Brexit has echoes of the breakup of Yugoslavia

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Is the stability of the European Union as a whole now under threat following the UK's decision to leave? **Catherine Baker** *draws a number of parallels between the dynamics that preceded the break-up of Yugoslavia and the ongoing developments that have followed the EU referendum. She highlights that while the demise of Yugoslavia was itself not inevitable, the violence that accompanied it could certainly have been spared. This represents a warning for political leaders, who should now be careful to listen to the alternatives proposed by the public and heed them, instead of suppressing them.*
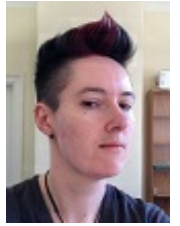
Even before the results of the United Kingdom's referendum on European Union membership, the tone of the campaigns, the polarisation of public attitudes and the uncertainty over the country's constitutional future had all started to recall another European crisis, two and a half decades ago: the break-up of Yugoslavia and the international community's failure to prevent a bitter constitutional crisis escalating into war.

Jacques Poos's comment that 'this is the hour of Europe', when he flew into Yugoslavia as chair of the European Community's foreign affairs council on 29 June 1991 to mediate between the Yugoslav prime minister and the presidents of seceding Slovenia and Croatia, not only proved hollow but also symbolised, as Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Croatian Serb militia offensives against Croatian towns escalated, an emptiness of 'Europeanness' at the very moment the EC had looked towards a future as today's EU. (Poos's remark gave its name to Josip Glaurdić's exhaustive diplomatic history of the break-up.)

Yet for several years the Yugoslav public had already been feeling a sense of spiralling, interlocking crises over the balance of power between different republics and nations inside the federation. Slobodan Milošević's moves to recentralise the federation on terms most favourable to Serbs, addressing Serbs as victims of persecution as he did so, interacted with Slovenian demands for fiscal and political autonomy with such implications for Croatia and its border regions (where Serbs were concentrated), and threatening knock-on effects for Bosnia-Herzegovina, that by June 1991 the 'Yugoslav public' was already an extremely fragmented – yet not defunct – idea.

People who lived through the Yugoslav wars – like Kemal Pervanić, who survived the Omarska concentration camp after the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) took control of his home town in 1992 and now lives in Britain, or Feđa Burić, a Bosnian historian weighing up the dangers of referendums – draw parallels between Yugoslavia and Britain as multi-national, deeply unequal societies which would unsettle anyone who believed the causes of conflict in Yugoslavia were unique to the Balkan region. 'These terrible things don't happen to some strange people – they happen to people like ourselves,' Pervanić said in a Thomson Reuters Foundation video published on 28 June.

The break-up of Yugoslavia took the public through a downward spiral of collapsing expectations, each dragging people into a new sphere of uncertainty and fear: from the Yugoslav system being more successful than its capitalist and Warsaw Pact neighbours, to the reverse; from it being unthinkable that the union of republics would break up, to it seeming inevitable that it would; from living an everyday working life to seeing your standard of living and the whole economy collapse beyond repair; from Communism being the ideology you learned at school, to an entire system of political power and property ownership falling apart; from moving normally around your town, to fearing for your safety on the streets, based on what others read as your ethnicity.

Even if these were ill-founded – historians still debate whether or not Yugoslavia had too many long-term weaknesses to be viable when it was unified in 1918 – they were part of people's common sense, until they could not be.

When I teach courses about the break-up of Yugoslavia and the social contexts behind the 1990s wars, British students start seeing their own society differently.

The issues at stake for Britain and its constituent entities have many resonances with, and important differences from, Yugoslavia – but perhaps the most troubling parallels come from *how* politicians and the media brought Yugoslavia to the point of collapse and co-operated to intensify fear and hatred once Slovenian and Croatian secession was inevitable.

Recursive secession

Scotland's likelihood of leaving the UK if Britain leaves the EU, because the larger country is seceding from something that the smaller country inside does not want to leave, is an example of what political scientists call 'recursive secession'. In Yugoslavia, Croatian independence under a nationalist government was unacceptable to the Croatian Serb militias, supported by Milošević, who started taking control of Serb-majority municipalities in Krajina in August 1990. If Croatia seceded, the SDS threatened to secede in turn.

