Biography

James Ker-Lindsay is Professor of Politics and Policy at St Mary’s University, Twickenham. Prior to this, he was Eurobank Senior Research Fellow on the Politics of South East Europe at the European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, where he remains a senior visiting fellow at LSEE – the LSE research unit on South East Europe. He has written extensively on the politics and international relations of Turkey, Greece, Cyprus and the Western Balkans, as well as on Britain’s relationship with the region.

Summary

The decision to leave the European Union will inevitably reshape Britain’s relationship with every country of the European Union. Although considerable attention is likely to be paid to Britain’s future relations with the larger members, such as France and Germany, it is important to consider how Brexit will also affect Britain’s ties to the other states across the European Union; especially where there may be important outstanding issues that could become points of contention in the Brexit negotiations, or could otherwise shape Britain’s relationship with the EU once it has left. This submission considers the EU member states in South East Europe: Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Cyprus. Of these six countries, the most important will be Cyprus. However, Britain will also need to bear in mind that the region will be the centre of the next wave of EU enlargement. Therefore, Britain’s diplomatic relationship with the six candidate member states from the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and, especially, Serbia – will need to be considered and cultivated in the years ahead.

Diplomatic relations with the current EU members in South East Europe

1. The first two counties to consider are Slovenia and Croatia. By and large, these two former Yugoslav republics would appear to pose few immediate concerns for the United Kingdom. Slovenia joined the European Union in the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement in 2004, which Britain strongly supported. Since then, relations between Britain and Slovenia have been very good. There have been no notable issues of contention between London and Ljubljana. Looking ahead, it seems unlikely that Slovenia will be a major factor in Britain’s future relationship with the EU. There are very limited trade links between the two countries, and the Slovenian population in the UK is very small. Likewise, Britain was also a steadfast advocate of Croatia’s accession to the European Union, in 2013. Again, there are no outstanding issues of contention that come to mind. The trade relationship and population links are minimal, although Croatia is proving to be an increasingly popular holiday destination for British tourists. Both countries are also members of NATO, and so Britain is likely to enjoy close relations in that context.

2. Bulgaria and Romania have the potential to be a much greater source of concern for the United Kingdom as it prepares to leave the European Union. Both countries have gained significance over the past four years due to the large number of their nationals who have
made their way to Britain following the end of seven year transitional controls on freedom of movement, on 1 January 2014. It is therefore likely that questions surrounding the rights of EU nationals will play an important part in shaping Britain’s relationship with both countries in the lead up to Brexit, as well as in the years thereafter. Beyond this, there are few strong historic links between Britain and these countries. However, there are potentially valuable trade links. According to HMRC Overseas Trade Statistics (1st-3rd Quarters 2017) Romania is the largest regional source of imports into the UK (ranking 45th worldwide) and is also the largest regional export market (45th worldwide). Both Bulgaria and Romania are NATO members, and so Britain will continue to engage with them on security issues. Having supported their accession to the European Union, in 2007, Britain is likely to enjoy continued good relations with both countries, if the issue of the treatment of their nationals can be resolved amicably.

3. Relations with Greece will need to be cultivated in the period leading up to Brexit, and thereafter. While considerably smaller than the Romanian and Bulgarian communities in Britain, there is nevertheless a significant Greek community in the country. This has grown with the economic crisis in Greece. Many of these Greek citizens in Britain are highly educated professionals. They will be very outspoken if Britain treats them in a way that they feel to be unfair. It is also worth considering that Britain and Greece have an established trading relationship. Of the six South East European EU members, Greece is the second largest source of imports (ranking 56th overall worldwide, 2017 year to date) and the second largest regional export market (50th overall). Many British holiday makers travel to Greece each year. Although Greece is a partner in NATO, relations can sometimes be testy. Cyprus is also an area that has the potential to cause problems. The question of the Parthenon Marbles is a running, if low level, irritant, which some have suggested could become more relevant in the Brexit process.

4. Although one of the smallest members of the EU, by far the most significant EU member in South East Europe from a British perspective is Cyprus. Britain has a relationship with Cyprus that is wholly different to its relationship with any other country in the region. As well as retaining two large sovereign military bases on the island, as the former colonial power Britain is also vested with a treaty based responsibility to protect the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Cyprus. As well as its close interest, and recent direct involvement, in the UN-led process aimed at reaching a settlement, Britain remains the largest single contributor to the UN peacekeeping force on the island. Additionally, there are extremely close ties between Britain and Cyprus in other areas. Britain is home to a substantial Cypriot community. Likewise, there is a small British expatriate community on the island and many Cypriots in Cyprus also hold British citizenship. It is also an extremely popular holiday destination. In recent years, relations between Britain and Cyprus have improved significantly. Ties are better than now than at any point in recent years. However, the Brexit process will pose major challenges. The relationship between the Bases and Cyprus will have to be resolved. This is a far more complex process than many realise and could lead to tensions. Indeed, if handled badly, calls for Britain to relinquish the Bases altogether could become louder. Again, the status of Cypriot nationals in Britain, and British nationals in Cyprus, will also have to be carefully considered. While Cyprus is not a member of NATO, and shows little if any inclination to join, it is a member of the Commonwealth. This could well become a more important forum for bilateral communication and cooperation in the period following Brexit.
EU Accession States

