





**Bled
Strategic
Forum**

Future of Europe

Preface

Times of crisis usually present us with a perfect opportunity for reflection about who we are, where we want to go and how we want to reach this goal. In recent years Europe has faced several different crises with the COVID-19 pandemic enduring and influencing the social, economic, and political structure of the entire world, Europe, the European Union, its Member States, and every individual. These crises have also revealed the need for the European Union to adapt and transform.

In July 2021, Slovenia assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, steering the direction for the union of 27 member states at such a challenging yet decisive time. Moreover, during the Slovenian Presidency, the Conference on the Future of Europe was launched. The aim of the Conference is to give the citizens of the European Union the opportunity to debate Europe's future challenges and opportunities. The culmination of these factors shaped the content of this year's Forum and its title: The Future of Europe.

This year Bled, an alpine town of 8,000 inhabitants, hosted over two days five presidents, 12 prime ministers, 10 ministers of foreign affairs, 14 ministers, and more than 25 high-level representatives of international organisations, besides few hundred participants from academia, business, the nongovernmental sector and other fields. Furthermore, this took place amid the exceptional circumstances dictated to us by the pandemic. The immense success of the Forum can be attributed to the dedicated and passionate team behind the Bled Strategic Forum. Moreover, the Forum would not be possible without a myriad of local and international partners that helped us in making the most distinguished Forum so far. Allow me to use this opportunity to sincerely thank them all.

The Bled Strategic Forum has always been a platform for an exchange of different opinions by a diverse set of people and this year was no different. So, what is the future of Europe? Based on the discussions at the Forum, I can say that the future of Europe is sustainable, digital, connected, social, solidary, competitive and resilient. The future is a bigger and strong European Union that can influence world affairs by itself or in cooperation with its like-minded partners. A European Union that is able to strategically respond to geopolitical challenges.

Of course, there were also disagreements among the attendees, mostly concerned with the way we want to reach the goals mentioned above. We must not forget that there is nothing inherently wrong with that. What is important is that we continue frank and open conversation with everybody, listen to one another and try to understand. In the future the Bled Strategic Forum will remain committed to its mission – to foster a platform for contrasting opinions on modern society and its future.

Regardless of the different opinions, I think I can confidently say that we can all agree that Europe is the future.

Peter Grk
Secretary-General
of the Bled Strategic Forum

About BSF 2021

The 16th Bled Strategic Forum (BSF) took place on 1 and 2 September in Bled, Slovenia. This year's focus of the two-day event was the future of Europe with a call to increase its resilience to respond more effectively to current and future challenges.

The overarching theme of this year's Bled Strategic Forum was the Future of Europe. The panels were structured within four clusters, showcasing the pivotal areas for the debate – a cluster on the Future of Europe offered an honest and soul-searching debate on where Europe stands at this point and where is it heading. The *Leader's Panel – Future of Europe – To Stand and Withstand* touched upon the most pressing issues Europe is facing, from migrations and enlargement, to economic growth and European global reach, to ensuring that solidarity remains the cornerstone of the EU. The *Leader's Panel – Future of Europe – Enlargement* underlined the importance of a viable enlargement perspective and a credible process towards it for the Western Balkans to counter a growing influence of third countries in the region. On the other hand, the focus must also be turned to the people living there – the enlargement is not a goal in itself, but must be a means of helping people towards a more prosperous life. The Former *Leader's Panel – Future of Europe – Experience Counts* offered an opportunity for reflection on the EU's past as well as what may lie ahead. Recent crises, ranging from financial and migration, to COVID-19 and the failure in Afghanistan shook European values and identity and demonstrated the need for a more active and assertive EU. For a credible Europe in the world and a strong(er) voice in international affairs, the EU must find internal cohesion and unity. Balancing differentiating views, on the one hand, and finding consensus on the other will be key. Future of Europe – Diversity and Consensus revealed how diversity can really be an asset for the EU. Different opinions enable faster adaptation to change. The EU should and must be based on cooperation, strengthening democracy and building the Union from the ground up. The Conference on the

Future of Europe can provide an outlet for renewed cooperation and evolution of the EU. *Future of Europe – Our Common Values* showed that there is more that unites us than divides us. But while the basic values that the EU is built upon – democracy, human rights, equality and the rule of law – remain a powerful factor, times have changed and so have people. The EU must therefore give people a voice, must reconnect with the citizens, and listen to their initiatives in order to successfully navigate towards the common future.

A cluster with global panels featured a *Partnership for a Rules-based Order in the Indo-Pacific* and a *TSI and BRI: The Future of Infrastructure Competition and Interconnectivity in South-Central Europe* debates. The failure of Afghanistan, the rise of China and the changing balance in the world will greatly affect the future European standing in the world and thus its future. Analysis of the EU's policies and their effects, strengthening the cohesion and an increased presence in the world remain key challenges. Stronger cooperation with India, the largest democracy in the world with connections to Africa, can be part of the solution. A European presence, especially if based on values and credibility, can somewhat stem Chinese influence and support the strength of democracies in the region. The growing Chinese presence is not only felt in the Indo-Pacific region – infrastructure projects and the growing economic interconnectedness that connect and bind regions to China not only threaten the EU's neighbourhood but also reach EU member states through the Belt and Road Initiative and 16 (17)+1 initiative. While growing ties with one of the world's largest economies can be beneficial, the EU and its member states must stay vigilant and increase cooperation and investment through other channels within the EU and abroad and promote a values-based approach to policies and relations to offset the negative influence China may have on European governance systems.