Structurally, though, Scotland as the Scottish National Party (SNP) currently imagines it is the Slovenia of the piece: the small northern republic, keen to prosper within 'Europe' and struggling against political shifts in the larger country that will prevent it doing so. Nicola Sturgeon's efforts to negotiate independently with European leaders strongly resemble how the Slovenian and Croatian presidents, Milan Kučan and Franjo Tuđman, started sounding out international support – finding their strongest allies in Germany and Austria – for their plans to secede after Slovenia held an independence referendum on 23 December 1990.

Kučan, indeed, recently drew qualified comparisons between Brexit and Slovenian independence, comparing the Leave campaign to the self-interest of Milošević and his supporters.

Croatia, in this mapping, would be the Northern Ireland. The prospect that Milošević would support his Croatian Serb allies in opposing independence and undermining Serbs in other parties who co-operated with the Croatian government made independence much more complex and risky for Croatia than Slovenia, which had no settled Serb minority.

Despite the intense nationalism of Tuđman's government, and its indifference to how Croatian Serbs perceived Tuđman's ambivalence towards the legacy of Croatian collaboration with fascism during the Second World War, public and political resolve for independence in Croatia was lower than in Slovenia even in spring 1991. The Borovo Selo massacre on 2 May, when Serb insurgents killed 12 Croatian police officers in Eastern Slavonia, tipped the balance. 93.2 per cent of voters in Croatia – not counting Krajina, where Serbs boycotted the vote – voted for independence in a referendum on 19 May 1991. SDS in Krajina had declared autonomy in September 1990 and claimed republic status in December 1991, after six months of open war.

Like Croatia did in 1991, but along different lines, Northern Ireland has a recent history of ethnopolitical conflict, and independence would risk instability and political violence on the mainland as well as Northern Ireland itself.

But there are important differences between the two sets of secessions – including how few voters in England seem to have appreciated the impact that Brexit would have on Northern Ireland, the UK/Irish border and the Good Friday Agreement, and the effect of fearing a return to the violence of the 1970s–90s, compared to how keenly aware other Yugoslavs were in 1989–91 of the potential for violence in Croatia.

The most immediate is that neither Holyrood nor Stormont are militarising their police and equipping army reserves ready for confrontation with the armed forces of the larger state, as Slovenia and Croatia both did in spring 1991 – leading to Slovenia's ten-day war against the JNA and Croatia's much longer conflict with JNA and Krajina forces.

And, structurally, Scotland can hardly signify Slovenia and the Serb Democratic Party at the same time.

Asymmetric confederation

What makes Brexit a constitutional as well as a political crisis is that results in two of the UK's 'four nations' (England and Wales) showed a majority to Leave, and results in the other two (Scotland and Northern Ireland) were a majority Remain. Westminster rejected the SNP's demand for a 'quadruple lock' on the referendum (so that Leave could not succeed without majorities in all four nations) in June 2015.

Scottish and Northern Irish voters who feel that they are being taken out of the EU against their wishes have a sense of territorial democratic autonomy to draw on which is not available to English and Welsh voters who feel the same way – except by building territorial–political identities around cities like London, Oxford and Bristol with Remain majorities.

After 175,000 internet users signed a petition for London to declare independence, the city's new mayor Sadiq Khan said on 28 June that 'As much as I might like the idea of a London city state, I'm not seriously talking about independence today – I am not planning to install border points on the M25!'. He did demand new powers over business, housing, transport, health, policing and tax, and has been negotiating with Sturgeon and the chief minister of Gibraltar (where 96 per cent voted Remain) about their 'shared interests' in remaining in the EU.

Proposals for some UK territories to Remain while others Leave, but for the UK to stay together as a state, arguably have partial precedents such as the relationship between Denmark and Greenland or Spain and the Canary Islands – though still skip over the problem of residents of England and Wales who would still want and need to exercise the individual rights, especially freedom of movement, they had taken for granted as part of the EU.

They echo the plans to reform Yugoslavia as an asymmetric confederation, proposed by Slovenia and Croatia in October 1990, where each Yugoslav republic would have its own defence and foreign policies and the right to apply for EC membership individually. The presidents of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia offered another 'asymmetric federation' proposal in February 1991.

Scholars debate why the confederation plan failed or whether it was even intended to succeed (Glaurdić makes the case that Milošević sabotaged it; Dejan Jović argues it was only ever a tactical move); but this is the level of complexity with which the UK constitution would have to be re-negotiated in order to balance the democratic majorities from Scotland and Northern Ireland with the total majority vote across the UK.

