Turkey’s turmoil and the EU/US conundrum: How should the West approach post-coup Turkey?
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Introduction

Every pillar of Turkish political and social life is changing fast, and the eventual outcome of this change is uncertain. These tumultuous times pose challenging questions for analysts and decision-makers in the West, for whom Turkey represents one of the biggest puzzles, in an increasingly precarious geopolitical environment. Turkey’s shift from a pro-European model for other Islamic countries in the Middle East to the West’s perceived adversary, all under the same leadership, requires in-depth and thorough analysis.

With these considerations in mind, South East European Studies at Oxford’s (SEESOX) Contemporary Turkey Programme aims to study, debate and respond to key challenges regarding Turkey that influence global and regional affairs. In SEESOX’s best tradition, the programme ended the year on 6 December 2016 with a high-level day-long workshop titled ‘Turkey’s turmoil and the EU/US conundrum: How should the West approach post-coup Turkey?’ Turkish politics were already in a state of emergency before the failed coup but even more so after, linking with crises in the region, as well as increasing authoritarianism and human rights abuses within the country.

SEESOX’s Turkish workshop consisted of three sessions that each focused on different aspects of the current turbulent period. The first session kicked off with a diagnosis of EU–Turkey relations, which undoubtedly form the essence of Turkey’s Western journey. The session attempted to analyse the recent developments that shaped bilateral relations, such as the EU–Turkey refugee deal and the possibility of freezing Turkey’s accession talks. The second session focused on the compatibility or divergence between the security interests and policies of the West and Turkey, with particular emphasis on the Russia–Turkey rapprochement and the spillover from the Syrian civil war. The third session discussed ways for the West to respond to Turkey’s increasing authoritarianism and human rights violations.
Session I: EU–Turkey relations and their structural components

The AKP’s pro-EU stance changed drastically from the start of its third governmental mandate. In 2013, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the then Prime Minister, infamously said, ‘The European Union is stalling us. Let us say au revoir to the EU and join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.’

With misunderstandings and blame games on both sides, EU–Turkey relations continued at a low profile until the migration resulting from the Syrian refugee crisis began to pose a direct threat to European countries. EU leaders, who had occasionally criticized Erdoğan’s crackdown on freedom of speech and the rule of law, decided to negotiate a deal with Turkey. However, the stalemate in Turkey–EU relations meant that arriving at a deal that would stem the flow of refugees into Europe would be a difficult challenge. Yet in order to have any impact on the grim situation of millions of refugees, each party needed the other’s cooperation and assistance.

The EU countries have international obligations regarding accepting refugees and granting them refugee status. Against this background, Turkey and the EU negotiated a landmark deal in March 2016, which envisaged cooperation on border controls to manage irregular migration, assistance to refugees, financial support to Turkey and visa liberalization for Turkish citizens.

Even though the deal halted the influx of refugees to Europe through the Aegean, it also became a source of political leverage for Erdoğan and enabled him to indulge in scaremongering against the EU. Nevertheless, from an EU perspective the plan was and is critical to the future of Turkey–EU relations, as well as to Turkey’s democratization. Not surprisingly, the post-coup climate did this tentative, fragile EU–Turkey deal no favours, leaving the EU in a defensive position vis-à-vis an increasingly authoritarian country with aspirations to join the Union. President Erdoğan threatened to tear up the deal in response to the EU Parliament’s overwhelming2 vote to freeze accession talks with Turkey in November 2016. The Parliament’s decision received mixed reactions from EU politicians. While some found it belatedly appropriate, others argued that it was vital to maintain dialogue with Turkey. According to the former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, MEPs took ‘a populist short-term, rather than a strategic long-term, approach’ to relations with Turkey. The EU’s foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, said that halting accession talks would be a ‘lose–lose scenario’3.

