

Bled Strategic Times

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On the Road to Armageddon and still Pretending it is just a Normal Ride!

Is This the World we Want? We can and Must do Better!

Nataša Pirc Musar

President, Republic of Slovenia



It has been 32 years since Agenda 21, a comprehensive international plan of action to build a global partnership for sustainable development to improve human lives and protect the environment, was adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Subsequently, at the turn of the millennium, UN member states gathered at the Millennium Summit and unanimously agreed on the Millennium Declaration, which defined eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at reducing extreme poverty by 2015. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002 our goals and commitment to eradicating poverty and protecting the environment were reaffirmed.

In Rio de Janeiro in 2012, at the conference named Rio+20, we adopted the document “**The Future We Want**”, in which we defined the goals and began taking measures to fulfil the sustainable development goals. Based on these agreements, in 2015, at the UN General Assembly, we began the process of tracking the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. We clearly agreed on what our common challenges are and what we want to achieve by 2030. An annual analysis is published for each goal and objective.

However, **reading these annual reports offers no basis for optimism**. Only six years separate us from 2030, the year by which the United Nations member states are to have made significant progress on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, as agreed in 2015. The adoption of these goals has sent a strong signal to the world. It seemed that **the agreed global objective was to change the world and improve people’s lives**. Yet, every year, as we read the progress reports regarding the achievement of these goals, we see that while we initially made some decisive steps, we have mostly stagnated since 2019.

For illustration: this year’s report tells us that from 2019 to 2022 the number of people living in extreme hunger increased by an unacceptable 23 million. Approximately one-tenth of the global population suffers from hunger. Despite the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the developed world, current data shows that total greenhouse gas emissions have risen to their highest level ever. Due to wars and persecution, the number of displaced persons has risen to 110 million. From 2022 to 2023, civilian casualties in armed conflicts increased by 72 percent.

UN analysts assure us that the quality of the data used to monitor the goals, which was initially poor in 2015, has significantly improved. Today we know very accurately what is happening in the world and where we



are headed. It seems that we know exactly how slow our progress is in achieving our agreed goals. **Does this mean that we lack the courage and responsibility to change the current path?**

Today’s world is based on the internationally agreed world order - multilateralism, respect for human rights and the rule of law. While in theory we all agree that egregious violations of international agreements, attempts to change internationally agreed and recognised borders, and blocking or violating UN Security Council resolutions are unacceptable, we still witness apathy on a daily basis.

It seems that **we live in times when the international order is changing**. The memory of World War II, which had devastating consequences for mankind, shook the world and brought about a new international order based on the rule of law and respect for human rights, is fading. What can we do to restore peace and stability in the world on the basis of the current order?

While in theory we all agree that egregious violations of international agreements, and attempts to change internationally agreed and recognised borders are unacceptable, we still witness apathy on a daily basis.

2024 is a momentous year because it is expected that elections will be held in countries that account for half of humanity’s population. Whom will we choose to represent and lead us, and what policies will we select? Will voters be able to decide based on political programmes? Will the elected politicians be able and willing to lead us to the goals we have set? Or will we fall for lies and promises, which have become a socially acceptable part of everyday life?

And let’s not forget the technological challenges we are facing. New technologies are offering numerous pos-

sibilities to enhance our life, develop new businesses and services and enable us to be better connected with our colleagues and the people we love. But technology is also bringing unprecedented challenges: What will happen with those who are left behind and cannot afford to be connected? What will happen when and if machines take over our responsibilities and start deciding on important issues contrary to our values? Is there a risk that machines will run the world?

It is hard to be optimistic as the facts and experiences are relentless. Yet, I do have hope. My hope is fuelled when I see concrete progress in some areas. For example, we have managed to reduce infant mortality and the data on increasing gender equality is equally encouraging.

This proves that **we can make progress if we want to**. My hope is also encouraged when I see **young people all over the world demanding concrete actions**. They are running numerous movements, some seemingly very minor, but of crucial importance for local communities and some of a real global nature, in which they are mobilising millions of people, especially youngsters demanding change. This is a very valuable expression of active citizenship and should be encouraged and valued. And it is up to politicians to find compromises and provide concrete responses to these demands.

Finding solutions is never easy nor straightforward. It requires solid facts and the articulation of legitimate interests and concerns, followed by a frank and respectful exchange of opinions on suitable solutions. **Sincere and open dialogue is the key.**

Considering the scale of the challenges we are facing, we must provide a framework for a fruitful and honest exchange of views and have an open conversation on what we are doing right and where we are lagging behind. The Bled Strategic Forum is an excellent opportunity for such discussions and could contribute to finding a way towards a better future. A future for all. ■

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The Changing Multilateral World Order and the Summit of the Future

(from the perspective of a small state and an active non-permanent member of the UNSC in the light of a rapidly changing global geopolitical environment)

Robert Golob,
Prime Minister, Republic of Slovenia



Unprecedented crises, geopolitical tensions, break of trust among nations, loss of responsibility towards collective action for securing peace and stability are threatening the existing rules-based multilateral system.

This is not a threat to multilateralism but rather a crisis of political will to comply with and respect the international system the international community has built after World War II. The current multilateral system is being undermined. Undermined by the disrespect for the UN Charter, the international law and the decisions taken by the UN Security Council.

Restoring the political will and trust, as well as recommitment to basic principles of the UN Charter must be at the forefront of the efforts of the UN Member States. As said by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the UN Charter remains “the moral compass to promote peace, advance human dignity, prosperity and uphold human rights and the rule of law”.

The world is undoubtedly changing, as it has throughout history. The UN system was built to last and to withstand pressures of always developing times. However, it needs to remain nimble. To make the global governance work, we need a transparent, responsive and accountable multilateral system, built on trust, respect and international law.

We need a living multilateral system ready to adapt to new trends, challenges and realities of changing geopolitical situation (geographical representation, gender balance, small states - the majority of the international community,

developing countries – two thirds of the UN membership etc).

Slovenia, as the Non-Permanent Member of the Security Council and as the member of the UN, will focus on reminding what is the real mission of the UN, on overcoming the misuse of veto in the Security Council and as we are living in a time of crises, on finding solutions.

The main principles of international coexistence, of international order – from respect for international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law, to the principles, enshrined in the UN Charter, should remain intact, no matter how big the divides or how tense the competition. Bending the rules in order to adapt them to one's unilateral interests, therefore cannot be accepted.

We are at the critical milestone. “Summit of the Future” is an extraordinary opportunity to renew and improve the trust between nations, bolster our existing commitments towards peace and stability, including the commitment to the UN Charter, and to renew and reinvigorate multilateralism. It is also a unique chance to chart a new path ahead – towards a future where we, our children, and the future generations can thrive and be safe.

The task ahead is to make sure we internalize the commitments that will be set out by adopting the Pact for the Future. The Pact should address pressing international issues, accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and prompt reforms of the UN system. It should include a forward-looking vision, with concrete measures and timelines, rather than focusing on what has already been agreed. It is time to deliver concrete results. We need tangible progress and we need to ensure that the actions are taken forward and implemented.

Reviving multilateralism must be seen as an inclusive process, working with private sector, civil society, NGOs, youth, regional and sub-regional organizations and arrangements. It should embrace and reflect on new technologies and innovations, address equal opportunities and unleash the potential of youth, women and girls.

Inclusive cooperation is also very important for small states, Slovenia being one of them. We can serve as bridge-builders, as glue that can reunite. We can be honest brokers and this is what Slovenia is bringing to the table.

Today, the Security Council is highly polarized, its internal dynamics fully reflects the wider geopolitical setting (after Russian aggression on Ukraine, situation in the Middle East). The urgent work on crucial international issues is thus challenging, since the ability to reach consensus is diminishing, unfortunately at the expense of the suffering and loss of lives of innocent people. The current elected (non-permanent) members of the UN Security Council, including Slovenia, share the ambition to move things forward.

We believe that the elected members of the Security Council bring fresh energy and a new perspective in the work of the body. Because of our diverse origin, priorities and experience, elected members bring insights from various regions that can contribute to international efforts.

As we come together for the Bled Strategic Forum, I wish each of us a constructive and inspiring dialogue on how to shape a better world for our future generations. Let this podium in Bled be a catalyst for innovative solutions and meaningful cooperation. Only together, we have the power to create long lasting positive change. ■

Welcome by Nataša Pirc Musar,

President, Republic of Slovenia



Welcome to the Bled Strategic Forum. Here in Bled, a beautiful alpine gem in Slovenia, we have gathered from all corners of the world to discuss the many challenges all nations are currently facing. The security, peace, and prosperity we used to enjoy in Europe contrast starkly with life in our vicinity and in many parts of the world. We need to look beyond our narrow confines, understand and empathize with others, and find solutions in the spirit of multilateralism. The first step is always to understand the challenges, followed by an exchange of opinions and open dialogue. I hope we can find fresh solutions to the challenges we are facing and even pave the way for an agreement on implementing them.

It has been nearly twenty years since the Bled Strategic Forum was organised for the first time. Its main objectives were to create an opportunity for an open exchange of views on the key challenges Europe and the world are facing. At past forums, current foreign policy issues and global challenges were addressed, together with a special focus on key European topics. World leaders and statesmen have joined us, enriching our comprehension with their contributions.

We live in a complex world that is interconnected and interdependent. Humanity's challenges are immense and there are no simple solutions. Let us use the Bled Strategic Forum for an open exchange of opinions and discussions and take a step towards understanding each other and making decisions that are acceptable to all, leading to a better tomorrow. Enjoy the debates and let's seize the opportunity presented to us. ■

Welcome by Tanja Fajon,

Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, and Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia



Dear readers, dear visitors, The Bled Strategic Forum is here again, and with it a new issue of our traditional gazette. This year it has a refreshed look and a new layout, to help the readers navigate easily the topics covered.

I am honoured that our contributors and distinguished guests are once again eminent personalities whose reflections and contributions will enrich the themes and discussions of this internationally established political platform.

The title of this year's forum is “A World of Parallel Realities”, but don't forget that while you are reading and exchanging views in the halls, the swans are swimming in the lake outside and Bled custard slices are being baked.

Try to enjoy the best of both parallel worlds here in Bled, this beautiful Slovenian pearl. ■

Five Minutes to Midnight – Can the West Rise to the Challenge?

We are at War. A Global War for Democracy.

Garry Kasparov

Russian Chess Grandmaster, former World Chess Champion, political activist and writer



Two and a half years after Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine continues to put up an astounding fight, defying all initial expectations that it would fall one, perhaps two, weeks into the war. Its incredible resiliency is a reflection of the strength of its people's conviction in what they are fighting for—their country's survival as a free democratic state, but equally, the very future of global democracy. That is not an overstatement. From the beginning, the lines of the conflict have been crystal clear: dictatorship and tyranny on one side, and the liberal democratic order on the other. So what is Russia fighting for? The Russians dying on the front lines of the conflict are fighting for Putin's political life, for the survival of the corrupt, morally bankrupt mafia structure that stands in for Russian government today.

The regime has reached a point where war is the only way for it to maintain the political balance needed for its tenability. During the quarter of a century that Putin has been in power—just writing those words fills with me anger and grief—he has morphed from an authoritarian strongman into a hardcore ideological dictator. In its current form, the regime cannot function without war as its primary engine. Every facet of Russian life has been channeled into sustaining the war effort—political, military, economic, ideological. Even what is left of cultural life has been transformed into disguised propaganda to spread the regime's vision of Russian society. (And, when artists don't conform to the new social fabric willingly, they are punished. A Russian theater director and playwright were recently sentenced to six years each in prison on charges that the play promotes terrorism; this is an accusation levied indiscriminately against all members of the opposition, myself included.)

The war will not—cannot—end as long as Putin stays in power. Anyone who says otherwise is either blind to the forces at play, or corrupt. The logic of the regime is such that it needs external aggression to survive. Moreover, Ukraine as a target plays into the specific brand of nationalist mythology Putin believes in and propagates. In this world picture, Ukraine does not exist; it is cul-

turally, historically, geographically part of Russia. Under these circumstances, we cannot conflate the possibility of a temporary ceasefire, negotiated by outside actors, with the possibility of a genuine resolution to the war. The goal of annihilating Ukraine as a state and a nation has never been abandoned. There can be no negotiation with an adversary that seeks to wipe Ukraine from the map.

Diplomacy may not be an option, but the alternative is not to sit idly by. Parallels drawn to the 20th century to justify caution are at best inaccurate. The geopolitical balance has radically shifted since then. The period preceding World War II was marked by pervasive instability, with France, Britain,

ute to it. And, it is tainted by greed, the consistent setting of short-term gains above our underlying norms and values. Putin senses these weaknesses, and exploits them. He understands that the way to conduct his war is to play to divisions inside the free world, to bluff and blackmail with escalation. He understands, too, that war in modern times isn't limited to crossing borders and deploying artillery shells. It can mean many other things: using technology to sow discord, funding political forces that will do your work in other places. He is adept at both, coopting our own technology to be used against us, and funding political parties in Europe that will undermine democracy on his behalf.



and other smaller democracies facing Nazi Germany and fascist Italy in their midst, and a rising Japan in the East. The overall climate was deeply unfavorable to democracy. The leaders who failed to confront Hitler in the 1930s, while they should by no means be excused, were dealing with the devastating recent memory of World War I and an understandable fear of re-tipping the geopolitical scales.

The strength of our institutions, norms, and values is only as strong as our will to protect them against threats

Today, by contrast, the free world holds a decisive military and economic advantage but lacks the political will to use it. It suffers not from genuine geopolitical obstacles to action, but from a disease of the will. It is riddled by complacency, set in after the victory over Communism and Fukuyama's infamous prediction of the "end of history." It is beset by a lack of direction and political imagination on the part of its leaders, to envision what a democratic future holds and how they can contrib-

Abandoning the stage never results in a morally neutral vacuum. Any empty space will inevitably be filled by other forces. And, abdication always comes back to haunt one at home, as we are now painfully seeing. Democracy hurt anywhere will have reverberating effects on democracy everywhere. Years of projected weakness, across the political spectrum, from Obama to Trump to Biden, have allowed for a continued chipping away at democracy worldwide. No wonder then that the landscape of the current election in the United States looks the way it does. And it's not just what is happening in Ukraine and in the U.S.—Gaza is clearly part of this global challenge to democracy. One only has to look at who the forces are propping up Hamas to see which side Israel is on in the global fight between the forces of tyranny and freedom. Many just don't want to recognize it. We see, too, the advance of illiberal forces in Africa, as America's retreat has left a vacuum that China and Russia quickly stepped into, taking advantage of the continent's riches in the process. It's just that nobody wants to talk about it.

The simple message here is: we are at war. And it's a global war. Globalization

cannot be played backward. We must admit that we have no choice but to act, cannot plug up our ears and stick our heads in the sand. Putin has a plan; China has a plan; the Islamic radicals have a plan. We don't have a plan, at least not yet. Instead, our leaders have been engaged in an almost hypnotic collective chant: We must avoid war. As though if they repeat this incantation enough they will succeed in bending the reality of the current situation to their wishes. They are not the only ones who seem to be under a spell; the Russian citizenry is living in a zombified state, having been fed the myth of an imperial Russia through decades of propaganda. They, too, need a shock in spirits to reorient them, and nothing less than the Ukrainian flag flying over Sevastopol will do. As for the rest of us—the sooner we recognize that regime change is the only policy that can bring the war in Ukraine to an end, and to turn the future of Russia around, the better.

The free world is beset by a lack of direction and political imagination on the part of its leaders, to envision what a democratic future holds and how they can contribute to it.

The war in Ukraine is the writing on the wall, and the letters are growing bigger and bigger. If the free world does not confront Putin's regime, we stand to usher in a new global era, one in which I, for one, don't want to live. If Putin is allowed to have his way, to redraw the lines of a sovereign state along his border—and, mark my words, all the strongmen around the world, from North Korea to Nicaragua, Belarus to Zimbabwe, are taking notes—we will have failed in our responsibility to uphold democracy, so hard-won by previous generations. The strength of our institutions, norms, and values is only as strong as our will to protect them against threats—which will always be there, whether we like it or not. We are at a moment of inevitable escalation. We know from history and experience that ceding to authoritarians and dictators always prompts them to try to take another inch. The costs of preserving the liberal world order will only continue to grow with each passing day, so I fervently hope we don't waste any more time. We must present a fully unified front in our support for Ukraine, and equally, in our uncompromising stance toward preserving democracy worldwide—even when it requires pain and sacrifice in the present. ■

Parallel Realities in Increasingly Divided World

The World is People, not Statistics

Tanja Fajon

Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Deputy Prime Minister, Republic of Slovenia



Last year, as I was writing an article for our traditional gazette, Slovenia was under water after catastrophic floods. The content of the article was dictated by Solidarity. With a capital S, because without Solidarity, that too often forgotten word, the impact of the floods would have been much worse. Fortunately, there are no floods in Slovenia this year, and I would love to write about more optimistic topics. However, it is often the adverse events that dictate the (foreign) policy agenda. The number of global hotspots has increased again since last year. And if a few months ago I told the UN Security Council that there is no room for frustration in diplomacy, today I have to admit that while professionally this must be true, for me personally – diplomats are human after all – it is distressing to realise that the international community, for all its efforts to bring peace and security to the world, is neither swift nor effective, and least of all united.

Above all, we need the political will to respect the fundamental principles of the multilateral system and the rules of international law, which should never be an optional choice, but an unconditional moral imperative for every UN member state.

As many as 92 states are currently involved in conflicts outside their borders, the highest number since the Global Peace Index was launched in 2008. Armed conflicts around the world are therefore becoming increasingly international and collective, with “minor” conflicts tending to grow into major ones. For example, Ethiopia, Gaza and Israel were labelled “minor” conflicts as recently as 2019.

In the first quarter of this year alone, armed conflicts around the world claimed 47,000 lives. If this trend continues, 2024 could see the highest num-

ber of war casualties since the Rwandan genocide thirty years ago. And this is not counting the wounded, the refugees, the displaced, many of them children, or the global environmental and economic impact of violence, which has risen to 13.5% of global GDP, or to an unimaginable USD 19.1 trillion.

