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## **The United Kingdom and EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans: From Ardent Champion of Expansion to Post-Brexit Irrelevance**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the United Kingdom's approach to the question of European Union enlargement in the Western Balkans. It shows that while Britain had no traditional attachment to the region, it championed expansion as part of its long-standing aim to widen EU membership to prevent deeper political union. However, as immigration from the EU increased after the 2004 enlargement and a Eurosceptic Conservative-led government took charge in 2010, official support for enlargement began to decline. Britain ceded its place as the strongest supporter of EU expansion to Germany. Meanwhile, during the referendum campaign on EU membership, the prospect that future enlargement could further increase the number of migrants emerged as a central point of debate. Although this discussion was primarily focused on Turkey, the Western Balkans also played a part. Therefore, even had the United Kingdom decided to remain in the EU, there is an argument to be made that Britain could well have become more opposed towards future expansion. As it is, the decision to leave the EU (Brexit), has ensured that Britain has now lost its say over enlargement.

**Keywords:** European Union, Enlargement, Western Balkans, United Kingdom, Brexit

### **Introduction**

On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Although the exact mechanics of departure have yet to be determined, and the timing decided, it nevertheless marks a watershed moment for the European Union. Leaving aside Algeria's departure from the EU after its independence from France in 1962, and Greenland's withdrawal in 1985, Brexit, as it is colloquially known, will mark the first time that a member state has formally abandoned membership. What makes the decision even more remarkable, and ironic, is the fact that the United Kingdom had long been regarded as a champion of enlarging the European Union. Since it first joined the EEC, in 1973, it has supported the integration of new members. Notably, it was a champion of the 2004 enlargement process, which saw the membership of the EU jump from 15 to 25. Subsequently, it supported the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, in 2007, and Croatia's membership, in 2013. At the same time, it was seen to be a powerful advocate of further enlargement. For many years, the United Kingdom stood at the forefront of efforts to promote Turkey's membership of the bloc. Importantly, it also lent a powerful voice to efforts to encourage the countries of the Western Balkans to join the EU – a position that was also closely related to its efforts to stabilise Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

And yet, beginning in 2010, this began to change with the election of a Conservative-led government that was more outwardly hostile to the European Union. While the Foreign Office was still keen to stress that the United Kingdom was committed to further EU expansion, and that it remained a lead actor in the enlargement process, the reality was that

Britain ceased to champion expansion (Euractiv, 21 December 2014). Set against an increasingly hostile debate over immigration, and a growing tide of Euroscepticism, Britain's political leaders began to shy away from openly advocating further expansion. This ran hand in hand with growing calls from within the ruling Conservative Party for the United Kingdom to hold a vote to leave the EU, a position that was strongly supported by key sections of the popular press. In early 2016, the Government finally announced that a referendum would be held. The campaign that followed saw the United Kingdom make a radical break with the past. From having been an ardent advocate of enlargement, the question of future expansion became politically toxic. Indeed, there is even a good case to be made that had the UK voted to stay in the EU it would have become one of the more powerful voices against further expansion. As it is, the decision to leave the EU has now rendered the United Kingdom wholly irrelevant in the enlargement debate.

This article analyses how British support for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans has evolved. It starts by exploring the way in which Britain traditionally viewed enlargement. It will then examine the relationship between Britain and the Western Balkans, showing that while there was a strong ideological support for enlargement there was little by way of close cultural, economic or social connection with the Western Balkans. This meant that there was not a strong constituency pushing for expansion into the region. It then proceeds to show how, following the large-scale movement of people into Britain following the 2004 round of enlargement, support for enlargement diminished as popular opposition to the EU grew. This in turn fuelled the political debate over British membership of the Union and led to the Brexit referendum. Finally, the piece will show how the question of the Western Balkans entered the Brexit campaign and how the decision to leave has effectively, though not formally, ended the United Kingdom's say over the process of enlargement.

