

To be or not to be an EU member state – A question for the Balkan aspirants as well?

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Last month, a majority of British voters decided that the UK should leave the European Union (EU). In the wake of the Brexit result, anti-EU politicians in a host of member states began to float the idea of putting the same 'in-out' option to electorates in their own countries. As the economic and political fallout of the UK's choice to withdraw from the EU continues to unfold, an acute sense of uncertainty gathers steam and ripples not just through the remaining member states but also their EU-hopeful neighbours in the Balkans. What will the departure of the UK from the EU mean for the Balkan enlargement process?

Any predictions about the future are wild guesses as long as the EU still stands on shifting grounds. Whether the now 27 member states will end up closing – or else breaking – ranks on European integration in reaction to the outcome of the UK vote is obviously consequential for the prospect of further EU widening. Yet, even if a Brexit contagion is somehow averted, the risk that the anti-EU fever spreads or gets worse among EU member states and their Balkan counterparts remains high so long as the 'business as usual' approach to enlargement prevails.

The EU fleet keeps running

Should there be life for the EU project after the Brexit storm – as many European leaders still seem to hold true – the integration of the Balkan countries into the now fractured bloc is expected to go on. Making good on the decade-long commitment towards the Balkan countries is a sensible course of action at a time when the credibility and ability of the Union to deliver look frayed. In addition, pursuing the integration of the Balkans as a means of building reliable partnerships on the basis of shared values and interests makes strategic sense for an EU whose enduring power of attraction has been battered by multiple crises.

However, the mere warranty uttered at last week's Paris Summit on the Western Balkans that enlargement has not been called into question by the outcome of the British referendum is only partially reassuring if the European integration of the region keeps struggling to advance and reap successes. Although the conditionality developed for the Balkans is more rigorous and complex than in any previous rounds, it has not managed so far to whet the member states' appetite for expansion and has fallen short of achieving (sustainable) results on the ground in the aspiring countries.

The logic of 'strict but fair' that has come to dominate the EU's approach to enlargement might be well-intended in view of past lessons and ongoing Balkan realities. However, it has also often allowed the process to fall hostage to specific bilateral disputes and the vagaries of domestic politics in some member states, without lending a vigorously helping hand next to the firm hand consistently shown to the Balkans. Political, economic and technical support from EU capitals to the Balkan countries has been largely selective, mainly rhetorical and essentially disproportional compared to the kind of demands and expectations set on the region. In time, this has slowed down progress on the dossier, weakened the credibility of the policy and exposed the lack of positive narrative on enlargement needed to rake in public support.

Member states will not backtrack at this point on the enhanced conditionality for the Balkan region and, to be sure, there is nothing wrong with the EU clearly marking its 'red lines' for would-be members. However, something will have to give in the post-Brexit era because, as things stand at present, the EU's strategy seems neither able to prevent democratic backsliding in the region, nor able to foster the Balkans' economic convergence with the Union. Signs of state capture, paralysing political polarisation, media freedom infringements, and corruption stain the record of most (including front-running) Balkan countries, despite many years in which the EU has been banging on about the priority given to democratic conditions. Moreover, crumbling industrial production, soaring (youth) unemployment, large trade deficits, sizeable external debts, and bad demographics weigh rather heavily on the still-not-functioning-market economies in the Balkans, putting a damper on the (recently upgraded) EU economic model for the region.

The more the EU fails to deliver on its promise of prosperity and well-being, the more people in the Balkans lose hope in the future and in the value of pursuing European integration. Selling a drawn-out EU accession in the Balkans is increasingly unfeasible if hard work is perceived to return few or no tangible benefits in the short or long term. If political elites in the region were not able to fulfil the membership criteria when electorates were overwhelmingly in favour of joining the Union, can they honestly be expected to advance on the reform agenda now that their populations are turning away from the EU membership aspiration?

Since 2014, a handful of member states have sought to breathe a new lease of life in the Balkan enlargement with concrete projects aimed at modernising and integrating the region's economic and transportation infrastructure in the context of the so-called Berlin Process. Three years later, the achievements are minimal and insufficient to ease the growing frustration with enlargement. Some EU capitals understand that results in the Balkans dossier matter – a view echoed this June in the EU's brand new Global Strategy – but this has yet to produce meaningful change in practice.

As the UK bids farewell to the Union, the group of enlargement-friendly countries is shrinking. In reality, over the years, hostility towards immigration had already turned many British politicians increasingly cautious about enlargement and manifestly critical of it during the referendum campaign. Perhaps from outside the EU, London will resort to its age-old tactics: helping the Balkans to join the Union for no other reason than to try to sabotage the integration project by increasing the club's number of players. While the EU should be aware of potential British shenanigans, the key challenge will in fact be to admit that the Balkan enlargement is in trouble with or without the Brits throwing a spanner in the works. Instead of doing the same and expecting different results, the EU should therefore seriously reflect on devising new instruments in its enlargement toolbox and possibly changing gear in its approach to the Balkans.

Member states keep abandoning ship

And because current events advise against simply dismissing mind-boggling scenarios, the possibility of further EU disintegration needs to be taken into account. In that case, the EU might continue to hold its door open to new members as existing ones are departing, perhaps in an attempt to rescue the integration project and under the large assumption that there would still be something (worthwhile) to salvage. However, the more likely upshot of such dynamics is not damage control but no more enlargement at all. Ultimately, why would the Balkan countries still want to join a Union that others – maybe even core and founding states – run away from?

Already, the EU's toils to respond to various modern day crises while maintaining its unity, principles and values have exposed a valley of hypocrisy between the ideal of conditionality and the grim reality in different member states. This increases the temptation for countries – including in the Balkans – to wonder if membership is still worth the effort, and suggests that the EU should articulate a more plausible pitch on the advantages of accession in the future. The irony is that in spite of the EU's internal inconsistencies and fragmentation, solutions to ongoing and upcoming problems are more likely to emerge and be effective if (neighbouring) countries work and stick together. This makes European cooperation and the Balkans' integration a strategic asset both for the region and the Union. Seen from this perspective, there is only one question still pending: *how* – not *if* – enlargement should happen.

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