Constitutionally, however, the UK 'four nations' and the Yugoslav republics are different kinds of entity. The status of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland dates back to 'Acts of Union' with the Crown from 1536, 1603 and 1800, with subsequent amendments including the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the devolutions of 1998. England, the largest nation and the equivalent to Serbia in a rough UK/Yugoslav parallel, has no separate constitutional status, and it is UKIP rather than Labour which has led calls for an English parliament.

The Yugoslav republics, established as Tito's Partisans gained control of territory during the Second World War and confirmed by the 1946 constitution, had all officially exercised national self-determination in forming the federation and ostensibly had the right to secede – though whether this right applied to republics or to ethno-national groups (whose demographic boundaries did not coincide with the republics) was the very constitutional issue behind conflict in Croatia in 1990–1.

How quickly public support for independence can flip

Nicola Sturgeon's immediate commitment that 'the option of a second referendum [on Scottish independence] must be on the table' after the referendum results rested on an SNP manifesto commitment in the May 2016 elections that the Scottish Parliament should be able to hold another referendum if there were 'a significant and material change in circumstances […] such as Scotland being taken out of the EU against our will'.

While the change in the Scottish public mood isn't so overwhelming for Sturgeon to actually call the referendum

straight away, the closeness of the UK-wide result adds to the perception that the national Leave majority is too small to take such a drastic step.

So, even more damningly, does the feeling among Remain supporters that all the Leave campaign's promises were based on misinformation – from the promise of taking back national sovereignty when the next prime minister is likely to be unelected, to the quoted £350 million per week that Britain could save by leaving the EU, to statements that Turkey was on the brink of joining the EU and, with its large Muslim population acquiring EU freedom of movement, posing a national security risk to the UK. (The Leave campaign subsequently wiped its website.)

And so does the revelation that neither the Leave campaign or Westminster had a plan for actually managing and negotiating Brexit, leading to a situation where the all-important Article 50 notification (which would trigger Brexit after two years) might not even be made.

Remain supporters, in Scotland and elsewhere, do not just feel outvoted – they feel betrayed, and afraid (as Leave voters will if Westminster never activates Article 50). Scottish voters have an outlet for those sentiments in the SNP.

The shock of the result and its aftermath does not in itself evoke the same kind of visceral terror as the Borovo Selo massacre – though the fear created by escalating racist violence on UK streets has its own similarities to the early stages of ethnopolitical conflict.

But majorities tip from supporting autonomy towards the riskier choice of independence when it becomes clear that the nation has no prospect at all of achieving what voters see as its self-determination within the structure of a larger country – and the referendum crisis may have brought Scotland to that point.

By the time Slovenian and Croatian voters were deciding between autonomy and independence, political activity in Yugoslavia was centred almost entirely on the separate republics, with the multi-party elections of 1990 all taking place at different times. By the time the Yugoslav prime minister formed his own Yugoslavia-wide party in July 1990, aiming to offer an alternative to Milošević's authoritarian vision for the federation, Slovenia and Croatia had voted already, with nationalist parties winning in both.

Building political alliances across, as well as within, autonomous national units will be essential for UK political movements that seek to hold the country together.

'Europe' as a symbol of hope – about to be betrayed?

While the UK referendum was directly about the European Union, Slovenia's and Croatia's independence referendums might as well have been. Slovenian liberals aspired to join Europe culturally and politically, even (or in some eyes especially) if it meant leaving the 'Balkan' remainder of Yugoslavia behind. Kučan reformed the Slovenian League of Communists into a social democratic party under the slogan 'Europe Now!'

In the early stages of the war in Croatia, the Croatian government as well as many of the public looked to the EC to intervene, force Milošević to accept Croatian independence and end the occupation of Krajina. 'We want to share the European dream, we want democracy and peace,' Tomislav Ivčić sang in an English-language song, written as war intensified in August 1991, which Croatian Television hoped would serve as a promotional video for the Croatian cause abroad.

A few months later, the hopes Croats had invested in Europe would be dashed as the JNA and paramilitaries overran Vukovar in November 1991 and the Croatian government accepted a ceasefire in January 1992 which left one third of its territory under occupation – just as SDS in Bosnia-Herzegovina was about to declare a sovereign 'Republika Srpska' to prevent Bosnia seceding too.

