

February Geography Report

Our speaker was Dr Jonathan Mitchell a former diplomat, who continues to advise the Foreign Office. He is an expert on Middle Eastern and South East European affairs. His talk was titled "Russia vs. Ukraine: Impact on S.E. Europe". It was illustrated by a series of highly detailed and informative maps, which he produces himself and uses to analyse regional geopolitics. Jonathan has also worked with Gerald Blake on an atlas of the Middle East and North Africa.

Jonathan's talk considered the effect Russia's invasion of Ukraine had on its relationship with the Balkan countries of Bosnia Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bulgaria. Whilst the countries are very diverse in character, they are all poor in terms of their Gross Domestic Product and this poverty amplifies other issues. Traditionally Russia has had close links with this region and Jonathan referred to its ability to meddle and destabilise, using what he described as "mischief levers".

He explained that borders in the Balkans have changed frequently and don't necessarily reflect cultural identity or ethnolinguistic groups. This can lead to political instability. There is still nostalgia for the time of the Soviet Union and resentment of Western intervention. The Russian Orthodox Church is also influential, and Russian is spoken in Bulgaria and former Soviet countries. Some populations, for example, those in Serbia are staunchly pro-Russia, but politicians tread a more cautious line and sit precariously on the fence. The economies of all these countries are heavily dependent on Western Europe for both imports and exports and most seek EU membership in the long term.

Putin may not have achieved the desired effect through his invasion of Ukraine as the Balkan countries have supported UN votes condemning the invasion. Western Europe has become more aware of the need to resolve issues in the Balkans region and realised the importance of countering Russian influence. Forging closer economic ties, with a view to future EU membership, will be a prolonged process given the impoverished state of the region's economies. Dr Mitchell concluded by considering the various scenarios which might present in Ukraine and their likely impact on the Balkans.

This is only a short summary of a detailed, thought-provoking talk. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who came away more informed about the complex geopolitics of this region than when I arrived.

Report by Jane Harrison

Next meetings:

Thursday 16th March 2023. 2pm in the Witham. A geography 'smorgasbord' of contributions from members on map and climate themes.

Thursday 20th April 2023. 2pm in the Witham. Gerald Blake will talk about "The Geography of pre-colonial Africa."