5. As well as considering Britain’s relationship with the existing EU member states in South East Europe, it is also important to bear in mind that the region is home to the next wave of EU members. While the United Kingdom maybe planning to leave the EU, there are at least seven other countries that are in the queue to join the Union: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. Although the prospects of Turkish membership look exceedingly dim, the other states all have the potential to join by 2030. This means that they too could eventually have a voice over future British relations with the EU. Therefore, the United Kingdom will also need to consider its diplomatic relationship with each of them as well as its relations with the current members of the Union.

6. At present, the leading candidates to join the EU are Montenegro and Serbia. Recent statements from EU officials suggest that both could become members by 2025. Montenegro leads the way in terms of EU accession. To date, it has opened negotiations on 28 of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, the EU’s body of laws. By all accounts, relations between Britain and Montenegro are very good. Montenegro became the 29th member of NATO in June 2017. There are no issues of concern in bilateral British-Montenegrin relations.

7. Serbia is less advanced on its EU accession than Montenegro. So far, it has opened 10 chapters. For Britain, this is a far more important potential member than Montenegro. Indeed, it is the most important potential EU member in the Western Balkans, largely because of its size and its strategic location at the heart of the region. Despite the historical friendship between Britain and Serbia, bilateral relations between London and Belgrade have been strained over the past twenty years. Britain’s support for military action against Serbia over Kosovo, in 1999, and its strong support for Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence, in 2008, caused deep rifts. Although there have been recent signs of a warming relationship, difficulties remain and can come to the fore at any moment. For instance, the bilateral relationship suffered a setback in 2015 when Britain drafted a UN Security Council resolution on genocide that made repeated mention of the massacre in Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Belgrade viewed the resolution as unnecessarily provocative, and sought Russian help to veto the resolution. Importantly, Serbia is not a member of NATO, and shows no immediate sign of wishing to join. Of all the countries of the region, it could be argued that the greatest attention should be paid to cultivating the relationship between London and Belgrade.

8. After many years of increasing authoritarianism, Macedonia has recently seen a change of government. This is a positive development. Importantly, the process was aided by the United Kingdom working alongside its EU partners. This means that the new government is positively disposed towards the UK. However, Macedonia’s EU accession hopes are still stalled due to its ongoing dispute with Greece over the country’s formal name. (Bilaterally, Britain recognises the country under its constitutional name, rather than the appellation former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYROM).) If this issue can be resolved, and there are signs of movement on the matter, it may well be the next in line to join the EU after Montenegro and Serbia. It is also likely that it will join NATO. British relations with the country are very good. Interestingly, Macedonia is the largest export destination for British goods in the Western Balkans (53rd worldwide, 2017 year-to-date).

9. The other three states of the Western Balkans are much further away from joining the
European Union. At this stage, none of them would seem to pose a major challenge to the United Kingdom and could all be useful partners. Britain has been a strong friend to Kosovo, and has played a central role in securing recognitions following its declaration of independence. Kosovo is likely to be a close ally of the United Kingdom in the EU. However, it is the least advanced on its accession path, largely due to the opposition of five EU members (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) that do not recognise its statehood. Albania is also a member of NATO, and Britain supports its EU accession path. However, there are persistent British concerns about the prevalence of organised crime and various forms of trafficking, and the way that this filters through to the United Kingdom. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains politically divided, which has held up its EU accession path, as well as its prospects of joining NATO. Although, Britain has long supported the country, and could expect it to be an ally, the country’s foreign policy decision making processes can often rely on agreement between the three main communities. This means that Britain’s relationship with Bosnia could potentially be affected by Britain’s relationship with Serbia. Overall, Britain’s trading relations with these countries tends to be very low level.

Conclusion

10. As Britain leaves the EU, it will need to ensure that it builds alliances where it can, and avoids damaging existing ties wherever possible. In broad terms, it must be recognised that no EU member state can be neglected. With no formal voice at the table, Britain will need to cultivate potential partners who can raise its concerns on a host of issues. Likewise, it cannot afford to alienate states unnecessarily. The countries of South East Europe are important in both contexts. There are some countries with which we have good relations, and could well be valuable partners. Then there are others where the ties could become more complicated and tense. Much will rest on how the Brexit process is handled. Furthermore, it is important for British policy makers to bear in mind that there are six countries in the region that could potentially have a seat at the EU table over the next decade or so. Britain will need to cultivate relationships with them at the same time as it develops its bilateral ties with current EU members.

November 2017