While global developments will in no small measure determine the general direction the EU will be heading in in the future, the regional outlook and development will have an even bigger impact on the Future of Europe. The regional cluster of panels addressed some of the most pressing issues. *Building connectivity in CEE – the Case of*

the Three Seas Initiative illustrated that the underdevelopment of connectivity in Central and Eastern Europe hinders its economic development. The growing need for green transport demands even greater efforts to modernise the region. The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund can therefore prove to be a valuable asset and an addition to already existing EU programmes, enhancing cross-border cooperation and thus contributing to the overall prosperity of and in the region. *EU's Challenging Eastern Partnership Summit 2021: Calibrating its Agenda* demonstrated that the EU's approach to its eastern neighbours should change – these countries have changed profoundly in recent years, becoming more ambitious, while the EU's policies have not. These should not be limited to governmental organisations and institutions alone, but should include civil society as well in order to push for positive change and contribute to more resilient societies there. *Lining up the Europe's Defence* addressed some of the most pressing issues stemming from the developments in Afghanistan. European defence should and must become more self-reliant, therefore increased investments in defence are necessary. These should be coordinated among the member states to increase efficiency and help address the lack of capabilities. Nevertheless, increasing self-reliance does not mean cutting ties with the USA; on the contrary, it will enable even stronger cooperation and will contribute to a more secure EU. *Mediterranean: A Geostrategic Chessboard* highlighted the importance of the Mediterranean for the EU's stability and security, as illustrated by the migration crisis. And while the same scenario cannot and will not happen again, it is paramount to increase cooperation within the EU, with third Mediterranean countries and with countries of origin. Afghanistan demonstrated that even after all these years, building democracy with a top-down approach does not help, so the efforts should be redirected towards civil society, their culture and building their resilience. An honest and open-minded Europe will have more chance of success. *New Wind in the Adriatic – Adjusting the Sails of Collaboration* presented a successful story of collaboration and cooperation. Slovenia, Croatia and Italy agreed on a way to best protect and preserve the Adriatic Sea and it was only possible by intensive talks, mutual trust and good intentions. The three com-

peting ports of Rijeka, Koper and Trieste also played a role and will continue to do so, modernising green rail infrastructure and having an awareness that protection of such a vital ecosystem can only be achieved by overall development of the hinterland as well.

Changing times require that Europe changes as well – the cluster of transformational panels showcased some of the areas, issues and challenges Europe must face to be better prepared for the future. *Post-epidemic Recovery: Opportunity for a Better Tomorrow?* highlighted that the EU was already much better prepared for the economic downturn during the pandemic in comparison to the financial crisis a decade ago. A swift and decisive response ensured that countries fared better while at the same time supporting those member states most affected. Nevertheless, the EU must make long-term adjustments, invest in research and development, ensure innovative environment and develop sustainably to ensure future growth, but also to become more resilient to such shocks. *AmCham Breakfast: Small Steps in Space – Giant Leaps on Earth* gave insights into the exploration of the next frontier. This is not possible without the appropriate technology – investment in education and knowledge, cooperation between governments, academia and companies, and an innovative environment are key. At the same time, trust must be built and established so that space will benefit us all. Only this can ensure that space brings people and countries together, that good ideas are shared, and that cooperation is genuine and in the best interest of all of the humanity. *Green Recovery with Social Sustainability at its Core – Putting People First* accentuated the need for all of us to start behaving sustainably: our behaviour is our own responsibility. Taking small steps has historically proven to be effective, be it greening the roofs or revitalising once abandoned gardens or industrially degraded areas. Sustainability is not a question of saving people or saving nature – they go hand in hand. The pandemic has shown that we are capable of and willing to spend countless amounts of resources to save industry and our economy, therefore we should be able to do the same to save our future. *Decarbonisation of Transport through Sectoral Cooperation: the Coordination of Policies for Achieving Climate Neutrality* is vital in the EU's quest towards a carbon-neutral

society. But it will also be vital to tackle these issues globally in order to maintain our competitiveness, especially since the pandemic has already hit the transport sector hard. Electrification of transport offers the prospect that decarbonisation is possible, but at the same time, it will be paramount to solve the challenge of decreasing emissions from the production of and increased demands for electricity. Innovations will be key and educational systems will need to be adapted to accommodate the need for interdisciplinary future engineers and researchers. *Climate Change: Understanding Risks and Ensuring Policy Resilience* delivered a worrying sentiment, that we are not at all aware of the speed of climate change and the associated risks. Mitigation policies are necessary, but adaptation policies must also be quickly formulated due to the increasing speed and severity of extreme weather events. Green financing must be increased and made available for poorer countries as well. More must be done to raise awareness that climate change is not an abstract concept, but that it first and foremost affects people and they must be the focus of our efforts. *Leaders in Communication: Fostering Future Engagement with Citizens* emphasised the importance of up-to-date communication messages and communication channels. To bring EU politics and policies closer to citizens, engaging in a conversation with citizens across various channels, including social media, should become a priority. They have also proved to be strong tools in fostering community and fostering communication, especially among young people who are actually the future of Europe. Nevertheless, having real conversations on the streets should not be ignored. *Digital and Transatlantic Cooperation: A Way Forward to CEE Resilience and Economic Recovery* stressed the importance of digital technologies as a potentially powerful driver for growth and for increased competitiveness in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Efforts in the region are noticeable, yet the biggest challenge facing Europe is that the adaptation to digital technologies is too slow. However, as we try to steer the digital future in a direction that corresponds to our values of democracy, human rights and privacy, it is important to reinforce transatlantic cooperation – other strong players can potentially have a different perspective on what the digital future should and will actually look like. *Digital Europe – Unlocking the*

