

The British people have voted to leave the European Union on the referendum held on June 23. The wait-and-see period is over, thus deep reflection, mature consideration and proper strategic decisions should be taken onwards as timing is important not to further lose European Integration perspective. The exit process officially may last two years but most probably it will take much longer since the negotiations would be far more complex. Predictions and estimations have been made on the different scenario, yet there is no certainty on the economic and political impact of a confirmed Brexit.

As far as EU enlargement concerns, the difficulty of foreseeing the impact is even more complex with too many factors to be considered. Much will depend on how the EU decides to respond and its ability to reform itself and overcome the crises, and to a lesser degree on the reaction of the candidate countries. In this brief we outline the three scenarios of the Brexit impact on the European future of the Western Balkan countries, which are all probable.

### Business as usual

Brexit may have no significant effect, and the enlargement perspectives for the rest of the Western Balkans are 'business as usual', a continuation of the current enlargement dynamics of gradual but slow progress. The enlargement fatigue had long ago been the state of affairs, and after Croatia's accession in 2013, the EU had temporarily rejected any further enlargement. After Brexit, the EU member states and the Western Balkans may be neither enthusiastic supporters of a fast track enlargement nor the cowards and trouble-makers of Europe; the best option for both parties may be to standstill and see how the future will develop. Both EU and the countries of the Western Balkans, will continue to commit to EU enlargement only 'part-time', with no imperative on fast enlargement. On the one hand, EU will try to keep the WB countries on the track of complying with EU conditions while

## BREXIT IMPLICATIONS ON EU ENLARGEMENT

### *IS IT MAKE OR BREAK TIME?*

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reflecting on Brexit and the increased skepticism towards enlargement in many other EU member states. On the other hand, WB countries will not rash to join but rather evaluate the best period and options of joining.

### Enlargement Revival

Brexit might actually move EU enlargement ahead, in order to maintain the momentum and reassure the credibility of the European project. EU and its member states, instead of acting cowardly and leaving space for further uncertainty may speed up to project a message of confidence and to secure the region even more firmly under its own influence.<sup>1</sup> EU further unites and re-commits to act on a more strategic decision to speed up EU enlargement. Commissioner Hahn has affirmed the EU commitment to enlargement and assured that the outcome of the UK's referendum will not stop the EU enlargement process.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU put Enlargement issue back into the union's agenda by presenting it as one of the fifth priorities of its EU presidency aiming to reach concrete progress in the accession process.<sup>3</sup> Even EU countries that are reluctant to European Integration, as in the case of UK, may see EU's enlargement, at least partly, as a way out to slow any further integration believing that a wider EU would slow centralization and open up the idea of a multi-level and multi-speed EU.

1. Richard Newell. 2016. *Brexit and the Balkans*. Balkans in Europe Policy Blog. Centre for Southeast European Studies - University of Graz. 20 June.  
2. European Western Balkans. 2016. *Hahn: Enlargement process will not stop*. 24 June.  
3. Enlargement is explicitly stated as the fifth priority of the Slovak EU Presidency. See the official site of Slovak EU Presidency <https://sk16.eu>

Such a scenario would prioritize a rapid and Balkan big bang enlargement, potentially integrating more quickly the Western Balkans in policies and sectors where they want to and are able to meet the union conditions.<sup>4</sup>

## Abandoning Enlargement

For many analysts, the main question is not if the Brexit will damage EU accession but how much and for how long.<sup>5</sup> Lately EU enlargement decision and gravity have been shifted from Brussels institutions towards the capitals of EU member states endlessly delaying the accession process. UK has been among the most influential member states in EU policy debates, often sharing and allying with Germany's policy preferences, counterbalancing France approach. With UK out, candidate countries have lost a 'driver' who advocated inclusive approach to enlargement for all associate countries.<sup>6</sup> Thus, after Brexit, enlargement may be stuck with brakemen countries who will try to put off the decision to enlarge further. Many EU states have been affirming already that the Brexit will put a strong damper on further enlargement of the Union.<sup>7</sup> Even Croatia, the newest EU member state from the Western Balkans, believes that Brexit could slow down the pace at which candidate countries from the region will join the EU.<sup>8</sup> On the other side, candidate countries fear that Brexit could further shift focus away from enlargement. This might in fact produce a new wave of Euroskepticism in the region, where EU might lose its significance and alternative geopolitical options might gain in attractiveness. Using Enlargement uncertainty, countries such as Russia, Turkey or even China, have started to

promote their own interests in the region and leading some WB countries to be more appetite and falling back into their sphere of influence.<sup>9</sup> The Brexit and further disintegration of the Union will give space to other powers influence in the region and make EU lose its magic power in the WBs putting EU-WB relations into crisis and away from integration.

## It's Make or Break Time?

The Brexit may have no significant impact on the European integration of the Western Balkan countries and Enlargement policy would continue to be 'business as usual'. Although the European prospects for the WB looks a little bit more uncertain, business with the EU will continue as usual, because of the assurances that politicians gave in response to the referendum result.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, the Brexit could effectively bind candidate and member countries together or it could push them apart. The Brexit and further disintegration of the Union may put EU-WB relations into never-ending negotiations or abandoning enlargement process at all. Regardless of the affirmative rhetoric of sticking to EU enlargement agenda, a de facto delaying or permanently blocking EU accession could disrupt the process. Some scenario remains less likely than others, yet the risks are real even if not equally probable. EU and WB should now act wisely, with the right balance between caution and determination.<sup>11</sup> It is make or break time, for both EU and the candidate countries to weigh up the benefits and seriously focus on the real progressing with the European project.

4. European Western Balkans. 2016. *EWB Interview, James Ker-Lindsay: "Days of UK championing EU enlargement are probably over"*, 6 June.
5. Florian Bieber. 2016. *Ever Farther Union: Balkans and the Brexit*. Nations in Transit brief
6. For EU state preferences on EU enlargement see: Frank Schimmelfennig. 2003. *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric*. Cambridge University Press. New York. pp. 177- 178.
7. Hungarian Foreign Minister, Peter Szijjarto, affirmed that British vote to leave the EU, would put a strong damper on enlargement of the bloc. See: *Hungarian FM says Brexit to put damper on EU enlargement*, Finland Times Xinhua Report, June 21, 2016.
8. Antonio Brunic. 2016. *Brexit could slow EU enlargement, Croatia warns*. Reuters. June 24.
9. For the detailed analyses of the role and alternative incentives of Russia, Turkey, China engagement in the Western Balkans see: Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group. 2014. *The Unfulfilled Promise: Completing the Balkan Enlargement*. Policy Paper. May 2014. p.14
10. Denisa Kostovicova. 2016. *Reaction to Brexit around Europe: How the result affects the Balkans*. EUROPP – London School of Economics. June 24
11. Miodrag Vlahovic. 2016. *Brexit has Brought a European 'Ice Age' Closer*. Balkan Insight. June 24