### **Britain and European Union enlargement**

Since joining the European Union, the United Kingdom has been committed to the enlargement of the European Union (House of Lords 2013). Indeed, as one of the 'Big Three' members of the EU, it was often regarded as the most important champion of the bloc's expansion. This support for enlargement was a direct reflection of the underlying philosophy of successive British governments towards the process of European integration. 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 antidote to this process (Grant 2006). This approach was perhaps most neatly encapsulated in an episode of the classic British political comedy, *Yes Minister*. In the scene, Jim Hacker, the fictional Minister of Administrative Affairs, is discussing Britain's relationship with the then European Economic Community (EEC) with his 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'. Hacker then asks why, if that is the case, Britain had been pushing for more members. Sir Humphrey replies, "the more members it has, the more arguments it can stir up, the more futile and impotent it becomes." ('The Devil You Know', Series 2, Episode 5, 1982.) This sketch has become legendary for the way in which it managed to encapsulate traditional British thinking towards the European Union and on the issue of enlargement.

Although the rationale for encouraging expansion was primarily – though not exclusively – driven by the wish to prevent a further deepening of political ties within the EU, over the decades London became an important potential ally for aspiring members. Britain 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,<sup>1</sup> in 2004. Meanwhile,

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of Cyprus and Malta, British support was strengthened by the fact that both were former colonies and members of the Commonwealth of Nations, and thus had special ties with Britain. They

at a popular level, enlargement enjoyed relatively strong public support in Britain. A Eurobarometer survey taken in 2006 showed that while Britain was not the strongest supporter of EU enlargement amongst the pre-enlargement EU-15, a plurality (44 per cent) of those expressing a view favoured further expansion. This stood in marked contrast to the majorities against enlargement in Germany (66%), Luxembourg (65%), France (62%), Austria (61%), and Finland (60%) (European Commission 2006). Following on from the ‘big bang’ enlargement in 2004, the United Kingdom supported the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Union, in 2007.

Meanwhile, Britain remained a stalwart supporter of Turkish accession to the European Union (see House of Commons 2012). This was in many ways the ultimate example of the British tactic of avoiding deeper integration 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. With a population close to 80 million, Turkey would be the second largest member of the Union. 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. Britain long stood out as Turkey’s champion within the EU. While French and German politicians have over the years expressed their reservations about the Turkish EU entry (see Barysch 2007), 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. In July 2010, David Cameron, who had been elected prime minister just two months earlier, told an audience that he was, “the strongest possible advocate” of Turkish membership (Cameron 2010).

In July 2013, the United Kingdom warmly welcomed Croatia’s accession – the European Union’s first foray into the Western Balkans. London was particularly pleased 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 Croatia 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% (see Čović 2012). By the time it acceded, in July 2013, support for membership was extremely low and there was little trust in EU institutions (Zakoshek 2012). Britain identified Croatia as a potentially useful ally in its developing efforts to renegotiate the terms of its EU membership (British diplomat, comments to the author, May 2013).

### **Britain’s relationship with the Balkans**

Against this backdrop of general support for EU enlargement, the United Kingdom had always favoured expansion into the Balkans. However, it never stood out as a specific advocate for the region in the same way as, for example, Greece and Austria have been a champion of the EU’s expansion into the region (see Balfour and Stratulat 2015). As one official put it, Britain has never regarded the Balkans as its ‘backyard’ in the way that other EU members do (British official, comment to the author, July 2014).

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were also identified as possible allies on a range of areas. For example, in the case of Cyprus, which has a large international business sector, it was understood that Nicosia would be strongly opposed to efforts by certain members to harmonise tax rates. Britain, along with Greece, was also instrumental in ensuring that Cyprus could join the European Union despite the continue division of the island, which some members, such as France, had viewed as potentially problematic. However, in the case of others, British support, though strong, was not as pronounced. For example, in the case of Poland, Germany was seen to be its key ally and champion within the Union.

