



## THE FIRST DECADE OF BELGRADE SECURITY FORUM - 10 YEARS OF GROWTH AND EXCELLENCE

From the very beginning, the Belgrade Security Forum (BSF) built its unique profile among similar events in Europe. It was envisaged and designed as a venue for dialogue that will contribute to the development of a security community in the Balkan region and provide a meaningful contribution to the ongoing European and global security discussion. On the other hand, BSF intended to create a viable national, regional and international network of stakeholders who will continue to engage in regular discussions and consultations on various open issues.

The determination of the three founding organizations was to test this new initiative in 2011, when the first edition of the BSF was held in the Army Hall. From that point on the BSF grew to become one of the most engaging regional event aimed at security dialogue and a well recognized venue to meet "from Istanbul to Vienna". This year we celebrate our first decade of work.

Following the example set by similar security forums in Europe, as the Munich Security Conference, GLOBSEC, and the Brussels Forum our idea was to raise some of the most challenging issues important for the Balkans and beyond, approach them in an innovative way, respect, and open debate about those issues by respecting different points of view.

### What really makes the Belgrade Security Forum stand out?

First, the BSF was initiated and is hosted by three civil society organizations – the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy and the European Movement in Serbia – which allows for independent and original opinions. We have been finding our own way from day one; Serbian state understands the importance of BSF, but does not support it financially or in terms of logistics. This guarantees a high level of autonomy in program creation and choice of speakers, reflected in our program.

Second, from the start part of our program was the BSF Academic Event, bringing together young academics, researchers and practitioners of security policy helping them engage with decision-makers and policy-planners. It enriches the debate and consequently feeds policies with much-needed theoretical insights, as well as new ideas. Testament to Academic Event's popularity is that in 2020 alone, annual Call for Papers was answered by over 40 academics.

Third, we aimed to include our region – the Western Balkans and wider Southeast Europe – in this worldwide debate and at the same time help "the world" – especially Europe – to better understand what is really taking place here. BSF mission is enabling, as much as it is possible, Western Balkans' "actorness" in global debates while seeking the greater, common interest instead of particular ones. BSF is there to make us as a region much more reflective about ourselves and the world. and at the same time to help send out a very clear message that it is important to include this region in the global debate about our common future.

Four, the BSF is giving floor to women experts and practitioners to actively participate and contribute in the fields traditionally dominated by men. Every year at least one panel or session is dedicated to women's role, position and views in security sector. When we began, one third of our speakers were women; as of 2019, we stand at 43%. No manels policy is strictly in place to stimulate more women experts to participate which is particularly effective within the scope of the BSF Academic Event.

Fifth, addressing and including as many of students as possible through establishing cooperation with the faculties offering courses in foreign affairs and security policy. It is important to open the Forum for generations to come and to make them a part of debate, to both inspire them and allow them to be proactive and motivated to stay and fight for better future for not only Serbia, but the entire region.

Looking at it from a programming perspective, the BSF has a basis of continuity in all topics it deals with, yet our approach evolves every year adapting to the circumstances. Traditionally, there is a number of simultaneously hosted plenary panels, sessions, side events and addresses, **more than 230** since 2011.

*One of the most important objectives and the original idea behind the Belgrade Security Forum was to "bring the Balkans closer to Europe" and then again "to bring Europe closer to the Balkans". BSF team was working on it continually and that is what we have been trying to achieve over ten years.*

Every year by following the most important processes in the region, Europe and the world we tried to introduce new topics and new people through all-encompassing program, one that would cater to many different audiences.

The program gets drafted through discussions between the three organizations and our partners; thus, this circle widened through the years.

Some issues were present from the onset: Belgrade-Pristina panel has always been one of the most awaited events for all who follow the politics and relations between the two communities. Next was the issue of migration, especially before the 2015 crisis. Another concerns women and the need to ensure a more gender-balanced and gender-responsive security sector, as a prerequisite for increasing women's participation. We also insisted on holding sessions dedicated to energy security, environment and climate change related policies, as well as raising inequality - because we think in a long-term perspective. The continuity of some topics has also shown the evolution of our approach to contemporary events and challenges.



We are aware that the Western Balkans is not the center of the world. Although Europe is always present in a major way, we devote our attention to we are not Eurocentric either. For example, in 2013 a session was devoted to Iran, in 2016 to Latin America and China, in 2018 we had a fascinating discussion on the Middle East, in 2019 experts discussed Asian security architecture.

**Since 2011 more than 4000 people participated and more the 900 speakers presented their points of view** - some of them for the first time, launched as "new faces" on the expert scene.

The visibility of the Forum has increased in the past ten years and every year **more than 120 journalists from 80 media houses were present at the BSF. More than 5700 media pieces have come out from the event for the past 10 years.** Since 2015, some of the BSF panels and sessions were broadcasted live on regional or national TV stations.

We can proudly state that the Belgrade Security Forum influenced the official (both national and regional) discourse, focused messages and the approach of decision and policy makers. During the Fifth BSF in 2015 the organizers released the Belgrade Appeal with regard to the refugee crisis and this document become a part of the official message of the Serbian government dealing with the crisis. By introducing a structured and concise message as conclusion and recommendations at the end of each BSF the organizers are hoping that the BSF debates influence policies and solutions to the problems.

During all those ten years BSF was supported by a large number of donors and partners, including a number of strategic partners, that made the very existence and the autonomy of the Forum possible, but also implies a tremendous effort fund raising for the realization of the BSF every year.

It started as a vision and after ten years it seems like dream that became true. At the very beginning there was a good will, dedicated people, devoted friends and limited budget and resources all the three-organization put in the BSF machinery. Forum was growing every year and became very well structured and secured a strong base for further growth.

From 2015 the structure was very clear and strong. Steering Committee consists of leading representatives of each of the three organizations, Executive Director, responsible for overall organization and leading the Coordination Team and Program Director responsible for program development. Coordination Team, consists of 12 members. And this all makes the core of the BSF team, even though the team has changed during these years. Every year there are new members, and only four from those who were starting the BSF successful story are still in the team. However, the team spirit and motivation remains high. BSF also relies on more than 50 volunteers each year, young and ready to work and learn. These wonderful young people provide an incredible contribution that each Forum runs smoothly. BSF organizational team engaged more than 50 associates in various fields, who provide their services in a highly professional manner.

After 10 years, BSF has been recognized as the event of the year in Serbia and in the region with the tendency of confirming that image in this part of the Europe. While the past ten years were dedicated to positioning the Belgrade Security Forum and building a stable structure that will make it even stronger, we are ready and eager to see what will next decade bring for the BSF. What awaits us in 2020, once pandemic is (hopefully) over? Writing for the Guardian, Charles Grant of the Center for European Reform in London states: de-globalization; nation-first politics; tighter borders; uncertain fate of "green policies"; tensions between the East and the West, and the North and the South of the EU. And that "only" concerns the EU. In the Western Balkans, questions of relations between neighbors, the weakening 'European perspective', state capture all remain relevant – even more so as we slowly emerge from curfews and restrictions. BSF will be there as the venue where all this – and more – will be analyzed and debated from a critical and productive point of view.



**Svetlana Stefanović**  
Executive Director and one of the original members that started the Belgrade Security Forum success story in 2011

