



# REPORT ON THE MARSHALL CENTER SECURITY FORUM

The Geopolitical Confluences in the Western Balkans in the Midst of the  
Coronavirus Crisis: Euro-Atlantic Perspective

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"The Geopolitical Confluences in the Western Balkans in the Midst of the Coronavirus Crisis: Euro-Atlantic Perspective"

Marshall Center Macedonia hosted the **MARSHALL CENTER ALUMNI SECURITY FORUM, 27 August 2020** in Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia. The event was sponsored by the Alumni Programs, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Macedonian Marshall Center Alumni Association and NATO Public Diplomacy Division. The gathering provided an excellent setting to discuss important defense issues and take stock of how the Marshall Center's alumni can be agents of change, working together to resolve contemporary security challenges. Out of 50 applications from seven countries, 20 alumni were selected to participate in the event.

### **Objectives:**

Having the geopolitical convergence of a number of security challenges in the Western Balkans and the Covid-19 crisis as an unprecedented multidimensional challenge as main drivers of the event, this one-day webinar redistributed into 3 principal thematic panels discussed "hot potato" topics on national, regional and global level. In particular, the webinar put an emphasis on the implications of the great powers' involvement in the region and will shed light on the situation with Covid -19 crisis in the wider WB region and beyond. The policy response undertaken by the WB governments as well as by the EU and NATO as guarantors of peace and prosperity to tackle the Covid -19 crisis was also a topic of the webinar. The insights of using both the open access and classified information in dealing with hybrid threats, the cyber security postures in the regions and the levels of preparedness to react against attacks coming from the virtual space put an additional quality to the webinar. While a great deal of the program will be dedicated to the Euro-Atlantic perspectives of the region, their successes, failures and developments were viewed through the lenses of the security. The effects of the pandemic on the EU integrative processes of the WB countries was also one of the focal points of the online event. In a nutshell, the overall goal of this regional project was to develop a high quality reflection among the participants, to provoke a mind-challenging debate and to analyze the transnational security threats in national, regional and Euro-Atlantic context.

## **Welcome Remarks**

The gathering was opened by the President of the Republic of Northern Macedonia Dr. Stevo Pendarovski, US Ambassador to North Macedonia, Kate Marie Byrnes, Anke Holstein, the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Republic of Northern Macedonia, and Colonel Zoran Jankovich, Chief, NLO, Skopje.

## **Panels**

### ***Session 1 – The Implications of the Covid -19 Crisis on the Power Competition in the Western Balkans***

Having historical examples as a background material to analyse the current and forecast future geo-political developments, it is not difficult to argue that the WB has always been a hotbed for foreign spheres of interest, a flaming cocktail of mixed internal challenges and external factors. The corona virus with its unprecedented consequences on one side and the WB weak economic and social systems on the other side make the WB region a fertile soil for major external players to step in and fulfill the geopolitical vacuum. The short democratic capacity, the authoritarian-prone systems, the high poverty levels in concomitance with the harmful effects of the corona virus have borne the first fruits in the region: declined democratic levels in some of the countries, compromised privacy of the citizens, exaggerated securitization of the Covid-19, uncertain European perspectives. Such negative tendencies in concomitance with the steadfast intervention from China and Russia in assisting the WB countries in the fight against corona virus might encourage the WB governments to accept and consequently replicate the authoritative Chinese and Russian regimes. Having said that, this panel focused on: What the world will look in the post Corona era? Will the crisis reinforce the realpolitik and the great power competition? How will it affect the WB countries? How resilient the WB countries are to the various geo-political influences in times of Covid-19? What did the countries undertake individually to minimize the effects of the crisis? Is the WB region fully determined to join the Euro-Atlantic security community or it displays a certain degree of malleability in the era of Covid-19? How do the EU and NATO contribute to increasing the WB's security, economic and social resilience to fight the disease?

## ***Session 2 - NATO's role in Providing Security and Stability in the Southern Flank; Combating Multidimensional Security Threats***

With the adoption of the latest NATO declaration, the Alliance has recognised the exceptionally complex security environment and has committed itself to countering the growing fragmentation of conflict actors. The aggressive Russian behaviour in Eastern Europe was once again reaffirmed as a major security challenge while the Chinese growing influence and international policies were recognised for the first time as both challenge and opportunity that need to be addressed. Aside from the traditional security threats coming from state actors, the Alliance is also faced with systemic and macrosocial challenges that complement the multi-dimensional security matrix. The most recent Covid-19 crisis has put the Alliance in a state of emergency to help some of its members to better deal with it. The expanding youth bulge in Africa combined with the poverty and resource depletion pressure represent a considerable long-term threat that may cause immense migratory flows towards the countries making part of NATO's Southern Flank, thus affecting the entire Euro-Atlantic security community. The remnants of the Islamic caliphate which provide radicalised foreign fighters, the omnipresent terrorist threat and the religious extremism are additional burdens that the Alliance needs to eradicate sooner rather than later. Such unprecedented diversification of the security challenges is subject of analysis of this panel dedicated to NATO's role in providing peace and stability. By deconstructing the extremely complex matrix of menaces, this panel focused on the gravity and magnitude of each of the threats threatening NATO's Southern Flank, that look into NATO's current engagement in dealing with diverse threats, including the Corona crisis and also lay a trajectory of NATO's future military and civilian actions.