In part, this is down to history. Traditionally, the UK does not have strong ties to the Western Balkans. Certainly, there have been periods of British interest in the area. For instance, England was one of the powers that negotiated the 1699 Treaty of Karlowitz, which ended the war between the Ottoman Empire and Austro-Hungary. And a century ago, Britain's defence of Serbia and Montenegro was a key factor leading to the First World War. However, for much of the second half of the twentieth century, Britain took little interest in the region. At a time of decolonisation and the Cold War, Britain's political focus lay elsewhere. Of course, 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, there was little willingness to intervene. 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 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.

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 were few. 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 in comparison to other communities. Indeed, 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 member states. According to the most recent census figures, from 2011, the total population of those born in the Balkans and now living in the UK stood at around 65,000.<sup>2</sup> This compares with, for example, 694,000 from India; 579,000 from Poland; 274,000 from Germany; 191,000 Nigeria; and 177,000 from the United States (Office for National Statistics 2013). This means that there has never been a particularly large or powerful constituency in Britain to press the case for membership of the Balkan states. Nor has there been any overarching interest in pressing the case for enlargement into the Balkans to placate a domestic audience.

Lastly, there have been no significant economic factors driving Britain towards supporting the region. Despite strong efforts from the Foreign Office to try to encourage British investment in the Balkans (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. In 2015, just one Western Balkans country featured in the top 50 export destinations for British goods: Macedonia in 46<sup>th</sup> place. Not one featured in the top 50 UK import sources (Office for National Statistics 2016). This lack of commercial interest in the region is also supported by anecdotal evidence. For example, one ambassador from the region, upon his arrival in London, decided to focus on building trade ties between his country and Britain. However, he was quickly informed by a banker with a strong interest in the Balkans that this would be an

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<sup>2</sup> 'Of the 28,000 Kosovan-born residents in 2011, 70 per cent 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 per cent (5,000), arrived during the period 1997-2000...The break up of the former Yugoslavia after 1992 resulted in many 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 per cent of the 8,000 Bosnian-born residents in England and Wales in 2011. Of the 8,000 Croatian-born residents in 2011, 33 per cent arrived in the period 1997-2000; 19 per cent of the 9,000 residents born in Serbia and Montenegro arrived in the same period.' (Office for National Statistics 2013)

all but pointless task. British businesses just were not that interested in the area (Ambassador of a Western Balkan state, comments to the author, April, 2014). This difficulty in drumming up trade has also been experienced by other ambassadors from the region (Ambassador of a Western Balkan state, comments to the author, September 2014).

### **The United Kingdom's attitudes towards Balkan enlargement**

Where there has been a strong and specific British interest in the EU accession of the Balkans, it has tended to be narrowly focused on Bosnia-Herzegovina and the interrelated accession paths of Serbia and Kosovo (International official, comments to the author, October 2014). (Or, as one Serbian official told the author in 2014, 'Britain is obsessed by Bosnia and Kosovo'.) In the case of Bosnia, British involvement has been driven by several factors. In part, it seems to be fostered by guilt for not having played a greater part during the conflict in the 1990s (British official, comments to the author, October 2014). This has had a much greater impact on British foreign policy thinking than is often realised (The Economist, 15 May 2011). Britain has played an enormous role supporting the reconstruction and stabilisation of the state following the end of the war in 1995. It 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 (International official, comments to the author, October 2014). This was seen most obviously during the period when Paddy Ashdown served as the High Representative. Thereafter, Britain paid particularly close attention to the country because of the strong personal interest in the situation shown by the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague (The Economist, 15 May 2011). However, British interest in Bosnia 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 (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2014). This in many ways served to cement Britain's reputation as the most engaged EU member in Bosnia (EU official, comment to the author, 2012). And yet, at the same time, the attention given to Bosnia has been declining relative to the focus given to other post-conflict areas around the world. For example, the Department for International Development (DFID) ended its operations in the country in February 2011.<sup>3</sup>

As for Serbia and Kosovo, British interest has been a product of its close involvement in the situation in the conflict in 1999. As noted, the United Kingdom led the call for NATO air strikes against Serbia. Thereafter, it continued to take an interest in the territory's development. 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 (Reuters, 6 February 2006). Following the declaration of independence, in February 2008, London became, 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 Kosovo's wider recognition on the international stage, but has also been keen to see an enhancement of Kosovo's EU integration prospects (UK Government 2016).

