

# Europe risks losing its Balkans backyard

*The failure of the bloc to move ahead with accession talks forfeits a visionary goal as well as practical perks*

DAMIEN MCELROY

The theatrics of Brexit at last week's European summit largely obscured another crisis – the failure of the bloc to move ahead with membership talks for western Balkan countries.

A number of European leaders – among them French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as Denmark and the Netherlands – blocked membership talks with North Macedonia and Albania, prompting opprobrium from EU commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, who described it as a “major historic mistake” and European council president Donald Tusk, who said he was “embarrassed” by the bloc's actions.

They have a valid point: Europe is losing its Balkans backyard and this development comes as other parts of the world are flocking to the region, with good reason.

When the religious and ethnic wars of the 1990s erupted across the former Yugoslavia, the future of the region was pretty obvious amid the bloodshed.

As the bullets flew, every transaction was done in deutschmark. Germany had a key role in the diplomacy while France and Britain were key to the military interventions that stopped the spiral of conflict.

Stabilisation was a project that was funded in euros, the currency that reflects the post-war revival of Germany. For the Balkans, all-important diplomacy was well-supported by political engagement from Brussels and other European capitals.

So far, only Croatia has been invited into the club of EU nations. The rest are effectively being told that a common European home has been put on the never-never list of international talks.

An appalling signal was sent out when Mr Macron abruptly ended



European Council president Donald Tusk, right, with North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev before the Brussels summit

talks on bringing in North Macedonia and Albania to the accession process when the issue was discussed on Friday in Brussels.

Many in the room were furious, among them Mr Juncker. “It's a major historic mistake,” he said. “I hope it will only be temporary and won't become engraved in the collective memory as a historic mistake.”

Europe has often turned its focus on to its western core. Turkey has been sitting in the waiting room for decades. Balkan states first began

EU accession talks at a summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. After Brussels, there is a feeling of shock and betrayal across the region. One analyst was said to have called Mr Macron “the European Trump” as he described the scale of the volte face. North Macedonia's foreign affairs minister Nikola Dimitrov tweeted: “The least that the European Union owes the region is to be straightforward with us. If there is no more consensus on the European future of the Western Balkans, if the promise of Thessa-

loniki 2003 does not : zens deserve to know a tweet from Mr Tusk for patience: “I would a message to our Ma Albanian friends: don did your share and w have absolutely no d will become full me European Union.”

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## Gulf conservationists playing an important role

Peter Hellyer

Earlier this month, a gathering in Abu Dhabi of the world's elite in their field went under the radar of most residents in the UAE. At the four-day conference, sponsored by the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD), more than 350 specialists in the conservation of the world's endangered plants and wildlife gathered to discuss challenges in the struggle to preserve global biodiversity.

The event brought together members of the Species Survival Commission, a group of more than 8,000 expert volunteers from around the world, who come under the umbrella of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the body that issues a “red list” of endangered species. So far, more than 105,000 species have been assessed, with a target of 160,000 set for the end of next year.

This red list classifies species on the basis of the following categories: not evaluated, data deficient, least concern, near-threatened, vulnerable, endangered, critically endangered, extinct in the wild and extinct. Through regular re-evaluation, individual spe-

cies can then move from one category to another. Occasionally, their status can improve. The risk status of the scimitar-horned oryx, for example, native to the Sahel region of Africa, might shortly be downgraded from extinct in the wild to critically endangered, thanks to the success of a reintroduction programme organised by EAD in collaboration with a number of other organisations.

For the most part, however, the trend is downwards. More than 28,000 species assessed so far are thought to be threatened with extinction, including, remarkably, more than half the native trees of Europe. Only 14 American red wolves are believed to survive in the wild.

But I don't want to focus on threats to the world's biodiversity; that is a never-ending conversation. Instead, it is worth focusing on ways in which the UAE's conservation bodies such as the EAD are now playing an increasingly important role on a global scale.

Their good work in the country is recognised by those in conservationist circles, although they could do with getting attention on a wider platform. Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority, for example, is planning to in-



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roduce fines of up to AD50,000 for those dumping waste in what it describes as “wilderness” areas. I look forward to reading about the first culprits being caught.

In Abu Dhabi, the EAD has just announced the discovery of two new species of wasp, one at

Al Wathba nature reserve and the other in Fujairah's Wadi Madaqa, while a new species of mammal for the UAE is thought to have been found in the Al Dhafra region – further evidence that there is still much to be discovered about the country's biodiversity.

Here in the Emirates, however, we hear little about what our environmental and conservation bodies do overseas. Besides the scimitar-horned oryx reintroduction programme in Chad, the EAD has also been active in Central Asia and Mongolia. Its global footprint is also

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