With this background, the participants of the workshop evaluated the current approaches vis a vis Turkey. There seemed to be three camps in the EU with regard to Turkey. The first camp, taking an essentially principled approach, calls for the freezing of accession negotiations until the rule of law and civil liberties are restored in Turkey. The second camp, using Turkey’s democratic backsliding as cover for their civilizational approach, contends that consideration of Turkey’s accession to the EU should cease immediately. The third camp are the pragmatists, who argue that the EU should continue cooperating with Turkey for the sake of peace and stability in Europe’s neighbourhood. It is indicative that the EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker’s claimed: ‘We have relations with all

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2 MEPs in Strasbourg voted by 471 to 37 to halt Turkey’s EU accession talks, with politicians ranging from the Conservative group to the Greens lining up to back a resolution that condemned the Turkish government’s ‘disproportionate repressive measures’ after a failed military coup in July. There were 107 abstentions.
3 Turkey reacts angrily to symbolic EU parliament vote on its membership, Guardian, 24 November 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/24/eu-parliament-votes-freeze-membership-talks-turkey
dictatorships because we need to help organize, to co-organize the world. 

Typically, the argument behind the pragmatist approach is that the EU should apply strict conditions for fear of a massive wave of irregular migration because Turkey would stop patrolling its borders in retribution. According to this viewpoint, an influx of immigrants would then fuel anti-immigration sentiment and bolster the far-right in the EU countries.

Nonetheless, this argument may represent a misunderstanding of the current reality, in that the assumption of a huge wave of migration resulting from of Turkey’s leaders ‘opening the floodgates’ should not necessarily be taken at face value. The reasons are as follows:

Firstly, according to civil society organizations that explore refugee incentives, substantial numbers of Syrian refugees do not necessarily want to leave Turkey for Europe. Those seeking to rebuild their lives in a European country have already done so in 2015 - around 850,000 of them in all.

Secondly, with the onset of the Syrian civil war, Turkey received around 4.5 million refugees, 2.8 million of whom are still in the country. The EU’s efforts to stem the refugee flow focused on the central Mediterranean, disregarding the Aegean route. It was only when 250,000 people crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey to a European country in October 2015 that the EU required Turkey to deal with what had become a crisis of sovereignty, border security and stability in the Balkans and countries such as Hungary, Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden.

While eyes were turned elsewhere, things were also changing in Greece and the Balkans. Borders were closing successively from north to south, notably the border between Macedonia and Greece, putting a stop to the so-called ‘Balkan route’. Refugees in Turkey knew that if they wanted to go to Europe, there was time pressure because the borders would be closed; hence the influx of irregular migrants in October 2015.

However, from November onwards, numbers dropped significantly, owing to the closure of the border, NATO deployment in the Aegean and the re-establishment of closed detention centres on the islands and Greece. These game-changing developments sent a strong message to refugees in Turkey that it was no longer viable to move through Turkey into Greece, and they had a greater deterrent effect on the refugees than the EU–Turkey deal.

For these reasons, the EU–Turkey deal’s influence on the movement of refugees may have been overemphasized. The EU needed Turkey in order to gain time from October 2015 to February 2016 in which to mobilize resources such as NATO and Frontex. Thus, when the deal came into force, all the necessary steps to prevent a wave of migration to Europe had already been taken.

Given the practical, humanitarian and legal challenges of the agreement, and the overall complexity of the refugee situation, it is misleading to suggest that the solution to the EU’s refugee crisis lies exclusively in Turkey’s continued cooperation.

The EU regards the promotion of democracy as a central element of its security and stability. The behaviour of any government with which the EU deals has a direct impact on the internal security and stability of the EU. There is no doubt that it is difficult for the EU to balance norms and interests. However, maintaining a dialogue should not necessarily mean tolerating an increasingly authoritarian government in a candidate country, which


could be on the brink of a regime change from parliamentary democracy to an uncontrolled executive presidential system. While emphasizing Turkey's historically troubled relations with the EU, some policymakers claim that the current stalemate is just another episode. However, this view underestimates the scale of the systematic erosion and destruction of formal and informal democratic institutions in Turkey, which old paradigms are inadequate to explain. While from a western perspective Turkey has always had problems with its defective democracy, expressed by military interventions or lack of respect for minorities' civil and political rights, the big issue now is how to prevent an elected government from undermining democracy. Not recognizing this will leave the EU bereft of a valid approach while the authoritarian spiral deepens in Turkey.