At the same time as London has been at the forefront of efforts to promote the accession of Kosovo, it has also been active in trying to reduce Serbia's resistance to Kosovo's independence. 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

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<sup>3</sup> 'The DFID Bosnia and Herzegovina office is now closed', Bosnia and Herzegovina, DFID < <https://www.gov.uk/government/world/organisations/dfid-bosnia-herzegovina> > (Last accessed on 3 October 2016.) However, the site points out that 15% of all EU money spent in the country comes from the UK.

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 (B92, 3 August 2008); 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 by 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 and Kosovo (and Serbia), the United Kingdom tended not to take the lead on pressing the case for further EU enlargement elsewhere in the region: Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania (International official, comments to the author, October 2014. British official, comments to the author, October 2014). At present, the frontrunner in the accession process is Montenegro. Given its relative small size, and the fact that it has few obvious issues of concern, it is widely seen to be the best candidate for the next round of accession. To this end, Britain has supported its EU entry. In the case of Macedonia, Britain has not taken a particularly active role. Of course, it is in favour of its accession to the European Union. However, while the UK led the way in advocating that it be given candidate status during its presidency in 2005 (British official, comments to the author, 2014), it has not emerged as an especially strong advocate for its EU membership since then. For example, it did not do anything to try to break the deadlock between Skopje and Athens over the name issue.

Of course, none of this is to say that Britain has not undertaken any steps to enhance their accession prospects. It has. For instance, it provided £3 million of funding for activities aimed at enhancing various sectors, such as 'judicial reform and media freedom' and donated a further £10 million on conflict prevention (UK Government 2016). It also established a secondment programme for British officials to prospective members. However, in many ways these efforts tended to be more concentrated on initiatives that help Britain rather than the countries themselves (British official, comments to the author, October 2014), such as by tackling wider security challenges that emanating from the region. The United Kingdom certainly did not emerge as a passionate 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's accession the same year.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom's attitude towards Albania's candidacy proved to be interesting because it appeared to reveal the first tangible evidence of a more sceptical and cautious approach towards enlargement. In December 2013, London decided to align with four other EU members – Netherlands, Germany, France, and Denmark – in blocking Albania's candidacy for EU membership (Euractiv, 21 December 2014). Although this decision was subsequently reversed at the European Council in June 2014, the move nevertheless came as quite a surprise to many observers. In Tirana, the feeling had been that Britain was one of the few countries they could rely on (Foreign office official, comments to the author, June 2014). In part, this change reflected the fact that Britain, like most of the rest of the European Union, increasingly believes that it is vital that new members can meet the demands of membership. Few wanted to see a repeat of the problems presented by Romania and Bulgaria. As the House of Lords report stated: 'We welcome the increased focus on implementing real, lasting changes in aspirant countries ahead of their accession, and the prominence of the rule of law in ongoing dialogues about enlargement. We also support the strict use of conditionality, so that progress towards membership is inseparable from concrete reform and vice versa.' (House of Lords 2013). At the same time, Britain had long raised concerns over organised crime in Albania (British official, comments to the author, August 2014). However, in many ways, the decision over Albania also appeared to be indicative of a

more fundamental transformation in the relationship between Britain and the EU that was already reshaping British policy towards enlargement.