Bosnians who had hoped in 1990 that the Krajina conflict would not affect Bosnia would share Croatians' disenchantment with 'Europe', and suffer an even more devastating war, as the EC failed to prevent SDS militias and

the JNA killing and expelling non-Serbs in municipalities they controlled, encircling other towns and nearly partitioning the capital, Sarajevo.

Violence on the scale of the war in Croatia or Bosnia is not imminently threatening the United Kingdom. But scenes of young people appealing directly to 'Europe', like the March for Europe on 2 July or the demonstration in London that interrupted a live Channel 4 News broadcast on 28 June, recall independence rallies in Slovenia or, even more so, peace rallies in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina where other young people begged leaders not to let them down.

Politicians get emotional as 'normal' politics fall apart

Scenes from the European Parliament on 28 June – with the European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker asking the UKIP leader Nigel Farage why he was still there, Farage goading MEPs ('You all laughed at me… well, I have to say, you're not laughing now') and the SNP's Alyn Smith, after demanding the EU respect Scotland's vote to remain, receiving a standing ovation for his concluding 'Scotland did not let you down… please, I beg you, do not let Scotland down!' – were so far outside the usual frame of EU parliamentary politics that they immediately became items of viral news.

The spectacle came from the contrast between speakers' emotions and what viewers probably expect to be the dispassionate nature of a European Parliament chamber (much more so than the unruly, 'braying' sound of UK Prime Minister's Questions). The feelings Juncker, Farage, Smith and others displayed hinted at longer-standing resentments over questions of sovereignty and independence which were suddenly on public view.

Notable, too, was the invisibility of the United Kingdom, as opposed to its individual nations, in Smith's direct appeal to European lawmakers.

All of these seem to be signals that the boundaries of 'normality' in UK/EU politics have shifted in a very short space of time, driven by people who are still coming to terms with it.

People who remember scenes from televised Yugoslav Party congresses and parliaments in 1988–92, or indeed news footage from the period in 1990–1 when the European Community still appeared to be able to influence the outcome in Yugoslavia, might see several parallels – from the unprecedented emotion with which politicians talk to each other, to the fact that, the euro crisis apart, the break-up of Yugoslavia was the last overnight geopolitical crisis where the EC/EU as an institution played a major role.

In the UK as in Yugoslavia, however, the media have been implicated in producing the crisis for much longer, in ways that might parallel the course of events that made it even become conceivable in the late 1980s that Yugoslavia could imminently break apart.

Media spectacle can make centres out of extremes

Only a few years ago, UK media treated UKIP and Farage as marginal parties rather than part of the core of political options (where Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats belonged), giving them and the Green Party broadly similar coverage.

Ofcom and the BBC awarded UKIP 'major party' status in England and Wales for the 2014 European elections after it made significant local election gains in 2013–14, and confirmed UKIP, but not the Greens, as a 'major party' for general elections in 2015.

'Major party' status entitles parties to an extra party political broadcast and is also likely to influence news editors charged with maintaining political balance in reporting election campaigns. Themes and images in tabloid media, especially on immigration and on the disenfranchisement of England, harmonise with UKIP campaigns more directly than any mass newspaper or television channel amplifies Green campaigns when their policies fall to the left of

Labour.

UKIP 'managed to define the discourse around migration' in the 2015 election, Laleh Khalili writes, even though the party itself only gained one seat.

Farage's confrontational and triumphalist tone as a speaker appeals to UKIP supporters as a sign he will take on the Westminster and Brussels elite on behalf of England but strikes many on the Left experience as bullying and unpleasant, most of all in his post-referendum victory speech when he praised 'the dawn breaking on an independent United Kingdom […] without having to fight, without a single bullet being fired' only a week after the shooting of Jo Cox. Although his own background is in City trading, and for years Labour and Conservative politicians had already been politicising immigration, his discourse stands out from established members of the political elite.

In a parallel way, Slobodan Milošević used populist language and a promise to reverse the disenfranchisement of a nation through constitutional change to present himself to Serbs as a political outsider, leading the so-called 'anti-bureaucratic revolution', even though he had risen through the ranks of the Serbian Communist Party and previously headed a major Yugoslav bank. (Charles Simić, writing in December, likened Milošević's political communication to Donald Trump.)

Non-Serbs, especially Albanians in Kosovo, Croats and Bosnians – as well as Serbs struggling for more rather than less democracy in Yugoslavia – feared Milošević as a figure who would legitimise and incite ethnopolitical violence by Serbs. (One of Milošević's first acts of aggression, in March 1989, was to revoke Kosovo's autonomy as a province of Serbia, repress Albanians' political and cultural rights, and introduce martial law.)