It was felt that unless the EU stops sacrificing democratic values to its geopolitical interests, because of its incomplete understanding of Turkey, the result is likely to be the further alienation of democratic forces in Turkey. What is needed is an honest conversation about relations with Turkey and engagement with broader Turkish civil society and the grassroots. The majority of the participants at the workshop agreed that reform at state level is highly unlikely, and that the EU should be working on the ground to find groups to support, which deal with environmental, urban and women's rights issues. It was underlined that engaging directly with civil society is crucial to prevent the monopolization of the domestic Turkish discourse on the EU. The EU also needs to remind Turkey openly and more clearly that dependence is mutual.

**Session II: Syria, ISIS, the Kurds, Russia and cooperation with Turkey on security**

Turkey’s role in many of the pressing foreign policy and international issues of today and developments in the Middle East, and not least in the Syrian refugee crisis, is pivotal. The AKP government embarked on a fundamental foreign policy review, which can be seen as the external counterpart of the domestic changes within its conservative, devout, non-Westernizing constituency. Unlike its secularist, military-influenced predecessors, the AKP government did not view its external relations exclusively through the lens of security. Political interest, trade and historical relationships were important drivers.

For a period, this new approach seemed to pay off. Trade burgeoned and old historical and cultural connections with the Arab world were revived. However, it was not long before the toppling of Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi prompted Turkey's intervention on the Sunni side in the increasingly confrontational Sunni/Shiite divide in the Middle East region.

The participants at the workshop felt that Turkey's foreign policy regarding the Middle East is convoluted and ambiguous. Whether Turkey has a strategy to achieve particular aims or is making it up as it goes along is uncertain. Although it is not possible to speak of a coherent doctrine, the AKP’s foreign policy contains two intersecting strands: offensive realism and attempted idealism. Ankara regards the Middle East as an anarchic region and seeks to assert itself. This is seen in Mosul and Syria as part of its offensive realism. Attempted idealism is the notion that Turkey could shape the Middle East and emerge as a middle-ranking power. This idealistic drive, which was more apparent during former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s time, is encapsulated in President Erdoğan’s ‘The world is bigger than five’ dogma, referring to the UN Security Council’s five permanent members. On the other hand, Erdoğan is more of a pragmatist than an idealist and deploys a rapidly changing rhetoric to pursue a transactional foreign policy that serves his personal interests.

Turkey, like the West, has a keen interest in solving the migration problem, Middle East
terrorism, Syria and the challenge presented by Russia. But that does not necessarily mean that Turkish security policies are identical to those of the West; in fact, the current catalogue of Turkish concerns differs significantly from that of the West.

Besides inflaming sectarianism, the inability of the US to manage post-conflict Iraq left the country more at risk of a breakup than ever, raising the prospect of an independent Kurdistan. Iraq has also been partially occupied by ISIS, and ISIS itself won Sunni acquiescence, at least for a time, thanks to Western errors. The horrific dismemberment of Syria put Turkey in the position of supporting the Western alliance. However, this came at the cost of ISIS terrorist attacks in Turkey in retribution and meant confronting Kurdish forces in northern Syria, which they believe to be closely linked to the PKK but which are also fighting in Syria against ISIS, alongside American forces. The US wishes to retain Turkey as a strategic ally on the edge of the Middle East and to use its airbase in Incirlik. This military and strategic alliance seems to have entered its most bitter phase as a result of differing priorities that have put a great strain on relations. Whether bilateral relations will be reset under the Trump administration is uncertain.

Policymaking has become more difficult in Turkey, as the number of Turkish policymakers is now much smaller, consisting as it does of President Erdoğan’s close and trusted circle of advisers, for whom the state departments are mere implementing agencies, not policy initiators. The policy itself is short-term and transactional in nature.

The expectation in Ankara that US–Turkey relations may improve under Donald Trump is based on the prediction that Trump’s foreign policy also appears to be transactional. Having said that major disagreements may disrupt bilateral relations in the coming months, as a result of differing stances between Washington and Ankara vis-à-vis the Kurds, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad regime. These issues have the potential to derail US–Turkey relations, quite apart from potential personality conflicts between Erdoğan and Trump.

As for Russia–Turkey relations, the recent rapprochement between the two states has influenced the political and security geometry of the region. The bilateral relationship between Turkey and Russia that was built up during the Putin administrations essentially focused on energy, trade, tourism and nuclear power cooperation. This cooperation collapsed for a period following the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey, only to be revived when both sides realised that it was hurting them both.

