

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 41st in our series of expert comment and analysis. This is a summary of the conclusions of the South East European Studies At Oxford (SEESOX) Hilary Term 2020 Seminar Series by **Sir David Madden**, Senior Member and Distinguished Friend of St Antony's College, University of Oxford. We had originally planned to co-host a presentation on the seminar series at GSF in June, but lockdown prevented it. As always, the views expressed are those of the authors and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## Security Challenges In South East Europe In A Changing Geopolitical Context

This eight-part seminar series covered: the role of external actors (The West, Russia, China); new (and old) global threats e.g. energy, migration, cyber security; and regional security threats - Serbia/Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina, Radicalisation in West Balkans.

A full list of the individual seminars, with titles and speakers is attached.

It was deliberately designed to be a comprehensive and balanced picture of the range of challenges facing the region. And the timing proved fortuitous. The final seminar was on 10th March, just before the region went into COVID-19 lockdown. The series therefore represented an ideal

opportunity to draw a balance before a new and fresh challenge appeared, and provided the perfect chance to look at the status quo ante.

The ten main take-aways from the Hilary Term series were the following:

1. There are a number of outdated assumptions: that actors are united (not true of the US, EU, or even within countries); that international security is based on territorially-defined borders (challenges are trans-border and shared); that states are the only actors (there are also economic entities, non-governmental bodies, civil resistance, even migrants).
2. In the case of the EU, there is the enlargement framework, but also enlargement fatigue on both sides; and in October 2019 the French Non to



[events@globalstrategyforum.org](mailto:events@globalstrategyforum.org)  
[www.globalstrategyforum.org](http://www.globalstrategyforum.org)

Albania and North Macedonia, though this has subsequently been lifted. There has been a blockage on Schengen membership for Romania and Bulgaria since 2011. More encouraging are the sectoral cooperation policies (counter-terrorism, border management, countering disinformation), which are in the interests of both EU Member States and applicants; and arrangements such as the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, which encourage equal partnership and cooperation not competition: though the multiplicity of platforms pose challenges of duplication and overlap. At some point the EU and some of the West Balkan countries have to return to the core business of enlargement, and there are some encouraging signs of focus here.

3. NATO has some essential policies in the region: but there are uncertainties because of the inconsistencies of the Trump Presidency, and the position of Turkey.
4. The impact of Russian involvement is rather short-term and questionable, because it does not rest on genuine historical roots, despite the posturing, and is essentially opportunistic. The Western Balkans is not a region of primary strategic interest for Russia, though it has some capacities and sustains limited involvement. Russia seeks ties in specific areas rather than broad relationships or military intervention. The failure of efforts

by the Russian Orthodox Church to sabotage or postpone the autocephaly of the Ukraine Orthodox Church has weakened its position.

5. In the case of China, by contrast, there is: carefully considered investment e.g. in transportation, energy and telecommunications; ample finance under favourable conditions (albeit conditional on host-government guarantees and collateral in the form of real-estate); enhanced soft power; and a strategic interest in increasing access to the EU as a whole. China is still building coal-fired electricity plants: but that is what local political and coal industry interests favour.
6. The Eastern Mediterranean is rich in hydrocarbon reserves, territorial and maritime border disputes and regional power politics. Energy is a source of tension and dispute rather than peace and cooperation. There is a contrast with the level of cooperation and settled relationships in the Black Sea. But energy is an accelerator of competition, not the source of it. Turkey is a rising and demanding regional power.
7. On migration, the 'Balkan route' has effectively been closed. It exists mainly in the FRONTEX imagination. 'Reception centres' have basically become camps.
8. South East Europe is a hotspot of cyber activity, not least because of poor critical infrastructure, weak rule of law, and low



level of trust in institutions. The region is a particular target for Russia, because of its connections with both the EU and NATO; and is often viewed as a weak link. Russia is active at sowing and exploiting political and social divisions weakening Western societies from within, slowing down NATO expansion and/or diminishing internal cohesion by non-violent means. Flash points, elections and lack of trust between governments and oppositions all provide opportunities. But much of the toxicity in political debate is domestic in nature, rather than artfully injected from outside.

9. The normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo has been largely halted since 2017. The political dialogue had been at the top political level, so for ordinary people engagement with the other side was always difficult. There is a need for local initiatives and ideas e.g. border-free trade in the so-called Mini-Schengen, not least to give people an incentive not to leave. Kosovo is at a standstill unless Serbia makes a move. The land swap idea in August 2018 did not gain public legitimacy but was a proposition to get out of the current

deadlock for Kosovo. The EU, after the glory days of 2013, is losing its way. US cowboy-style diplomacy is not working. With BiH, there is a strong sense of déjà vu: ethnic bickering, dysfunctionality, migration crises and human drain.

10. Radicalisation in the West Balkans is often seen in terms of radical Islam. But there is also Orthodox Christianity and nationalism. The roots of radicalisation lie in individual identity crises, corruption, state capture, and loss of hope. Enlargement fatigue also gives ammunition to recruiters, allowing them to argue that the West is not the answer. As a result of war etc., societies are fragile, and identities in crisis.

*Sir David Madden*  
*October 2020*



## List of seminars:

*Western Policy Approaches To South East Europe: Engagement Or Neglect?* Mirena Pencheva (St Antony's College); Jarek Wisniewski (Independent Analyst)

*Radicalisation In The Western Balkans: Political, Social Or Religious?* Florian Qehaja (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies); Asya Metodieva (Central European University)

*The 'Balkan Route': Humanitarian And Security Perspectives.* Amanda Beattie (Aston University); Myriam Foutu (University of Leicester); Jelena Obradovic Wochnik (Aston University)

*Energy Dynamics In The Eastern Mediterranean: Cooperation Or Conflict?* Bill Kappis (University of Buckingham); Okan Yardimci (St Antony's College)

*How To Restart The Normalisation Of Serbia-Kosovo Relations?* Ian Bancroft (OSCE); Jessie Barton Hronesova (Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford)

*The Role Of The Balkans In The Geopolitics Of Cybersecurity.* Lucas Kello (Centre for Technology and Global Affairs, Oxford); Cvete Koneska (S-RM Intelligence and Risk Consulting, London)

*South East Europe In Russia's Geopolitical Objectives.* Roy Allison (St Antony's College); Othon Anastasakis (St Antony's College); Andreja Bogdanovski (University of Buckingham)

*China In South East Europe: Economic Or political interests?* Jens Bastian (ELIAMEP); Igor Rogelja (King's College, London)

## Co-convenors:

Othon Anastasakis, Jessie Barton Hronesova, David Madden (St Antony's College)

## Chairs:

The co-convenors, plus Foteini Kalantzi, Charles Enoch, Elizabeth Roberts, Ezgi Basaran and Rana Mitter