Serbian media helped to create the myth of Milošević as a combative, anti-elitist defender of Serbs when TV Belgrade repeated clips of his comment, made while visiting Kosovo Serb protestors in April 1987, that 'Nobody is allowed to beat you!' (referring to their allegations of being beaten by Kosovo police).

Farage's and Milošević's programmes resemble each other in that both address disenfranchised members of majority nations (a white English public or the Serbs) as groups who are marginalised, victimised and under siege, using language of crisis and threat. For Farage, the threat is of floods or swarms of immigration, putting Britain under social and cultural strain, which EU rules supposedly prevent Britain from reining in.

Earlier on the day of Jo Cox's death, Farage had posed in front of a poster reading 'Breaking point: the EU has failed us all – we must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders'. The image was of a column of refugees, mostly Middle Eastern, on the Slovenian/Croatian border in the summer of 2015.

Both Serbs in 1988 and residents of deindustrialised England in 2016 faced serious economic disadvantages, of recent onset, that Yugoslavia or Westminster had not addressed. (Even for Serbs, living standards would fall yet further under Milošević except for those in positions to benefit from corruption, war profiteering or organised crime.)

Yet ethnic minorities, EU migrants, LGBT people, disabled people threatened by further austerity, and left-wing activists in the UK fear the consequences of a UKIP-driven government in the UK in ways which are not identical to, but have some parallels with, the fears of non-Serbs in the early stages of Milošević consolidating power through the Yugoslav federal system.

One major difference between the media of 1988–91 and the media of 2016, however, is how and where the public see tide-turning audiovisual moments and in what ways the media fragment their audiences.

Fragmented media help interpretations of the crisis diverge

In Yugoslavia, people saw incidents like Milošević's remark to Kosovo Serb protestors or the pictures from Borovo Selo at home on broadcast evening news. Today, moments like the European Parliament speeches or the news

about Jo Cox reach us throughout the day, on workplace computers and mobile devices, at different times.

Which moments, narratives and interpretations even reach us are conditioned by how we structure our own social media and what network algorithms then choose to show us, in a more finer-grained way than different newspapers have always framed reality in different ways for their readerships.

Late 1980s Yugoslavia did not have such individualised media fragmentation but, with all republics' broadcasters controlled by their republics' Communist parties (and some programming shared between republics), its broadcast infrastructure still meant that viewers in different republics formed divergent, directly opposed understandings of what the Yugoslav crisis even was, unless they consciously sought alternative sources of information. After the 1990 elections, Slovenia and Croatia could follow Milošević's lead in using television as a vehicle for their own political and historical narratives.

Different publics in Yugoslavia knew less and less about how the crisis was seen elsewhere in the country. Within an escalating cycle of ethno-political fear, increasingly, they did not want to, until ethno-national identity became the predominant frame of reference in public.

The Yugoslav crisis happened, and the Brexit crisis has happened, at dizzying speed, leaving the public trying to piece together 'instant histories' from media, their own experiences and their friends and neighbours. Digital media might intensify polarising tendencies even further, if people see less and less outside their online as well as offline 'filter bubble'.

They might deterritorialise the polarisation which in Yugoslavia occurred on a territorial, ethno-national basis; in England, at least, the two hardening 'sides' are spread throughout the country, with more or less concentrated majorities or minorities in certain areas. Within as well as between nations, the public end up with substantially different 'instant histories' and act on them in different ways.

But digital media also give more access to alternative perspectives than print media and analogue broadcasting ever made possible – an advantage on which campaigns based on solidarity across difference will need to capitalise.

Ethnic and racist violence shapes how collective identities form

The most frightening, immediate effect of the referendum campaign and result in the UK has been what is publicly perceived as, and is highly likely to be, a dramatic increase in racist abuse and violence.

Jo Cox's assassination on 16 June by a man linked to neo-Nazi terrorism shocked the public – including her fellow Labour MPs, now embroiled in a contest over the future and existence of their party – because it marked a form of political violence that UK residents not already under threat by the far right usually suppose not to exist in Britain.

During the referendum campaign, far-right groups circulated propaganda about Muslim refugees as terrorist infiltrators and sexual predators – playing on the attacks in Paris, Brussels and Cologne – that harmonised horribly with the mainstream Leave campaign's public statements about immigration and Turkish membership of the EU. (Compare how caricatures of Albanian Muslims as rapists circulated in late 1980s Serbia, adding their undertones to Milošević's claims that Serbs were being persecuted in Kosovo.)