Potential tackled the dangers of (over)regulation. While regulation is intrinsically a risk-limiting approach, it is far from easy to regulate in a constantly evolving and dynamic digital sphere. Overregulation could easily kill the innovative spirit that tries to harness the potential of these technologies, potentially bringing vast advances to our society. It is therefore better to work to ensure that digital technologies are only bound by the principles our communities want and need, while having the freedom to prosper. *European Foreign and Security Challenges in a Digital World* proposed a layout in our quest for a cybersecure future. Cybersecurity will increasingly become fundamental for economic activity, so there exists a certain urgency from governments and private sector. Norms that enable an unassailable standard of conduct must be strengthened. Malicious behaviour in cyberspace must be dealt with swiftly, while speedy, transparent and efficient information-sharing ensure the best possible outcome. To keep the internet open, a multi-stakeholder approach must be maintained. *The Future of European Tourism* became a vital issue with the start of the pandemic that limited travel. Long-term effects and the changed travel habits will also require a change in tourism – towards a responsible tourism that takes into an account local environment and communities. Investment and transformation towards sustainable tourism and sustainable destinations will be needed – dwindling incomes due to the pandemic along with the loss of human capital will make such a transformation challenging. *Strengthening Europe against Economic Coercion* pointed out that we find ourselves in a comprehensive competition without a clear idea of what the next world will be like, but that at the moment it is changing from geopolitics to geoeconomics. This is coupled with a deadlock of the multilateral system and the rise of unilateral action contrary to international norms. As trade, technology, data and national security issues combine to form a single challenge, the EU cannot remain completely open without the necessary tools to defend ourselves and to have options for an effective response. *Fighting Disinformation with Information: Securing Security through Facts* clearly showed that China and Russia, which use the same techniques and channels and have similar behaviour when it comes to the spread of disinformation, have yet to coordinate their efforts.

But instead of fighting disinformation, more should be done to promote our values, our story, our ideas, and our evidence-based narrative in support of our democratic life based on human rights. Educating people and encouraging them to be proactive and to check information themselves should be a cornerstone of every policy countering disinformation.

A more extensive summary of some of the abovementioned panels can be found later in the report.

The recipient of the traditional Bled Strategic Forum Award 2021 is **Pedro Opeka**, Slovenian humanitarian and founder of Akamasoa project in Madagascar, who has been honoured for more than 30 years of public service, humanitarian work and the fight against poverty in Madagascar. The Slovenian missionary's work managed to bring tens of thousands of people out of poverty. Several thousand houses were built, alongside schools, sport halls and churches, materially and spiritually supporting the local population. During a *Conversation with Pedro Opeka, humanitarian, and Aloysius John, General Secretary of the Caritas Internationalis* the role of faith-based organisations in the poverty-stricken parts of the world was highlighted. Local organisations, like Opeka's Akamasoa, help empower people and communities. Stronger financial support would help bring about even greater change, although the challenges of poor education and un(der)developed health systems remain largely unsolved, and only exacerbated by low or even non-existent access to COVID-19 vaccines. The western world needs to do more in this regard.

The panels of the Bled Strategic Forum were broadcast live via the [Forum's website](#) and the BSF social media accounts.



Photo: Tamino Petelinšek | Slovenian Press Agency (STA)



Photo: Tadej Kraft | KraftArt

Opening

Thomas Bach, the President of the International Olympic Committee, was the first to address (online) the conference, emphasising that the last Olympic Games sent a powerful message of peace, solidarity, joy, inspiration and hope in the future, long after we have left behind the severe pandemic period. Sport can also contribute to the future of Europe by increasing the positive role in communities and Europe at large for broader social, educational and health outcomes, binding communities together through robust solidarity mechanisms that exist in Europe.

In his welcome address, **Dr Anže Logar**, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Slovenia, highlighted some of the most important challenges facing Europe – enlargement to the Western Balkans is crucial for the future of Europe, as it is a move from the Union that responds to problems towards one that anticipates them and deals with them collectively and strategically. But first and foremost, the Union must provide a safe and stable environment for citizens in an increasingly interdependent world. Therefore, “the future starts today, not tomorrow”.

The President of the European Council, **Charles Michel** stressed that the COVID-19 crisis had revealed important shortcomings of the EU, namely the EU’s (over) dependence on strategically important sectors and industries, but that nevertheless the Union’s response has been faster and more determined than in previous crises. Adaptation is and must be the EU’s strength, because “our European Union is not a static union, it’s dynamic. It is inspired by an idea bigger than itself. We started with six member states and today we count 27. The EU has always been enriched by those who wanted to join and eventually did so. Each enlargement made the union better, brought us where we are today and who we are today – a union of ideas, of solidarity, of innovation, of diversity”.

The Prime Minister of Slovenia, **Janez Janša**, pointed out that the EU has changed significantly since Slovenia held its first Presidency of the European Council, as different crises have followed one after another. But going forward, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, but we should focus instead on finding consensus, mutual respect, subsidiarity and solidarity. “The debate on the future of Europe is foremost a discussion about who we are, about understanding the logos, pathos and ethos of European nations.” And while different visions about the future exist, we cannot afford to exclude one or the other. Everyone should be allowed to participate in the debate, listen and be heard. Ensuring unity, but also respecting diversity is therefore paramount.

- Welcome address by **H.E. Dr Anže Logar**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia
- Address by **H.E. Mr Charles Michel**, President of the European Council
- Address by **H.E. Mr Janez Janša**, Prime Minister of Slovenia



Photo: Tamino Petelinšek | Slovenian Press Agency (STA)



Photo: Tadej Kreft | KraftArt



Photo: Tadej Kreft | KraftArt

Leader's Panel – Future of Europe – To Stand and Withstand

In his keynote address, the President of the European Parliament, **David Sassoli** expressed his conviction that Europe must strengthen its cohesion and needs to strengthen its values and identity in order to be credible in the eyes of Europeans and the rest of the world. Europe also needs a strong and common voice on the international scene to be able to respond to geopolitical challenges. This especially holds true for the Western Balkans, "that's why we must be ready to commit ourselves in the accession process, because we must review this process, we can't keep countries and the public waiting for decades, they want to join our European family. Any delay can play into the hands of other players and also our adversaries." This will ensure a stable, peaceful and democratic continent that will benefit all European citizens.

A wide range of issues and challenges pertaining to the future of Europe were raised. First and foremost, it is important that European politicians are driven by the desire to create a better life for the citizens. Solidarity was and remains a core value of the EU and should serve as a guiding light when dealing with future challenges.