While it is true that these tragic statistics, which in fact conceal the faces, names and destinies of real people, inhabitants of our shared planet, are directly caused by aggressors, we must admit that the world leaders who observe these conflicts and wars, hold dis-



cussions about them and try to help, are by extension also involved by the ongoing conflicts. But – due to the different interests of states, political affiliations, traditional dependencies, physical distance, lack of ambition or other reasons – we are unable to reach unanimous decisions and engage in actions that could prevent or end these conflicts.

In the UN Security Council, where Slovenia is a non-permanent member in the 2024–2025 term, I have yet to meet a leader who is not committed to peace. This makes it all the more incomprehensible and disturbing that we are repeatedly witnessing such grave violations as the violations of the UN Charter (Russian aggression in Ukraine) and violations of international humanitarian law and human rights (Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine, Afghanistan, etc.). We are faced with blatant disregard for Security Council resolutions and sanctions (Sudan, Gaza, Democratic Republic of Congo, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, to name but a few).

In order to be able to fulfil its mission, the Security Council needs to be radically reformed, which is no easy task at a time of such major crises. One

way out of this vicious cycle, at least in part, would be to focus more on ending the abuse of the veto, which is what Slovenia will try to contribute to during its term. Above all, we need the political will to respect the fundamental principles of the multilateral system and the rules of international law, which should never be an optional choice, but an unconditional moral imperative for every UN member state. As Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, I make this very clear at every opportunity.

By recognising Palestine as a sovereign and independent state, Slovenia

reforms. The Palestinian Authority, law and order, structure and peace must return to Gaza; its people, men, women and children, who are paying the greatest and most terrible price in this conflict, must be able to return to Gaza.

And this takes us back to the beginning of this piece – to frustration. It is impossible not to be deeply concerned about the increasing number of children caught up in conflicts around the world. During its debate on the situation of children and armed conflict in June, the Security Council considered a UN report which examined 32,990 grave violations committed against 22,557 children in 2023, the highest number in a decade. The violations include the recruitment and use of children in conflict, killing and maiming, abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of access to humanitarian aid. Slovenia stressed the need to end impunity for child abuse and called for zero tolerance for violations of international law. We drew particular attention to the situation in Sudan, Palestine, Israel, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Haiti and Ukraine, which require the immediate attention of the international community.

Russia’s attacks on a children’s hospital, civilian targets and infrastructure in Ukraine (as well as similar attacks anywhere in the world) are despicable and I strongly condemned them at the last Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels. Slovenia continues to support all efforts for a just and lasting peace based on the UN Charter and international law. The surrender of Ukraine, which Russian President Putin is currently pushing for, could set a very dangerous precedent. I am well aware that peace cannot be achieved without the involvement of both parties, but, unfortunately, the time is not yet ripe. However, ways to end the war must be discussed together, including with China, Brazil, India and regional organisations. I believe we will all be closely following the US presidential campaign and elections. We need an outcome that will bring a voice of determination, reason, morality and solidarity to international politics, and help us, as a conscious and responsible international community, to stop the growing curve of bleak statistics. ■

A roadmap to Peace, Freedom and Prosperity in the Indo-Pacific Amid the Strategic Fluidity and Uncertainty

Kak Soo Shin

Deputy Chairman, NEAR Foundation
Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Republic of Korea



The rampaging two wars in Europe and the Middle East are a stark reminder of the advent of the post-post-Cold War era in disarray.

The strategic terrain of this uncertain era has been undergoing several profound changes. Primarily, the relative decline of the US, combined with the rapid rise of China as a systemic challenger, has sapped the primacy the US has held as the sole superpower during the post-Cold War era. It is fair to say that we would not see the US hold overriding sway over international poli-

Fourth Industrial Revolution driven by digital transformation is altering the contour of geo-economics

tics within the foreseeable future again.

On a closely related development, **the foundations of the liberal international order that had buttressed global peace, freedom and prosperity are being seriously undermined** by diverse centrifugal and centripetal forces. The most significant centrifugal force is China's ambition to shape its own alternative international order. China has assisted and banded together with Russia and pariah states like Iran, North Korea and Venezuela that share hostility to, and ceaselessly disrupt, the liberal international order. The emerging and developing states of the Global South which, like China, have been the beneficiaries of globalization under the liberal international order are forming the third pivot on the world stage, though they lack a common ideology or program and tend to seek cherry-picking in the Global West-Global East confrontation.

At the same time, **the centripetal forces for the maintenance of the liberal international order are weakening** due to the rise of isolationism and America First-ism in the US, its main architect. The world with an introvert America will be left wanting for global public goods in a Kindleberger trap. The socio-economic downturn of Europe and Japan, America's allies and the traditional champions of the liberal international order, is also exacerbating this trend.

Simultaneously, **we are experiencing multiple mega changes that are closely interconnected with each other.** The Covid-19 pandemic has already wreaked havoc on an unfathomable scale, and may portend the increasing frequency and gravity of similar pandemics. Global boiling requires a joint global action to reduce the greenhouse gas emission by transitioning from fossil fuels to green energy, which **entails profound impact upon energy geopolitics.** The Fourth Industrial Revolution driven by digital transformation is altering the contour of geo-economics to underscore the significance of emerging technologies in economic competition and their deepening nexus with security. The shrinking population of developed and, increasingly, developing states will be another source of long-term power shift.

The strategic landscape is further compounded by a spate of complex poly-crisis in the form of black swans or gray rhinos. We therefore find ourselves in a murky, volatile and rudderless international community. **The features and factors of the post-post-Cold War era have meant a return of geopolitics, a fragmented global order and a hyper-connected world.**

In the post-post-Cold War era, the Indo-Pacific has become the pivotal region thanks to its rising economic and geostrategic weight in the global power constellation. During the last two decades, this region has emerged as the epicenter of the global manufacturing and consumption, generating several great powers with economic prowess and military muscle. Asia's GDP share in the world economy is projected to increase from 48 percent today to 58 percent in 2030.

There are several characteristics of the Indo-Pacific worth mentioning when discussing the prospect for peace, freedom and prosperity of the region. First and foremost is China's economic dominance and outstanding military muscle, as demonstrated by its GDP share in Asia reaching 55.6 percent in 2022 and overwhelming military outlays being the world's second largest, which outweigh the rest of Asia combined. It makes the intra-regional balance of power *à la Europe* well-nigh impossible. As the rest of Asia alone cannot check Beijing's ambition to turn the entire region into its sphere of influence, **a continued US presence and engagement is essential for preserving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.**

In global terms, **the Indo-Pacific is most crucial in determining the future course of the US-China rivalry.**

Beijing's strategic goal is to drive out the US military footprint from the first and second island chains by employing an Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) strategy. In the western Pacific, the specter of the "Thucydides Trap" looms over as China's rapidly growing military force with the advantage of geographical proximity is assessed to have already reached parity with the US. Along this geopolitical fault line lie the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, where China has made the legally dubious "Nine-dash line".

The Indo-Pacific is also a laggard in terms of regional integration and collective security arrangement. There is nothing comparable to the EU or NATO in the region owing to the absence of a region-wide historical, cultural, linguistic, or religious heritage and a weak regional identity. In a bid to bridge the gap, particularly in the security field, the US recently created a host of lattice-type mini-lateral groupings by connecting many spokes under its bilateral alliance system in the Indo-Pacific. The examples include Quad, AUKUS, Korea-US-Japan trilateral framework and other trilateral networks of similar kind.

The strategic landscape is further compounded by a spate of complex poly-crisis in the form of black swans or gray rhinos. We therefore find ourselves in a murky, volatile and rudderless international community.

Moreover, **the nuclear threat in the Indo-Pacific is growing conspicuously** due to the near completion of the North Korean nuclear and missile program and China's plan to triple its nuclear warheads by the mid-2030s. Amid the nuclear parity between the US and Russia, the addition of Chinese and North Korean nuclear capability will pose a grave danger to the strategic stability, and risk triggering a nuclear domino effect in Northeast Asia. Especially worrying is North Korea's aggressive nuclear posture which does not explicitly rule out first use and even codified the development and possession of nuclear weapons in its Constitution, as it might lead to the lowered threshold for the use of nuclear weapons.

The Indo-Pacific is also replete with many potential conflicts arising from historical animosity, territorial and maritime disputes, nationalism and egregious human rights violations. **The region is currently mired in fluid and**

unstable strategic landscape, absent the genuine historical reconciliation about the unfortunate history. Unbridled nationalism coupled with rampant populism could wane the dynamism that this region has relished during the last several decades.

What can be done to secure the peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific amid the myriad risks and challenges ahead? There certainly is no panacea to address these complex vectors neatly, yet there are some valuable efforts that could contribute toward a thriving, just and peaceful Indo-Pacific. The most important priority is to prevent the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing from degenerating into a spiral of suspicion and escalation leading to open war. The two countries must spare no efforts to manage their bilateral relations by setting up guard rails, and sustain strategic communications to avoid unintended collision and conflicts.

The Biden-Xi summit in San Francisco last November was a right move in this direction but domestic politics in the two countries can unnecessarily ramp up the confrontation in rhetoric if not in substance. Many countries in the region are mindful that when the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled. The US and Chinese leaders would also do well to remember that a war between them could precipitate a nuclear Armageddon.

All major stakeholders in the region must join hands to work out a minimum code of conduct to safeguard peace, freedom and prosperity in the region. The minimum common denominators like the United Nations Charter, international law, the rule of law and the respect for human rights should guide and constrain the conduct of all states in the region. To ensure continued dialogue and communication even amid strained relations, it would be desirable to create an all-inclusive platform on dialogue and rule-setting in the Indo-Pacific, as Europe did with the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) during the Cold War. As the Helsinki process underlined the importance of human rights in their quest for peace and security in Europe, the Indo-Pacific should give priority to the promotion of human rights in the region.

The sustained joint efforts to secure minimum common denominators, create regional architecture and motivate regional rule-making can facilitate a peaceful change and eventually establish a Pax Consortis regional order. The proliferation of regional and global is-

sues of transnational nature also calls for close collaboration despite competition and confrontation among major powers.

The most important priority is to prevent the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing from degenerating into a spiral of suspicion and escalation leading to open war.

In this long and challenging process, **the role of middle powers such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, Canada, Indonesia and New Zealand is crucial** in playing the balancing role for the maintenance of a sound and stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific. Sharing common values and driven by common interests to protect the liberal international order, they should create a forum at which they seek close collabora-

tion to bolster the liberal international order and **engage the Global South whose voice assumes growing weight in global governance.**

Close cooperation and linkage between the Indo-Pacific and Europe are necessary to deter the axis of disruption in Eurasia. The grave threat to the security of Northeast Asia and Europe posed by the Russo-North Korean strategic convergence highlights the urgency for cooperation. Beyond mere recognition of their security indivisibility, the two regions should move to take joint actions to stabilize Eurasia in the face of rising menace.

It is welcoming to see many new initiatives in this vein intensify recently. The regular meeting between NATO and the AP4 countries in the Indo-Pacific, namely Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, is a good example of such joint efforts. The increased number of joint naval and air

exercises, the conclusions of reciprocal access agreements between states in the two regions, the joint surveillance activities against North Korea's sanctions violations and Germany's recent accession to the United Nations Command can further partnership.

Lastly, states in the Indo-Pacific should do their utmost to maintain their economic vitality from diverse headwinds. **Today, we are witnessing an increasing number of adverse forces trying to undermine the free trade system.** While eliminating non-level playing fields to make international trade fairer is important, this should not be a license for protectionism or preferential industrial policy. Excessive securitization of trade, fragmentation of supply chain, and creeping encroachment upon free trade by exploiting gray zones in the fields of labor, climate change and the environment must be inimical to regional thriving.

The defunct WTO regime must be resuscitated at an early date to play the role of rule-setter and dispute settlement mechanism. In the arena of de-risking for economic security, objectivity and transparency should be guaranteed to minimize its adverse impact upon international trade and investment and prevent its misuse or overuse.

Various hurdles are ahead on the road to peace, freedom and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. The current strategic environment in flux is not favorable for the region to weather them. We must return to the time when the international community first conceived and created the liberal international order from the ruins of the Second World War. **In the spirit of progress, human dignity, solidarity and collaboration, we in the Indo-Pacific, together with the other parts of the global community, should strive to prevent wars and sustain economic dynamism.** ■

VIEWPOINT

The Fading Pax Americana

How the International World Order Became the House of Cards

Philippe Etienne

Former Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the President of France. Former Ambassador of France to the United States



The global dominance of the United States was unchallenged following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its power had

been predominant and growing since World War I, superseding the old European nations, with an alternation of engagements and withdrawals. This culminated in America's self-affirmation as the "indispensable nation", both as a global power and as a democracy, when the West won the tense competition with the USSR and the communist regimes in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The paradox is that just as the international community, faced with global challenges such as climate change, more than ever needs an efficient system of governance, now such a governance becomes more elusive.

9/11 was then a watershed moment that deeply shook up America, both domestically and as an actor in the international arena. It was also a watershed moment for the international dynamics worldwide.

Three elements have subsequently contributed to a sea change.

First, the failure of the interventions in Iraq and then in Afghanistan had significant consequences inside and outside the US. Domestically there was a growing reluctance to get involved abroad, in particular through a massive cultural change of the Republican Party from Reagan to Trump. This has translated into a marked reluctance to risk any new military involvement abroad. Internationally, there was a certain loss of credibility, not only of the United States but more broadly of the West, which was accompanied by the accusations of double standards by the South, even when the countries pointing the fingers are rife with their own double standards.

Second, the increase in assertiveness and the rise to international prominence of the "revisionist powers" (those looking to change the international distribution of power and for territorial gain), in particular China but also Russia, has filled the vacuum left by the lack of strategic action of the West. In parallel, the United States and the West have repeatedly neglected to take decisive action in crucial situations to support values essential to them. In the launch by Moscow of its own military operations (in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine), two aspects have played an important role: the impression given by the West that it would not stand up to protect its

own principles (the "red line" against Assad and his use of chemical weapons against his own people in 2013); and the development of the hybrid forms of warfare/influence like in Africa (use of "private" militias) or increasingly on the front of disinformation (manipulation of information).

Third, the collapse of the multilateral order, which had been mostly created and shaped after World War II by the Western powers (including the focus on Human Rights and Democracy) and the growing difficulty for its central body, the UN Security Council, to assume its global responsibilities. This has been exacerbated after Russia, one of its permanent members, decided to blatantly violate the most sacred prin-

ciples of the international community.

The long statement issued by the Presidents Xi and Putin in Beijing just before the invasion of Ukraine is the so-called political program of those "revisionist" powers. The message of this statement, aimed mostly at the audiences in the South, was "we are entitled to have our own conception of democracy and human rights. The so-called global South is indeed the audience to convince. It consists of countries in circumstances very different from the West, all naturally determined to use this competition to the best of their interests, some of them having the capacity to carve out a very influential position in this new world.



The paradox is that just as the international community, faced with global challenges such as climate change, more than ever needs an efficient system of governance, now such a governance becomes more elusive. The old, largely dismantled, order is not being replaced by new, better adapted rules. Ironically, some of the members of the much-criticized West have been among the most active advocates of building such an improved international order, based on the United Nations and its values, but leaving room in the decision-making processes for new countries (in Africa, Latin America, Asia) and prioritizing the needs of the South. France is one of those nations, *inter alia* having in 2023 hosted a plurilateral Summit organized in Paris in 2023 to establish a new pact for people and the planet, aimed at reconciling development and climate goals.

In terms of the United States as a key leader in the international community: it would be wrong to describe the present position of the United States in the world as a new isolationist consensus. Currently the main focus of most political stakeholders in America is an external challenge, a competition, first and foremost technological, with China. The wave of measures announced every month in Washington, aimed at better equipping the US to outpace China, gives rise to a kind of contest between the Democrats and the Republicans on who will be more efficient in containing the rise of the Chinese power.

The result of the next US election will thus be very consequential for the world but will not change some fundamental aspects of the American foreign policy: the priority given to the competition with China and the reluctance towards new military engagements abroad

In order to keep its influence and positions in the Indo-Pacific, Washington is also engaged in strengthening its relations in the region, as well as the capacities of its most important allies and partners there (Japan, South Korea, but also more and more in South and Southeast Asia), and in coordinating more closely these efforts with its Atlantic allies.

This new American consensus on the “Chinese challenge” has obviously its limits, especially in this election year, with the Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump insisting on getting more money from the US allies for the military support the US provides to them, and announcing, if elected, a new wave of tariffs which would hurt, beyond China, those same allies, both in Europe and in Asia (as was already the case during his 2016-2020 mandate with measures on steel and aluminum, taken on a legal basis related to national security). Another big difference between the Democrats and Republicans is the rejection of the multilateral insti-



Photo: Paul Martinet

tutions by the new, Trumpian, Republican Party, whereas the current Democratic administration has recommitted to these institutions, also as a way to contain the rise of Chinese influence.

The result of the next US election will thus be very consequential for the world but will not change some fundamental aspects of the American foreign policy: the priority given to the competition with China and the reluctance towards new military engagements abroad (reinforced by the terrible impression left by the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021). In all scenarios, the US will look closely at its relations with allies but will handle them differently depending on who will become the next President.

The Europeans have four lessons to draw from these observations.

The *first* is naturally to get prepared for all cases, in particular for the case of a Republican victory which would lead to very tough bilateral negotiations on trade and regulations.

The *second*, probably the most important, is that, whatever the result of the US elections –the choice of the American people– they will have to get their act(s) together as Europeans and develop their own collective sovereignty in order to have the necessary policies, instruments and resources in place to keep or to regain control of their collective future. The awareness of this necessity has grown a lot across the EU, following the brutal aggression of Russia against Ukraine, but much remains to be done.

The *third* is that the European Union, more than ever, will have the role of a responsible global power, faithful to the values which are not “western” but universal, and working with others, in Latin America, South-East and South Asia, the Middle East and Africa to rebuild a collective framework that can create trust and stability and tackle our common issues.

The *fourth* is that the Europeans will have to make every effort to keep their close alliance with the United States, the nature of which will depend on the evolutions on the other side of the Atlantic. Indeed, the best interest of the transatlantic community prescribes that each partner, keeping to their common fundamental interests –in particular the defense of our democracies– and coordinating their positions as closely as possible, plays its own part and respects the choices of the other partner.

But in the long run, everybody will lose, and will lose big, in the absence of a new international order, considering the level of threat to all from potential worldwide instability.