### **Freedom of Movement and the enlargement debate**

Speaking in June 2014, Baroness Warsi, a Foreign Office Minister, stated: “The UK continues to be a strong supporter of enlargement based on firm but fair conditionality, focusing on key concerns shared by many Member States, particularly around the rule of law. Enlargement has proved a huge driver of peace, prosperity and progress across our continent” (Hansard 2014). Certainly, within the corridors of the Foreign Office there was still a commitment to enlargement (British official, comment to the author, October 2014). However, there was no doubt that mainstream political support for enlargement was in decline. This was primarily due to the growing focus on immigration in British political debate – a development that saw the issue of EU freedom of movement conflated, deliberately or otherwise, with the arrival of people from outside the 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. In contrast, when Romania and Bulgaria joined, in 2007, the United Kingdom decided to join other EU members and impose transitional restrictions on both countries (see Gower and Hawkins 2013), much to the disappointment of Sofia and Bucharest (House of Commons 2008). Seven-year controls were also introduced when Croatia joined the Union, in 2013 (Gower 2013). This change in policy over transition periods had been driven by the large-scale arrival of workers that occurred after 2004. Originally, the expectation had been that the number of arrivals from the new member states would be 15,000 per year (BBC News, 22 August 2006). In 2015, net migration from the EU reached 184,000 (BBC News, 26 May 2016). British public opinion – encouraged by a media that was dominated by newspapers that take a distinctly Eurosceptic line<sup>4</sup> – now became increasingly focused on the demographic implications of further EU expansion. A December 2013 poll showed British voters identified limits on new arrivals from elsewhere in the Union as the single most important issue that should be tackled in any UK effort to reform its relationship with the EU (YouGov 2013).

Meanwhile, this growing focus on freedom of movement led to the massive surge in support for the arch-Eurosceptic and anti-immigration United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (see Gottfried 2014). In May 2014, it received the most support of any British party in European Parliament elections (House of Commons 2014). Just a few months later, in October and November 2014, it won its first ever UK parliamentary seats in bye-elections held following the defection of two Conservative MPs; both citing immigration as the reason for their decision to join UKIP (Carswell 2014; Reckless 2014). This led to panic in the Conservative Party, which has found itself under increasing pressure to appeal to those its traditional supporters, many of whom were either sympathetic to UKIP’s policies or had formally switched allegiances in the poll. A seismic shift took place in the party. Whereas in the past, enlargement was viewed as the best way in which to stave off efforts at greater EU centralisation, this was now offset by the cost of having potentially more immigrants arriving from these new member states (The Guardian, 21 December 2013; The Observer, 30

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<sup>4</sup> Of the mainstream British newspapers, The Sun, The Mail, The Express, The Daily Telegraph and The Times all took a generally Eurosceptic line. (Although The Times and the Mail on Sunday both eventually supported a vote to remain in the EU.) The Independent and The Guardian are generally seen to be pro-European. However, the degree to which they drive opposition to the European Union was contested. As noted, ‘It would be a mistake to conflate the role of the press in reporting European Union affairs with wider economic, social and political developments which feed criticism and cynicism about the EU. The British media reflects rather than creates popular attitudes although it does so through the distorting prism of a massive magnifying glass.’ (Palmer 2013)



December 2013). Enlargement was no longer an unquestioned central tenet of faith in the party. Rather, it became increasingly subject to qualification. It could only continue if it is done in such a way that it limits the freedom of movement of citizens of acceding countries. 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.” (Euractiv, 21 December 2013.)

Such views also started to creep into the Labour Party, which was traditionally fully supportive of Britain’s membership of the EU. In a speech before British business leaders, Ed Miliband, the party leader, 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.” (Miliband 2012) Even the Liberal Democrats, the party that has most consistently maintained an openly pro-European position in British politics, became more cautious on the issue of freedom of movement and, consequently, EU expansion. Officially, it continued to support further EU enlargement. 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 of lasting peace and stability in the Western Balkans.’ However, it too became far less committed to enlargement than it once was. While it maintained the rhetoric about enlargement as a long-term goal, it did little to press the case publicly in the short term (Senior Liberal Democrat figure, correspondence with the author, July 2014).

In the period that followed, the link between large-scale immigration and future enlargement became ever more explicit. This was largely fed by growing concerns over the imminent end of transitional controls on Bulgarian and Romanian citizens. On New Year’s Day 2014, one television station sent a camera crew to Luton Airport (which handles a lot of flight to central and eastern Europe) to interview Keith Vaz, the Labour Party MP who chaired 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 arrivals from the two Eastern Balkans countries that the press had predicted, he nevertheless pointed out that Macedonia, 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 that the matter of further immigration would need to be put to the British people (Sky News, 1 January 2014).