The most pressing issues for the EU in the near future will be enlargement and balancing between the migrations and demographic problems the EU is facing which, if unsolved, will further diminish the EU's weight in the future. In order to successfully tackle these challenges, the EU must address them strategically and move from reactive policies towards a proactive approach. Enhanced cooperation is needed to become more operational, introduce hard power to EU politics and strengthen the geopolitical weight of the EU for the

preservation of the process of peace and democracy that the EU is. This will only be achievable with continued economic growth that will and should increasingly stem from green and digital transformation.

While there are always differing opinions on what the primary challenges for the EU are and how to solve issues, **President Michel** reiterated that there must always be "a mutual understanding /.../ in order to be able to take a step together in the same direction". Coordination of different interests and solidarity have been paramount in and for the EU, summed up by **Prime Minister Mitsotakis'** statement that the "European Union is the art of small compromises in order to reach big ambitions."

Keynote address by **H.E. Mr David Sassoli**, President of the European Parliament

- H.E. Mr Andrej Babiš**, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic
- H.E. Mr Eduard Heger**, Prime Minister of Slovakia
- H.E. Mr Janez Janša**, Prime Minister of Slovenia
- H.E. Mr Charles Michel**, President of the European Council
- H.E. Mr Kyriakos Mitsotakis**, Prime Minister of Greece
- H.E. Mr Viktor Orbán**, Prime Minister of Hungary
- H. Em. Mr Pietro Parolin**, Secretary of State of the Holy See
- H.E. Mr Andrej Plenković**, Prime Minister of Croatia
- H.E. Mr David Sassoli**, President of the European Parliament
- Ms Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-President for Demography and Democracy, European Commission
- H.E. Mr Aleksandar Vučić**, President of Serbia

Moderated by **Mr Marko Balazic**, Political Analyst, Secretary General of Focus2031



Leader's Panel – Future of Europe – Enlargement

In the keynote address, **Borut Pahor**, the President of Slovenia, stressed that the enlargement (to the Western Balkans) is a strategic issue and must be carried out as soon as possible. The slow pace of the enlargement process is proving to be an ideal breeding ground for the rise of nationalisms and the strengthening of the influence of third countries. While the countries of the region must make further reforms, the EU also must make the process of enlargement a credible and achievable perspective. Because “only a swift enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkan countries can strengthen the principle of territorial integrity and thus the security of the region and the entire Union”.

Enlargement is a strategic question for the EU, however, because the “question of enlargement is a question of the future of Europe” as **Prime Minister Janša** stressed. He further stated that “when the European Union was created, the founding fathers did not speak about the west and east, they spoke about Europe. Europe whole and free. And the enlargement of the European Union is a tool to fulfil this goal. And we are not yet there.”

There must exist true political will for enlargement on the EU side. The process must be stable and irreversible, but also concrete in order to be credible. Some tangible benefits, like visa liberalisation, could also make the prospect of EU membership more attractive.

While there must be a conviction in the Western Balkans that it is worth going through the reform process, the focus should also move away from purely bureaucratic demands and instead focus on the people – people in the region want economic development, the respect of human rights and liberties, the rule of law and security.

For that reason, “we [the EU] cannot afford to fail with the Western Balkans – we cannot afford to fail to address all the integration aspects of the Western Balkans into the European Union. And this is what we should be working on – integrate them politically, integrate them fully into the security architecture, integrate them into the economy, integrate them into society” affirmed **Commissioner Várhelyi**.

Speakers:

Keynote address by **H.E. Mr Borut Pahor**, President of Slovenia

H.E. Mr Šefik Džaferović, Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina

H.E. Mr Janez Janša, Prime Minister of Slovenia

H.E. Željko Komšić, Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina

H.E. Mr Albin Kurti, Prime Minister of Kosovo

H.E. Mr Mateusz Morawiecki, Prime Minister of Poland

H.E. Mr Rumen Radev, President of Bulgaria

H.E. Mr Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania

Mr Christian Schmidt, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mr Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

H.E. Mr Zoran Zaev, Prime Minister of North Macedonia

Moderated by **Dr Andraž Zidar**, Head of Diplomatic Academy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia



Post-epidemic Recovery: Opportunity for a Better Tomorrow

In partnership with Generali and the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Slovenia

The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread economic disruption due to the closure of public life and of the majority of economic sectors. But the response has been swift and the vast amounts of money spent on relief packages averted an economic collapse.

The Eurozone fared much better than in the previous financial and economic crisis and it reflected on non-Eurozone members as well since “what is good for the monetary union is normally also good for the EU and vice versa. The latest example is Europe’s policy response to the pandemic. /.../ it was fast, powerful, and well calibrated” stated **Managing Director Regling**. The coordinated efforts and the fact “that the European country situation /.../ has been quite favourable because of the solidarity aspect which /.../ for countries /.../ with higher dependence on tourism for example /.../ the impact on GDP has been higher and then the solidarity package has kicked in with higher figures so this has been extremely helpful” were pointed out by **President Renaud-Basso**.

These measures enabled strong and robust economic recovery, although more must be done to prevent further damage by a potential rebound of the pandemic. While ensuring liquidity for companies and supporting recovery in the private sector remain short-term answers in the fight against economic damage due to the pandemic, long-term adaptation and transformation is needed, where, “one very important element in the

transformation of our economies, of the health systems, of addressing the climate change is really that we need to invest heavily in new technologies, in skills, and in infrastructure” assured **Vice-President Pavlova**. Investments are key for Europe’s competitiveness, a precursor for a strong economy.

