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Contemporary Balkanisation on the Eurasian Chessboard: The Post-EU-aligned United Kingdom and Non-Aligned Power(s):

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Introduction

The reality of international relations is that it is impossible to foresee all possible developments after some decisive and long-prepared step (at least, as it seemed to its participants and supporters).

Brexit falls into that context. The real content-based thinking about what that breaking novelty in fact means, starts after the event itself.

On review, it may be that the United Kingdom's first potential parallel in terms of self-identification and exploring its sense of a separation from others – while not directly in the same form, but coming quite close to it – can be found in a quite unexpected format, and on the opposite corner of Europe.

The Context of Balkanisation

The title of the paper was inspired by the famous book of late Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Grand Chessboard", published in 1997. There are several reasons for that – Brzezinski's analysis focused on political games of great powers not only in Europe, but also in Asia, and several powers or pivots are in fact located spanning Europe and Asia. It means that if they would prefer to develop independently instead of belonging to some group of countries, it has an immediate impact on the situation in both parts of the Eurasian continent.

The process now called Brexit involves a familiar process of separation from another country or group of countries, and has previously taken place in politically unstable regions. In Europe this has happened in the Balkan Peninsula and the formation of new and new countries was for a long period called 'balkanization', i.e. something linked directly to Europe. Brzezinski introduced in his book a new term, "Eurasian Balkan", which for him meant the space of former Soviet Republics in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and, in South Caucasus – Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia.¹ Brzezinski added to this list Afghanistan and according to him, also neighbouring this space, Turkey and Iran had demonstrated enough instability to be included in the same group.

As is well known, only the European part of the Eurasian Balkans has produced several independent entities or quasi-states - Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh. Due to this, we can speak

¹ The first European Commission conceptual paper about future enlargement ("Wider Europe Neighborhood – A New Framework for Relations with Our Eastern and Southern Neighbors", Brussels, 11 March 2003) declared that South Caucasus "falls out of geographical scope of this initiative" and, as result, nothing was said about Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In all the latest papers this strange remark (which one Southern Europe country had insisted on) was overcome and the scope of Europe is presented as it is.

about ‘Balkanization’ there. However, this happened due to direct participation of Russian troops (one can literally say “independence” was created around the Soviet Army military bases there) and their subsistence depends openly from Kremlin policy. But if ‘Balkanization’ is understood as separation from the collectivity of countries, then something similar to Brexit would be expected to take place in near future just in South Caucasus. At the same time, such a development should be seen as temporary, as opposed to the permanent change applying to Great Britain.

Before explaining this development, let’s remind ourselves what ‘Balkanization’ means. Brexit itself is such a new phenomenon that its essence has not yet been defined, only described in general terms. So we are drawn towards using the term ‘Balkanization’ which explains quite similar phenomena, but in another historical circumstances.

According to Wikipedia ‘Balkanization’ “is a geopolitical term, used to describe the process of fragmentation or division of a region or state into smaller regions or states that are often hostile or uncooperative with one another”.

Brexit fulfills – in accordance with that definition – the first of those preconditions (fragmentation or division of a region) though it is set in a modern, contemporary version – a context of a lack of hostility but working in cooperation between the Great Britain and the EU. The second precondition – fragmentation of a state – also exists in Europe. The classical case is Catalonia, where consecutively now a referendum on independence from Spain will take place in October 2017. Scotland has already once voted (unsuccessfully) on independence, and there remains the enduring prospect of a new referendum. North Italy or Padania is also considered a potential venue for independence.

The fragmentation or division of a region has, surprisingly, two scenarios for general development.

First – further ‘Balkanization’ involving separation from a state or group of states with a confirmed future in Europe not only geographically, but also politico-ideologically.

Secondly – further ‘Balkanization’ involving separation from far-developed and deeply intertwined European organizations (of which the European Union forms the definitive example), followed by economic cooperation and political subordination to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), headed by Russia. This is now not just a theoretical possibility. As a result of political games and over-cautiousness there is a region inside of Europe, with the official title of the “EU applicants and potential applicants region” and the policy towards this region is called “EU enlargement policy.” “Potential applicants” here means that these countries have yet not started the process of joining the EU.

This region covers the Western Balkans, which is a relatively artificial term – it doesn’t include Slovenia and Croatia, which became members of the EU respectively in 2004 and 2013. Today’s “EU applicant and potential applicant region” or Western Balkans includes Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. The key state here is Serbia, which is since 2014 is subject to heavy pressure from Russia, and is the key player here over rejecting plans for EU and NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans.