Of course, there was very little rationality to this debate. For a start, the numbers of new arrivals in question would be relatively small. The entire combined population of the seven Western Balkan states lining up to join the European Union is less than eighteen million. This is considerably less than the 22 million in Romania, which joined in 2007. Moreover, there are very good reasons to argue that when these countries do join the EU, Britain would not be their natural destination of choice. For most of the region, Germany is a much more likely option. Indeed, Britain tends to lie relatively low in the list of preferred destinations for the Balkan countries. 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 (Gallup Balkan Monitor 2009) Such views were only encouraged by the fact that while the rest of the European Union has introduced visa liberalisation for almost all the Balkans (Kosovo is the exception), in 2009, the United Kingdom had kept its strict controls in place. Indeed, it was notoriously difficult and expensive to get a British visa. 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). This had a very negative effect on how the countries of the region saw the UK (United Kingdom MEP, comments to

the author, July 2014). It is also interesting in that this has been an issue that has galvanised at least part of the Balkan community in Britain (Balkan Insight, 2 November 2011). As one observer put it, the immigration policy was not, “in accordance with the rhetoric on enlargement.” (International official, comments to the author, October 2014.)

### **The Brexit decision**

Perhaps the most significant effect of the debate over freedom of movement was the way in which it fed into the question of Britain’s continued membership of the European Union (The Economist, 12 December 2012; The Times, 25 August 2014). Ever since the Conservatives had taken office, in May 2010, Britain had increasingly questioned its place in the EU. The obvious wish of so many figures within the major coalition partner to leave the EU had seen the government become increasingly confrontational in its dealing with the EU to appease these hard liners. But it was not enough to appease the party’s Europhobic wing, especially given the growing popular and media hostility towards freedom of movement. In a major speech, in January 2013, Cameron announced his intention to seek a ‘new settlement’ on Britain’s place in the EU and then hold a referendum on the country’s continued membership of the EU. Although such a referendum was impossible at that stage, due to fierce opposition from the pro-EU Liberal Democrats, the announcement nevertheless contributed to a worsening of relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom. In the months that followed, observers noted how the EU was taking less notice of British views across a range of policy areas (Financial Times, 6 March 2013).

This growing alienation between the EU and Britain applied as much to enlargement as to any other issues. Indeed, it may have been even stronger given that it seemed pointless to pay attention to British positions on the acceptance of new members when it was so actively talking about leaving the ‘club’. Perhaps the most obvious example of this change was Britain’s absence from a major German policy initiative designed to reinforce the EU’s commitment towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. By 2014, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, had begun to position Germany as the new champion of the Balkans expansion (Euractiv, 13 June 2014). In August that year, a high-level summit of leaders from the region was held in Berlin. This new forum for dialogue, which became known as the Berlin Process, quickly attracted the interest of other EU members. In 2015, the Summit took place in Vienna. In 2016, it was held in Paris. In 2017, it will take place in Rome. Notably, however, the United Kingdom did not participate. Even as other large EU members sought to lend their active support to the Process, and be seen to be involved, Britain remained notably absent. When asked about this, German officials insist that there was never any attempt to exclude any EU members (German official, comments to the author, September 2016).

By this stage, the countries of the region had concluded that Germany was now the main actor driving the enlargement process in the region and, hence, should be the main object of their attention. As one regional diplomat noted, ‘Germany is now seen as the most important country, full stop. United States comes second.’ (Former ambassador from a Balkan state, comments to the author, July 2014). Diminishing British interest in enlargement, alongside its increasingly hostile tone over immigration and freedom of movement, saw its influence and standing reduced. Indeed, the countries of the region increasingly began to question whether it was worth engaging with London at all. As they saw it, their limited diplomatic and political resources would be better used engaging with countries that could help them to join the EU, such as Germany and France, rather than be directed at a country that may well be on course to leave the EU. Indeed, one could detect a sense that aligning with Britain may be counterproductive because it was far better to be seen to be a good European (Serbian official, comments to the author, July 2014). To counter this impression, British Embassies in the region sought to emphasise that enlargement was still high on the British agenda (British official, comments to the author, October 2014). However, it had little effect. There was a

marked decline in the level of regional engagement with London on enlargement issues. As one Serbian official noted, the last visit to London by a senior Serbian official working on enlargement was in May 2014 (Serbian official, comments to the author, September 2016).