Speakers:

Mr Valerio De Luca, Board President of the Task Force Italia, Board President of the Global Investors Alliance

Ms Lilyana Pavlova, Vice-President, European Investment Bank

Mr Klaus Regling, Managing Director, European Stability Mechanism

Ms Odile Renaud-Basso, President, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

Mr Miroslav Singer, Director, Institutional Affairs and Chief Economist, Generali CEE Holding

Mr Andrej Šircelj, Minister, Ministry of Finance of Slovenia

Mr Boštjan Vasle, Governor, Banka Slovenija

Mr László Wolf, Deputy CEO, Commercial Banking Division, OTP Bank

Moderated by **Mr Francesco Papadia**, Senior Fellow, Bruegel



New Wind in the Adriatic – Adjusting the Sails of Collaboration

The panel focused on cooperation between Slovenia, Italy and Croatia following the declaration of the Italian and Croatian exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the Adriatic Sea. The effects of the EEZ on the three largest ports in the northern Adriatic, Koper, Trieste and Rijeka were also analysed.

The establishment of the Croatian EEZ was a politically delicate issue in Slovenia and a trilateral approach was needed to foster a positive outcome. Even more, “we were able to agree to bring this cooperation in the Adriatic Sea to a whole new level” stated **Minister Logar**. He added that the “exclusive economic zone is the best solution to preserve the Adriatic Sea”. This agreement offers opportunities for environmental protection, as pollution is likely to affect all three coastal states and the problem must therefore be tackled together. It also facilitates greater port integration and thus additional opportunities for strengthening the economy.

While port management is not just about transshipment, wider development of the area must be taken into consideration. It is necessary to take care of the environment, infrastructure and other issues that affect the lives of local people alike. All three ports are investing heavily in development and becoming more “green,” especially through the construction of rail infrastructure.

Dialogue is therefore necessary and useful and “the Adriatic Sea obliges us to act together and to use instruments and tools that are at our disposal – either national, bilateral, trilateral, multinational” reminded **Minister Grlič-Radman**.

Speakers:

Mr Zeno D’Agostino, President, Port Network Authority of the Eastern Adriatic Sea

H.E. Dr Gordan Grlič-Radman, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia

H.E. Dr Anže Logar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia

Mr Ivan Pavlovič, Member of the Supervisory Board, Port of Rijeka

Mr Dimitrij Zadel, President of the Management Board, Port of Koper

Moderated by **Prof Dr Marko Pavliha**, Professor at the Faculty of Maritime Studies and Transport, University of Ljubljana



Photo: Tamino Petelinšek | Slovenian Press Agency (STA)

Mediterranean: A Geostrategic Chessboard

Stability in the Mediterranean is of vital importance to the EU. To that end, the ministers participating in the panel therefore advocated increased cooperation in the region. The region experienced great difficulties during the 2015 migration crisis and the on-going Afghanistan crisis may lead to another migration wave. The panellists agreed that the EU must not make the same mistakes it did in 2015, opening the borders and leaving Mediterranean EU member states alone. For that reason, **Minister Logar** affirmed that “The voice of nine Mediterranean countries within the European Union would be quite substantial if we stick to the same thoughts and we try to present them” while **Minister Christodoulides** added that Eastern Mediterranean “is the only region in which there is no regional organisation” and that we have to be prepared “when the political conditions are there, to establish a regional organisation on security and cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean”.

Minister Logar also posited that “geostrategic thinking should be included in our [EU] foreign policy”. Building democracy using a top-down approach has not been working, neither in Afghanistan nor in Northern Africa (Tunisia and/or Libya). Instead, the EU should be addressing the fundamental issues that fuel migrations, or else we will be facing the same crises over and over again.

International cooperation is crucial in this regard but as **Minister Bartolo** noted, “a few weeks ago there was a geological study published showing that the continents of America, Europe, and Africa are actually drifting apart /.../ apparently four centimetres a year. I think politically [it] is happening at a faster rate”.

This has also led to the growing influence of China – and it should not be countered by moral judgements or expression of mistrust, but by Europe presenting an alternative, setting a positive and honest example to the region.

Speakers:

- H.E. Mr Evarist Bartolo**, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Malta
- H.E. Mr Nikos Christodoulides**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus
- H.E. Mr Nikolaos-Georgios Dendias**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece
- H.E. Dr Anže Logar**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia
- H.E. Dr Augusto Santos Silva**, Minister of State and of Foreign Affairs of Portugal

Moderated by **Mr Ali Aslan**, Journalist and TV Presenter, Germany



Climate Change: Understanding Risks and Ensuring Policy Resilience

In partnership with Chatham House

The debate on creating an appropriate policy environment and enacting legislation to mitigate climate change and the risks associated with it offered insights into the current state of play in the world.

While we are facing increasingly tangible testaments to the climate change in the form of floods, dry spells, heat waves, etc., “we are not fully aware of the economic risks /.../, we are not aware of the social risks /.../, we are not fully aware of the ecological risks /.../, and the most worrying thing is that we are not aware of the speed and the growing probability of climate risks” attested **Dr Kajfež Bogataj**. **Dr Warner** added that “we don’t really understand the pace, the intensity, the scale of climate change impact, but knowing there is a likelihood of the Earth’s average temperature passing that 1.5-degree threshold is the reason for concern.”

Mitigation policies, especially cutting down greenhouse gas emissions, should be a top priority, especially for the developed world, which is responsible for the vast majority of emissions since the start of the industrial age. “The biggest thing that we can do in the industrialised world is to get our house in order because we have created the problem” affirmed **Mr Bridge**.

While mitigation is our best policy for the future, adaptation policies will nevertheless be indispensable – climate change is here to stay and we will need to adapt to it. Such policies will require extensive investments, but since “we have run into not identifiable or quantifiable

risks and have been hit by uncertainty” as **President Hoyer** explained, countries are failing to act in a timely manner.

Adequate financing and a connection between green innovations and development will be crucial in averting the worst climate change scenarios. Regardless, we must help countries finance climate change measures, must take care of those affected by the changing climate, “we have to put in place mechanisms and support that allows us to address the transformation /.../ and leave no one behind” concluded **Ms Bardram**.

