

Europe reaches its Balkan crossroads

Does Brexit mean that Europe's core will look eastwards? **Alida Vračić** examines the prospects for Balkan integration – and what the region must do to prepare itself

The worldwide frenzy caused by Brexit didn't escape the Western Balkans. For some in the region, Brexit was conclusive evidence of the EU's failure to keep itself together. It also signalled that EU enlargement as we once knew it will not return. For others, Brexit is an unforeseen opportunity: the EU may just shift its focus to the Western Balkans in a desperate attempt to restore its essence and cohesiveness. Brexit, to them, has revealed that the EU's greater problem lies within its core member states rather than among its newcomers. This is a revelation the Western Balkans can play with. As ever, the truth rests somewhere in the middle.

Although membership of the EU is still attractive, according to various surveys, the Union's appeal has waned over time. Enlargement conditions and bureaucratic hurdles, coupled with complexities on the ground, have led to many conflicting and confusing EU stances towards the Balkans. Often the EU's priorities were unrelated to the region, yet had a direct impact on its future. Unresolved domestic and bilateral disputes within and between the countries of the region laid bare the structural limitations of the process, leaving the EU's transformative power with a very limited effect. No country but Croatia, which joined in 2013, has come close to membership. But in many awkward ways, the region is already part of the EU. It shares borders with EU member states. It trades with the bloc. NATO countries are close by. Several important transport and trade routes pass through the Balkans. In 2015, at the peak of the refugee crisis, the region proved a virtually matchless partner for the EU. From border controls to security matters, it was clear that the Balkans shouldn't be left out.

Western Balkan leaders with poor EU integration records can use Brexit to cement their own populist agendas, deploying well-known destructive nationalism to take the region backwards. Dreary economies and soaring unemployment rates have created



Alida Vračić is Mercator-IPC fellow at the Stiftung Wissenschaft and Politik Berlin and Executive Director and founder of the Bosnia and Herzegovina think tank Populari

deep public apathy. Paying lip service to the EU by complying with minimum requirements has been enough to let elites who have ruled since the 1990s prolong their political lives. Numerous ready-to-launch reforms were crafted, but there was never the political will to implement them. If Brexit is seen as an additional spur for the decline of liberal solutions, the spillover effects may be far-reaching. Extremely weak institutional set-ups, including in the judiciary and police, may not respond as adequately as in the rest of Europe if challenged by a new populist government. Strong political and party control, including over the media, along with the public's disengagement from political life, offer a bleak outlook.

Another, perhaps less observed issue that Brexit may trigger in the Western Balkans is the reinvigorated positions of non-European players. Russia enjoys influence in countries with an Orthodox majority. In the energy sector, it holds significant political sway through membership of various international organisations. Moscow's refusal in 2014 to support the extension of a Western peacekeeping force in Bosnia is another good example of its influence. The British-German push for Bosnia's EU accession also raised Russia's hackles, with the Kremlin protesting that Euro-Atlantic integration is not the only option or direction for Bosnia. Turkey nurtures relations with predominately Muslim "kin communities". It is omnipresent in the region with cultural and religious networks as well as instruments of political influence, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and FYR Macedonia. Both Russia and Turkey could exploit the dissatisfaction of Western Balkan populations, who desperately need progress, by offering governance models that are very different from Europe's.

Western Balkan states' chronic lack of progress leaves no country ready to enter the EU. Citizens need a breakthrough from stagnation, and the real hazard is that political elites will simply manipulate Brexit to continue business as usual. The EU must maintain its focus on development in the Balkans. The fact that Theresa May visited Germany and France first following her appointment as the UK's new Prime Minister speaks volumes about the relationship she wants to have with the EU, which is facing a greater challenge than before to fulfil its role as a global power. While it could find a way to its full potential by including other new members, Western Balkan countries must define their strategic goals and set – and meet – their own firm deadlines. ■

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