The Russian President used the opportunity of the July coup in Turkey to bond around what Russia would define as the “constitutional order”. According to Putin, Russia should support incumbent state structures and leaders, a narrative that Russia has deployed for some time in supporting other authoritarian leaders. Putin’s initiative played very well in Ankara and was welcomed as a display of Russian solidarity vis à vis Erdoğan’s Turkey.

In November 2016, the head of the Russian Liberal Democrat Party, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, had a 45-minute meeting with Erdoğan on a ‘pivot north’, where the parties discussed restoring ties and the possibility of creating a union of five states - Russia, Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq - as well as Turkey leaving NATO. At this meeting, Zhirinovsky’s position and rhetoric, which, five months earlier, had been very hostile towards Turkey, changed drastically – a hint of the extent of Russia’s long-term ambitions. The question that naturally arises is how far Turkey would be prepared to play along with these goals and jeopardize its relations with NATO.

On the other hand, the major rift on how to deal with the Syrian imbroglio remains, even though the two states, along with Iran, seem to be in agreement on a truce plan. Although his rhetoric regarding Turkey’s military position in Syria is inconsistent, Erdoğan
appears to have accepted a type of Assad/Assadist structure. Currently, Turkey’s primary goal is to deny an area to PKK-related groups.

Nonetheless, the Turkish position involves a lot of wishful thinking, which builds on the assumption that Russia would also accept a no-fly zone and Turkish actions to prevent any corridor being established by the Syrian Kurdish movement. The Russian–Kurdish relationship dates way back in history to the Tsarist period, when the Kurds were seen as an alternative source of support against Ottoman Muslim forces. Hence, Russia’s historical relationship with the Kurds is much more historically embedded than the Pentagon’s relationship with the Syrian Kurds. Russia is also one of the few countries that do not recognise the PKK as a terrorist organization. Therefore, it remains to be seen how Russia will develop its relationship with Turkey in the context of the issue of the Syrian Kurds.

Despite Turkey’s seemingly anti-Western rhetoric and her current closeness with Russia, it would be far-fetched to assume that Turkey will abandon the Western train and cut ties with NATO at a time when its military has been tarnished and weakened by the coup attempt and the ensuing purges. It is also more than a security concern to keep a viable relationship with the West. Economically and socially, Turkey cannot afford to be isolated from Europe. In the long run, Turkey’s orientation will still be towards the West, while at the same time keeping ties with Russia.

The present direction of Turkey’s Middle East policy is still unclear and tentative. Its security policy has proven to be counterproductive, making Turkey much more vulnerable and fragile. Turkey has lapsed into a heavy-handed, unsustainable Kurdish policy, which has triggered a whole new wave of radicalization and instability in the region, as well as on Turkish soil. The choices and policies that Turkey has so far attempted in Syria and Iraq have the potential to drag Turkey into a situation that has far-reaching unintended consequences.

**Session III: Authoritarianism and Human Rights Violations in Turkey**

The workshop participants in the third session discussed Erdogan’s increasing authoritarianism and human rights violations against journalists, the Kurds and academics. In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, the purge of Gülenists from the state has reached unprecedented levels. Turkey now ranks just behind Russia in the press freedom index of countries with the largest number of imprisoned journalists in the world. More than a dozen Kurdish MPs, including co-chairs of the main pro-Kurdish party, the HDP, are in jail. Almost all mayorships held by the HDP have been seized. The crackdown on the Kurdish media has left the region without any Kurdish voice.

Without a doubt, the silencing of academics is also another central motif of this authoritarian era. This was exemplified by the reaction to the ‘Academics for Peace’ initiative in January 2015. Academics involved in the initiative signed a petition calling on the government to revisit the peace process, but also declaring that they would not take part in or, by staying silent, be complicit with the crimes going on in the south east.

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6 Followers of the Gülen movement, named after an Islamic cleric from central Anatolia who has been in exile in the USA since 1999. The movement has a secretive network structure whose followers are believed to hold influential positions in institutions from the police and secret services to the judiciary. The spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen, and the movement, which has been designated a terror organization since March 2016, are accused of masterminding the coup attempt.