Speakers:

Ms Elina Bardram, Acting Director – International, Mainstreaming and Policy Coordination Directorate, DG Clima, European Commission DIGITAL SPEAKER

Mr Nick Bridge, Special Representative for Climate Change, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, United Kingdom

Dr Werner Hoyer, President, European Investment Bank (EIB)

Dr Lučka Kajfež Bogataj, Climatologist and Professor at Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana

Ms Tina Kobilšek, Head of the delegation to UNFCCC, Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning of Slovenia

Dr Koko Warner, Manager, Vulnerability subdivision, Adaptation Division, United Nations Climate Change Secretariat DIGITAL SPEAKER

Moderated by **Prof Tim Benton**, Research Director, Energy, Environment and Resources Programme, Chatham House



Lining up the Europe's Defence

In partnership with the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia

The USA decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and these events fostered a lively debate on European defence. In spite of the recent developments, the lessons learned must also include the broader geopolitical situation as well as past events.

Minister Parly admitted that "this event that we faced in the last few weeks is something that deeply moved our military community and, more than that, our public opinion". It is therefore of the utmost importance that future missions revolve around the safety and security of people, but also centre on defence and values.

The world we live in is complex and we are in the middle of a power competition between the big powers. If Europe is to be able to play a part in it, it should therefore raise its defence capabilities and capacities, because "strategic relevance comes from capacity but also from a sense of purpose /.../ and that means looking at aspects such as what are the vital strategic interests for us" stressed **Minister Gomes Cravinho**, but cooperation with NATO is and will nevertheless remain invaluable. That "NATO is now not looking only to missions and operations but looking to adapt itself to the changing nature and definition of security" as **Deputy Secretary General Geonană** emphasised, further reinforces the relevance of NATO for the EU.

And while European countries have pledged to raise defence spending, the pandemic and its impact on the economy demand political will and time. Nevertheless, Europe would go a long way if spending efforts were coordinated and areas of strategic importance reinforced.

Dialogue will be crucial and "the European Union will always be an area where we will emphasise how important dialogue is and that it can solve all the problems" expressed **Minister Tonin**. The debate in the coming months will set the tone for the pace and course for the strengthening of European defence.

Speakers:

Mr Mircea Geonană, Deputy Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Mr João Gomes Cravinho, Minister of National Defence of Portugal

Ms Florence Parly, Minister of the Armed Forces of France

Mr Matej Tonin, Minister of Defence of Slovenia

Moderated by **Mr Ali Aslan**, Journalist and TV Presenter, Germany



Photo: Nebojša Tejić | Slovenian Press Agency (STA)

Partnership for a Rules-based Order in the Indo-Pacific

In partnership with Observer Research Foundation

The Indo-Pacific region will undoubtedly be one of the key domains in the 21st century. Thus far, economic growth and the potential for it makes the region one of the centres of economic activity and as such cannot be overlooked. Countries are translating their new found economic power into other areas as well. But are these countries and the region as a whole ready and willing to take on the responsibility that such power carries?

The first part of the panel focused on the prospects of stronger engagement of the EU in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU is deepening its partnership with India because "India represents the most populous democracy in the world. I think it's a natural interlocutor within the region" stated **Minister Logar**, but also since it shares and adheres to the same liberal order. India can also serve as a counterweight to China in this part of the world, so "improving our relations and our cooperation with the societies in all parts of the world that share with us the same principles" must be a priority emphasised **Minister Santos Silva**. Engaging with the EU is also in India's vital interests because the "COVID world has raised fundamental issues about whether the current globalisation model is the right model" stressed **Minister Jaishankar**. The pandemic has only further exposed the vast inequalities among countries and regions and these must be addressed. Africa that sits at the other end of the Indo-Pacific is also looking to develop and Kenya serves as a gateway to Africa for the wider Indo-Pacific. It is therefore sound for the EU to nurture and to strengthen relations in the region and it can deliver political, economic and connectivity results.

The second part of the panel continued the previous discussion but tried also to evaluate the needs and the efficiency of the major actors in the region. In spite of what happened in Afghanistan, the USA recognises the importance of the region and welcomes all who support a stable rules-based international framework. For that reason, "the US vision for the Indo-Pacific is based on the responsibility to promote peace and prosperity in the region and drive sustainable growth and development" asserted **Ambassador Keshap**. Regional development and the growing influence of China has also prompted the EU to more actively engage in the region. There is a strong momentum for the EU to be a political actor in the Indo-Pacific, start contributing to the stability of the region and support democratic movements. Active engagement of democratic societies in the region can produce results, but they must lead by example. Genuine commitment at the ground level could lead to positive outcomes that are going to create benefits for people and societies as a whole.

16.00–17.00

H.E. Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Minister for External Affairs of India

H.E. Dr Anže Logar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia

Hon. Ababu Namwamba, Chief Administrative Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kenya

H.E. Dr Augusto Santos Silva, Minister of State and of Foreign Affairs of Portugal

17.00–17.30

Ambassador Atul Keshap, Chargé d'Affaires, United States of America Embassy in New Delhi DIGITAL SPEAKER

Ms Velina Tchakarova, Director, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy

Dr Daniel Twining, President, International Republican Institute DIGITAL SPEAKER

Moderated by **Dr Samir Saran**, President, Observer Research Foundation



Young BSF

Future of Europe - Youth at the Centre

From August 29 to 31 August 2021, Bled (Slovenia) was once more the meeting point for young leaders, who in the scope of the Young Bled Strategic Forum and Bled Strategic Forum framework joined forces and shared their creativity and ideas in order to contribute their piece of the puzzle (as active citizens) to the challenges (or better said) opportunities of today and tomorrow, that civil society, decision-makers, the private sector, members of academia and all members of society will need to address jointly, with strong voices and decisive actions, to secure a prosperous Future of Europe.

A group of 40 participants, trainers and organisers from the countries of Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine and the United States of America participated in an intensive programme of capacity building and exchange of ideas through workshops, panel discussions, networking and other interactive activities the Young BSF is known for. The Programme was prepared in close cooperation with an international group of trainers and experts, who have extensive experience in the field of European Union policy, regional cooperation and the perspective of the Western Balkans region, economy and employability, resilience and recovery (in the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic), climate change and green transformation, civil society engagement in decision making and other topics.