The Second Balkans

Before going into details I'll remind the reader also of the existence of another area in Europe which might also join the EU. These are the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and former Soviet republics Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, which since 2009 have in Brussels been considered as potential members of the EU - but since 2011 have also been considered as potential members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) by Russia.

The EaP was proclaimed in May 2008, i.e. before the Russian invasion of Georgia (in August 2008) and it started to function in May 2009. Russian leader Vladimir Putin launched the EEU project as an open challenge and rival to the EU in 2011 and very soon started an open competition to replace Georgia's and Ukraine's EU orientation with their orientation to the EEU. Georgia's clear EU orientation received a serious setback in 2013 general elections and then the struggle for Ukraine started.

Under the flag of the Euromaidan the people of Ukraine have stood to defend the EU choice. After the replacement of the old leadership by the Ukrainian parliament in February 2014, Russia launched an open invasion against Ukraine, occupied the Crimea and supported local separatists in East Ukraine in establishing the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. If the earlier separatist entities in former Soviet Union space had Soviet-Russian origin, then these new "republics" can be called Russian by birth, regardless of what is said by Moscow itself. So has 'Balkanization' reached Ukraine, another European country, in 2014.

The new "people's republics" immediately declared their interest to join the EEU. A similar position was taken by another separatist entity – on the soil of Republic of Moldova – by "republic" of Transnistria, which has been guarded by Russian troops since the end of Soviet times. In the 2016 direct elections, Igor Dodon was elected the President of Moldova and he openly declared his intention for Moldova to join the EEU. His respective activities created a new national confrontation as the parliament and government of Moldova still pursue their own policy to join the EU. In 2016 Moscow succeeded also in Armenia, when the leadership of this country officially joined the EEU.

Meanwhile Russia had also strengthened its influence on the Balkans and, above all, in Serbia. In 2012, the Russian Ministry of Emergency, headed by the capable Sergei Shoigu who very soon after became Russian Minister of Defense, successfully opened up a Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre (disaster relief centre) in Nish (Serbia). In 2016 this became involved in Russia's military operation in Syria. In 2016 negotiations on concluding a trade agreement between Serbia and the EEU had started – the first of a kind between this Eurasian organization and a state located totally in Europe. In spring 2017 joint military manoeuvres involving Special Forces from Russia, Belarus and Serbia took place in Belarus.

At the same time as these joint activities in Serbia, Russia has become more and more active in other Balkan countries, being a behind-the-scenes initiator and contributor to different anti-EU, anti-NATO and pro-neutrality movements and activity on the peninsula.

The sharp activation of Russia after the Euromaidan on all free spaces (that is to say, presently unaligned countries) that remained in South-East Europe forced the EU leadership to take countersteps. Among those the most significant was the initiative of Germany, Austria, France and Italy, who had declared their special commitment to Further Enlargement of the EU towards the Western Balkan region, and who started to convoke summits of leaders of Balkan countries together with their EU counterparts and (later) the leaders of its financial institutions. The first Western Balkan summit or WB6 took place in August 2014 in Berlin, and since then the initiative was called the Berlin process, with an established timetable for action set at 5 years, i.e. until 2019. (Some months later the freshly-elected EC president Jean-Claude Juncker declared that there will be no EU enlargement during his mandate, i.e. up to 2019 still). The second WB6 summit took place in 2015 in Vienna, the third in 2016 in Paris and the fourth in 2017 in Trieste.

After the Paris summit there were talks about the possibility of the UK joining the Berlin process and that the 2018 summit would take place in London, but given the referendum result, it was quite a surprise from the British Prime Minister Theresa May to confirm on 9 March 2017 both that the Brexit was set to start in several weeks, and also that the United Kingdom was ready to host the WB6 summit in August 2018 in London.

This announcement was silently accepted by the EU and leaders of four Berlin process countries. It is also logical to ask loudly what would London's leaving the EU say to the Balkan countries who are not yet even invited to accession negotiations? Will and does Mrs May recommend them to continue their activities for obtaining membership of the EU, or will she recommend they stay out of it?! Should they rather instead prepare themselves to assume a position similar to the UK's one in 2019-20?