Meanwhile, the march towards the final break with the region over enlargement came in May 2015, when the Conservative Party won a surprise victory in the general election. Without the opposition from the Liberal Democrats, which had suffered very heavy losses, Cameron now had no choice but to press ahead with his plan for a referendum. Over the course of that autumn, the British prime minister engaged in a re-negotiation with the EU. On 20 February 2016, it was announced that the referendum would take place on 23 June (BBC News, 20 February 2016).

Over the course of next four months, Britain engaged in a heated debate over its future membership of the European Union. Although the campaign ranged across many issues, three main themes emerged: the economy, sovereignty and immigration. It was in this third area that the question of enlargement once again emerged as a central point of discussion. Interestingly, however, the Balkans received relatively little attention. Although the literature put out by Vote Leave, the official group campaigning for Brexit, emphasised the fact that Albanian, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey were all candidates for membership (BBC News, 22 May 2016), the focus of attention was on Turkey (Ker-Lindsay 2017). Indeed, beyond this, there was barely any attention on the Western Balkans. One of the few examples was when Michael Gove, one of the leading figures in the Leave campaign, suggested that Britain could team up with Albanian, Serbia and Bosnia in a free trade zone if it left the EU. This provided one of most amusing moments of light relief in the campaign. This provided one of the most memorable moments of light relief in the campaign as Gove was mocked for his comments (Balkan Insight, 21 April 2016). Indeed, even Edi Rama, the Prime Minister of Albania, became involved. In an article published in *The Times*, he reminded Gove that his country was in fact pursuing EU membership, and that it was probably not the best example for Britain to emulate if it left the EU (Rama 2016). Nevertheless, the attention given to freedom of movement and the possibility of further immigrants from new members, forced the government to take a much harder line approach towards the question of enlargement than ever before. Most notably, in her one and only major speech during the campaign, Theresa May, the Home Secretary, who was a reluctantly supporting to campaign to remain in the EU, and would go on to become prime minister after the vote to leave, stated:

And it is time to question some of the traditional British assumptions about our engagement with the EU. Do we stop the EU going in the wrong direction by shouting on the sidelines, or by leading and making the case for taking Europe in a better direction? And do we really still think it is in our interests to support automatically and unconditionally the EU's further expansion? The states now negotiating to join the EU include Albania, Serbia and Turkey - countries with poor populations and serious problems with organised crime, corruption, and sometimes even terrorism. We have to ask ourselves, is it really right that the EU should just continue to expand, conferring upon all new member states all the rights of membership? Do we really think now is the time to contemplate a land border between the EU and countries like Iran, Iraq and Syria? Having agreed the end of the European principle of 'ever closer union', it is time to question the principle of ever wider expansion (May 2016).

A few weeks later, on 23 June, 2016, the United Kingdom narrowly voted – 52-48% – to leave the European Union. The outcome had an immediate and dramatic effect on the way in which Britain was treated in EU circles. Within days, British officials began to note a backlash from EU partners in meetings. There was a sense that Britain had forfeited its right to have a string say over the future development of the European Union (British official,

comments to the author, July 2016). This was particularly strongly felt on the question of enlargement. While, formally speaking, the United Kingdom remains a member of the EU, and is fully entitled to vote on enlargement matters, the reality is that British officials understand that it would be inappropriate to take a position on specific elements of further expansion of the EU, let alone block the opening or closing of chapters, while Britain is preparing to leave (British official, comments to the author, July 2016). Likewise, EU officials, and officials from other member states, have also made it clear to London that they do not feel that Britain should take a strong stand on enlargement matters any longer (British official, comments to the author, July 2016). To this extent, and perhaps ironically given its history, the very first casualty of Brexit was the United Kingdom direct influence over future enlargement (British official, comments to the author, July 2016).

