Michael Gove is arguing the UK should be like states that want to join the EU

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Michael Gove's recent speech—the facts of life say leave: why Britain and Europe will be better off after we vote leave—was a call to arms for the Leave campaign to inject the campaign with optimism. Gove wanted to oppose Project Fear and the idea that leaving the EU would make Britain more uncertain and unstable than status quo. However, Gove's logic is circular, claims ***Eleanor Knott****. Essentially, he is arguing that the UK should try to be like the very states that are seeking to join the EU.*

For example, Gove argued that should the UK leave the EU, the UK would undoubtedly have access to the EU's free trade zone which goes "from Iceland to Turkey". He claimed that EU would be unlikely to turn away the UK given that "Bosnia, Serbia, Albania and the Ukraine" are members of the free trade area.

However states with EU free trade agreements, overwhelmingly, see these agreements as a stepping stone to EU membership. Albania and Serbia have been candidate countries to join the EU since 2014 and 2012, respectively. Bosnia has been promised the prospect of joining the EU when it is ready and, in February 2016, submitted its application to be an EU candidate country. Even Turkey has been an EU candidate country since 1999.

Pro-EU demonstration in Kiev, November 27, 2013

The exception of those named by Gove is Ukraine (not *the* Ukraine, as Gove quoted) which is not yet an EU candidate country. The EU does not yet consider Ukraine as ready to begin negotiations to join the EU. Ukrainian public opinion, however, is growing in support for EU membership. Between 47% and 59%, depending on the poll, support joining the EU in Ukraine. An absolute majority may not, always, support joining the EU, but it is the largest camp in contrast to alternatives, such as status quo or joining the Eurasian Customs Union.

The key difference between states that are signed up to EU agreements, "Bosnia, Serbia, Albania and the Ukraine" and those that do not, like Belarus, is the political willingness and public endorsement of relations with the EU and a

desire to join the EU as soon as possible. The stop gap to membership is that the EU wants more reform within candidate countries, in terms of accountability, transparency and corruption, before membership.

First, then, EU free trade agreements are a stepping stone to membership for many signatories. Second, these free trade agreements, such as the Deep and Comprehensive agreement (DCFTA) signed by Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in 2014, require "legislative approximation". In other words, to make a free trade agreement with the EU, states have to be willing to adopt EU acquis. In the case of DCFTA states, they adopted approximately 80-90% of EU acquis before signing.

Adopting acquis is an asymmetrical process. The EU determines its own common body of legislation and determines which of these should be adopted by those within the free trade zone. States within the free trade zone, therefore, are encumbered to adopt the acquis without the ability to influence what they are.

The case for leaving the EU is based on a misunderstanding of the relations between the EU and its non-EU neighbours. Free trade agreements offer their signatories, comparatively-speaking, worse deal than they offer EU member-states. The reason so many states have been willing to sign up to agreements and to adopt EU legislation in which they have no say is because of the value of access to a single market. This access is worth the costs of "regulation without representation" and, for many, conceived as a necessary step towards the eventual goal of EU membership, which would require adopting EU acquis anyhow.

Gove's argument, then, is circular: the UK should leave the EU and aspire to join a free trade area which is comprised by many states that want to join the EU. Why can't the UK just remain in the EU and influence what EU legislation looks like?

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