In fact, the Pax Americana has never been complete, even if its vulnerabilities were hidden for some time. It corresponded to a rather short period in the span of history, and its fading would, as such, not be a problem for the world if it were not accompanied by a growing chaos in the global governance and the rise of existential threats such as climate change, terrorism and proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, the world seems to continue drifting along this worrying path, but that need not continue forever.

It may be a paradox, but the stakes of the fading Pax Americana may not be the highest for the United States itself, whose power will surely remain, if not unchallenged. The US will indeed continue being fully capable of affirming its influence and its interests in the world. The biggest question mark for the great American nation is of an internal nature: will its democracy find ways to adapt and resist the polarizing headwinds we see today? Most probably, yes, considering the strength of its institutions and the prevalence of the American dream; the upcoming Presidential elections will serve as a new test in this respect.

The consequences of the fading Pax Americana are neither maximal Asia or Latin America. China is retaking the place it considers it should never have lost at the center of the global community. India is becoming a superpower of its own. Many other countries find opportunities to increase their influence in this new situation.

The two regions with the highest stakes in this evolution, for better or for worse, are –for different reasons– Europe and the most vulnerable nations, notably but not only in Africa. The latter need more cooperation than confrontation to solve their own existential issues, for instance mitigation or the rise of sea levels in some island states, and of becoming too dependent on a few influential partners they might be obliged to choose between in the middle of an international confrontation. The Europeans have much to lose, to the point of becoming irrelevant, if they lag behind the Sino-American technological and industrial competition, if they continue to be seen as a part of a declining Western world, and if they are unable to join their forces to defend themselves against the increasingly aggressive behavior of some actors.

But in the long run, everybody will lose, and will lose big, in the absence of a new international order, considering the level of threat to all from potential worldwide instability. It is the responsibility of the United States, and of others like China, to understand this and act upon it, since they have the most leverage. But it is also very much the task of our good old Europe, considering its history which generates its own responsibilities, considering also the unique and successful experience of the European integration to date, which gives it the opportunity to propose solutions to its partners (see the report of the first Conclave in Portugal in November 2023: Europe 2040, Tomorrow is Today, co-building a global, sustainable and responsible power.) ■

China as a Global Player in the International Arena

A Growing Role on the International Stage

Henry Huiyao Wang PhD

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As global economy and politics undergo significant shifts, China as one of the largest beneficiaries of the global system, seeks to strengthen and enhance the global governance with all major powers. We have entered into a multipolar world and China has risen as a key player, utilizing its economic power and diplomatic skill to contribute and to improve international multilateral system. With conflicts simmering worldwide, China's role as a mediator in wars and disputes has increasingly come to the fore. This influence stems not only from its economic strength but also from its sophisticated approach to diplomacy, anchored in principles of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. Furthermore, China has implemented innovative strategies for economic development and green transition, also advocating for multilateral cooperation and strengthening its engagement with the Global South. These efforts are poised to profoundly redefine the contours of international relations in the evolving world order.

[China's approach to international diplomacy is deeply rooted in its historical narrative and foreign policy principles.](#)

China's Emerging Role in Mediation of wars and conflicts

As global conflicts simmer, China's role as a mediator is gaining prominence, with its economic influence and diplomatic connections helping it to foster dialogue.

Last month, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba met his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Guangzhou. During their talks, Wang reiterated China's commitment to promoting a political resolution to the Russian war on Ukraine, a stance that received a positive response from Kuleba. China's significant influence largely stems from its economic connections with the parties to the conflict. During the Guangzhou talks, Wang emphasized China's role as Ukraine's largest trading partner. According to the Chinese customs office, bilateral trade was at US\$6.81 billion last year. Wang also pointed out China's position as the primary importer of Ukrainian agricultural products and underscored Ukraine's early participation in the Belt and Road Initiative.

At the same time, China's position as Russia's top trading partner, with bilateral trade rising to US\$240.1 billion last year, further solidifies its unique role as a potential neutral mediator. This economic interdependence with both nations gives China leverage that few other countries can match.

China's economic diplomacy scored a notable success a year ago when it brokered the restoration of ties between long-standing rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a major trading partner and the largest oil customer of both nations, China wielded significant influence. This economic leverage was bolstered by major bilateral agreements: a 25-year cooperation deal with Iran reached in 2021 and a strengthening of its comprehensive strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia in 2022.

China's deep economic ties with these Middle Eastern powers provided both the means and the motivation to push for their reconciliation. As Israel's third-largest trading partner, and with bilateral trade volume reaching US\$14.5 billion last year, China can also play a significant role in promoting a peaceful resolution to the Gaza crisis, potentially offering a path to dialogue where traditional diplomacy has faltered.

Furthermore, China's seat on the UN Security Council has become a cornerstone of its growing diplomatic influence, particularly in its push for multilateral solutions to global conflicts. After the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza broke out, China proposed high-level international conferences to address the crises. This approach bore fruit earlier this year when rival Palestinian factions came together for the Beijing Declaration, a rare moment of unity brokered through Chinese diplomacy. Days later, on July 25, China's Permanent Representative to the UN Fu Cong reiterated Beijing's stance on the war in Ukraine during a Security Council review, emphasizing the need for peace talks and a political resolution.

More importantly, China's approach to international diplomacy is deeply rooted in its historical narrative and foreign policy principles. China doesn't have a colonial past and has not engaged in invasive military campaigns in recent history, which serves as a foundation for its credibility on the global stage. This stance, encapsulated in its "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", emphasizes dialogue and consultation over force and aggression in resolving international disputes.

In addition, China's diplomatic efforts extend to developing nations, as evidenced by the recent China-Brazil consensus on the Ukraine crisis. Their six-point proposal outlines key de-escalation principles, including no ex-

pansion of the battlefield, no escalation of fighting, and no provocation by any party. Significantly, it proposes an international peace conference, to be held at a time agreeable to both Russia and Ukraine, ensuring equal participation and fair discussion of all peace plans. This trend was also underscored last year when an African peace delegation visited Ukraine and Russia.

[China is steadily carving out its role as a responsible major power on the global stage, with a firm commitment to actively engage with a wide range of international bodies, including the United Nations, BRICS, G7, and G20.](#)

China Can Promote Global Economic Collaboration and Green Transition

On July 4, 2024, the European Commission announced anti-subsidy duties ranging from 17.4% to 37.6% on Chinese EVs. The EU's decision to impose additional taxes on Chinese new energy vehicles is unnecessary. At a time when the global climate is experiencing record-breaking changes, we should be more committed to adhering to the Paris Agreement. The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that global demand for new photovoltaic installations will reach 820 gigawatts, roughly four times the capacity added in 2022. This surge in demand is driven by the need to meet the ambitious targets set by the Paris Agreement. The green appetite of the world market is huge and dwarfs the capacity of suppliers. To achieve climate goals outlined in the Paris Agreement, substantial investments in clean energy are imperative – annual \$4 trillion investments are requested according to the IEA, with only \$1.7 trillion fulfilled in 2023. The gap between required investment and actual expenditure underscores the need for high-cost-effective products, advanced technologies, and efficient resource allocation. It is impossible for China to handle the challenge of climate alone.

China has made significant progress in enhancing its capacity to produce renewable energy technologies. In 2023, China manufactured 90% of the world's solar panels, cementing its position as a global leader in this sector. Moreover, China has emerged as a dominant force in the electric vehicle market, accounting for 60% of global EV sales.

Therefore, China and Europe should promptly resume the China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, lifting sanctions previously posted on each other with the new EU Parliament, encouraging Chinese companies to in-

vest in Europe, thereby boosting local employment, increasing tax revenue, revitalizing the manufacturing sector, and reducing high tariffs. Decoupling between China and Europe is not an option.

China and Europe should also vigorously develop cooperation on the digital economy and AI.

I have recently co-hosted with H.E. Patricia Flor, German Ambassador to China and H.E. Bertrand Lortholary, French Ambassador to China a symposium at the CCG titled "European and Chinese Perspectives on AI Governance" to outline the importance of AI cooperation between the EU and China. Moreover, the importance of the digital economy and its governance cannot be emphasized enough. According to the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT), the digital economy now accounts for nearly 60% of global GDP. In China, the digital economy has shown remarkable growth, consistently outpacing overall GDP growth for 11 consecutive years. As the latest data suggests, the digital economy contributes 41.5% to China's GDP, a figure that highlights its increasing significance, rivaling the contribution of the secondary industry to the national economy, which presents enormous opportunities for the EU companies to work in China and jointly in third countries.

China Can Deepen Global Cooperation with the Global South

China is steadily carving out its role as a responsible major power on the global stage, with a firm commitment to actively engage with a wide range of international bodies, including the United Nations, BRICS, G7, and G20. This engagement underscores China's dedication to global governance and its proactive stance on addressing the pressing challenges facing the world today. Among its core priorities is the advocacy for global peace and stability, with a particular emphasis on the critical need to prevent the escalation of nuclear conflict.

In pursuit of these goals, China has expressed a strong willingness to collaborate with key global players, notably Europe and the United States, to tackle a host of global issues that require collective action. One of the areas where China's diplomatic influence could be particularly impactful is in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. By taking an active role in mediating this crisis, China has the potential to contribute significantly to de-escalating tensions and finding a peaceful resolution. Simultaneously, Europe's involvement could serve as a catalyst in advancing

EUROPE 2040

The Way to a Global, Sustainable and Responsible Power

For the Conclave Board,
Co-founder of Conclave:
Peter Grk, Secretary General of BSF.
Guillaume Klossa, President of
EuropaNova and Chairman of the Board
of Conclave

The first Conclave “Europe 2040” took place on 24-26 November 2023 at the Presidential Palace of Cascais with the support of the Bled Strategic Forum and major European foundations. Operated by EuropaNova, the Conclave was hosted by President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa with the support of Antonio Costa, then Portuguese PM and presently European Council president elect. It gathered top politicians, academics, scientists, thinkers, entrepreneurs, trade unionists, artists, and citizens from the entire EU. Its **aim** was to **develop a shared understanding of the global and European political context** and of the **transformation potential of the EU**. In addition, the purpose of the Conclave was to **identify the European Union’s most pressing challenges**, which need to be tackled for the EU and its Member States to remain relevant in the future and **develop a trans-disciplinary and forward-looking framework to address them**. The results of the Conclave were presented to most of the EU heads of state and contributed to the preparation of the **Strategic agenda of the EU** adopted this June 2024 by the European Council.

Participants in the First Conclave “Europe 2040” discussed the collective destiny of Europeans, which is at stake in a rapidly changing world. After having listened to leaders from the outside world with challenging views, they aimed to identify what might be the new European public goods of tomor-



The aim of the Conclave was to develop a shared understanding of the global and European political context and of the transformation potential of the EU

row and the ways and means to produce them. The aim was to design the European Union we need in the short term and by 2040.

On this basis, the Member States and the EU institutions pledge a much stronger promotion of common European interests, values, and unity. To survive in an international environment that is henceforth dominated by force and to remain competitive in a more and more technology-driven world where critical size is fundamental, they insist on the fact that the **European Union needs to urgently change its mindset to assert itself as a first-class global, sustainable, and responsible power for citizens**, equipped with significantly en-

hanced decision-making and execution capabilities – all of which will indeed require the EU treaty changes and budgetary increases. They propose a major **focus on four** fields which, for a long time, were not at the heart of European **priorities**, but should now structure the strategic agenda with a clear objective of leadership and competitiveness: **Geopolitics, Science and Technology, Development model, and Democracy**. They draw the conclusion that these four domains, which are increasingly intertwined, **urgently need a radically new approach and a much higher degree of ambition**, if the EU and its

European Union urgently needs to change its mindset in order to assert itself as a first-class global, sustainable and responsible power, equipped with enhanced decision-making and execution capabilities

Europe needs a radically new approach and a higher degree of ambition

Member States want to remain relevant to their citizens. In this respect, they identify seventeen fundamental issues that the Europeans need to tackle immediately to prepare a positive collective future. These issues are developed in the Conclave report.

This fundamental change can only happen if the citizens are on board and are effectively part of this democratic adventure.

Please read the Conclave Report “Europe 2040 : tomorrow is today. Co-building a global, sustainable and responsible power”: (EuropaNova publishing) <https://europanova.eu/conclave/report/>

→ China-US relations, fostering a more constructive dialogue and cooperation between these two major powers. Through such multilateral efforts, China demonstrates its commitment to a balanced and pragmatic approach to international relations, aiming to build bridges and reinforce global stability in an increasingly complex world.

China has been collaborating with members of the Global South to balance the gap between developing and developed countries. China, as a founding member of BRICS, has engaged heavily with developing countries in commerce and trade through BRICS. This BRICS mechanism is an increasingly influential force in the global financial

sector and political security. Measured by purchasing power parity, the BRICS countries have already outpaced the G7, accounting for 35.6% of the world’s GDP compared to the G7’s 30.3%. By 2028, this disparity is projected to grow even more in favor of the BRICS, with estimates showing a ratio of 36.6% to 27.8%. The robust intra-BRICS economic cooperation attracted more “middle power” nations to join. For example, in June, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan discussed his country’s pursuit of new opportunities to cooperate with BRICS in a speech at the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), a non-governmental think tank in Beijing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, China’s evolving role as a mediator in global conflicts underscores its growing influence on the international stage. By leveraging its economic ties and diplomatic principles, China has positioned itself as a key player in fostering dialogue and promoting political resolutions, as seen in its involvement in the Ukraine-Russia conflict and its successful mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. China’s

BRICS mechanism is an increasingly influential force in the global financial sector and political security.

commitment to peaceful coexistence, coupled with its innovative approaches to economic development and green transition, further solidifies its leadership in shaping a new world order. As China advocates for multilateral cooperation and continues to deepen its engagement with the Global South, its efforts will likely play a pivotal role in redefining the contours of international relations in the years to come. ■

India's Incredible Internationalism in the Emerging International Order

India Rising

Satu Limaye

Vice President, East-West Center
Senior Advisor, Center for Naval Analyses



India is an embodiment of internationalism; manifested as nearly 20% of the world's population, 5th largest economy, 1st greatest diaspora, immense cultural diversity, robust democracy, and historical as well as contemporary destination for and source of ideas and influence. Regardless of how much India's secular economic, diplomatic, and military power grows, India has been, is, and will remain a strong contributor to and an essential component of internationalism.

India's importance and relative share in internationalism likely will increase.

Assessments of India's future trajectory differ—ranging from modest to great expectations - always staying above collapse yet well below dominance. The empirical record demonstrates that over time India is emerging stronger in every metric of conventional international power: economic, diplomatic (including multilateralism), military. Simultaneously there remains a high, unmet ceiling to becoming a true great power. For example, India is the world's 5th largest economy, yet it has the lowest per capita gross domestic product of any G20 country. India's bilateral relations have expanded and, in many instances, have been enhanced across the globe, but where they are determinative is undemonstrated. India's multilateral memberships have proliferated even as key memberships in global governance such as the United Nations Security Council elude it, and it chooses not to join key commercial ones such as the Indo-Pacific's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). India's military and technical capabilities increase as does its access and opportunities to work with the most advanced countries, but its own defense expenditures and capacities remain very measured.

India's internationalism is incredible (to steal from the country's tourism slogan—Incredible India!). It reflects a singular combination of challenges, strengths, and most markedly—diffusion; characteristics that are inter-related and a function of key economic and politico-strategic interests. For example, if one “maps” India's key economic

interests such as trade, foreign direct investment, petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) imports/exports, multilateral/commercial debt, and remittances among other factors the net result is that no single country or region is critical to India or vice versa. India must engage and act everywhere to maximize achievement of incremental, marginal, and niche interests. Similarly, India's politico-strategic interests (e.g., autonomy, de jure/de facto recognition of India's nuclear weapons status and conventional arms commerce, support for a UNSC seat, and membership in global, North, South and regional organizations, and

commitment to “non-alignment” and “strategic autonomy.” Indeed, even concepts such as nonalignment and strategic autonomy should be seen as less about deltas in alignment with different international players and more about how and how much India should be engaged in world affairs. The manner and degree of India's international engagement must be perceived in the context of domestic needs, the prevailing distribution of international power and possibilities of partnership.

Congress governments have gone with first Prime Minister Nehru's “non-alignment” (during a bi-polar US-Soviet



even diasporic relations) by definition require an incredibly wide-ranging engagement. A central feature of India's “incredible internationalism” is that India's interests require robust global engagement, yet India's material influence internationally is still increasing. India and the world are weighting on and waiting for each other.

India's will combine its heightened engagement in coalitional arrangements

India now has the potential to take advantage of emerging trends such as the diffusion of power, multipolarity among countries, fragmentation and networking in global and regional institutions, and emerging coalitions of functional and values-based alignments in the international order. It remains to be seen if it will take advantage of them, given domestic priorities, competing demands, and the emerging order's push and pull on India to make choices.

India's internationalism is contested more within India than outside of it. Observers of India's international role have overly debated the country's

viet international order), the first BJP government under Vajpayee used “strategic autonomy” (just as the bipolar international order collapsed and the US hyperpower loomed), and Prime Minister Modi's administration uses “Vishwabandhu” and “Aatmanirbhar Bharat” (self-reliant India) amidst global fragmentation, networking, and emerging multipolarity.

India's foreign and security policies have traditionally been a preserve of a tiny elite. A considered recent effort has been undertaken to internationalize India at home via, for example, holding G20 events across India's cities to highlight the country's international role. Though the overall federal structure of India will likely bear little on the country's broad foreign policy interests and engagement, specific states will exercise outsized weight in relations with neighborhood countries (e.g., West Bengal with Bangladesh, North-Eastern Indian states with Myanmar, Tamil Nadu with Sri Lanka, etc.) And India's coalitional politics at the national level will shape ceilings and floors of what India does abroad, even if it is unlikely to guide continuity on key economic and politico-strategic interests.

What kind of actor will India be in the newly emerging international order that is characterized by multipolarity, coalitional multilateralism and systemic polarization? India's positioning on the evolving international arena will be defined by the domestic political developments and by the navigations required due to a shifting, uncertain international environment. Continuity rather than departures will be dominant in India's approach to the emerging international order.

First, **India will redouble efforts to develop domestic economic, social, technological and defense capacity, and to strengthen itself by seeking cooperation and assistance with beneficial partners** (countries, companies and mechanisms) that can contribute to domestic development in pursuit of Viksit Bharat (“Developed India”). Domestic development, primarily using its own resources, will be India's preferred way to achieving its great power aspirations, and will trump any foreign policy pursuits.