The Young BSF programme began on Sunday, 29 August in Bled (Slovenia) with introductory remarks presented by **Peter Grk**, Secretary-General of the Bled Strategic Forum, **Katja Geršak**, Executive Director of the Centre for European Perspective, **Jernej Grahor**, BSF Project Manager (Responsible for Young Bled Strategic Forum) and **Dafina Peci**, Young Bled Strategic Forum Master of Ceremony.

On Monday, 30 August 2021, the programme continued with workshops structured on decisive elements

of creating an inclusive and engaging environment for the active participation of young people, and discussions on global challenges where perspectives (ideas) of young people need to be further supported. The first session was prepared by **Krisela Hackaj**, Western Balkans Youth Cooperation Platform Executive Director and **Gresa Smolica**, Cooperation and Development Institute Project Officer. Participants explored different initiatives, strategies and projects on the topic of the economy and development, leading to the drafting of recommendations on how to take action towards youth participation in sectoral policymaking.

Jan Kulenović, Regional Youth Cooperation Office Director of Programmes continued with a workshop on the topic of diversity, working on the important roles and opportunities of actors within society in the process of advancing the implementation of tolerance and inclusivity. Building on the broad experience and knowledge of V4SDG on the topic of climate change and green transformation, **Lilla Judit Bartuszek**, V4SDG Secretary-General, engaged the participants in a discussion on the potential for cooperation, joint possibilities and responsibilities of promoting sustainability through cross-sectoral opportunities and actions towards a long-term vision.

The evening programme of Young BSF day one was devoted to a structured approach towards the drafting of a joint Young BSF declaration, and an evening Night Owl session presented by **Matt Jacobs**, Digital Coordinator at the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs of the US Department of State and Coordinator of the European Digital Diplomacy Exchange Programme. An open discussion tackled the challenges of successful digital communication and social listening, that within the possibilities of the digital environmental space offer an opportunity to further bridge the gap between decision-makers (or institutions they represent) and civil society, and the opportunity to in effect contribute to the safeguarding of digital resilience and information integrity protection.

On Tuesday, 31 August, the intensive programme continued with presentations of partnering organisations.



The first session foresaw the implementation of the Third Fundamental Rights Dialogue, organised by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in the form of a live event streamed on social media and on-line platforms. Along with **Michael O'Flaherty**, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, participants took part in an open discussion on topics of fundamental rights protection and advancement. The discussion was moderated by **Ms Peci**. Through a comprehensive discussion on many topics, guest speakers, Young BSF participants and online listeners were offered an opportunity to voice out their concerns and share their experiences. The importance of green transformation and sustainability, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital challenges (such as the process of safeguarding information security, support for media literacy as a proactive mechanism to address disinformation), progress in the field of artificial intelligence and the role/responsibility of the EU in the world were only some of the topics discussed within the Fundamental Rights dialogue. **Mr O'Flaherty** closed the session with an invitation and motivation to the participants of the Fundamental Rights Dialogue to stay informed but also indignant, and demand a better world, a vision all stakeholders can achieve together.

Dr Staša Mesec, Government Office for Development and Cohesion Policy and European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and **Jernej Grahovc**, European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Priority Area 10 Coordinator continued the day's programme, and included the participants in a workshop on civil society engagement in decision making. The young leaders began by exploring the opportunities for cooperation and work within the established structures of the macroregional strategies, moving towards group work on specific topics closely supported by the Danube and Adriatic-Ionian region, discussing opportunities for closer engagement of civil society and young people in decision making on a local, regional and transnational level.

Within the first afternoon session, prepared in cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council and the Western Balkans Youth Lab, a workshop was prepared by **Petra Balažič**, Regional Cooperation Council Political

Advisor. The discussion included the opportunities for better cooperation on a regional level (such as within the six economies of the Western Balkans) and a bridge between regions (such as the WB6 economies cooperation with the European Union). A strong emphasis on economic cooperation, mobility and other cross-cutting topics that contribute to the creation of a more prosperous environment for young people, as well as contributing to the progress and advancement of the region as a whole, were explored within the workshop.

The closing session of the Young BSF included a panel discussion organised in cooperation with the Youth Council of Slovenia. Participants discussed the topic of youth participation in the European Union and exchanged their ideas with the session moderator **Patrik Bole**, National Youth Council of Slovenia Vice President for International Cooperation, **Lucija Karnelutti**, United Nations Youth Delegate of Slovenia, **Jaša Levstik**, Project Manager of the 94th International Session of the European Youth Parliament – Ljubljana 2021 and **Tjaša Božič** representing the Institute for Political Management.

Young BSF continued with the participation of young leaders in the proceedings of the Bled Strategic Forum as panellists and active participants of the workshops, panel discussions and meetings taking place on 1 and 2 September 2021.

In the overall process of two preparatory events (organised virtually from 30 June 2021 to 1 July 2021 and 13 July) and the main event organised live in Bled (Slovenia), young participants contributed their voices and vision through the preparation of a joint declaration on the Future of Europe they desire, deserve and wish to help create, that was further supported and promoted within the Conference on the Future of Europe and the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.





Photo: Tadej Kreft | KraftArt

BSF Young

Young
Bled
Strategic
Forum

Future of Europe – Youth at the Centre Joint Declaration

As active young people, from all across Europe, we feel that it is time for us to speak up and act faster than ever. There is an urgent need for better cooperation between civil society and governments to address the COVID-19 ramifications and necessary recovery action plan. At the same time, we should move forward towards democratic and European societies together.

We highlight the urgency for cooperation across our societies by offering our strengths and determination to act now. This is our joint stand to recognise the power and contributions of young people starting from a small change in our local reality to our participation in complex and important political affairs.