8 According to Human Rights Watch 2016 report, the collapse of the Kurdish peace process ‘was accompanied by an increase in violent attacks, armed clashes, and human rights abuses in the second half of the year. The latter included violations of the right to life, arrests of non-violent protesters and activists on terrorism charges, and ill-treatment of detainees.’
Immediately, all signatories were labelled as terrorists, terrorism supporters and ‘so-called’ intellectuals who were debasing what intellectualism means in Turkey.

Conditions worsened after the coup attempt. Some argued that ‘Academics for Peace’ deserved their fate because they engaged in issues that did not concern them. Dissident academics were also the targets of purges, even though some clearly had no role in the Gülen movement. Countless academics lost their jobs, and fear that they will never be able to return to their profession again.

In the light of these developments, authoritarianism in Turkey should be seen in the context, firstly, of the severity of human rights violations, and secondly, of the reasons and the environment that permit such human rights abuses.

It is of major concern that torture seems to have re-emerged in state practice. According to the UN Special Rapporteur, there is substantial evidence of torture in Turkey in the aftermath of the 15 July 2015 coup attempt. State security officials dealing with investigations of terrorist activity have been given a free hand with regard to the use of torture. Large-scale detentions and the excessively broad interpretation of anti-terror legislation have reached new heights, with around 55,000 people arrested and 200 media outlets and 1,527 NGOs shut down since 15 July.

3,000 out of a total of 13,000 judges and prosecutors have lost their jobs, with a chilling effect, since no judge would now be willing to acquit someone accused of committing a terrorist crime. In the Kurdish region, the Interior Ministry has deposed more than 40 mayors, while 48 are currently in prison. The collective nature of the punishments should also be noted: when someone is accused of committing a crime of terror, the whole family is affected, and his or her spouses and siblings end up losing their passports.

The right to a fair trial and the right to defence are severely restricted. Detainees cannot see their lawyer during the first five days, and after this point can see their lawyer for only one hour once a week and with a prison official present.

The environment that permits such human rights abuses utilises the state of emergency imposed six days after the coup attempt, the extension of which suits President Erdoğan and his personal presidential ambitions. This mode of governance gives authorities the right to bypass Parliament and pass so-called ‘decree laws’ to regulate affairs without any parliamentary oversight.

The Turkish constitutional court established case law in 1991 at the height of the Kurdish insurgency and human rights violations. Even under those circumstances, the Turkish constitutional court took the decision that such state of emergency decrees should be subject to the control of constitutionality as determined by the Turkish constitutional court. By contrast, the present constitutional court, most likely owing to the detention of some of its members, has decided that it has no jurisdiction to control the constitutionality of such decrees. This development may well be termed the ‘deconstitutionalisation of Turkey’.

The looming referendum on the executive presidency in 2017, negotiated by the AKP and the nationalist opposition party, the MHP, appears to be creating a strong anti-Western, anti-Kurdish and anti-liberties bloc. The AKP and MHP alliance, which represents 60–65% of the Turkish constituency, is highly likely to establish the executive presidency regime to which President Erdoğan has long aspired. The proposed constitutional reform will give President Erdoğan the power to appoint ministers, judges and public servants without any oversight. It will also enable him to stay in power until 2029.
Key Points to take away

In the final session, participants were invited to come forward with suggested action points. Hereewith a consolidated list:

1) **The overarching conclusion from the workshop was that the West, particularly the EU, should continue to engage with Turkey.** It should show solidarity with its traditional partner, yet at the same time avoid compromising democratic norms and values.

2) Western reactions towards Turkey tended to be of two types: a) superficial responses to human rights violations, without the will to seek real change; and b) attempts to confine any problems within Turkey. To avoid serious short-term consequences for the West, the priority must be to establish a common consensus on meaningful steps to help Turkey.

3) **The motto of the EU's policy to Turkey should be 'Do no harm'.** Isolating Turkey would have grave consequences, fuel already growing anti-Western sentiment and scupper any viable discussions which are still going on. Such a policy requires clear, transparent and well-calibrated language, engagement with politicians in the Turkish opposition, including democratic Kurdish representatives, and the generation of a common political will among EU member states towards Turkey.