Second, **increasing alignment with the United States (and many of its allies and partners, especially in the Indo-Pacific)** is likely to persist despite a highly globally distributed, regional and Indo-Pacific focused set of

engagements. These allies and partners are seen as the most promising (but by no means the only) partners for facilitating India's aspirations at home and abroad.

Third, **India will continue to navigate great power politics** amongst the US, China, Russia and other major countries to give itself the space to shape outcomes in its interests. Indeed, by “straddling the seams” of international relations and “standing straight” by the accrual of more power, **India's internationalism will be inclusive rather than exclusive.**

India both a revisionist and a responsible global stakeholder, with a tilt towards the latter

Fourth, **India will combine its heightened engagement in coalitional arrangements** (e.g., the Quad, G7+, even potentially the IP4 and other configurations over time) **with continuing efforts to reshape global governance in its interests.** The emergence of coalitional or “wired” multilateralism (rather than the hubs-and-spokes “wheels” of alliances and partnerships and the

“webs” of networked mechanisms) provides India with a greater space to utilize international mechanisms to pursue specific interests. The net effect is that such combination makes India both a revisionist and a responsible global stakeholder, with a tilt towards the latter (given more improved relations with countries seeking to maintain the post-1945 international order than those seeking to amend it). In this sense, too, **India will continue to speak for the global South even as it continues to work more than in the past with**

the global North. India will likely speak even more loudly for itself, rather than for the causes seen as amenable and aligned with it. Like any country, India balances international positioning with interests, but India is becoming markedly less ideational and more earthy in the pursuit of its interests.

With continuing efforts to reshape global governance in its interests

Finally, India's contemporary domestic politics and material progress have created a sort of **“peak India” internationally.** Key Indian personnel such as Prime Minister Modi and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar have been the most positively influential Indians globally in recent decades. India's economic growth rates and diplomacy have been robust. Whether such conditions will prevail cannot be foretold. But such things matter, of course, not in lieu of other structural factors in India and in internationalism, but in combination

with them. **India interestingly appears to be immune from intense polarization regarding international engagement**—though that seems to be a function of a consensus-based calibration of India's internationalism rather than the absence of such a debate.

As the 21st century begins its second quarter, India's standing and role will be vital in shaping internationalism's future. ■

The Summit on Peace in Ukraine

Paving a Hard-Fought Path to Freedom

Julia Martinet

Editor-in-Chief, Bled Strategic Times

Path to peace: steps preceding the Summit

In June 2024, representatives from 92 nations and 8 international organisations attended the Summit on Peace in Ukraine. They came together to find common ground and a starting position for **building a just and lasting peace in Ukraine**, the country that has been fighting against all odds for its free and democratic future, and for the world's liberal values since February 2022.

The Summit used President Zelenskyy's 10-point peace plan as a springboard for its discussions. **Based on the principles of the UN Charter**, the key elements of this plan were focused on the cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of Russian troops, the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, justice and reparations, radiation and nuclear safety, food and energy security, and prevention of escalation.

The discussions at the Summit were deliberately narrower in scope, focusing mainly on civilian issues directly impacting the population (i.e., nuclear safety, global food security, prisoners of war) – topics and underlying principles which are on their own accord highly relevant for the international community.

Russia, the aggressor in the conflict, had expressed no interest in taking part in the Summit, and no formal invitation was issued. However, on the eve of the Summit, President Putin released his own terms for a peace agreement, which were based on the “new territorial realities” (MinFA Russian Federation) indicative of what he would like to have reached as the outcome of negotiations. According to Putin, any peace agreement had to be based on the international recognition of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson as part of the Russian Federation, a demilitarisation of Ukraine and a lifting of all sanctions against Russia. Ukraine and its allies denounced Russia's terms as an “ultimatum” and “renaissance of Nazism” (AP



News), pointing out that it was not a sincere attempt to reach peace.

Previous attempts to mediate between the two parties, or offers to help, were made by China and Brazil in early 2023, by a pan-African peace delegation (led by Zambia, Comoros, Senegal, South Africa, Egypt, Republic of Congo and Uganda), and by the Indonesian Minister of Defence, both in June 2023.

Whilst Brazil attended the summit as an observer, China declined the invitation to attend, preferring instead to “continue to promote talks for peace in our own way” (MinFA of the PRC). End May 2024, China and Brazil put forward an alternative proposal for a peace conference in the future that was to be “recognised by both Russia and Ukraine” (government of Brazil).

Conclusions reached at the Summit

A Joint Communiqué was issued as an outcome of the summit, which first reconfirmed the participants' commitment to develop a framework for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, based on international law, including the UN Charter. This framework for peace should be based on the absence of threat or use of force against the territo-

rial integrity or political independence of any state, the principles of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all states, including Ukraine, within their internationally recognised borders, and the resolution of disputes through peaceful means.

The Communiqué lists the following three focus areas that may form a foundation of trust, on the basis of which further peace negotiations could be held:

1. “Firstly, **any use of nuclear energy and nuclear installations must be safe, secured, safe-guarded and environmentally sound.** Ukrainian nuclear power plants and installations, including Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, must operate safely and securely under full sovereign control of Ukraine and in line with IAEA principles and under its supervision.

Any threat or use of nuclear weapons in the context of the ongoing war against Ukraine is inadmissible.

2. Secondly, **global food security** depends on uninterrupted manufacturing and supply of food products. In this regard, free, full and safe commercial navigation, as well as access to sea ports in the Black and Azov Seas, are critical. Attacks on merchant ships in ports and along the entire route, as well as against civilian ports and civilian port infrastructure, are unacceptable.

Food security must not be weaponized in any way. Ukrainian agricultural products should be securely and freely provided to interested third countries.

3. Thirdly, **all prisoners of war** must be released by complete exchange. All deported and unlawfully displaced **Ukrainian children**, and all other **Ukrainian civilians who were unlawfully detained, must be returned to Ukraine.**”

The Communiqué was signed by 84 participants to the summit. As the Joint Communiqué is considered a “living document”, several states either opted in or out following the end of the summit. As of 25 August 2024, the Communiqué is signed by 93 countries and organisations.

What next?

Each of the three focus areas mentioned in the Communiqué will be developed further by working groups in specific action plans.

Aside the development of the action plans following the Joint Communiqué, the China and Brazil's peace proposal may also see a further follow-up in the future.

Regardless of who undertakes the initiative, however, the essential point is that any negotiations must be based on the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. ■

“Is Political Correctness Essential in Healthy Media Narratives and Political Discourse”

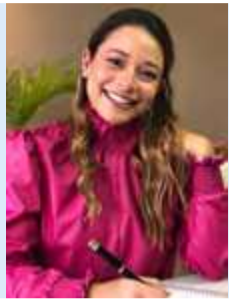


YES 63%*

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Look around! In today's world, misunderstandings, miscommunications, and conflicts have become alarmingly common. We barely adapt to new socio-political contexts before they change again, challenging us to stay equipped and responsive. It's true that we live in “liquid” times of uncertainty: sociopolitical upheavals shake the foundations of our societies, armed conflicts and their devastating consequences turn people from different sides into perceived enemies, the excessive and mindless consumption of media shapes our perceptions, often in divisive ways.

In these turbulent times, we must ask ourselves: how can we handle these complexities without harming and/or exacerbating existing disadvantages? The answer lies in political correctness, which is far more than a set of rules to avoid offense. It is a critical tool which prevents real harm and addresses profound disadvantages that marginalized groups face nowadays. Political correctness is about using language and behavior to ensure that our interactions do not harm our fellows or deepen existing divides. Take the example of racial minorities who face frequent microaggressions. Comments based on stereotypes and prejudices such as “You don't sound Asian!” or “Where are you really from?” are less overt forms of hate speech which, over time, contribute to hostile environments, impacting their mental health, social integration, etc. The road to violence is lined by what doesn't appear to be violent.

Our perception of reality is shaped by the language we use. Language is not passive; it actively molds our thoughts, directs our actions, and defines our interactions with the world. Imagine this: you're a member of a marginalized community constantly faced with derogatory terms and stereotypes. Consider the term “gypsy,” and the connotations it might carry. Its usage (including extensions such as ‘gyped’) has caused the Romani community much harm, to the extent that it is recognized as a slur.

Without political correctness in media narrative and political discourse, language can exacerbate disadvantages, fuel discrimination, and increase inequality. Its presence, therefore, ensures that everyone is treated with respect and dignity. This is not just an abstract concept; it has real consequences, as acknowledged by the American Psychological Association, in establishing an Inclusive Language Guide.

We live in a postmodern world, known for deconstructing overarching stories that claim to explain all aspects of reality (dominant metanarratives). In this context, political correctness becomes a way to break down the harmful language and practices which supported these dominant narratives. For instance, media narratives have traditionally framed immigration in a negative light, emphasizing themes of crime, economic burden, and cultural threat. Use of language such as ‘drain’ or ‘burden’ in political discourse sustains existing power dynamics and further ostracizes already marginalized communities. Therefore, political correctness is necessary as it promotes language and practices that respect and accurately represent the experiences of immigrants (and other groups). It promotes movement away from singularly focused narratives towards more inclusive narratives which also highlight the contributions of immigrants, recognize their struggles, and emphasize the value of diversity.

Along with this, we know that postmodernism challenges the idea of ‘objective truth’. What we consider to be true is often shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. This brings us to the importance of multiple viewpoints and voices, particularly those that have been marginalized. Since political correctness promotes inclusivity and respect towards diversity, it can be seen to ensure these perspectives are acknowledged and respected accordingly.

Great minds like I. Kant and M. Nussbaum assert that human life and dignity are of utmost importance, irrespective of an individual's background. When media narratives and political discourse fail to uphold political correctness, they undermine the dignity and respect of marginalized groups. Without political correctness, these individuals are continuously devalued. Therefore, this is not just a matter of polite language, but a moral imperative rooted in the fundamental respect for all humanity.

We know how to identify harm and assign responsibility. However, this paradigm collapses when we consider a world without political correctness. In such a world, no one would be held accountable for the harm and discrimination they propagate. So, just ask yourself: do you really want to live in such a world?

Political correctness tends to be portrayed as a positive virtue; but do you realize that it can also be used to protect, legitimize, and perpetuate biased narratives?

We all have biases, that come from our nationality, culture, academic background, professional occupation, life experiences, and so on. Political and media communications are produced by human beings, therefore, the biases of the producer (or the publisher) are reflected in the pieces. Even if they are generated with AI, AI tools, such as ChatGPT, also have biases themselves. So it is doubtful that you will ever read or watch a political or media narrative that is bias-free.

The existence of bias, per se, is not a problem. The problem is when the “political correctness” discourse is used to sustain the standard that a certain narrative is “neutral”, when, in fact, it is biased, just like any other narrative.

“Neutrality”...is there such a thing when it comes to media and politics?

I will offer you a very clear – and polemic – example to illustrate my point. Let's say that the two following headlines were used by two different news portals to communicate the same fact:

News portal A: “Israeli soldiers kill 19 children in Gaza”

News portal B: “Missile aimed for Hamas leaves civilian casualties”

The “politically correct” crew could argue against headline A, sustaining that it would be politically incorrect to take a side in the conflict and assume that the deaths were meant by the Israeli soldiers. That side would argue that a “politically correct” approach would neutrally convey the information, without making any assumptions. Thus, they would advocate for the political correctness of headline B.

However, headline B is not neutral either. The emphasis on the missile – instead of the people who sent it – and the assumption (or simple acceptance) that the missile was really aimed at Hamas, also means taking a side. The reference to “civilian casualties”, instead of “deaths”, and the omission of the fact that those who died were children, is also a political choice.

My point here is not to defend headline A or B, but to demonstrate that both present a political agenda and convey biases, and there is no “neutral” message. Therefore, none of those narratives should be shielded under the “politically correct” discourse. They are subjected to judgment and criticism, and may be challenged by other arguments, fuelling the debates that make our society evolve. Attempts to kill such debates under the “politically correct” discourse lack any intellectual sophistication and are not protected by law either.

Now you might wonder: ok, but if there is no “politically correct” standard, how will we be able to communicate in a respectful way as a society?

In highly politicized environments, the law aims to be a fair moderator of what we can and cannot do. The right to freedom of opinion and expression is established under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the European Convention of Human Rights, among other international legal texts.

According to the established case law of the European Court of Human Rights, freedom of expression is one of the essential foundations of a democratic society, one of the primary conditions for its progress and for the development of each individual. It applies not only to “information” and “ideas” that are favorably received, regarded as inoffensive, or which leave one indifferent, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb – it implies pluralism, tolerance and openness, without which there is no “democratic society”.¹

The Court has emphasized that freedom of expression is subject to exceptions, but these must be interpreted narrowly, as the need to restrict it must be convincingly established. This provision leaves little room for restrictions on freedom of expression in two areas: political speech and matters of public interest. Among the legitimate reasons to limit the freedom of expression, the Court highlights hate speech, negationism and revisionism, threat to the democratic order...but guess what, political incorrectness is not among them.

Legal standards aside, if you are still very concerned about the “politically correct” standard, I ask you: shouldn't you be more concerned about what is actually happening in the real world to give rise to the discourses that trigger you so much? Coming back to the previous example, what is more important: the fact that 19 children died, or the headline that will be used to convey the information that 19 children died?

On a final note, I leave this thought here for our reflection: is it unfair that non-politically correct actions are portrayed in a non-politically correct way?

* These are the results of an online poll on this topic that was conducted using only the question above and not the articles in this column.

¹ Council of Europe. Department for the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Thematic factsheet: Freedom of Expression. April 2021.

BSF 2024 Distinguished Partner Award

Alexei Navalny "It is Better to Die Standing up (for your Beliefs) than Live on your Knees"



Photo: ACF archive

This year, the Bled Strategic Forum's Distinguished Partner Award is posthumously given to Alexei Navalny, to honor the memory of this prominent Russian opposition leader. Navalny's work was dedicated to exposing and challenging the Kremlin's corruption, impunity, and abuse of power. His courage and unwavering determination in championing democratic principles, transparency, and accountability, was an example to many, and he will remain a towering figure

and an inspiration to people fighting for justice in oppressive regimes.

Navalny rose to prominence as a charismatic social and political leader at the time Putin first assumed power in Russia. Navalny was an outspoken critic of corruption and authoritarianism, and a believer in the power of ordinary citizens to effect change through civic engagement and political participation. Through his actions he inspired a new generation of opposition activists.

Political repressions against Navalny culminated in his long-term imprisonment following a narrowly survived poisoning attempt in 2020. Even with him in prison, the Kremlin felt threatened by his charisma and influence, indicating the extent to which he has challenged the status quo. Alexei Navalny died in prison on 16 February 2024.

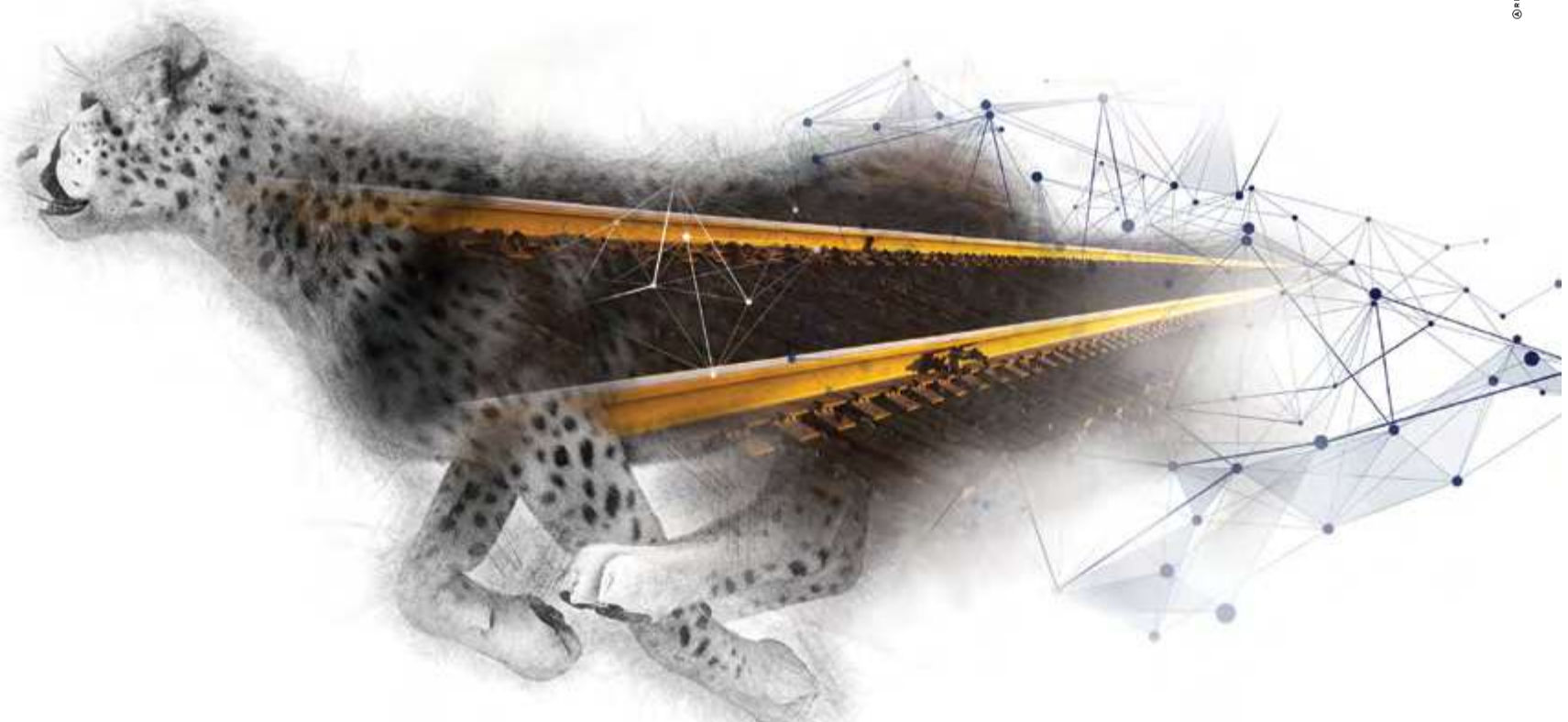
Yet death did not extinguish his light. Navalny's story is a poignant reminder of the dangers of authoritarianism and the importance of defending democratic institutions everywhere. In the context of this year's Bled Strategic Forum theme, "A World of Parallel Realities," the life of Alexei Navalny serves

as a stark contrast to the parallel reality of Russia propagated by the Kremlin. While Navalny fought for an open, dynamic and collaborative Russia, it has been anything but that under Vladimir Putin. Russia has become increasingly isolated, contributing to the destabili-

zation and political polarization of the rest of the world. Nevertheless, Navalny's lifelong pursuit of freedom and accountability stands as a beacon of hope for activists fighting oppression. ■



Photo: ACF archive



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NATO beyond 75

A Reinvigorated Alliance

Julia Martinet

Editor-in-Chief, Bled Strategic Times



This year the North Atlantic Treaty Organization celebrates a milestone anniversary – 75 years since its founding. And

at this respectable age, NATO is in its prime. The organization has evolved with the times and has been reinvigorated by the recent geopolitical security developments caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Today, NATO is in a state of transition. And, as its members declared a few weeks ago at the July Summit in Washington, NATO is willing to rise to the challenges, to stand up in order to uphold its values and the rules-based world order.