Declaration

In order to overcome the challenges that we are facing all across Europe such as:

Boosting economies and the level of youth employability which is influenced by a lack of coherence between education systems and the needs of the labour market, but also non-formal education being under-regulated.

Brain drain is one of the emerging issues, which stands influenced by outdated labour laws, insufficient resources and a faulty contract between state and private sector regarding employability programmes.

We recommend:

- **Strategically construct connectivity infrastructure among countries within the EU and EU potential members, in order to boost cooperation and mutual benefit in economical level. This connectivity plan must integrate youth as a prima beneficiary through a multi-sectoral perspective.**
- **Reinforce the legislation on labour law.**
- **Incentivize a dialogue among civil society, institutions and business community for a renewed approach towards employability schemes and fighting brain drain.**
- **Initiate sector-based youth growth and blue careers to bring young people close to sectoral policies and opportunities.**

Within the framework of the Young Bled Strategic Forum 2021, we agree that the meaningful participation of young people is essential for the successful implementation of comprehensive processes which permeate our everyday life.

Strengthening youth-institutions-relevant stakeholders' relationships can generate a better understanding of our needs and the right environment to build a common path towards solutions.

Civil society engagement in decision-making processes;

The inclusion of young people in decision-making is not well managed. The apathy of young people is becoming more frequent and widespread across Europe. Limited resources are an obstacle to enabling diverse civil engagement.

We recommend:

- **Improving the curricula of school subjects that tackle civic education and political participation. Educating young people from early age to participate actively in society and influence decision-making for matters that concern them the most.**
- **Contributing to the development of democratic and participatory culture among young people, education and informing on democracy, democratic values, and political, economic, social and cultural rights.**
- **Encouraging young politicians to engage more with their peers, propose ideas and suggestions for the improvement of the position of youth in the policy cycle.**
- **Maintaining and increasing the resources at disposal for meaningful engagement of civil society in various and important processes.**

EU enlargement policy and regional cooperation;

There is low inclusion of young people in the EU enlargement process in both potential member states and existing EU member states, because of the lack of interest from young people, and disinformation and flawed mechanisms. On the other hand, regional cooperation with the WB has been fostered and it has delivered several successful mechanisms, but there is still a huge need to deepen cooperation, increasing funding sources, and to replicate the success stories.

We recommend:

- Adapting strategies of countering Euroscepticism by including communication on EU enlargement with EU youth while providing communication channels to WB youth within the EU.
- Establishing EU-WB youth dialogue with an appropriate forum and two-way exchange opportunities, formal and non-formal.
- Fostering regional cooperation by creating and investing in several mechanisms which promote regional ownership and co-managing in various sectors such as education, employment and sustainable development.

Climate change and sustainability;

Overconsumption, overproduction and use of cheap affordable energy resources have made invaluable damage to the environment, which is increasing day by day due to the lack of societal readiness to make changes. Geopolitical competitions and regionalisation of markets influence the lack of sustainable leadership in the field of tackling climate change issues. The disharmony of regulations and struggles for resources and new technologies have slowed the response to climate change, which was even more pushed to the margins with the post-pandemic setback.

We recommend:

- Investing in educational reforms as a baseline for a bottom-up approach to tackle environmental issues and climate change challenges.
- Boosting regional sustainability cooperation through a dedicated mechanism and involve the youth sector systematically from the very first phase.
- Creating a broad European coalition to push the green agenda.

About the Declaration

This Declaration has been developed by Young Bled Strategic Forum 2021 participants of Albania, Croatia, France, Hungary, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine, with the support of the Organising Team. The objective of this Declaration was to give an opportunity to Young Bled Strategic Forum participants, as young leaders and activists, to come together and to establish common key messages, concerns and requests that they have gathered based on the discussions that took place during the three-day Forum. This Declaration is directed to the policy makers and stakeholders and will be presented in the Bled Strategic Forum. The declaration will reach out to young people through all the official media and social media channels and will also become part of several discussions and debates taking place across Europe with regard to the future of European Union and meaningful youth engagement.



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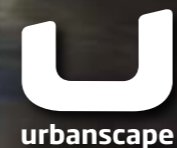
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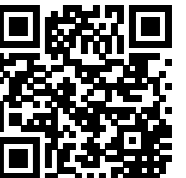
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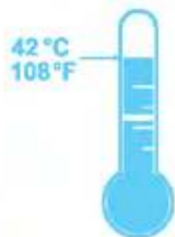
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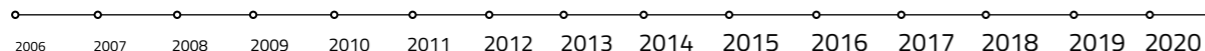
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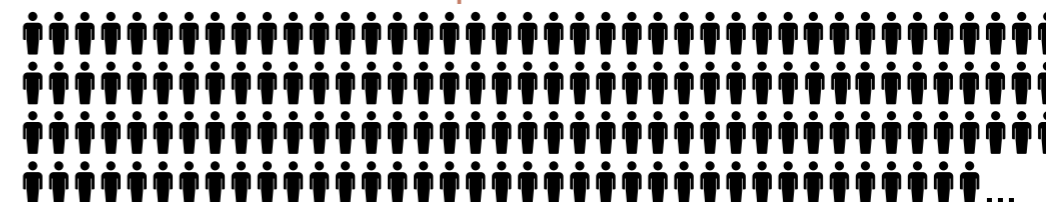
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2021 BLED STRATEGIC FORUM

Future of Europe

CONFERENCE REPORT

Publishers:

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia
Prešernova cesta 25, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

Centre for European Perspective
Grajska cesta 1, 1234 Loka pri Mengšu, Slovenia

Executive Editors: Katja Geršak, Urška Volk Kovačič





Authors: Peter Grk, Tine Šušteršič, Jernej Grahor





Language editing: Fiona Thompson

Design and illustrations: David Fartek

DTP and prepress: Premedia, Andrej Juvan

Ljubljana, November 2021

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