Breaks and Links

Returning then to the definition of 'Balkanization', let's first remind ourselves that nowadays new countries or countries that are newly-independent from some organization will preserve links and active cooperation with countries from those they separated. It is, and will be, the fate of the United Kingdom after Brexit. In fact, countries that are conversely in the process of joining some union of countries will also be in a similar situation. On the other hand, this generates a potential condition where a state may be still sitting between two choices of future development. In the case of regional leaders or pivots – as Brzezinski calls these countries – these halfway, pre-membership positions permit them, as a minimum, to follow a relatively independent and influential foreign policy. This then is among the main reasons why countries like Great Britain prefer to stay out of the control of others, to assure their independence in decision-making.

Brexit will here set up a precedent and it is a clean one. At the same time, it is not difficult to understand that in the near future, two European countries will draw attention due to their sharply increased role in international relations. To put it bluntly, Europe has forgotten that on its soil in times of cold war and two system confrontation, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was set up. This

was not an organization for economic or military cooperation – it was an organization to serve and protect the political interests of developing countries.

Its first conference took place in Belgrade, the then-capital of the ‘red-Yugoslavia Empire’, in 1961. After that, despite a second gathering of its leaders taking place in Belgrade in 1989, the NAM’s activities were carried out mostly in Asia, Africa and Latin America, without drawing much attention from the Western media. Notwithstanding some setbacks linked with the end of the Cold War, NAM’s membership has increased and now brings together 120 countries.²

In 2009, it was decided that the NAM’s 16th summit would take place in Iran in 2012, which then was a pariah country for the West. The summit itself happened to be a success, and the 17th summit was held in Venezuela in September 2016 (it was delayed for one year and successfully avoided the political turmoil in the country as the location for the gathering was Margarita island). It was resolved that the 2019 summit location will be Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. It means that the NAM is returning to Europe; and it is not ruled out that the place of the 19th summit in (presumably) 2021 will be again Belgrade, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the NAM. (Serbia had already tried to win hosting rights also before the 50th anniversary in 2011, but had begun the bidding campaign seemingly too late, in 2009).

The full significance of one detail should not be too difficult to grasp, but since 2009 the chairmanship of NAM has fallen (since the assigning of the new Summit place means also the start of its chairmanship) to the world’s oil and gas rich countries. Appointment gives to NAM and its leader an additional weight and importance in international relations. For example, it provided a number of opportunities to Nicolas Maduro, the President of Venezuela who is under criticism at home, to catch a completely different type of attention abroad with statements concerning oil prices.

NAM’s chairmanship transfer to Baku created totally a new geopolitical situation in Eurasia as Azerbaijan is officially moving towards EU, yet at the same time also officially has close links with institutions created and headed by Russia. Undoubtedly, this new post for Azerbaijan increases its possibilities for increasing its own independent stance in relation to the foreign policies of both poles of power. As we saw, Brzezinski called Azerbaijan a pivot state. In recent times, oil-rich Azerbaijan has demonstrated its potential with the organization of the inaugural European Games in 2015 and as a new place for Formula1 competition. The chair of NAM allows for Azerbaijan to also delay the final decision-making between approaching either Brussels or Moscow. Of course, it is only a temporarily solution, as in 2021/22 the NAM will obtain a new leader.

According to today’s predictions, the most favoured candidate to take the next chair from Azerbaijan is Serbia and the reason is very simple – the 60th anniversary of the NAM. It would mean that the NAM leadership stays in Europe as minimum until 2025. Everything, which was said above

² With the collapse of the ‘red-Yugoslavia empire’ its participation in NAM ended officially in 1992; but representatives of Serbia/Yugoslavia have appeared at its events from time to time as observers. The same status saw Serbia president Tadic, who attended the summit in 2009 to study possibilities in taking over the leadership in NAM. It was decided to continue as observer. Another co-founder of NAM from Europe, Cyprus, left NAM after joining the EU in 2004. The same decision was made by Malta (member in 1973-2004). So now there are only two official members of NAM from Europe - Belarus (since 1998) and Azerbaijan (2011). Among the observers are Armenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia; from the old Soviet space, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, as Turkmenistan (since 1995) and Uzbekistan (1993) are full members of NAM.

concerning Azerbaijan as NAM leader, also applies towards Serbia in the same position in 2021-25, including approaching the standards of the EU while keeping special relations with Moscow. In each case, due to the post of NAM leader, both Azerbaijan and Serbia will be considered as independent players in Europe alongside the EU, the United Kingdom, Norway and Switzerland – a position which would be beyond of capabilities of other Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries. However – Azerbaijan and Serbia will be only temporary guests in this list of equals, and would (so the assumption goes) later join the ranks of the EU. Until that moment they must be treated as more or less independent decision-makers in Europe and world affairs, i.e. in the category of post-Brexit Great Britain.