Cox resembled the moderate police chief of Osijek, Josip Riehl-Kir, in her potential to interpret the crisis in an alternate way to the political consensus. Cox had written, days before her death, in defence of EU membership and free movement of people, and campaigned for Britain to resettle more Syrian refugees. Reihl-Kir had tried to defuse ethnicised Serb/Croat tensions in Slavonia in spring 1991, in marked contrast to Serb militants' antagonism towards Croatian police elsewhere on the emerging front line, until his assassination by a Croat ex-policeman that July.

A report on Islamophobic hate crime by Tell MAMA, which Cox would have launched on 30 June, had already found a 300 per cent increase in offline crimes against Muslims in 2015 compared to the previous year, with spikes after

the attacks in Paris. Muslims were most likely to be attacked in shops, on streets or on public transport, and when wearing Islamic dress.

Accounts of on-street attacks, threatening letters, school and workplace bullying, and racist slurs have spiralled since the very day of the referendum result – with police recording a 57 per cent increase in reported hate crimes compared to corresponding days last year, the National Police Council calculating that hate crime reports have increased fivefold since the referendum, and a Facebook group organised to collect first-hand accounts of racist violence, Worrying Signs, becoming overwhelmed.

Ethnic minorities, Muslims, East Europeans (already targets of cultural racism in UK tabloids) and white people with foreign accents have all reported abuse and attacks – giving the impression of violence that is both escalating and widening the range of people meant to be intimidated.

Public concern about a sudden 'surge' in xenophobia, Akwugo Emejulu writes, conceals years of 'everyday and institutionalised racism and violence' that people have experienced in Britain and which they have often been disbelieved when they describe. Race, and who has been more or less likely to feel the effects of racism, is the deepest-rooted dimension of the divergence of 'scripts' that different members of the public now have for making sense of the crisis.

Acts of ethnicised and racialised violence, even between one person and another, have collective effects. Before open war broke out in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and beyond areas that were occupied or became front lines, people who belonged – or were just finding out that they belonged – to ethnic, political and sexual minorities suffered intimidation that was supposed to reverberate into the consciousness of others who shared the same identity.

The difference between Britain and Yugoslavia is not the underlying dynamic of collective violence and intimidation so much as the different balances of histories and power behind the violence. War broke out in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina after sustained campaigns of intimidating ethnic others, undermining social and political alternatives, and equipping future armies and paramilitary groups on a mass scale.

Residents of Sarajevo stand in line to gather water during the siege of their city, 1992. Credits: Mikhail Evstafiev / Wikimedia Commons

The identities drawn into conflict with each other in Yugoslavia were ethno-national, all based on a link between ethnicity and sovereignty over territory that had to be proved or broken to determine which state the land should belong to.

Racist violence in England is based on a narrative of white English sovereignty in which Britain can never be 'home' to immigrants or to any Black or Asian Britons at all – a country which, Kehinde Andrews writes, 'was always happy to exploit the dark skinned subject, but never comfortable living with them.' The global historical legacies of British imperialism and the legacies of Serbian national expansionism are not identical, and too direct a comparison between Yugoslavia and Britain would erase the reckoning with colonial history that Britain, in the aftermath of Brexit, needs urgently to undertake.

Uncertainty and insecurity harden social divisions

The scripts about belonging that EU citizens living in the UK thought they had – though their scripts were already inflected by race, language and religion – have been whipped away since the beginning of the referendum campaign.

Without their own say in the referendum (unless they were Irish), 3.3m citizens of other EU states have had to watch British politicians and the public overturn plans they had made for their long-term future and expose them to at least two years of uncertainty over whether they can continue living in the UK on equal terms. Some arrived in schools and workplaces the morning after the referendum to be told by classmates and workmates they were going to be sent home.

Their uncertainty has only built further as David Cameron and Theresa May (now a front-runner for Conservative leadership) have refused to guarantee that EU citizens already living in the UK would retain their current residence rights after Brexit and a UKIP peer, Lord Pearson of Rannoch, encouraged the government to use uncertainty over EU migrants' status to 'retaliate' if necessary in negotiations with the EU.

