

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 Last year's promise of accelerated progress in achieving Turkish accession has been replaced by a distinct distancing.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.