As is known, Brexit has also now put on the agenda rumours about the possibility of Frexit, Grexit and the rest. It seems for now at least that there is no immediate basis for that assumption.

Nevertheless, the solo stance that has been already started by Azerbaijan confirms that contemporary international relations are flexible enough to allow to some countries to be separated from supranational organization for ever (the case of the UK) or to act independently for some limited period (the case of Azerbaijan). It is also symbolic that this last separation from a bloc of countries is explained with the official status of Azerbaijan specifically as a non-aligned country. The reality is that an independent Great Britain is simply becoming non-aligned with the EU country.

Conclusion

The irony of our recent history as Europeans is that while witnessing with Brexit the launch of the process of non-alignment with one of the most influential organizations of the world, the continent was also elsewhere being reminded that there already exists a quite powerful Non-Alignment Movement.

Let's add to that two short remarks linked with the UK's own links in 'Balkanization'. I was recently reminded that on the same day as I was presenting a version of this paper at an international conference, 28 June 2017, the 13th General Assembly of UNPO (the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organisation) was also concluding its work.³ It took place in the Scottish Parliament Building in Edinburgh. According to the information put in the public domain, the person responsible for holding UNPO's General Assembly there is a Scottish MSP, liberal Willie Rennie, with no links with Mrs Sturgeon and her Scottish National Party government.

I mention it as the UNPO was founded in Estonia on 5 September, 1990 by representatives of the national movements of Estonia, Tibet, Crimean Tartars, Georgia, Tatarstan, Eastern Turkestan and East Timor, who at that stage had not yet obtained statehood and UN membership. Estonia and Georgia obtained independence and were admitted to the UN in 1991, which meant leaving the ranks of the UNPO. But two General Assemblies of the UNPO had taken place in Tallinn, and in the same building where we were holding our Brexit conference, the 6th General Assembly of UNPO on

³ On June 28, 2017 the international conference "Post-Brexit Europe" (supported by The Red Cell) took place in the Estonian National Library building in Tallinn.

17 February, 2001 adopted its most famous document, the “Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples”.⁴

It is interesting to add that at first UNPO used two working languages – English and Russian. Now it uses only English, but at the same time it is possible to note the renewed interest of Russia towards UNPO.

Besides political events, UNPO has also its own sport event - the football tournament of the ConIFA, or Confederation of Independent Football Associations. This confederation was created for those who are not members of the FIFA. ConIFA's first cup tournament of ConIFA was held in Gävle, Sweden in 2014 (among members of the UNPO are representation of Skane or South Sweden). This tournament was also attended by a team of Ellan Vannin from the Isle of Man.

The second tournament in 2016 was planned to take place at Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia which was separated from Georgia in 2008 after the invasion by Russian troops. The so-called independence of Abkhazia has been recognised only by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru, but since 1991 Abkhazia itself had been a member of the UNPO. In 2011, in a situation otherwise of international isolation, representatives of UNPO were invited to observe the presidential elections in Abkhazia and since that event UNPO's partner in Abkhazia is its Foreign Ministry, the highest level partner for UNPO today. The Ellan Vannin team was subsequently invited to take part in a cup tournament, but on the eve, in May 2016, the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office officially recommended players not to travel to Abkhazia and the football team of Isle of Man obeyed.

Not all breakaway entities lie outside of the realms of great politics, even if they only play football.

⁴ Online at unpo.org/article/105

About the Author



Toomas Alatalu has studied history and political science. He received his PhD for “Revolutionary situation and its peculiarities in Latin America” (1977, Leningrad University). His teaching experience ranges from universities in Estonia to the Universidad Centroamericana (Managua, Nicaragua 1988-90) and Masaryk University (Brno, Czech Republic).

In 1992-2007 he was three times elected to the parliament of Estonia, working in its Constitutional Law, Foreign Relations and European Union affairs committees. Over 1993-99 he was a member of the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly.

He was a member of the Riigikogu delegations to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

In 2007-12 he was Dean of Faculty at IR Eurouniversity, Tallinn. His main fields of interest are contemporary revolutions, ENP, geopolitics in the EU/NATO-Russian relations, and the foreign policy of border countries. He has written numerous academic articles, is a longstanding columnist since student years, and is a TV commentator on foreign and security policy issues. His most quoted paper remains “Tuva – A State Reawakens”, Soviet Studies, Vol.44, No 5, University of Glasgow, 1992.