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Western Balkans will need champions in an increasingly enlargement sceptic EU

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*The results of the European Parliament elections will have been closely watched in the Western Balkans – and with good reason. Support for enlargement, undermined in recent years by the attention given to the financial crisis, is likely to diminish still further as the anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic feeling that emerged from the period of austerity has finally been reflected in the ballot box. However, the region may yet find a champion, or two, from within the new line up at the heart of European Union. **James Ker-Lindsay** discusses.*

The reverberations from the [European Parliament elections](#) are likely to be felt across a wide range of policy areas in the next few years. One area where the changes will be keenly felt is enlargement. Most obviously, the effects of the vote will be seen in the European Parliament itself. There is going to be an influx of MEPs opposed to the Union and everything it stands for. This will inevitably shape the way in which the Parliament handles debates over future expansion. On the floor of the chamber, as well as in various committees, one can expect to hear more vociferous opposition to further enlargement. While this is unlikely to be an obstacle on its own – especially given that the main parties, which will continue to hold a majority, still favour enlargement – it will almost certainly affect the general tone and tenor of the Parliament's discussions about future expansion.

UK no longer a staunch defender of EU expansion

However, of far greater concern will be the attitude of the member states towards further enlargement. The tide of euroscepticism is likely to make more and more countries cautious about pressing an issue that does not command widespread public support. Britain is perhaps the best example of this. At one point, London was the strongest advocate of enlargement. Always sceptical of the 'ever closer union', which many in Britain saw as an unacceptable march towards federalisation, successive British governments saw the continued widening of the Union as the best protection against deeper integration. The problem is that this desire to weaken the Union through further expansion has now run headlong into the reality that with new members come new immigrants. The political calculation behind supporting enlargement has therefore altered radically. The United Kingdom is no longer the stalwart defender of expansion that it once was. Indeed, it was noticeable that Britain was one of four states that joined the Netherlands in opposing the start of accession negotiations with Albania in December 2013, despite a recommendation from the Commission to do so.

A silver lining: potential to shape EU institutions

But it is not necessarily all doom and gloom. The elections also have the potential to shape the way in which other institutions within the European Union approach the Balkans. Already the debate has started over who will replace Jose Manuel Barroso as President of the European Commission. Once this is decided the process of selecting the new commissioners can begin. One key portfolio will be the enlargement commissioner. Whoever takes over from Stefan Füle will have an important role to play in guiding the accession talks with Serbia and Montenegro and trying to open the way for the other states of the region to press ahead with their integration. However, the post is also an important soapbox to make the case for further EU expansion at a time when there is growing hostility to the idea. If a relatively unknown figure is appointed, or someone who does not have the appetite to defend the cause is given the post, it is likely that the Western Balkans will feel the consequences. More than ever, they need a champion. They need someone who can make the case to the member states, and to the wider public in the Union that enlargement is still a good thing, and that concerns about an unmanageable wave of new immigrants is largely unjustified. (The population of the six prospective members of the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – is less than 20 million. In other words, the combined population is smaller than Romania's.)

The other key post that will have to be decided will be the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and head of the EU's External Action Service. Over the course of the past five years, the current holder, Baroness Catherine Ashton, has taken an increasingly high profile role in the Western Balkans. Indeed, her effort to foster dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has come to be seen as one of the truly great successes of her tenure. To this extent, there is naturally a lot of interest in who will replace her. Will it be someone who will also see the Western Balkans, and its outstanding issues, as a priority for the Union? Again, a high profile and active post holder could well help to further the peace initiatives that have already started to bear fruit in the region as well as give a new impetus to other processes, such as those in Bosnia, that remain steadfastly immune to EU influence. (Of course, there is also the danger of too much of a good thing if both the EEAS head and the

enlargement commissioner take a keen interest in the same topic. This is not hard to see happening given that two of the potential candidates for the posts are former High Representatives in Bosnia!)

Balkan policy-makers must now help others to help them

There is no doubt that the Western Balkans will now face a difficult period. The political environment, which has been less than welcoming these past few years, could well get worse; both in the Parliament and within the member states. For this reason, much will now depend on who will press the case for enlargement within the Union. However, at the same time, it is also important to emphasise that the situation is not entirely out of the region's hands. Now, more than ever, they must show the Union that they can be good members and that the negative stereotypes that will be put about by those hostile to enlargement do not match the realities on the ground. They need to reform and continue their efforts to overcome outstanding problems with their neighbours. At this difficult time, Balkan policy-makers must also realise that they can, and must, play their part in helping others to help them.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

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