

## 2024 Southeast European Student Symposium – Second Edition

**Organisation: Southeast European Studies Student Symposium and Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft e.V. / SOG)**

**Online via Zoom, 4–6 April 2024**

**Report by Sophia Strähhuber, Jena**

### Introduction

The Southeast European Studies (SEES) Student Symposium originated as an initiative by students from the universities of Graz, Jena and Regensburg. The overarching aim of the Symposium is to provide an opportunity for networking among undergraduate and graduate students who have a subject-related connection to Southeast Europe. Furthermore, it was conceptualised as a platform for exchange and feedback on current research papers and projects, thus resulting in a wide range of topics. In total, 63 participants registered for this year's Symposium, including 17 presenters who were previously selected through an application process. About 84 per cent of the participants were presently pursuing their studies at a university, with half of them specifically engaged in Master's degree programmes. While most of the registered participants came from all three German-speaking countries, the Symposium was attended by participants coming from a further six countries, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia. The presentations were grouped into panels according to their overarching topics. The participants' contributions employed perspectives from various disciplines, including history, political science, international relations, anthropology, cultural studies, Slavic studies and law.

### Day 1, Room 1 –

#### Introduction and Keynote Lecture

The Symposium kicked off on Thursday afternoon with a short introduction by the organising committee. It consisted of *Aris Douglas* (Graz), *Oliver Kannenberg* (Halle), *Enej Lovrečić* (Graz), *Gresa Morina* (Regensburg), *Johannes Nüßler* (Regensburg), *Anna Charlotte Richter* (Regensburg) and *Sophia Strähhuber* (Jena). The introduction was followed by a short welcome from Zsófia Turóczy, Speaker of the Young Southeast Europe Association.

Moderated by *Oliver Kannenberg*, *Ramona Dima's* (PhD, Department of Culture and Education, Södertörn University) opening keynote lecture entitled "Filling up the Gaps: Queer Research in the Romanian Academia" was based on a biographical approach and dealt with LGBTQ research in Romania from a long-term historical perspective. This made it possible to combine political, social, and cultural aspects and developments in a thought-provoking way. The audience, comprised of 20 to 25 participants, exhibited profound interest and engaged in a lively exchange of questions following the presentation.

### Day 2, Room 1 – Participant Presentations

Chaired by *Sophia Strähhuber*, the first panel in Room 1 started with a presentation by *Peter Wagener* (BA European Studies, Chemnitz) on "The Memory of the Holocaust in North Macedonia – National Narratives in a European Context". Peter gave an overview of the Holocaust in Macedonia, which was occupied by Bulgaria at the time. Ninety-eight per cent of all Macedonian Jews were deported and did not survive the Shoah. Peter focused on the development of a national culture of remembrance in the context of far-reaching political events (independence in 1991, the "Skopje 2014 project", the Prespa Agreement in 2018 and the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Skopje in 2011).

*Anela Dumonjić* (MA Southeast European Studies, Graz) held the second presentation on the topic of her Master's thesis, "I want my son back the way he was: – The Embodied Reality of Loss in Daytonesque Bosnia and Herzegovina". Anela introduced the key data of the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, and her approach of examining the Dayton-induced paradigm (dis)continuities and shifts through the lens of

bodies: She explained that bodies and physical experiences are central elements of the politics of remembrance. Also, she reflected upon the impact of the Dayton Agreement on post-war society in Bosnia and presented significant NGOs, such as the Mothers of Srebrenica.

Moderated by *Ivana Dinić* (Regensburg), the second panel opened with *Bekim Lahi* (MA Southeast European Studies, Graz), who presented the draft of his Master's thesis on the "Deterioration of Queer Rights under the Auspices of the European Non-Discrimination Regime in Serbia". Bekim's research question of how European non-discriminatory frameworks, competitive authoritarianism and a challenged civil society led to the deteriorating situation of queer people in Serbia already introduced the hypothesis that the position of queer people is actually worsening.

*Anna Charlotte Richter* presented the WIP (Work-In-Progress) of her Master's thesis entitled "Election Law Reform and Constitutional Implications in Bosnia and Herzegovina," delving into the intersection of election law reform and constitutional dynamics in the country. By addressing the complexities of the failed transfer of institutions and integrating perspectives from diverse disciplines, Anna's research aims to offer valuable insights for policy-makers, legal practitioners and scholars alike, fostering a more inclusive and democratic electoral framework in modern BiH.

## Day 2, Room 2 – Participant Presentations

Chaired by *Oliver Kannenberg*, *Chara Polydorou* (BA International and European Studies, Piraeus) presented her Bachelor's thesis on "The Role of the EU in the Efforts Made to Resolve the Kosovo Issue" to ten participants. She examined the role of the EU in the conflict, referring to its role as a mediator in combination with the soft power and influence that it can exert by utilizing the economic means, technical know-how and institutional experience that it possesses.