And yet, the UK has not entirely relinquished its rights. Interestingly, in October 2016, it blocked the opening of two chapters with Montenegro that related to freedom of movement of workers (Balkan Insight, 12 October 2016). At the time, it was suggested that London was covering its position. If Brexit does not occur, Britain would not find that the other EU members had taken decisions that would allow citizens of new members to have unfettered rights to move around the EU that the UK would then have to accept because it abstained on the vote. Even now, the politics of immigration continues to dominate the UK's relationship with the European Union.

Notwithstanding its decision to leave the EU, British officials are keen to emphasise that the United Kingdom remains supportive of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and that it will not turn its back on the region. Under the Brexit slogan 'Global Britain', the UK is attempting to show that leaving the EU does not mean a withdrawal from international, or even European, affairs. In October 2016, the UK announced that it would be sending troops to Kosovo to bolster the NATO mission there (Ministry of Defence 2016). Meanwhile, officials still emphasise the value in the stability that EU membership would bring (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2017). Perhaps the most significant development to this end was the announcement by the British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, in November 2016, that Britain would host the 2018 Western Balkans Summit in London (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2016). And yet, all this cannot disguise the fact that the UK has lost its single most valuable tool for engagement with, and influence over, the Western Balkans: its ability to play a direct role in deciding on the region's EU accession process.

Meanwhile, and rather ironically given the role Britain had traditionally played as an advocate of enlargement, some observers have also noted that Brexit may in fact be better for the Balkans than a vote to remain. Given the fierce rhetoric that had emerged during the campaign over freedom of movement and future enlargement, there is a good case to be made that had Britain opted to stay in the EU, it may well have become one of the most sceptical members regarding future expansion. It is very possible that the government would have taken a hostile line over enlargement as a means by which to show those that had voted against membership of the EU that their concerns had indeed been heard. As one senior diplomat from the Balkans commented, 'perhaps it is better that the UK has decided to leave the EU.' (Diplomat from a Western Balkan state, comments to the author, September 2016.)

## **Conclusion**

Traditionally, the United Kingdom was the most fervent supporter of European Union enlargement. This was largely because it saw the continued expansion of the EU as the best defence against efforts by the other members to pursue greater political integration. To this extent, successive British Governments took a strong interest in helping the Balkans to join the European Union. Even if Britain has tended only to pay close attention to a small number

of countries in the region – 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, the UK's overall attitude towards enlargement, and its ability to shape the Union's policies in this area, underwent a profound transformation over the course of the Conservative-led period of coalition government, and particularly since the latter half of 2013. The increasingly shrill immigration debate in Britain, coupled with rising Euroscepticism and growing support for UKIP, meant that the British Government was 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 meant the arrival of more people to British shores. The fact that there was no appetite within the EU to allow for restrictions on freedom of movement beyond the transitional periods allowed after a country joined the EU, meant that this matter became an either/or issue: either more expansion and more new immigrants, or no enlargement and no new arrivals. It appears London tacitly opted for the latter. While the Foreign Office was adamant that Britain remained a driving force behind expansion, this was not how it was perceived beyond the United Kingdom, or even amongst pro-Europeans within Britain. Meanwhile, the discussions over immigration presented a very negative picture about British support for further enlargement within the Balkans. The UK had ceased to be force behind enlargement that it once was. Germany now emerged as the critical actor. The referendum only served to emphasise this. Enlargement and freedom of movement became a central issue in the debate, albeit with discussions primarily focused on Turkey. In the end, the vote to leave the European Union has ensured that Britain has effectively ceased to have any say on the matter. After having shouted loudest for enlargement for so long, Britain's gradually declining say over future EU expansion has now been silenced altogether.

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