A cornerstone of the post WWII international order

NATO's success "is measured not in battles won, but rather in lives saved, freedoms preserved and wars prevented"

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright

During its last summit in July 2024, NATO celebrated its 75th anniversary in Washington DC, the same place where its founding treaty was signed. Established in 1949 with 12 Member States, the organisation grew over the years in 10 rounds of enlargement to its current composition with 32 members, North Macedonia, Finland and Sweden having joined most recently.

Protecting more than 1 billion people, NATO is a political and military alliance with a collective defence and security system. Relying on combined military strength and its related deterrent effect emanating from this, the organisation has only seen its Article 5 obligation to defend one another invoked once in its 75 year existence, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

Over the past decades NATO provided peace, security and stability to its Member States at a level hitherto unseen in history. It provided a framework in which its societies could focus on working together, and on building their economies, which prospered significantly. From 1953 to 1963, the gross national product of NATO countries increased by 75%. By way of example, just before Slovenia's accession to NATO and the EU, it witnessed an increase in foreign investment by a steep 148.7%, with similar or even higher figures recorded for the other members in the 2004 enlargement.

In addition to setting the stage for economic growth and prosperity for its members, the cooperation between

NATO members has expanded over the years beyond security, to include the advancement of science and technology, the provision of medical supplies and humanitarian relief, also to non-NATO countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Moldova, Tunisia and Ukraine.

Evolving role in changing times

"The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace."

NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

The world has changed significantly since the aftermath of the WWII, and with it has the organisation. **One of NATO's strengths**, allowing it to survive over the years, **is its capacity to adapt and change in response to new crises or major events.**

Four key phases can be distinguished throughout NATO's history. The *first* important phase was the Cold War years (1949-1989), the original context for which the organisation was founded. During this time, inter alia the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis took place, leading NATO to adopt its MC14/3 Strategic Concept and the Harmel Report, **introducing the notion of deterrence** and détente and **laying the foundation of cooperative security** which NATO pursued as an approach in later decades.

The post-cold war years (1989-2001) represented NATO's *second phase*. With the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO redefined its purpose and tasks and **focused predominantly on dialogue, cooperation, peace keeping and crisis management.** It reached out to Russia and other post-Soviet states by establishing in 1994 the Partnership for Peace Programme which provided a basis for cooperative relations, albeit without directly granting any perspective of membership.

The attacks of 9/11 marked the beginning of the *third phase*. Whilst NATO pursued further its peace keeping and crisis management activities, new security risks and non-state actors came to the fore, requiring an **additional focus on counter-terrorism and the need to engage and cooperate** with partner countries and other international actors. During this time, NATO set up ISAF, a multinational military coalition which had its troops deployed for the first time outside Europe and North America, and which was supported by both NATO and partner nations.

Russia's invasion in Ukraine, first by illegally occupying Crimea in 2014, and thereafter by launching a full-scale invasion in February 2024, triggered NATO's *fourth and ongoing phase*. Russia's attack has led to a **reinvigoration of the organisation** and full realisation by its members and their societies of NATO's

raison d'être. The current war was at the very basis of NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, in which it identified Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic Area". The war caused a **greater emphasis on Deterrence and Defence**, led to the biggest increase of defence expenditure amongst the European allies and Canada in decades, a reinforced commitment to NATO's institutions and initiatives, and an enlargement with two hitherto neutral countries directly bordering Russia.

In each of these four phases, NATO was faced with different types of threats and risks, challenging the organisation each time to adapt and address the situation in the most appropriate manner. Whilst the organisation did so, the changes made were typically gradual, their implementation relatively slow in pace but founded in consensus amongst its Member States.

The often-quoted **reasons for NATO's lasting endurance and appeal** are first and foremost the strong political will and public support amongst its members. **At its core, its members are democratic states with a common value set and commitment to uphold liberal values and the rules-based world order.** NATO's functioning is based on consensus and diplomacy and allows ample margin for compromise. Smaller Member States highly value the access to the collective defence and combined military capability of the organisation, and the sharing of information and common training, which allows them to ensure effective and adequate security and defence for their citizens with a commitment to fair burden sharing.

Challenges and opportunities

"Ukraine's future is in NATO."

NATO 2024 Washington Summit Declaration

Whilst NATO has been recurrently declared, by the press or by others, as being in some degree of existential crisis, brain dead or at the brink of obsolescence, **NATO is as necessary today as it was at its foundation.**

The traditional definitions of armed conflict no longer apply per se today, with hybrid- or cyber attacks and other threats taking place in war and peace time alike. **The armed conflicts worldwide being increasingly interlinked, the ensuing instability and risks for the global security pose new and significant challenges with high geopolitical impact.**

NATO defined the **key challenges and threats to the peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic** in its 2024 Washington Summit Declaration as follows:

"Russia remains the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security. Terrorism, in all its forms and manifes-

tations, is the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity. The threats we face are global and interconnected.

Strategic competition, pervasive instability, and recurrent shocks define our broader security environment. Conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East directly affect our security and the security of our partners. Where present, these trends, amongst others, contribute to forced displacement, fuelling human trafficking and irregular migration. Iran's destabilising actions are affecting Euro-Atlantic security. The People's Republic of China (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies continue to challenge our interests, security and values. The deepening strategic partnership between Russia and the PRC and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut and reshape the rules-based international order, are a cause for profound concern. We are confronted by hybrid, cyber, space, and other threats and malicious activities from state and non-state actors."

NATO's reference to "strategic competition" and "pervasive instability" illustrates the **global character of the current security challenges.** The strategic partnership between Russia and the PRC is explicitly considered a "cause for profound concern", whilst it also condemns the problematic role of Belarus and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in enabling or fuelling Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

It remains to be seen how and to which extent NATO will position itself in the coming years in the light of the growing alignment of Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. For now, the **NATO members committed to strengthen the deterrence and defence posture and to accelerate the modernisation of its collective defence** by a wide array of measures. With respect to **Ukraine**, NATO expressed its support for the latter on "its irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership". In order to help Ukraine defend itself, a number of security and support measures were agreed upon, including the establishment of a NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine, a NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre in Poland, and a pledge of long-term security assistance to Ukraine with a minimum baseline of 40 billion Euro within the next year.

Similar to the previous phases it went through, NATO will need to undergo the necessary changes once more to successfully meet the various and significant challenges its Member States are facing today. NATO's July 2024 declaration, on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, shows that **its members have all the intent to rise to the occasion.** ■

Welcome to the Living Library

Elena Martinet, Assistant Editor

The Living Library is a window into the raw realities of refugees, and what is found within is more than a collection of stories. Residing here are not heartbreaking tales, but heartbreaking realities. Lived lives of resilience. Lives of loss and strength. Lives of horror. Lives of hope. Lives of pain and lives of love.

When even our own personal world—our daily life, work, people, stresses, city—seem so large, it is easy to get lost in it, and it becomes easy to forget that our existence on this earth is a layering of so many realities—so many co-existing worlds which are all growing, shifting, and at times overlapping.

The living library offers a door to one such overlap, a place where you can step into the personal worlds of refugees from Ukraine, Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan and other places. And it is made possible through the contributions of many. Refugees in camps willing to share their experiences. Activists and writers, who collected and wrote down what was shared with them, transferring the experiences to paper.

In this Living Library you will find messages of resilience from Doaa Al Zamel (Abo Nabout), and Olena Grab - people of refugee background, recalling their lives and struggles and hopes. You will also find poignant recounts of refugee experiences from Afghanistan, Syria and Palestine, that were collected and eloquently written down by Widad Tamimi.

Why a “Living Library” at the Bled Strategic Times 2024?

Sonja Schirmbeck and Tijana Defar
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Humans are storytellers. Different from all other species, the social fabric of our societies is woven by sharing experiences, and by listening to the hopes and fears of others. Even today, when our discourses are characterized by “bubbles” drifting apart from each other, when black and white dominate, and the middle ground is lost – the power of an individual account can bring credibility back to a contested debate, and create common understanding.

For that reason, “living libraries” are an ideal tool to build bridges in “a world of parallel realities”. Meetings with different people through their life stories leads to a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of a contested subject, and helps to overcome misconceptions and stereotypes.

In this section, just like in a real library, you can delve into the stories you are most interested in – and if you would like to switch to another volume, you simply move on to a different article to learn about another perspective on this poignant topic.

Welcome to our “living library”!

Interview with Doaa Al Zamel (Abo Nabout) with the Bled Strategic Times

Written with the help of and translation by Heather Wokusch



BST: What drives you to share your remarkable story?

Doaa Al Zamel (Abo Nabout): Through being deprived of my rights,

through my dangerous journey, and through the people that I lost in front of my eyes, I experienced tremendous pain and suffering. And that has motivated me to become an ambassador for human rights.

Just as Doaa was deprived of her rights as a normal human being, there are thousands of people like her who have also been deprived - and still are being de-

prived - of their basic rights.

It is imperative to act in solidarity to ensure that human rights can be enjoyed by everyone regardless of race, color, and religion. This includes the right to education, the right to expression, and the right to live in peace.

I realize that all people have their own story and struggles. By sharing my personal experience, I hope to help others overcome the challenges and difficulties they may face. I believe that when we communicate, collaborate and support each other, we can build tolerance, understanding, and justice.

And finally, I believe it is crucial to present the stories of refugees so that Eu-

OLENA A Life Shattered

I am Ukrainian, but now live in Osijek, Croatia because of the war. I work in a local department of the Red Cross, sometimes helping with translations as a volunteer.

My family came from Mykolaiv, the southern city of Ukraine, which is located on a peninsula surrounded by water on three sides.

We woke up on the 24th of February 2022 to missile attacks at 5:00 am. The explosions were so strong that the entire building where we live shook. My husband closed the windows with polystyrene foam against splinters. Russian troops landed in the city every day. We prayed for our country for 10 days fasting.

After the tank battles that took place in the city center 10 minutes from our house, we decided to leave the country. During these tank battles, two blocks of private houses were left without roofs.

It was not possible to leave Mykolaiv immediately, because the bridge to Kyiv was

blown up and the only way out to freedom remained through the bridge to Odessa. But the bridge was raised and there was a long line of cars waiting for permission to cross. On 8 March we left the city with the help of volunteers who took us to Odessa. We reached the Ukrainian-Hungarian border by train. Our friends then helped us get from Hungary to Croatia.

We thought that we came to Croatia for just one month, but we have already been living here for 2.5 years. For the first six months, my child had nightmares every night and could not fall asleep on her own. My other daughter often asked where she would grow up. Thank God now everything is okay. We were keen to have the children integrated in the Croatian society. The next month our children started going to a Croatian school, made friends with Croatian children and are feeling better now, seemingly having forgotten the adversities they had to go through.

We are so glad that we are safe now and are very grateful to the European countries for their support.

War destroys human lives, dreams, and

Europeans can understand the impact of the suffering and war on the individuals who were forced to flee their country. Refugees do not flee in vain, for tourism, vandalism, or labor. There is no cause to blame us.

BST: In your view, what measures should host countries put into place for refugees?

DAZ: Host countries can facilitate laws for refugees and grant them residence so that they can work, study and learn a lot. Education is key.

Ensuring human rights for refugees is something that helps the development of a country - and not the other way around, as some think.

BST: Why is education key?

DAZ: Education is necessary in the lives of individuals and for the society in general. Attaining knowledge and skills enables individuals to achieve their goals and develop their abilities, thus fostering critical thinking, building innovation, and opening new horizons.

Education also contributes to building sustainable societies, which in turn enables economic progress. In short, I see education being of great importance in the development of the individual and of society in general.

BST: Is there any other kind of support that you see as key to provide for refugees?

DAZ: Psychological support – and especially for two demographic groups: women and the elderly. It is very import-

ant to support both groups in dealing with challenges and psychological stress.

Creating a healthy and nurturing environment that enables women and the elderly to express themselves and realize their full potential will contribute to building their self-confidence and emotional health. In turn, this will support them to reach their full potential. And again, that ultimately contributes to the development of the society as a whole.

BST: How about you? What are your professional goals?

DAZ: I aspire to learn a profession that I love, such as fashion and design. One day, I would like to create my own clothing designs and sew them.

Also, I would like to learn English and continue travelling around the world, talking about my experience and promoting human rights.

BST: The Young Bled Strategic Forum promotes knowledge sharing and collaboration among emerging leaders. What ideas would you like to share with young people today?

DAZ: Resilience is the secret to success and progress in life. Difficulties are painful, but they give us the opportunity to grow and develop new abilities and endurance that we didn't know we had. Remaining steadfast and strong in the most difficult of circumstances builds internal strength and helps you achieve your goals despite the difficulties you may face. ■

ABOUT DOAA AL ZAMEL (ABO NABOUT)

Doaa Al Zamel (Abo Nabout) fled Syria with her family in 2014 and endured a harrowing journey on a refugee boat across the Mediterranean. The boat sank near Malta, and out of 500 passengers, only 11 survived. Her fiancé, Bassem, died trying to save her, and Doaa, while enduring the challenges of the sea, managed to save an 18-month-old child, Masa, amidst the chaos. Today, she is a prominent speaker on refugee issues, human rights, and resilience.

Over the years, she has shared her experiences at international forums, using her story to inspire global awareness and action. Her efforts have included collaboration with NGOs, participation in UN events, and speaking at the WEF in Davos, highlighting the resilience of refugees and advocating for their rights and dignity.

the future in general. A person loses everything, all turns to emptiness. Yet it is crucial not to lose hope and to try to move forward. Christ once changed my life and gave me this hope. Trusting His word, I am in safety now. I know he promised to be my shepherd and to give me everything I need.

I found myself abroad for the first time in my life, not knowing the language of the country I came to. The language barrier makes it very hard to communicate and resolve many important matters. A migrant living in another country faces the problem of documentation. A university education obtained in our home country is considered null and void. You get a much better chance of finding a normal job if you know how to work with your hands or have experience in the IT field. You have to start everything from scratch, rent a house or a flat, learn a language, and so on.

Learning the host country's language is the first step on the road for every refugee that has come to a new country. It's good to know English but it's not enough. You

must fill in different forms in different institutions and all of them are in the language of the country you came to.

For migrants who came to other countries because of the war, the question of returning home arises. Is it safe to return home? Is there any place to return to? Are there opportunities to find a job and earn a living? How would the people who didn't leave for some reason perceive you having stayed in a safe place while they were in basements under the bombings? Returning home, you are returning to the past which unfortunately no longer exists. A lot of couples have gotten divorced as a result of long separation. Some people close to you are no longer there, the city where you lived is no longer the same. People are angry and disappointed. But maybe you still have something or someone dear to you there, your former home and some relatives. And Hamlet's question “to be or not to be?” remains relevant also for us. ■



WIDAD TAMIMI
Activist and Writer

Giving a Face to the Footsteps that Plough the Earth

It's a cold Sunday in November, the only warmth given by the shining sun. At the refugee camp people flock to the river: women, children, and the elderly, they make their way towards the mass of young men. They descend from cars like a wave in search of the shore, their goal - a dot on the horizon. With every month spent on this harrowing journey, hardships become heavier and take their toll. Many arrive at the camp sick, coughing, drying their noses on their sleeves, the only option readily available. They have escaped from wars only to enter a new world of uncertainty and fear, adrift at sea. At the camp there are those who saw fellow travelers, friends and family, die in the merciless waves, bearing witness to their bodies floating in the water. There are those who have journeyed to bring

their children to safety, leaving behind their loved ones to do so. There are those who have parted from their mothers and fathers, unsure of when, or if, they will ever meet again. They arrive with nothing but bags upon their backs and deep, aching pains in their stomachs.

It is there, at the Šentilj refugee camp, where Vesna and Widad meet. They are surrounded by volunteers and the desolation that hounds those who feel helpless, eyes reaching out and yet reluctant, because it is not pity, but genuine, distressing compassion.

Cum Patior. I suffer with. After spending their day amongst the waves of that crushing human crowding, the two women slip into a car that will take them back home. They speak. They are silent. Pain has penetrated the deepest corners of

their souls, that deep place that usually protects the self from feeling the consuming agony of the other.

Widad returns home and writes, Vesna draws. And as feelings and thoughts settle, questions arise. Are we big enough to be a part of the news and statistics surrounding these tragedies? Having been there, having seen how the echoes of these lives reverberate, in the wet eyes that look around, the hands that seek, and the cold feet that continue stepping forward, I must say it changes everything. Each of us has a world we inhabit, our own stories, and numbers are like a veil that hides—reflecting each life as a uniform tally, erasing the humanity beneath. Telling, giving a face to the footsteps that plow the earth from the Balkans to Northern Europe, becomes an urgency. Because this is

the power of narration, which overcomes data and seeks that seventh human sense - shy, afraid of an important meeting which bridges the gap between our reality, and those of the farther world. ■

Widad Tamimi is a writer and activist who has been volunteering in refugee camps, helping reunite families separated during police procedures when crossing the border. Being deeply touched by the experiences of those she came across, Widad wrote down their stories, which now feature on the pages of our Living Library.

"Hope out of Despair" Artwork by Guillermo Galindo, Fluchtzieleuropahavarieschallkörper, 2017 Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Paul Martinet.