The second presentation was held by *Vanja Tadić* (MA Southeast European Studies, Graz) on her Master's thesis entitled "Shifts and Changes along the Balkan Route – the Impact of EU Inte-

gration at the Border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina". Vanja discussed how these possible changes had an impact on individuals crossing the border, the locals living along it and the relationship between the two states. She also shared insights gained through her semi-structured expert interviews with people from both Croatia and BiH in order to gain different perspectives and experiences with respect to her research question.

*Diana Dukati* (BA International and European Studies, Piraeus) presented her Bachelor's thesis and discussed "The Kosovo Conflict – From Ahtisaari Plan until Today. The Consequences in the Regional Subsystem of Southeastern Europe". Diana explored the challenges surrounding Kosovo's secession, the involvement of the Great Powers in Southeast Europe, and their biases towards specific minorities in the region. The contemporary implications of the Kosovo issue on regional relations and balances were discussed, too.

The panel concluded with *Timoleon Ilias* (BA International and European Studies, Piraeus) who presented the WIP of his Bachelor's thesis on "the European Western Balkans Policy in the post-Dayton Period". He delved into the impact of the Bosnian crisis and the shortcomings of the Dayton Agreement on reshaping the European approach towards the Western Balkan countries, highlighting the EU's increased involvement in the region and the use of soft power to promote democratic reforms despite limited progress in accession talks.

## Day 2, Room 1 – Workshop "Learning to Fail" by Dr Katarina Kušić (Vienna)

During this workshop on dealing with rejection, moderated by *Rebekah Manlove* (Jena), *Katarina Kušić* and ten participants focused on how stigma is attached to failure and how societal expectations and capitalist circumstances shape our perception of success and failure. She challenged the idea of creating an individual brand of research, emphasising the importance of working on topics one is passionate about. Katarina also highlighted the constraints imposed by rigid research standards, which may hinder the exploration of novel ideas and approaches.

**Day 2, Room 2 –****Workshop “On Choice: Translating Literature from Southeastern Europe” by****Dr Ena Selimović (DC, St. Louis)**

During her workshop, *Ena Selimović* and her seven attendees explored the concept of choice in translation, examining various aspects such as language selection, internal and external factors influencing translation decisions, and the role of translators as editors and agents. Excerpts from two novels were used to spark discussions on these topics, along with insights from her own professional journey as an emerging translator and editor. The workshop was moderated by *Anna Charlotte Richter*.

**Day 2, Room 1 –****Presentation by****Dr Siegfried Gruber (Graz)**

During his portrayal on the state of quantitative data collection in Southeast Europe, *Siegfried Gruber* introduced empirical data from household registers as part of his current project. Moderated by *Enej Lovrečić*, the session provided valuable insights into the region's demographics and socio-economic trends, offering potential topics for BA or MA theses for the twelve participants.

**Day 3, Room 1 –****Participant Presentations**

Chaired by *Johannes Nüßer* and *Gresa Morina*, the first panel's opening presentation featured *Katalin Kósza* (BA History and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg), who explored the emotional landscape within the Hungarian community in Germany. The presentation focused on post-migrant perspectives on identity, tradition and homeland attachment. *Katalin* gave insights into her qualitative interviews with members of a Hungarian dance club in Munich, prompting a discussion on conducting good interviews and building trust and relationships. This was followed by peer-to-peer feedback on the challenges of formulating research questions for Bachelor's and Master's theses.

*Ivana Dinić* (MA European Studies, Regensburg) discussed the current state of her Master's thesis on “Coalitional Empowerment in a Peace-building Initiative for Young Women from Kosovo and Serbia”.

The presentation focused on the communication between Serbian and Kosovar women at the OSCE Dialogue Academy for Young Women. *Ivana* highlighted the use of expert interviews and emphasised the fact that conflicting topics were avoided as too problematic. Despite these challenges, informal interactions such as coffee breaks could have helped to build bridges between participants.

Moderated by *Enej Lovrečić*, the second panel started with *Amina Bahović* (BA International Relations and European Studies, Sarajevo) presenting her Bachelor's thesis “Second Thoughts? A Study of Determinants Influencing Field Changes after Graduation among Recent Graduates of a Political Science Major at a Small University”. Using mixed methods, *Amina* explored career changes which were important during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Resignation. In total, she stressed the importance of extracurricular activities for finding employment. Without this engagement, alumni are much less likely to find a job in their field. The Erasmus programme also contributed to a widening of horizons concerning job prospects in other fields.

