really matters, it will no longer be seen as a key actor. Indeed, already, we are starting to see a waning of its influence.

The British Government has already acknowledged that what happens in the Balkans has an effect on the country. This will remain the case regardless of whether the country remains a member of the European Union or not. However, if the United Kingdom does decide to leave the European Union, it must expect that its ability to shape and manage developments in the Western Balkans will be radically curtailed.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> '2010 to 2015 government policy: stability in the Western Balkans', Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 8 May 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Gerald Knaus and Felix Martine, 'Travails of the European Raj: Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina', *European Stability Initiative*, 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> Gabriel Partos, 'Bosnia to build on Ashdown legacy', *BBC News*, 31 January 2006.

<sup>iv</sup> 'Bosnia-Herzegovina–EU: Deep disappointment on Sejdić-Finci implementation', European Commission, Sarajevo, 14 February 2014.

<sup>v</sup> 'UK, Germany offer plan to break Bosnia's EU deadlock', *Reuters*, 5 November 2014.

<sup>vi</sup> Press Release, 3361st Council meeting, Foreign Affairs, Brussels, 15 December 2014.

<sup>vii</sup> For a review of this process and Britain's role, see James Ker-Lindsay, *Kosovo: The Path to Contested Statehood in the Balkans* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2009).

<sup>viii</sup> For example, the author was told that the Foreign Office even had a staff member tasked with coordinating efforts to secure international recognition.

<sup>ix</sup> For more on this see 'EU facilitated dialogue for the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina', European External Action Service website < [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/dialogue-pristina-belgrade/index\\_en.htm](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/dialogue-pristina-belgrade/index_en.htm) > (Last accessed, 3 September 2015). See also, 'Serbia/Kosovo: The Brussels Agreements and Beyond', Workshop Report, SEESOX, University of Oxford, March 2014.

<sup>x</sup> 'Serbia Nervously Awaits Kosovo Chapter in EU Talks', *Balkan Insight*, 21 January 2014.

<sup>xi</sup> '59% of citizens support Serbia's EU membership', *Tanjug*, 19 May 2015.

<sup>xii</sup> Former Kosovo minister, comment to the author, September 2015.

<sup>xiii</sup> Spyros Economides and James Ker-Lindsay, 'Pre-Accession Europeanization': The Case of Serbia and Kosovo', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 53, Number 5, September 2015.

<sup>xiv</sup> 'Review of the Balance of Competences between the United Kingdom and the European Union: EU Enlargement', Foreign and Commonwealth Office, December 2014, p.20.

<sup>xv</sup> 'Exodus from Kosovo: Why thousands have left the Balkans', *The Telegraph*, 21 February 2015

<sup>xvi</sup> 'Europe migrants: Tracing perilous Balkan route to Germany', *BBC News*, 26 August 2015.

<sup>xvii</sup> 'For Those Fleeing Poverty, Not War, Germany's Doors Are Closed', *Foreign Policy* (Despatches blog), 28 August 2015.



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- <sup>xviii</sup> ‘Immigration Patterns of Non-UK Born Populations in England and Wales in 2011’, Office for National Statistics, 17 December 2013, p.17 & 18.
- <sup>xix</sup> ‘Germany Grapples with Surge of Migrants From Kosovo’, *Wall Street Journal*, 19 February 2015.
- <sup>xx</sup> ‘Germany’s Foreign Policy towards Kosovo: A Policy Perspective’, Pristina Council on Foreign Relations, and Group for Legal and Political Studies, Pristina, January 2014, p.8
- <sup>xxi</sup> ‘‘Brexit’ would increase number of refugees entering UK, says ex-Tory minister’, *The Independent*, 31 August 2015,
- <sup>xxii</sup> ‘Bosnia’s Wartime Legacy Fuels Radical Islam’, *Balkan Insight*, 13 May 2015. ‘Inside Kacanik, Kosovo’s jihadist capital’, *The Telegraph*, 23 August 2015.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> ‘Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens’ involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq’, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, Kosovo, 14 April 2015.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> ‘Russia in the Balkans: Conference Report’, LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe & SEESOX South East European Studies at Oxford, March 2015.
- <sup>xxv</sup> For more on this see, James Ker-Lindsay, ‘United Kingdom’, in Rosa Balfour and Corina Stratulat (eds.), *EU Member States and Enlargement towards the Balkans* (Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2015).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> A 2009 report showed that the most popular destination were, in order, 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.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> ‘Immigration Patterns of Non-UK Born Populations in England and Wales in 2011’, Office for National Statistics, 17 December 2013, p.17 & 18.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> This has been very apparent in conversations the author has had with officials from the region in recent years.
- <sup>xxix</sup> ‘EU Enlargement’, House of Lords Hansard (Daily record of Parliament) Written Answers, Tuesday 17 June 2014.
- <sup>xxx</sup> British official, comment to the author, October 2014.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> ‘Knocking on heaven’s door’, *The Economist*, 27 August 2015.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> As has been pointed out, ‘NATO was not in a position to offer institutional transformation across the whole government and civil society, and therefore its influence (and use as a comparative model to the EU) was limited’. ‘Review of the Balance of Competences between the United Kingdom and the European Union: EU Enlargement’, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, December 2014, p.69.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> ‘Serbia: Only 50 pct of citizens support EU integration, 73 pct against NATO membership’, *Tanjug*, 20 June 2015.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> ‘Serbs ask Russia to veto UN resolution on Srebrenica’, *Associated Press*, 4 July 2015.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> ‘Russia Vetoes U.N. Resolution Calling Srebrenica Massacre ‘Crime of Genocide’’, *New York Times*, 8 July 2015.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> A number of Serbian officials told the author that they had not seen such hostility towards Britain in the media and wider society since the Kosovo conflict in 1999.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> ‘Review of the Balance of Competences between the United Kingdom and the European Union: EU Enlargement’, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, December 2014.