Aboubakar Fofana, Fundi (Uprising), 2017. Photo: Paul Martinet.

HAIDERI

A Cry of a Mother Separated from her Baby

My dear child, your cries will forever remain engraved in my memory— your cries of life have torn my soul apart. My baby. Born after that dreadful stormy night at rough sea, your eyes barely open to witness the first light of your existence. Your hands were clenched into fists, which you opened with an inconsolable cry of hunger or despair. Who understands the meaning of your sounds, when you come to this world and try to cry, laugh, play and talk?

I gently touch scratch marks left behind on my breasts by your soft nails in search of milk that now flows freely in your absence. My son, if they told me you would be raised by a good family and that your future would be better than anything I could ever offer, I'd stop crying. Despite the pain, my womb is an orphan of the greatest love. My only wish is to know, to know what will become of you, my darling boy. I'd like to know how you are.

You, my baby, innocent and pure, have lived through eternity even before you were born; war and flight, fear and anger—the struggle of a nation ravaged by hostilities. I dreamt of taking you with me even before our bodies were separat-

ed. I did not know of a place more secure than the one in which I carried and protected you until your birth. Maybe that's why you came into the world as we came ashore. Not before and not after. You clung to me, as I held your tiny body and prayed for you to wait a bit longer.

My love, my baby, you'll think I abandoned you. And this thought of mine is my worst pain. You will think I refused to nourish you, that I distanced myself from your life in search of mine. Perhaps you will draw Afghan robes, women on the run in colorful rags with eyes like your own: gray as your grandfather's outlined on a background of dark skin. And you will cry and curse your irresponsible mother who brought you into this life.

You have been uprooted, carried by the wind of people in search of life and salvation. My little sprout, I wish you love and peace. ■

Haideri is a twenty-year-old mother. Together with some of her family she fled Afghanistan to join relatives who already managed to make their way to northern Europe. She travelled in difficult conditions during her last weeks of pregnancy. Upon arrival in Greece, she was brought to hospital where her first child was born. Her discharge from the hospital was delayed for a few days, and her family members were alarmed, fearing that authorities would close the borders, leaving them stranded thousands of miles away from their relatives further north. The hospital finally allowed the mother to leave, without explaining that her son was not in a condition to be discharged. When confronted with this fact, Haideri refused to leave and wanted to stay behind with her child. The authorities denied her request, only allowing her to stay if she were to ask for asylum in Greece, otherwise she would have to leave without her child. The authorities further explained if she chose to leave, she could ask for family reunification at any time upon arrival at her final destination and they advised it as the preferred procedure. Haideri arrived in Slovenia in October. Like a ghost of herself, she was physically weak, and her psychological state caused me concern. She asked for a family reunification process to be initiated in every single country she travelled through but all attempts to establish contact with the hospital she gave birth in were in vain.

FATIMA

Torn Away from her Beloved

My love, I hate you! I hate you for making me leave alone with our two children. I hate you for casting us out into the world, saving us. You swore that we would be together again soon. My beloved, we are now but frightened memories of a time long gone, filled with the unbearable idea of a future without you.

Habibi, I can't stop these angry tears from flowing... This terrible anger that wells up in me at this cursed journey, forcing us upon these murderous waves of the sea. With each lurch of the boat, I try to find some answer—some way forward, but it remains out of reach, disappearing further and further into the darkness. Hovering in the distance like a dark heavy storm cloud—like death's shadow. To move past you must lay there, desperately feeling through your anxiety while clinging to the lives of the children you love.

I was convinced that we would die in that dark eternal night, forgotten by the world. My love, tell me: what will become of us? Of your two children? Of me?

Without you, we are nothing in this world so foreign it scares me to death. I remember when I saw you last, when we said goodbye at the harbor after you helped me put life jackets on our kids as they both hung around your neck and begged you to stay with us. We tried our best to keep them safe.

But no one is safe in a rubber motorboat. You never know what will happen when you venture into the night, over the restless waves of the sea. We drifted apart watching you wave and blow kisses. I'm going, habibi, you told me - the doctor doesn't leave. How many can you help before they bury you too?

We walked for long hours, wearing down my shoes to the point where I can't put them on anymore. Every step I take is another step away from you. Little Tarek fell asleep in my arms with all his weight. He snuggled up to me in his sleep and wanted to hug me. Karima followed me step by step, holding on to my waist with her arm. She no longer has the strength to cry. I look at the eyes of a five-year-old girl, covered by the veil of age. Our first child. Everything we wanted and planned for her. During the nine months that I carried her under my heart, I sewed her clothes of gold and dreams.

Now we are left with a suitcase of ashes. We are dirty. I've been bleeding for a few days now, but I don't have anything to change into. I feel like my pants are soaked in blood up to my knees and I'm ashamed of myself.

The fabric of my dirty jacket is the only thing I can use to wipe our children's tears and noses.

A child. The innocence of their childhood slipped through my fingers like sand in the wind. I wanted to die by your side, I wanted to die under the rubble of bricks that your grandfather smoothed so carefully. I wanted to die smelling the lemons under the tree in our garden.

I wanted to be buried in our garden, not in the mud of a world that was not mine.

My beloved, my wonderful love, habibi. I cry because of you.

I hate you and I love you. And my soul hurts.

I cry for us, for our country, for the fragrant lemons from our garden. ■

Šentilj, October 2015

A woman appeared in front of the used clothes tent. She wanted clothes for her children. But as soon as the other volunteers left for their lunch break, she collapsed on the bench, completely exhausted. I immediately saw that she was a neat and elegant woman. She cried. She apologized as she was embarrassed for crying in front of a stranger. She spoke of her husband with respect and with the anxiety she felt because she was left alone. Then she asked me to promise her that I would close the tent so that no one would be able to enter, and she lifted her hem. She showed me her legs, which were red with blood up to the knees. We used baby wipes, I put her dirty things in a black bag and found clean clothes for her. She wiped away her tears. She picked up a small child who was crawling on the floor among the used shoes and took the hand of a girl who had earlier chosen rubber boots with colorful flowers. She bowed lightly and left the tent.

PEGASUS

Yousef's Letter to his Younger Sister

Dear Awa,

I have reached Europe, alive and well. I miss you, my little sister, and I think of you all the time. At night, before I go to sleep, I look at the photo of us together— the one we took just before I left... It was such a great idea to go to the photographer.

Today when I was on the train, I looked at my reflection in the window. I look so different now. Remember when I left, I was wearing new clothes, still clean shaven with a fresh haircut— like I was just heading out for my first day of work. What would you think if you saw me now? For weeks I haven't been able to take a shower, and it was only a few days ago that I finally had the chance to trim my beard.

Awa, before I left, I told you that this wasn't a trip for a young girl, and I'm only more sure of it now. On this journey I hiked over high mountains, slept out in the open without shelter, and crossed dangerous borders. Traffickers crammed groups of thirty people onto boats meant for four. One of us fell into the sea... and we weren't able to save him. There, the waves are a giant, insatiable mouth.

The traffickers, like the cowards they are, didn't join us on the boat. Instead, they took our money and ran off. All they told us was to poke a hole in our boat if we spotted the coast guard. "Otherwise they'll send you back" one of them said. "And then what?" I asked him. "Pray!" he replied, laughing. A man in one of the refugee camps told me that sometimes, the coast guard pretend they don't see people sinking in the water and move on, leaving them to drown. Unlike so many others, we were lucky, they pulled us out and took us ashore.

And now I'm here, little one. In Europe. The refugee center says that we'll reach Germany in two days... I almost can't believe it. It seems impossible to me that this whole journey will soon be over.

But what about you, Awa? How are you? How is Auntie? I've wanted to call you so many times, but there was always a long line of people waiting, hoping to find their loved ones who got separated along the way. I give up my spot in the line, somehow it doesn't feel right for me to ask for my turn. But it's not because I don't think of you. You're always with me, at every moment, and it's as if you were here.

Last night I dreamed that a carriage drawn by winged horses brought you to me. With its help you avoided the steep mountains and the hungry seas, the police and the mud. I don't yet know how, little sister, but I promise you that I'll do everything I can to get you out of there one way or another. There may not be a carriage or horses with golden wings, but I promised mom and dad that I would take care of you for the rest of my life, and I will keep that promise, my little Awa. I promise that I will lead you out of this land of hatred and violence.

Give Auntie a kiss from me.

I love you, and I miss you so much.

Your brother Yousef

Yousef left Afghanistan on foot. He traveled through Iran and Turkey, sailed across the sea to Greece and made his way all through the Balkans to reach Slovenia. Yousef is young—barely of age. His parents died in a bomb explosion, so Yousef cared for his nine-year-old sister until he left. When he arrived in Slovenia, he was coughing heavily. He was examined by a doctor and given a new set of warmer clothes. He was utterly despondent. More than anything, he was tormented by the realization that bringing his sister to Europe would not be as easy as he initially thought. However, he was convinced that he had done the right thing by not taking her with him on this difficult and dangerous journey. He kept saying that he couldn't leave her there, that he had sworn to protect and take care of her, and that Afghanistan was a dangerous country. From time to time, he was overcome by tears, and he apologized: "I am sorry this sad story of mine has brought you grief too." Yousef's English was good, and he immediately made himself available as a translator between the doctor and other Afghani refugees.

AHMAD

Don't You Have a Father!?

Slam! I looked up to see a giant man, towering over us in his uniform, hit the side of the bus. He pointed towards it, looking at the crowd of us and said simply, "inside!" When it came to me to enter, he noticed that I stopped on the steps of the bus, holding my head in my hands, and he laughed at the top of his voice. Then he spread his shoulders, set his feet apart, and hooked his thumbs into the belt from which I could see the gun hanging. I tried to explain to his colleague, who was laughing with him earlier, that I had lost my father. I was approached by a young Syrian man who first spoke to the policeman in English, then made his way toward me, pushing through the narrow, neon-lit passage. "Tell me what's wrong, I can translate into English," he said. The young man spoke to the policeman, who eased up slightly when hearing the explanation in a familiar language. Then he told me, translating the giant's answer to Arabic, "I can't do anything. He says you must get on the bus so he can leave."

I held my head with my hands. Fear grew into despair. Memories blinded my thoughts like a blazing light. My mother, my brothers, uncles and cousins and you, my father, playing with me in the garden when I was a child. Thoughts, people, shadows, lightning, flight, water and fire, everything was spinning in my head in a powerful and uncontrollable whirlpool, pulling me under. Father, father, you wouldn't leave me for anything in the world, and I don't intend to either.

My vision flickered in and out of focus, surrounding me with blurry facial contours. "Where is he?" I gasped. "Tell me where he is!" I slammed my fist on the bus and jumped off the steps onto the platform. I was seized with rage. I needed air. A wild storm of thought raged in me, tearing me open, leaving behind a dark

starless night. I have been asking for him for hours and hours, throughout this cold night I have been arguing endlessly, but no one listens to me. I have been calm and patient until now, but you took my father away! You told me I would find him in the tent as you loaded him and his wheelchair into the van. But he's not here! My father can't walk and has a weak heart!

Like a sudden wave, I felt sadness crashing over my rage. The thought of my father's weak heart broke mine. "Please tell me where he is!" I cried. Out of desperation, I ran to the parking lot between the buses: "Where is he???" The young Syrian man who followed me continued to echo my words in English. He seemed to be crying too. "My father is a disabled person, you took him away, where is he? Tell me where is it? He's all I have left in this world, I promised him I'll take care of him, tell me where he is!!!"

The policeman grabbed my shoulders and shook me violently. I slipped out of his grasp and fell to my knees. Tears spilling from my eyes, I cried like a baby. Even the giant in uniform couldn't bear the weight of my despair. "I promised to protect him, I pushed his wheelchair all this way from Syria. Please," I cried. "Please tell me where my father is!"

Through the haze, I somehow managed to reach out, and as if I could not control my hands, grabbed the policeman by the jacket. "Tell me, don't you have a father?" I screamed desperately. In the background I heard the echo of my translator in English. The policeman bent over me and looked me in the eyes. Then, he patted me on the shoulder and offered me a pack of his cigarettes. He was no longer laughing, his watery eyes glittering in the darkness. He finally seemed to understand. ■

Ahmad is 17 years old. He came to Slovenia on foot. He was pushing his father in a wheelchair in front of him. After crossing the Slovenian border, the police offered him a ride. The father was loaded into an ambulance and Ahmad continued on foot alone. They were told that they would meet again at the refugee center. After arriving in Brežice, he did not find his father. That night he left the place without his father. He hoped they would meet again, but at the same time he feared they wouldn't. Unfortunately, Ahmad had no other option.



Hiwa K, *When we were exhaling images*, 2017 Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Paul Martinet.

THE RUSTED KEY

A Never-Ending Way Home

I became a refugee 43 years before I was born. On the 21st of April 1948, when my grandfather, a wealthy merchant, left Palestine. When we were little, he would tell us how he watched the sea for a long time from the balcony of his home, before turning back, closing the door and locking it behind him. "Children, we're going on holiday to Syria. We'll be back home in a few weeks!" was the call heard by my father, aunts and uncles. Vivid in my dad's memory was the key with which our grandfather, his father, locked the house.

To get to Syria, my family took the Haifa-Dar'a line, built by the Ottoman Empire in 1905. This train connected Damascus to Haifa, and from there goods could be transported to Europe across the Mediterranean. A few days before my family left, the English (who had occupied Palestine when the Ottoman Empire fell) sailed from Haifa's port in richly laden ships. From his balcony, my grandfather watched the English ships disappear over the horizon. They fled after sowing the seeds of war, just as it reached the verge of outbreak.

Many years later, I was born in a refugee camp in Damascus. My grandfather died there. Looking at the borders of Israel, this new country drawn onto the maps, and he would repeat: "They have occupied our house, but they will not take our identity. We are Palestinians."

Palestinians in exile have a tradition: they drive a nail into the wall of their new residence, hang the key to their homestead on it, and hope to return home one day. Before he died, my grandfather took the key

to our house in Haifa off the nail in the wall, all rusty, and called my father to him. "One day we will return home. Till that day, carefully guard this key of ours."

When the war began in Syria, my father's health deteriorated significantly. The refugee camp in which we lived was no longer supplied with food, water, and medicine. Dad, who had heart problems, died, as did many other Palestinians. Before he left this world for good, he called me over saying, "Maher, take the key to our house." And although I had never been to Haifa myself, I knew he was talking about the house in which he was born. "No matter where you are, if possible, come home one day."

I took the key, all rusted, and put it in my pocket. When my father died, I realized that the time had come for me to leave too. I gathered my mother and sisters around the table in the kitchen. "I promised dad that one day we would return to Palestine, but now we have to go somewhere even further. When they let us, we will go back there – to Haifa." In hollow silence, with tears in our eyes, we prepared our backpacks.

After 67 years of exile, at the age of 24, I left Syria with my sisters and mother.

Now we are refugees once more. ■

Maher is one of a multitude of Palestinians who were born into exile. Although international law stipulates that refugees have the right to one of two permanent solutions – to return to their homeland if conditions there allow it, or to obtain citizenship in the country where they live in exile, Palestinians have had the status of temporary refugees for almost 68 years.

At the end of 1948, there were 85,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria. In 2011, as the Syrian Civil War began, the number had risen to 560,000.

Over the years, the refugee camps in which Palestinians lived became extensions of Syrian cities. Since the outbreak of civil war, these camps have often been the setting of clashes between factions, going so far that entire areas of Palestinian refugee camps find themselves in the hands of ISIS. In such situations, international organisations are unable to deliver even the most essential necessities of life to the camps. As a result, many Palestinians, especially elderly people and children, have died of malnutrition. Yarmouk, the refugee camp where Maher lived, was cut off from the world for nine long months. Maher and members of his family left the camp in 2015 and embarked on a harrowing journey, choosing to take the risk even though they had neither citizenship nor passports.

Statistics, which were supposedly confirmed and supplemented after the end of the war, indicate that 280,000 Palestinians have been scattered about Syria in one way or another. Of these 280,000, around 100,000 have fled further to other countries in the Middle East or Europe.

For those without passports, the only options of escape are crossing the sea with through the services of traffickers. At least 2,300 Palestinians have drowned at sea as they attempted to reach the shores of Turkey and Greece.



Photo: Paul Martinet

MAHER

At the Service of Others

"Good evening, ma'am."

"Good evening, sir."

"Excuse me ma'am, I see you have a lot of work to do."

"Yes, it's true, I have a lot of work," answers the lady. She wears a red vest with a large cross on its back and a small cross on the chest. People around her are coughing, and she tirelessly twists and turns providing dresses, scarves and shoes as necessary.

I smile and thank her for everything she is doing before asking "Can I help you?"

"I should be thanking you," she replies, "of course you can help me," and then hands me one of the bags.

"You know, ma'am, I also helped in the refugee camp in my country. Just at the border, near the city of Gaziantep in Turkey. Do you know where that is?' Surprisingly, she does.

"We have the Red Crescent; do you know the Red Crescent?" I ask her, insisting that she hand me more bags, before helping her pass through the dense crowd. The people's hands wave in the air like ears of corn in the wind.

The lady smiles at me. "Of course I know the Red Crescent. Its members do the same as us," she replies, opening one of the passages. "Let us pass, let us pass," she shouts to the people, a moving mass in the night.

I smile at her. We spread the bags on the floor, and she strokes my hair with her hand. I help her divide what we brought: size 45 shoes for the gentleman with the blue hat, the girl needs size 26 shoes, here are shoes for the lady with the purple scarf, gloves for the child with big eyes, a T-shirt, another scarf, and a coat. Then I limp after her to help her bring in new bags of clothes and shoes.

Maher is twenty-seven years old. He escaped from Aleppo but didn't take the journey together with his family. His parents and brothers left their homeland almost immediately. But as Maher had no wife or children, he decided to help his countrymen. He helped in non-governmental organizations, as part of a group mostly working on security in one of the refugee camps on the border with Turkey. During the terrorist attack, all his colleagues, boys aged sixteen to twenty-five, were killed. Members of the NGO escaped through one of the security exits and saved themselves.

Maher was wounded and lay there for several hours under the corpses of his former colleagues.

After some time, he was taken to Turkey, where he was told he would have to pay ten thousand euros for an operation to save his leg from gangrene. He had no money and so his leg was amputated. He might have lost his leg, but not his sense of humor.