## ***Session 3 - Fighting Disinformation in the WB: The Information Integration Approach***

Using distorted information in the modern warfare seems one of the most effective methods of inflicting a certain damage to the adversary without causing any internal consequences. Fortunately, the releasing truthful information is the best counter mechanism to fight such information. Providing better understanding of the nature and the effects of the misleading narratives, forging effective national counter strategies,

exchanging reliable information between the security organs and strong protection of the classified and sensitive information are the key components of building a comprehensive counter response. By elaborating on the role of national security authorities in protecting the classified information, sensitive and open access information, this panel put a particular emphasis on the relationship between closed and open source information and their engagement in countering mis/dis information, fake news and other subversive tools. It focused on answers how to disseminate truthful open access information without disclosing any classified data, and provided examples how the regional security cooperation contributes to the defeat of this security challenge.

Although the virtual event was divided into 3 main thematic panels such as the implications of the involvement of the major powers in the region, the challenges of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, and the risks of cyber threats and fake news, the media mostly focused on the topic about misinformation and fake news and how they affect the trust in the institutions.

**Key points:**

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new major challenge into an already complicated security environment for Southeast Europe and the Euroatlantic community as a whole. Together with straining health systems, it has catalyzed a fresh wave of disinformation (“infodemic”) from malign state and non-state actors including China and Russia. Fake news and conspiracy theories about the coronavirus aim to spread confusion, division, and mistrust.
2. Strengthening resilience against such threats will require credible public engagement, capacity-building to recognize and expose disinformation (including the partially “Potemkin” nature of Chinese and Russian aid), intensified Euroatlantic presence and perspective, internal Euroatlantic unity, and further steps against corruption. Failure could leave Southeast Europe a buffer zone increasingly subject to influence by actors who don’t share Euroatlantic interests or ideals.

3. The COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a broader increase of security concerns in relation toward China. This key issue within the NATO Reflection and EU Strategic Compass processes also carries implications for the countries of Southeast Europe.
4. NATO's Hub for the South shows the alliance can also further contribute to addressing transnational security challenges including migration, organized crime, and violent extremism. To do so most effectively, however, the Alliance should calibrate its ambitions, concentrate on areas of comparative advantage, and work together with the European Union and other organizations.
5. The strategic breakthrough of NATO membership and green light to begin EU accession negotiations were important good news stories for North Macedonia and the wider region amidst the other challenges this year.
6. The interdependent nature of international and Euroatlantic security means it is important also for leaders and publics in Southeast Europe actively to learn and prepare to contribute to addressing challenges in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity rather being passive observers.

#### **KEY MESSAGES:**

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS INTENSIFIED PRE-EXISTING PRESSURES AND HIGHLIGHTED THE GROWING ROLE OF THE INFORMATION SPHERE IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE'S SECURITY**

**THE COUNTRIES OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE ARE SUBJECTS, NOT JUST OBJECTS OF REGIONAL AND BROADER EUROATLANTIC SECURITY**

**THINK STRATEGICALLY ABOUT THE FUTURE**

## **Comments**

It is particularly important to note that this time summarized information was sent to the media – Media release of what was discussed/debated during the webinar. This form of contact with the media proved to be efficient as over 10 or more web portals reported about it. The content of the information, was taken over from the Macedonian Information Agency (MIA), which was the first one to inform about the event.

Media reported with a special news about the participation of President Pendarovski. They not only reported his views expressed at the forum but also emphasized that they were presented at this virtual event.

In conditions when the way of functioning of the media has been changed, the organizers are satisfied with the distribution/share of information to the public. It is also expected that there will be an analysis in a video format that will be released later through the Voice of America network in Macedonian (to which some materials from the webinar have been sent). The Defence Magazine Shtit/Shield will also feature an article of the event.

## **Conclusion**

This Forum proved to be a good opportunity to talk about NATO, regional cooperation and other defense related issues.

Establishing a link between the new forms of warfare and the European and Atlantistic perspectives of the WB region, the Forum tended to provide practical examples and lessons learned on the mutual cooperation between the Euro-Atlantic partnership and the Western Balkans on these common security challenges. In particular, the Forum focused on: hybrid security and countering fake information (mis/dis information), malicious disruptive propaganda, strategic communication, human security and cyber defense mechanisms.

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