*Philip Piljić* (MA Southeast European Studies, Graz) touched upon his BA thesis about *Alija Izetbegović's* Islamic Declaration (1990) and the reaction from Yugoslavia and other international agents. He mainly focused on the declaration's content and discussed whether it represented any real threat to the Socialist regime in Yugoslavia.

*Nikola Donev* (LLM in International Human Rights Law, Skopje) held a talk entitled “North Macedonia – Between Emancipation and Nationalism”. He presented his current research on the effect of schools on national identity-building in North Macedonia after the fall of Yugoslavia. Focusing on school history textbooks, *Nikola* showed how the narrative of the “Other” was constructed. He used various methods to reach his conclusions: analysing school textbooks, public discourses and public opinion polls.

### Day 3, Room 2 – Participant Presentations

The final panel of the symposium was chaired by *Aris Dougas*, with *Konstantinos Katiniotis* (BA and European Studies, Piraeus), who opened it with his presentation “NATO’s Enlargement to Eastern Europe and Ukraine – Consequences for Southeastern Europe”. He delved into the historical background of NATO and its enlargement, particularly focusing on its implications for Southeast Europe. As part of the historical background, he highlighted the geostrategic significance of Greece and Turkey within NATO and discussed the challenges posed by the Yugoslav Wars. Despite ongoing interstate disputes, Konstantinos argued that NATO’s presence has contributed to stabilising Southeast Europe, with most states in the region aspiring to join NATO, thereby deterring regional crises. Feedback suggested the need for a more nuanced understanding of the Balkans and a departure from essentialist views (Konstantinos used expressions such as Southeast Europe “breaking free from its past”) to better inform foreign policy on the region. It was also suggested to place Southeast Europe in a wider geographical framework encompassing the Caucasus and Central Asia, to better understand its (post-socialist) dynamics.

*Kejda Mihai’s* (BA International and European Studies, Piraeus) presentation “The SEE Dimension on Ukraine’s Public Diplomacy Strategy during the Russian-Ukrainian War of 2022” emphasised Ukraine’s efforts to distinguish itself from Russia. Kejda outlined Ukraine’s diplomatic initiatives, including enhanced interparliamentary contacts and cultural diplomacy with Balkan countries, aimed at countering Russian influence and integrating into the EU and NATO. In the discussion section, it was suggested to adopt a broader historical approach to Russian-Ukrainian relationships extending into the pre-Soviet period. Also discussed were various Southeast European countries’ (e.g., Croatia’s, Greece’s, and Bosnia and Herzegovina’s) instrumentalisation of relations with Ukraine, as well as how these are used to establish parallelism with the past, with topics such as the aggressor/victim dichotomy coming into play.

The third presentation by *Anastasija Mladenovska* was cancelled. Instead, a

discussion on the parallels between the White Russian migration 100 years ago and today’s migration arose, which was led by participant *Elena Shuvalova*.

### Day 3, Room 1 – SEE! Career Prospects with Aleksandra Tomanić

Moderated by *Anna Charlotte Richter*, *Aleksandra Tomanić*, Executive Director of the European Fund for the Balkans, gave the 19 participants insights into her professional biography. With a background that includes tenure at the European Commission’s DG Enlargement and the German Development Cooperation (GIZ), she shared profound reflections on the nuances of working across diverse cultural landscapes. Touching upon the significance of personal vision in career pursuits, the discussion traversed topics ranging from Blue Book opportunities to resilience in the face of job rejections. She also offered insights into the pivotal role of internships and imparted knowledge on negotiation strategies in the realm of job applications. Altogether, the session proved to be an enriching tapestry of information and motivation, leaving the attendees inspired and empowered.

### Networking Events

Throughout the event, participants engaged in various activities to foster camaraderie and interaction. The Welcome Session on Thursday, 4 April saw 15 participants dividing into four break-out rooms for introductions and casual games such as “Find Something” and “Two Truths and a Lie”. On Friday, 5 April, with twelve participants, a brief overview preceded the engaging game “Human Bingo”, sparking conversations on diverse topics and enhancing mutual acquaintance. Saturday, 6 April, witnessed seven participants sharing largely positive feedback, highlighting the workshops and interactive discussions. While some expressed a preference for in-person gatherings, the overall sentiment was optimistic. The organising committee concluded by outlining plans for the future and encouraged participants to join further collaboration.

In summary, the second edition of the SEES Student Symposium successfully achieved its goal of bringing together students passionate

about Southeast Europe. The presentations sparked productive discussions, and the keynote and workshops provided valuable insights, fostering new connections with wonderful people from different countries and fields of research.

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