"I see you're limping. Why? Do you need medical attention?" she asks me, slowing down her walk.

"I left part of my foot in Syria. I didn't really want to leave," I answer her with a laugh. "So I left a piece of myself at home."

The lady smiles, but there is a shadow of sadness on her face.

"Don't be sad. I'll go get that piece of foot sometime later!"

The lady is stunned.

"Everything else is here." I pat my chest with my hands, or rather the shirt with flowers, which is visible underneath my leather jacket with the broken zipper.

"Where are you headed?"

"To Austria."

"Do you need anything?" she asks me, as she hands me a new bag of shoes.

"Why, don't you like my shirt with Hawaiian flowers?! If you do, consider it yours." The lady from the Red Cross smiles.

"Aren't you cold?"

I'm coughing, but I laugh "You know what?" I pick up the bag of shoes and throw it over my shoulder like Santa Claus. "I'd like another shirt; I still have this one from Greece."

"I'll find you some warmer clothes."

"No, I'd like a dress shirt if possible."

"Why do you want a dress shirt?"

"I will be in Vienna tomorrow, and I'll start looking for work right away. If I show up in a casual T-shirt, it'll be immediately obvious that I'm a refugee. And you know, I must say, I would never hire a refugee myself," I proclaim, very seriously.

We both laugh and continue handing out clothes to the people around us. ■



Photo: Paul Martinet

AISHA

The Only Survivor

I wade through a swamp of water and mud. My feet sink into deep pits, into abysses of horror that swallow me up. I'm afraid of noise and I'm afraid of voices and I'm afraid of my own breathing and I'm afraid of birds chirping. There is no peace. I have no peace. I don't know if I ever will again. Children, you do not know what happened, and I cling to your innocence. All I can bring you is this all-encompassing pain, this single unspeakable horror. I don't know how to tell you, if I can find the words. My children, I am the only survivor.

I'm drowning in a river of mud and shame. My feet sink and struggle through the abyss of our civilization. I'm mortified by the bloodlust of our species. We are all monsters in disguise. I lost my dreams, and my faith weakens by the day. My children, how can I tell you that we have no one left? Counting down as if it were a game, they were forced to kneel one by one. First your grandfather, then your uncles and finally your father. I clasp my hands tightly on the ship rocking on the waves. Nina, nana, nina, nana, sleep, my little star. It's getting darker.

Sleep is a looming nightmare, a terrible dirge that drives me to despair.

Rocking on the red lava waves, I sink into slow agony, alive... - and well?

I bury the coffin of my soul in the abyss. I have no legs left and my head is also covered in rubble.

They made me stand there and watch. As they slaughtered everyone dear to me. One after another after another. In the end, they killed our dog, while howling their menacing litanies into the sky. They dragged me in front of the house and set fire to it. Our most beautiful memories were disappearing among the flames that resembled the waves of silk.

My children, our home also burned down.

I disappeared in the dust of being. My legs never existed and my spirit wanted to be lost in the wind too. I drowned in the waves of eternal sadness. I knelt at the grave site of our former home. I shuddered and moaned, a slave to images that brought pain. Pictures of the horrors spinning in my head, let me go!

Deliver me, Allah, from my sorrows. ■

Aisha sent her children, aged twelve and fifteen, abroad months ago. Now they live with one of their relatives in a refugee camp somewhere in the north of Europe. She and her husband stayed because they had to arrange some things before leaving. In a few months, they planned to join the children.

In the end, Ajša traveled without the father of her children. She lost everything, and in the cruelest way. Her father, a university professor, was the first to have his throat slit. Then they executed all the remaining men. In front of her eyes. She left with her sister and nephews, who were headed elsewhere. She wanted to get to her two children but was horrified at the thought of having to tell them everything that had happened.

She arrived in Slovenia at the beginning of 2016. With a cap on her head and a bright red scarf, which in no way matched her pale face. She was completely lost. She tried in every possible way to stay in line. One of the officers kept shouting, "Stay in line. I told you to stay in line." She was shaking, all confused and unable to stand still. It was enough of a hug to make her eyes fill with tears. She was moaning. "I'm afraid, I'm afraid of my own shadow."

She told me her story as she drove.



Photo: Paul Martinet

SAMI

The Honeymoon Journey

We have come to Slovenia, my love. Why are you laughing? Slovenia... that's right. "Slovenia is the name of this country, isn't it?" I asked the guy with a beard who handed us a piece of bread and a small block of cheese with a smile on his face. My darling, we are probably already close to Germany - or at least it seems so to me. "Are we close to Germany?" I ask the lady with curly hair who offers us two bottles of water. I make eye contact with her, and she smiles at me but does not answer. Maybe she doesn't understand English. As we move forward in the line, I shrug and my beloved smiles at me. Oh, how beautiful you are when you smile.

If only Ibrahim had been allowed to enter the train, then we would be ready to cross the next border. But what can be done? This honeymoon of ours is full of unexpected events. Like a winding road, an obstacle course. Leila, I promise you that after I find a suitable job and save some money, I will take you to Paris. We will see the view from the Eiffel Tower together. I know... this journey of ours started off unpleasantly, but you'll see that things will get better and better with time. My sweet bride, you are so beautiful, so amazing... You only have to keep going

a little longer. And if you keep smiling at me like this all the time, I won't be able to resist taking you to the Eiffel Tower.

Admittedly, our breakfast is modest. You're right, we're not exactly in a fancy hotel. When we have our own house, we'll eat scrambled eggs, tomatoes, bread and cheese, and drink strong coffee. You miss hot coffee too, don't you, my love? I understand, the cold milk we get here is no culinary experience, the bed a little too hard. I know the room we slept in didn't smell well, and spending our first nights as a married couple in a hangar full of strangers had not been optimal. But know, *habibti*, marriage is a great test. We're starting it like this, but soon navigating our life's road will get easier, and we will be able to walk it at our own pace, don't you think?

Oh, my beloved, how lovely you are when you smile at me. I remember watching you play volleyball with your classmates during breaks. I dreamed about you at night and wrote you endless love letters during the day. Do you remember the first time I built up enough courage to bring you an origami flower? I was blushing with emotion—you were magically beautiful. I was sure you wouldn't

even look at me, even though I had to fold a thousand sheets to create that delicate origami.

And then you smiled at me, just like you smile at me now; standing in the crowd of people waiting to get socks without holes. And even though you're wearing this worn-out coat and you're not wearing makeup, you are the most beautiful in the world to me.

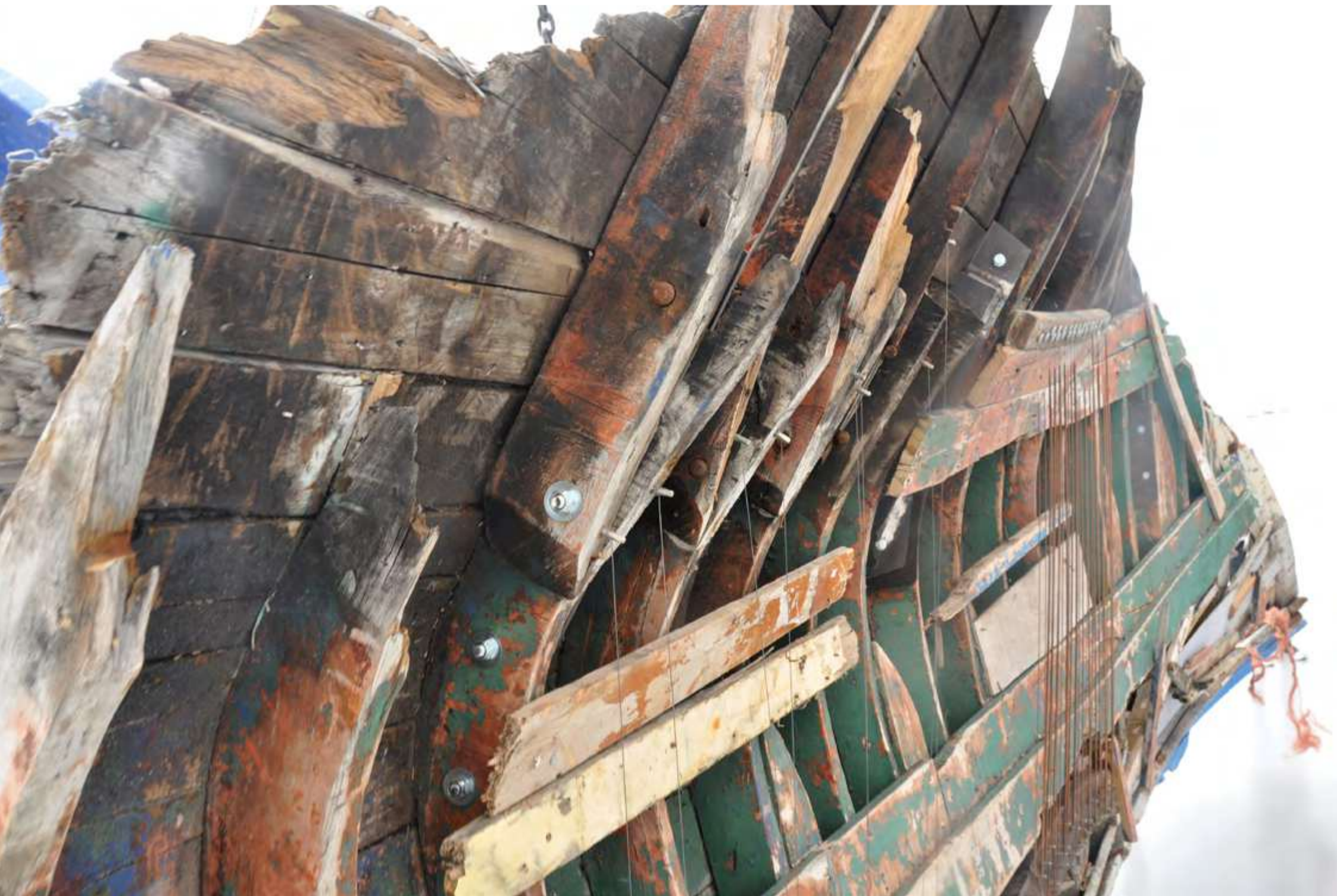
Isn't it romantic to travel? Think how many kilometers we left behind in this short time. If we count all the borders we have crossed and all the steps we have taken hand in hand, I can say that our marriage has already been tried and tested. We should be proud of that, *habibti*.

When I asked you to marry me, I said that I would take you on a very long journey, a long honeymoon.

But you shook your head and thought I was joking: after all, it's a war, what kind of honeymoon could we have? That's what you told me, didn't you? Now you see that I keep my word, we are finally travelling on our honeymoon! ■

Sami, a young, witty, friendly and extremely polite guy, traveled to Šentilj in 2014 with his wife. Both very, very young, hardly more than twenty years old. They got married a few days before they left Syria, leaving to create a better future for themselves. Sami's brother Ibrahim traveled with them. Because they were afraid that the passports and documents they received at the borders would get wet during the journey due to the rain, they put them all together in one plastic bag, which Ibrahim then carried in his jacket pocket. At the border between Croatia and Slovenia, Ibrahim found himself put on another bus and then shortly arrived in Germany, separated from Sami and Lejla. Sami called his brother from my cell phone and then the three of us headed to the border together. As he was afraid that they would not be allowed across the border without documents, he asked me to vouch for them with the Austrian police. Two days later he called me and put Ibrahim on the phone. He also has the same cheerful voice as Sami. And now they are together again.

"Remnants of boats used by refugees and recovered at Greek coasts" Artwork by Guillermo Galindo, Fluchtzieleuropahavarieschallkörper, 2017 Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Paul Martinet.





Bia Davou, Sails, 2017 Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Paul Martinet.

FATHER PAOLO

Hospitality, the Greatest Virtue

An old legend popular among the inhabitants of Damascus says that the end of the world will be marked by reconciliation between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. On that day, Jesus will return to earth and appear on the white minaret of the Great Mosque of the Umayyad in Damascus, which has been dubbed the "Minaret of Jesus" for this reason. The legend, while also a metaphor for the long-standing conflict that manifests itself more than ever in terrible violence, paints the picture of Syrian society as a rare intertwining of ethnic communities and religions. A society that has always been the victim of various conflicts, but which has nevertheless managed to re-establish itself.

Not far from Damascus, in the middle of the Syrian desert, stands the ancient monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi – the ancient monastery of Saint Moses of Abyssinia. He came here in the time of Muhammad as the son of an Ethiopian king, the son who had renounced his royal destiny to become a monk. The monastery also received a visit from Abraham, the father of Ishmael and Isaac, who chose it as one of the resting places on his way. Of his sons, one is considered the father of

Islam and the other the father of Judaism and Christianity.

The monastery itself stands on Mount Jabal al-Kalamun, 1300 meters high above sea level and can be reached by a long path over the rocks. In 1982, a young Jesuit from Rome, looking for a secluded place to retreat, came across the ruins of Mar Musa, which had been completely abandoned for two centuries. He entered the church under the open sky and within he discovered a trove of old paintings. Among these paintings were depictions of the Last Judgment, a paradise inhabited by prophets, evangelists, saints and monks, and a hell full of clerics and bishops. The young priest, who had studied in Beirut and spoke Arabic well (in addition to other languages) soon established contacts with the locals, Christians, and especially with the Muslims, who are in the majority there. Because of these encounters, he decided to stay in this place.

Ten years later, Mar Musa became the seat of a small monastic community based on three principles: prayer in Arabic according to the Syriac rite, physical and mental work, and finally; hospitality, "considered the greatest virtue among Semites, Arabs and nomads".

Christians and Muslims gathered in prayer around abuna* Paolo, sitting barefoot, as if in a mosque, on Bedouin carpets, facing Mecca. By candlelight, they read passages from the Bible as well as from the Koran.

That was until the expulsion decree arrived in 2012. Father Paolo dall'Oglio had exposed himself too much at the beginning of the fighting in the Syrian spring, and President Assad was not forgiving. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried persuading him against returning to Syria, but the attempt was in vain. Father Paolo had made up his mind: he would stay with his people until the end. Upon returning to Syria he travelled to Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State, and tried to mediate between the Kurds and the jihadists while advocating for the release of the hostages. On the twenty-ninth of July 2013, every trace of him was lost.

This, the twelfth and last story of refugees that I am telling you, I dedicate to him; Father Paolo dall'Oglio. In 2008, I met him twice in Mar Musa, where we cooked, ate, discussed and prayed together, believers and non-believers alike, both Muslims and Christians, witnessing our own unity, and united in the desire to

share this space of tolerance and interpersonal closeness. It was in his chapel that my husband and I, intoxicated with joy, first thought of getting married. We will regret until the day we die that we didn't have our wedding there, in Mar Musa.

All these months, as I watched the flood of refugees coming, not only from Syria, but all areas where war is currently raging, I often thought of Abuna Paolo*. He, who during the mass emigration, was the only one to persistently propel himself upstream, as salmon do during their arduous migration, when they rush out of the sea at the mouth into the river and then swim all the way to whence they originate.

I want to believe with all my heart that I will meet him again, and I hope that sooner or later the world will be filled by people like him, people who believe in dialogue and tolerance, if not out of goodness, at the very least because of a healthy and selfish desire to live in peace. ■

*Abuna means father.

The experiences in this Living Library section were collected and written by Widad Tamimi

Respecting and disrupting heritage

A soft diplomacy approach



Photo: Paul Martinet



Dagmar Hovestadt, Banu Pekol
Global Diplomacy Lab

In December 1970 the German Chancellor Willy Brandt visited Poland for the first time. Since 1945, with the end of Nazi occupation of Poland, no diplomatic relations had been established between both countries. But Willy Brandt, who fled Germany in 1933 for Norwegian exile, made improving relations with Eastern Europe a foreign policy priority. His visit was on the occasion of the signing of the Warsaw Treaty that would regulate the relations between both countries. The protocol suggested highly symbolic visits to two monuments: the tomb of the unknown soldier and the monument commemorating the 1943 uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. When visiting the latter, the German Chancellor wordlessly fell to his knees. An unforeseen reaction, spontaneous, heartfelt, saddened with the impossibility of representing a nation in whose name the Holocaust was committed. This “Warsaw knee fall” became a historic moment, itself later memorialized with a plaque at the scene. A human gesture of compassion, humility, a diplomatic act outside of any

protocol that changed the perception of a nation and its own relationship with the Nazi crimes.

A simple symbol, the “knee fall” is an interaction with history, with heritage and memory that shows respect and dignity where words fail. The power of heritage and history and the power to change the relations between peoples by such interaction couldn’t be better illustrated. But what is heritage? And how can we continue harnessing its power for better understanding among people and nations?

Heritage as concept

The Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972, considers monuments, groups of buildings and sites as heritage. It awards them the title *World Heritage Site* only if the site has “outstanding universal value” from the point of view of history, art, science, aesthetics, ethnology or anthropology. The World Heritage convention, with 195 countries who have signed it, aims to safeguard heritage in this universal way.[dh1]

In general, **definitions of heritage** tend to frame it as an inheritance, a source of identity, as an assemblage of values and discourses, or more broadly as a mediator between the past and present, human and non-human. Yet **heritage is also an arena of gover-**

nance, of institutions, and a space of both cooperation and contestation, weaved in networks of capital and institutionalized practices of governance. With this dynamic in mind, this article approaches heritage as plural and multi-faceted. It shifts the focus from the conditions that created it, to understanding **heritage** as a **challenge that can both bring people together, as well as set them apart, and something that is in flux** and has a propensity to change. Especially the contested heritage and the post-conflict heritage are of interest from the perspective of politics and diplomacy.

Historical imagination can be strongly influenced by memory. Traces, for example in heritage buildings, relate both to residual matter and to memory. The nature of memory is a socially framed property of individual minds. Collective memory is, in Schudson’s words, the ‘image of the past held by individuals who did not themselves experience it but learned of it through cultural artefacts.’ Individuals look to cultural forms and construct a memory of the past.

Reconstructions of the past are always first constructed in the present context. And this is where lies **the power of heritage for diplomacy and local intervention.** Even if memories exist in individual minds, they are social and cultural in nature. In this framework,

cultural heritage acts as a cue. Once these cues are activated, they become a part of social activity, inseparable from social and historical routines. Physical interventions to cultural heritage - such as reusing it for a new purpose- embodies selection, interpretation and distortion. So, distortion in memory is not a direct distortion in the individual or social memory but -in this context- a distortion to the fabric of the building which then acts as a catalyst for distortion in collective memory.

