

Problems in eastern Europe

One of the most disappointing things about the high strategy of the EU has been its approach to Eastern Europe. Today there remain substantial problems on the eastern frontier of the Union.

In Turkey the President is seeking referendum endorsement for more centralised power. The President wants more control over the appointment of Judges, the ending of the office of Prime Minister and general rights to run the country as he sees fit. The EU clashed with the President over the recent coup attempt and they have been critical of his record on human rights. It looks as if after years of offering Turkey the prospect of membership of the EU, Germany and the others are cooling on the idea. Last year's promise of accelerated progress in achieving Turkish accession has been replaced by a distinct distancing. Instead of it being possible to get over the obstacles, EU sources seem more inclined now to play up the difficulties in the way of membership.

On the one hand Mrs Merkel and some of the other leaders seeking re election at home may find it convenient to distance themselves from their previous decision to speed up Turkish membership. On the other hand they face a big problem anyway, thanks to the EU/Turkey Association Agreement. This creates freer movement of people from Turkey into the Schengen area of the EU. The Turks are becoming unhappy about the lack of EU support for them in their task as acting host to more than 3 million refugees from the Middle East. Were they to encourage many of those people to head westwards into the EU Mrs Merkel would have a major problem on her hands.

In Serbia the EU has also been negotiating possible membership. Last week Serbia was to initiate a new train service into Kosovo, which had emerged from the various talks with the EU over how there could be some rapprochement between Serbia and Kosovo after their separation in 2008. The decision of the Serbian authorities to implement this idea with a train that had painted prominently down its sides the message "Kosovo belongs to Serbia" led to a furious exchange with Kosovo. Serbia had to accept the train would not be allowed over the frontier. Clinton and Blair are remembered fondly in Kosovo for assistance in their struggle with Serbia. What is the EU going to do about the tensions that have flared again between these two?

We have often discussed the EU's approach to Ukraine and their role in the run up to the illegal annexation of Crimea by a Russia which both saw an opportunity and felt a threat to its naval presence in Crimea. There are no signs of any resolution of this dispute either.

The EU has to be careful not to overstretch. Its long and weak eastern frontier is the source of instability, at a time when the western countries are wanting to turn their backs on migrant flows and the problems of the Middle East for electoral reasons.

Beijingers buy less fireworks over pollution concerns

Beijingers set off less fireworks this year over pollution concerns as they celebrate Spring Festival, the most important festival in the Chinese calendar.

The Chinese Lunar New Year, which this year is the Year of the Rooster, fell on Saturday.

As of Friday, the eve of the Lunar New Year, sales of firecrackers and fireworks had decreased 4.9 percent year-on-year, the sixth consecutive year of decline, according to the fireworks office of the municipal government early Saturday.

The city reported 25 fires caused by fireworks on Friday, one less than last year.

Beijing has ordered the suspension of fireworks sale in case of serious air pollution alerts.

Compared with the daytime blue sky on Friday, Beijing's air turned noticeably hazy at night due to fireworks displays as locals welcomed the new year.

Due to fireworks and the lack of wind, the city's density of PM2.5, airborne particles smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter, hit a peak of 647 micrograms per cubic meter at 2 a.m. Saturday, down 7.6 percent from the same time of the last lunar new year, according to the Beijing Municipal Environmental Monitoring Center.

"Setting off fireworks and firecrackers surely adds to pollution and creates noises," said a college student surnamed Yu in Beijing's Chaoyang district. His stance is shared by the majority of citizens.

A recent poll on 1,000 residents in the capital showed 83 percent of interviewees said they would not set off fireworks during Spring Festival. This was 6.4 percentage points higher than last year.

Setting off fireworks and firecrackers during the Lunar New Year is a Chinese tradition, however, sales of fireworks have dropped in recent years in cities amid pollution concerns and government restrictions.

Nationwide, 444 cities have banned fireworks and 764 other cities impose restrictions on setting off fireworks, according to the Ministry of Public Security.

News story: UK and Jordan standing shoulder to shoulder in fight against Daesh

During a visit to London, where the King also met with the Foreign Secretary, Sir Michael discussed the UK's deep and longstanding support to Jordan, an important regional ally.

As a country on the front line in the fight against Daesh, Jordan is working closely with Britain and other Coalition members to defeat the terror group. Jordan was one of the earliest contributors to airstrikes against Daesh, operating four F-16 fighters, as well as other transporter aircraft.

Following the meeting with His Majesty King Abdullah II, Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon said:

Jordan is a longstanding and key ally of the UK and an important partner in countering the shared threats we face.

We stand shoulder to shoulder in the fight against Daesh, our militaries exercise together and we're assisting Jordan in the development to develop of its armed forces.

Through our global role we're committed to helping Jordan in sustaining its stability which in turn makes Britain safer and more secure.

Over the last financial year, the UK, through our Conflict Security and Stabilisation Fund (CSSF), has contributed over £32 million in helping Jordan's security, and next year we will aim to contribute a further £28 million. This funding, as well as longstanding defence engagement between the two countries, means that the UK and Jordan have a substantial defence relationship, including:

- Building up Jordan's border security, through helping develop their border surveillance capability.
- 200 UK forces last year participated in Exercise Shamal Storm 16, and this year British forces will work alongside a stepped up Jordanian force.
- The UK leads and helps to fund Jordan's Quick Reaction Force (QRF). The QRF is a Rapid Response force which has the ability to respond to

threats at distance.

- Through NATO, Britain is providing financial support to developing Jordan's cyber defence, military exercises and information protection.

Theresa May must be willing to tell President Trump that he is wrong – her failure to do so is shameful

Responding

to the joint press conference held between Theresa May and President Trump, Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry has said:

“The

Prime Minister promised to speak frankly to President Trump, and tell him where she disagreed with him, but we heard nothing of the sort.

“She

appears only to have discussed those issues on which we already know they agree: trade and security. But we heard nothing about climate change, about respect for human and reproductive rights, about war crimes in Syria, about the nuclear deal with Iran, or about the illegal settlements in the West Bank.

The Prime

Minister referred to a special relationship based on our shared history and interests, but she has to realise that it is also a relationship based on shared values, and if the President is going to discard those values, whether by embracing torture or ignoring climate change, then she must be willing to tell him frankly that he is wrong.

“Her failure

to do so today – even behind closed doors – was nothing less than shameful.”

Rationing of this kind is totally unacceptable and is against the best

traditions of the NHS – Julie Cooper

Julie

Cooper MP, Labour's Shadow Health Minister, commenting on reports of increases in waiting times for hip operations, said:

“It is absolutely shocking in 21st Century Britain that patients in some parts of the country will only qualify for knee and hip replacement operations on the NHS if they can prove pain so exceptional that it prevents sleep.

“Rationing of this kind is totally unacceptable and is against the best traditions of the NHS. However, there are concerns that if the Government continues to deny sufficient funding to the NHS, rationing of treatments could become more widespread.”