4) Alongside continued engagement, it is also critical to establish a new framework for negotiations. **Rather than freezing accession negotiations, the EU should work to make the process more of an active policy tool, and less formulaic, constantly reiterating the statement that Turkey belongs in the West.** At present, both sides know that they are not being honest with each other. Turkey is not trying to democratize, and the EU is not trying to bring Turkey into the Union. This creates fertile ground for anti-Western sentiment.

5) **Brexit may possibly represent an opportunity for a new framework, offering differing degrees of integration.** Europe could already be conceived as a number of concentric circles (EuroZone, non-EZ EU, EEA, Customs Union). Britain's exit might establish a new category of privileged partnership with the EU, a status which might suit Turkey, while in parallel the accession process would continue, with the aim of one day achieving full membership.

6) Assuming the negotiations can be reframed, it would be desirable for participation to be extended to members of civil society who conform to European values, such as representatives of the CHP and the HDP. **To this end, the EU needs to work at grassroots level within civil society to find the right people with whom to cooperate.**

7) Cooperation among opposition groups would require the Kurdish movement to come together with secular people, primarily the Kemalists; this is difficult in the current environment. **The EU could play an indirect role as a facilitator to encourage positive cooperation among non-governmental elements, including trying to promote a common agenda, but without coercion on the parties.**

8) In the promotion of civil liberties and democracy, it is important to **support the small independent news outlets which face severe financial constraints, especially in the Kurdish region.** This would include support for news channels broadcasting into Turkey.

9) In formulating and implementing policy, **the West needs to take into account the possibility of a future economic crisis in Turkey.**

10) Sanctions would most likely be counterproductive in Turkey, since if applied to a country as a whole they tend to have the effect of strengthening the hand of autocrats. They would also be harmful to Europe, since Turkey is a sizeable economic partner. On the other hand, **Western countries could impose targeted sanctions and promote specific anti-corruption policies and human rights conditionalities with regard to certain kinds of behaviour.**

11) **Methods of ‘smart endorsement’ should also be explored.** It is important to encourage and support the people who are building bridges between government and opposition, and also among members of the opposition.
There is a range of issues in which the West and Turkey have a mutual interest, such as defence cooperation, trade, counter-terrorism, action against drugs, visas etc. If the West, or EU as such, fails to act, those countries that have an interest in and influence over Turkey, notably the US and Germany, should step in.

The West should show support for, but not interfere in, any peace process with the Kurds; it should offer help and support as necessary/acceptable.

Failure to engage with Turkey may have adverse repercussions e.g. on migration flows and on the stream of foreign fighters, as well as the loss of Turkish air bases from which to pursue the fight against ISIS. There is little doubt that the West’s security priorities cannot be achieved without cooperation with Turkey.

Turkey should be kept fully involved and engaged in NATO, and offered full NATO support and capabilities.

A red line must be drawn, beyond which human rights violations and authoritarianism will lead inevitably to disengagement, as a last resort. That red line could be the reinstatement of the death penalty. This seems to be intermittently on and off Erdoğan’s agenda, and there are some signs that outside pressure on this point may be having an effect.
South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX) is part of the European Studies Centre (ESC) at St Antony’s College, Oxford. It focuses on the interdisciplinary study of the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. Drawing on the academic excellence of the University and an international network of associates, it conducts policy relevant research on the multifaceted transformations of the region in the 21st century. It follows closely conflict and post-conflict situations and analyses the historical and intellectual influences which have shaped perceptions and actions in the region. In Oxford’s best tradition, the SEESOX team is committed to understanding the present through the longue durée and reflecting on the future through high quality scholarship.

**Principal objectives:**

- To support high-quality teaching and research on South East Europe;
- To organise conferences, workshops and research seminars;
- To promote the multi-disciplinary study of the region within the University of Oxford (e.g. politics, international relations, anthropology, sociology, economics) working in collaboration with other Centres and Programmes within the University, including student societies;
- To spearhead intellectual exchanges and debate on these issues among networks of individuals and institutions beyond Oxford;
- To foster cooperation between the academic and the policy making communities.

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*About SEESOX*

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