EU citizens' prominence in arguments about immigration at this moment does not alter how seriously the political consensus to present immigration as a source of scarcity and tension has already affected non-EU citizens, or the violence that the EU will continue to inflict at its borders and through detention centres unless it significantly alters its own migration policy. Yet since Westminster not Brussels already controlled UK immigration policy, Brexit would change neither of those things except to the extent that non-EU citizens would have greater chances of obtaining UK visas – yet migrants from the Global South could anticipate visa requirements as restrictive as they are now.

Even many UK citizens who voted Remain have had their political identities, and their very senses of self, affected by the willingness of the Leave campaign to manipulate EU citizens' uncertainty: with shock that they never predicted such indifference; with dread that extremism they had already predicted is coming closer to the centre of power; with grief and disbelief that the other side voted the way that it did.

How do you comprehend that so many people in the country you are supposed to share values with could vote with such indifference to 3 million others' status and wellbeing – or, when stakes were so high, might not have been bothered to vote at all?

This is the beginning, but only the beginning, of how new political identities emerge and 'other sides' form.

The social bonds that broke down, and were deliberately broken down, before and during the Yugoslav wars included many 'former neighbours', close friends who found it impossible to understand the other's perception of events when they themselves were experiencing so much horror.

Britain is nowhere even close to experiencing the levels of violence that divided Vukovar or Sarajevo, and the forces impelling polarisation are differently configured. In coming days and months, movements seeking to build coalitions for change will nevertheless have to appeal to mixtures of Remainers, Leavers and voters who did not use their vote,

building solidarities which hardened political boundaries – though grown out of comprehensible, fearful emotions – could impede.

Here, polarisation can work both ways: projecting symbolic value judgments on to whole cities, such as Sunderland which highly visibly announced a Leave majority early in televised coverage of the results, 'misses complex stories of racism and resistance' that could help to build a broader consensus against austerity and racism than the Remain campaign was able to mobilise, or even commit to, in June 2016.

People are demanding alternatives nobody is offering

Public participation around both the Leave and Remain positions has revealed demands for social and political alternatives that no large political option currently has on offer.

No politician with a UK-wide remit began their post-referendum remarks with the kind of messages to EU citizens that Nicola Sturgeon or Sadiq Khan addressed to their electorates in Scotland and London.

No Leave voter who believed that a Britain outside the EU could afford to revitalise its economy and public services has been offered anything other than a politics of fear and ethnicised entitlement, or guarantees that the fruits of any prosperity Britain did achieve would go towards repairing their own marginalisation.

The loudest voices that members of the English and Welsh public determined not to be taken out of the EU against their will can identify with in their calls for an alternative to Article 50 negotiations are only able to offer another way out to a different British nation, unless Sturgeon can win substantial concessions affecting England and Wales in Scotland's negotiations with the UK.

The pro-EU rallies since the referendum in cities that voted Remain are not direct equivalents of the Sarajevo peace rallies – and no Euromaidan.

A pro-EU demonstrator in London, 2016. Credits: Ed Everett / Flickr.

But Yugoslavia in 1990 and 1991 contained a strong civic upswell of support for democratisation and peace within a still-Yugoslav framework which some alternative political parties channelled yet no leader with sufficient power was

prepared to adopt. Instead, bases for political solidarity outside the nationalist consensus were systematically intimidated and undermined.

Britain's history is distinct from Yugoslavia's, despite the surface parallels that attend the potential break-up of a multi-national state in contemporary Europe. Yet perhaps the most important insight from the break-up of Yugoslavia is that it was not inevitable, nor pre-determined by long-term ethnic tensions, for the constitutional collapse of the country to descend into war; the history of the Yugoslav wars, whether in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo reveals detailed evidence of violence deliberately perpetrated and alternatives suppressed. Interrupting comparable processes in Britain, within a different set of social and political contexts, will be essential in building a more democratic and just society whether the UK's future is as one country or more.

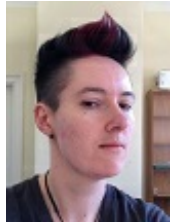*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s (2015), an introductory text on the break-up of Yugoslavia, and has published widely on media, popular culture and national identity during the Yugoslav wars, including *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991* (2010). Her current research aims at setting the post-Yugoslav region in global and transnational contexts, including its positions in global formations of 'race' and its presence in imaginations of the changing nature of conflict since the end of the Cold War. She graduated from LSE (BA History) in 2003. She blogs at http://bakercatherine.wordpress.com and tweets at @richmondbridge.

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