Just as memory selects and distorts in the service of present interests, the same is done with interventions in contested and post-conflict heritage. The past recedes, and the new interpretation does not operate independently from memory; it is a willful decision which affects the unconscious of social memory. Since people remember collectively, publicly and interactively and their interaction is not only with people but also with cultural heritage, when faced with no original physical remainder to contest their memory, people will accept the existing “truth”.

The Global Diplomacy Lab approach

Looking at the world today and at **the history of conflicts**, it seems that at their core there is often an abuse of heritage, the construction of “truths” about the past without respect for physical

The UNESCO world heritage site includes:

1223
properties

952
cultural sites

231
natural site

40
mixed

Out of these:

56
endangered

49
transboundary



and other remains resulting in a willful distortion for political gains. Heritage is also used as a discourse of belonging vs. othering, of one culture vs. the other, then extrapolated to the need to destroy “the other”. The Global Diplomacy Lab in its quest to find ways to a more inclusive and more diverse diplomacy has examined heritage as a field of diplomacy in need of change. While the UNESCO-approved world heritage sites -cultural and natural icons and intangible heritage- often create an easy connection within nations and among nations, it is the conflicted heritage that poses a larger challenge, a challenge which also UNESCO in its cultural site designation tackles.

Seeking to understand how societies negotiate a darker heritage for a more connected nation, what tools can emerge for diplomacy and how international cohesion can be generated from this process, two GDL labs in Argentina (in 2017 and 2022) developed a number of insights, and tools.

Historical Background: Argentina’s last brutal civil-military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 continues to have an impact on society to this day. At that time up to 30,000 people [the number is a matter of debate to this day, depending on where you stand in history, but impossible to verify due to the nature of crimes.] were abducted, tortured to death, executed, or disappeared without a trace, sometimes dropped from military planes into the ocean. How to deal with this dark period became a long struggle in the ensuing democracy, not to last because the military leaders and officers responsible for these atrocious crimes continued their tasks widely unpunished.

During the 2022 lab, the GDL group found a civil society active in the memory space. Many movements grew directly out of resistance to the military dictatorship. In the capital Buenos Aires several sites commemorate the victims and memorialize the period of dictatorship as a repressive period in the nation’s history. A military compound, ESMA, a former military school, now houses a museum, an archive, a forensics unit for finding traces of the disappeared and several educational and civil society groups. A large memory park with long walls naming all those that disappeared is right at the seaside where the planes took off. Among the civil society impressively vocal in the memory space are the mothers and grandmothers of those disappeared, still gathering weekly at

the Plaza de Mayo, groups of children of military officers confronting the silence of their parents and regional memory initiatives memorializing the traces of the dictatorship in smaller towns where the brutal repression happened in equal measure.

For diplomats, encountering this heritage requires sensitivity, listening and good preparation. While engaging with official memory events is an established and often too ritualized affair, a dialogue with civil society initiatives and actors is not regularly part of the diplomatic arsenal. It is often in this space, however, that a substantial part of a country’s organic as well as dark heritage is kept alive. It is here where diplomats need more training to incorporate this resource better.



Interacting with another country’s memory, culture and heritage can be a powerful signal, even when the current government ignores it. When French President François Holland during his state visit in 2016 met with the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and put the visit to the ESMA site on his agenda, he in essence forced then President Mauricio Macri to visit the group and the site for the first time. It validated the memory culture and its civil society actors. However, just as heritage is in flux, so is memory culture. With a new government in late 2023, the vibrant civil society activities are now under financial pressure by the Milai government. Additionally, members of the government through words and action deny, justify, or defend the military’s action during the dictatorship. The ESMA site, since 2023 part of the *World Heritage* list precisely for its heritage of repression, in the spring of 2024 became the site of an honor ceremony for vet-

erans of militaries in retirement, with the expressed support of the ministry of defense and on the day that commemorates the beginning of the military coup of 1976. A setback for those who fought for a different way of dealing with this heritage. It is thus in this constant dialogue around a heritage site that the ideas of the past, present and future of a nation and all other nations are negotiated. It is in this dialogue where diplomacy can be effective.

Looking ahead: Changing nature of relationship to heritage and the idea of a Charter

Contested cultural heritage can easily become a **battlefield for alternative realities**, as well as a potential catalyst for collaboration and peacebuilding. Unlike Greek philosophers, this article does not put the golden age at the beginning of the world, but argues that through cultural heritage it is perfectly possible for the past to find a much richer expression in the present, through facilitating dialogues that would otherwise be too risky to have. For that **it is necessary to acknowledge that not only does the present have a claim upon the past, but that the past has one on the present, too.**

The goal of these efforts should not be to eliminate conflicts, Conflicts are simply the unheard, unacknowledged,

erally used to justify inscription on the World Heritage List.

Within the discussion of Japan’s nomination of the Tomioka Silk Mills and Related Sites, for example, the Turkish ambassador skillfully connected Turkey’s own history of silk production to multiple sites and cultural traditions across Asia and Europe in order to propose future modes of cooperation. This illustrates how countries have become increasingly adept at articulating the diplomatic value of their own culture, both in the past and the present.

Heritage as diplomacy comes into play when such cultural forms come to be directly or indirectly involved in foreign policy.

As a result of its interaction with heritage in diplomacy, the lab in Argentina developed the idea to **establish a “Charter on Memory”** to foster engagement of diplomats, civil society, official memory actors and other stakeholders with memory processes and activities. The goal of such a charter would be to enable inclusive reflection on memory and heritage processes, to enlarge the diplomatic toolkit with solution-finding and connectedness, and to protect it from political instrumentalization. The form of a “Charter”, internationally signed by as many states as possible, could give it the necessary weight to accept compliance with it. On the way to such a charter the GDL envisions a collaborative, open design process that can strengthen the capacity of civil society AND diplomacy, and could advance diplomacy, making “the table bigger”.

A fundamental baseline for such Charter would be:

- If you (ab)use the past to support your present hold on power, open dialogue about it is not possible, leading to complications in its diplomatic use.
- If you use the past to illuminate the present, open and diverse dialogue is possible and leads to a better understanding of contemporary issues.

In addition to being appropriated for nation-building in ever more subtle and far-reaching ways, cultural heritage is also increasingly incorporated into various areas of international discourse.

Heritage diplomacy brings into focus tensions and contradictions. The desire to preserve and curate material culture has both brought nations together and simultaneously kept them apart. We need to better understand the complex forces and the political logic related to heritage, given that in this field cooperation and contestation co-exist as two sides of the same coin. ■

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Boat SF 9493, intercepted in 2011 by the Italian Coast Guard and the financial police in the immediate proximity of Lampedusa, Genoa Galata Museo Del Mare. Photo: Paul Martinet.

Natural Resources – the New Kid on the Security and Conflict Block

Bridging the Nature-Security Divide

Ambika Vishwanath,

Founder Director, Kubernein Initiative



Earlier this summer, water treatment plants in Finland's southern coast reported break-ins. Russian involvement was suspected though not confirmed. The idea of a state actor, especially one already embroiled in a conflict, targeting a vital natural resource to stoke further tension or advance their goals is not new – we've seen it repeatedly from deliberate flooding during the 1938 Sino-Japanese War to attacks by Iraqi and Syrian governments in areas that seemed sympathetic to ISIS. Similar attacks by non-state actors have also demonstrated a tendency to use water or other vital natural resources as a force for destruction or to instil fear. ISIS seized large dams, reservoirs and electricity grids in part of northern Iraq, to achieve military aims through 2013 and 2014. In February of 2021 a hacker tried to poison the water supply near Tampa, Florida through controlling the online systems. Technology has made us and our resources both safer and more open to newer forms of risk.

some of the primary resources tied to conflict are land, water and energy, accounting for nearly 75 percent of hostilities

Traditional discourse on conflict continues to be heavily influenced by notions of hard security. The increase in military and defence spending is telling: a 35 year high in 2023, not only by European nations but globally following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As is the expansion of NATO and a growing global discussion of potential Chinese aggression that previously might have only been a concern in certain Asian circles. Climate related hazards, and conflicts related to natural resources do not command the same attention, energy or finances despite a rise in competition over natural resources. Security actors - from traditional militaries to state security structures - do not always see themselves as a part of the climate discourse. This, despite the fact that 2023 broke records on heat, wildfires and drought and saw an uptick in resulting fissures.

Climate security is still often seen as a sum of its parts, where energy and

water security or heat and pollution for example are dealt with in siloes and are not part of a larger security debate. The question arises then if they should be, and what role do traditional security actors play, if any, in conflicts relating to natural resources and climate change. It is a question that many have been grappling with especially as resources become scarce. As UN Secretary General Guterres warned in 2018, **competition over resource is rising, as are the risks of new conflicts or the escalation of existing ones.**



Photo: Paul Martinet

However, the bigger question that we need to ask is if security actors and the security apparatus need to play a role in preventing such conflicts and not continue to only be reactive. Today, as we experience new and often unknown drivers of conflict, that are not always played out in the traditional arenas of land, sea and air, there is a need to expand the concept of both conflict - often viewed from a hard security/military lens - and how we envision security – protection of political boundaries, borders and citizens within. While natural resource such as land, water or critical minerals might not, yet, be a primary driver of conflict, they can often be threat multipliers. It therefore becomes **important to understand the intersection of natural resources with existing conflicts and also existing vulnerabilities within and between nations.** The increased use of incendiary rhetoric between India and Pakistan over the Indus Water Treaty that occurs when there is an uptick in border clashes or attacks is a case in point. **It is equally important to acknowledge that soon these resources will become the primary drivers of large-scale conflicts.** While water is an obvious example, we also need to think beyond and consider the control and use of resources and structures, such as land or electricity

grids, as weapons or tools. Governments therefore need to examine and understand conflicts rooted in the decline of nature and availability of basic resources, and adjust their security planning and find the opportunities for investment that are not only in military equipment or training.

On the one hand, a more equitable distribution of resources, more finances for development endeavours and a just transition system that benefits all would be the way forward, where all nations are able to reap the benefits of a mod-

ern world. And while this is no doubt necessary, the reality is that till we get there, with populations rising and climate changes affecting the very nature of how we live, **we need to re-imagine the relationship between security and conflict.** Just as environmental degradation and economic growth are part of a cycle of socio-economic drivers that lead to conflict, it is those very conflicts that contribute to the degradation and biodiversity loss, forming a nature-security nexus. By expanding the Civil-Military cooperation to address the root causes of environmental degradation and exploitation and using existing intelligence apparatus to address threats, we can work towards stemming a dangerous cycle.

Defence establishments and militaries are key stakeholders, well positioned to aid in mitigating environmentally linked conflict. The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice, amongst other indicators, tell us that Some of the primary resources tied to conflict are land, water and energy, accounting for nearly 75 percent of hostilities. These vary from being low intensity and simmering – such as increase in gang violence in Haiti after Hurricane Matthew in 2016, to others that are entrenched over time and affect a large population – such as the drought that contributed

to the civil war in Syria, displacing millions, or increased tensions in Sri Lanka between the government and LTTE following the 2004 Tsunami. These tensions can be localised, or in the most severe expression can lead to war. In every case the local populations are the hardest hit, leading to further cycles of discontent and further conflict within those countries, migration to neighbouring regions that lead to a rise in cycles of resentment, and different forms of stressors on available resources.

Several governments, from Germany to Japan, and defence establishments including multilateral institutions such as NATO, have begun incorporating a climate lens into their security strategies. These are primarily focused on recognising the impact of climate change on infrastructure, personnel and conduct of operation, and introducing capabilities to combat these changes. Rarely, however, do these focus on recognising the interplay of a nature-security nexus with strategies to prevent a resource from being used as a weapon, tool or long term driver of conflict. Shifting focus to this more holistic approach to security will not only bring greater

attention to the importance of safeguarding resources, with more research and finances, but will potentially aid in ensuring that the climate discourse is brought to a much wider audience; not only as something that affects far away fragile economies or 'undemocratic' lands.

By placing the environment and nature at the centre we can assess a much wider gamut of peace and security in a more proactive manner. We ignore these intersections in present and future security conversations at our own peril.

Hackers attempting to control water or energy infrastructure or attacks akin to what Finland faced are only likely to continue. As we integrate various forms of artificial intelligence into our systems, technology becomes a key factor in the nature-security nexus. By placing the environment and nature at the centre we can assess a much wider gamut of peace and security in a more proactive manner. We ignore these intersections in present and future security conversations at our own peril. ■

Climate Crisis on our Plates

The Crumbling Foundations of Global Food Systems



Martin Frick

Director, World Food Program Global Office Germany



Photo: © WFP

The European summer for many is synonymous with the Mediterranean lifestyle of sun, beach, and good food. The lifeblood of this cuisine is olive oil. However, the generous drizzle of this liquid gold over a Caprese salad is now to be taken quite literally. In just one year, the price of olive oil in the EU has surged by 50%. This spike is due to the heatwaves that have plagued southern Europe in recent years. An Italian producers' association is warning of a 50% drop in the harvest for 2024. This is the climate crisis, and we see its impact on our shopping bills. However, behind these rising prices lies a fragile food production system that is neither sustainable nor future-proof. The abundance of European supermarkets often masks the fragility of these global food systems. Previously, it was the prices of staple foods like sunflower oil and wheat flour that exponentially increased. The war against Ukraine caused one of the largest exporters to collapse overnight. As an American science journalist and author David Wallace-Wells describes in an essay in the *New York Times*, the extreme price swings in food are the seismographs of our food system. When they spike, we can be sure that somewhere in the world, the tectonic plates of global food supply are shifting,

often with the most severe consequences for those with the least means—the people struggling to get food on their plates.

Global Food Systems: A House of Cards

This fragility is largely due to the global diet being concentrated on a few staple foods. Wheat, corn, and rice make up 40% of the world's consumed calories. The bulk of production is limited to a few states, and many other countries depend on their successful harvests and favourable exports. When this delicate system is disrupted, the effects are felt worldwide. Therefore, if wheat fields in Ukraine are destroyed by war or harvests are scorched by a heatwave in India, the prices of this global staple and its alternatives rise. Daily bread becomes suddenly unaffordable for millions.

That high olive oil prices are not only a tolerable nuisance, they are also a harbinger of the necessary change in how we feed ourselves

Currently, 309 million people are acutely hungry, and over 700 million suffer from chronic food insecurity. And although hunger is not a problem of quantity, but of fair distribution and affordable prices, yet the already fragile food systems could entirely collapse if the supply of a broad range of products were to fail permanently. Worldwide, agricultural productivity growth has decreased from 65% to 35% because of in-

creasing temperatures and other impacts of the climate crisis. This creates a vicious cycle, as food production requires intact nature but also fuels its destruction. The current structure of our food systems contributes to more than a quarter of all climate-damaging emissions—through farming, logistics, and the waste of up to 36% of the products. Moreover, our current food industry is wreaking havoc on ecosystems, accelerating species extinction, and eroding biodiversity. This means that if we exceed the planetary boundaries, our environment could change irreversibly, making a life of social and economic prosperity impossible. It sounds paradoxical, but the way we feed ourselves today leads to hunger, endangers our future food security, and thus threatens our very survival.

Food is Security

In the big scheme of things, skyrocketing olive oil prices seem trivial in comparison to the **urgent need to overhaul our climate-damaging and nature-hostile food production systems**. This is evident where the climate crisis exacerbates conflicts over scarce resources. When people have little, they are reliant on a healthy environment for survival. When the environment is destroyed, the foundation needed to achieve other development goals like peace, justice, or food security is lost. This can accelerate negative dynamics in fragile states and destabilise entire regions. Therefore, **combating hunger must be part of a broader security policy** that includes human and environmental security as a foundation for the

stability of our planet, as nearly 40% of the world's population now lives in areas heavily affected by the climate crisis.

Functioning ecosystems can slow down these developments. The key to intact nature lies in the soil. Without healthy soil, there is no vegetation; without vegetation, there is no food; without food, there is hunger, migration, and destabilization as the struggle for survival erodes the social fabric of communities.

Small Farmers, Big Impact

The programmes of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) in the Sahel demonstrate what solutions look like in resource-poor regions facing interconnected challenges like conflict, hunger, and extremism. Since 2018, WFP, together with affected village communities, has rehabilitated over 400,000 football fields worth of land using simple agricultural methods. The reclaimed land is farmed by smallholder farmers, who are responsible for much of the food production in sub-Saharan Africa and have the potential to preserve the biosphere in the long term. These farmers primarily grow traditional, regional crops like sorghum, which, unlike wheat or corn, are far more resistant to extreme weather and can sequester carbon from the air, storing it deep in the soil. Nearly 70% of these smallholder farmers are women. As WFP also supports schoolchildren in these communities with daily hot meals, the women farmers can sell their produce to local schools. This investment in local food systems makes fragile states more in-

dependent of imports and thus more resilient to the global impacts of the climate crisis, conflicts, and economic turmoil. These **comprehensive programmes have a stabilising effect by creating income and opportunities, especially for young people, helping to curb irregular migration and hinder the rise of extremist groups.** This approach not only helps to fight hunger in the long term by creating livelihoods, but these large-scale projects also prove that the dependence of poor countries on imports and economic whims is not assured. Moving from beneficiaries to agents of change, they can secure their own food supply with simple incentives and make climate-resilient food systems future-proof from the ground up.

When our frozen pizza consists of 10 widely traveled ingredients that consume many resources in their production, it is bad for us, for nature, and for the climate.

Reimagining Global Food Systems for a Sustainable Future

Because this approach works, together with its partners, WFP plans to make another 600,000 football fields worth of barren land arable in the Sahel by 2027. Eight million people will thus be prepared against global economic and climate shocks. In times of tight budgets, this can make expensive

humanitarian aid redundant in the long term. Studies show that, thanks to these resilience measures, 80% of the villages in Niger participating in the programme no longer need humanitarian aid, resulting in development budget savings of \$54 million.

Fighting hunger in the short and long term is much more than an act of goodwill—it is in Europe’s security interest.

However, given the multitude of conflicts and disasters, there will continue to be a need for investment in humanitarian aid, simply to save lives. In the search for a solution to this problem amidst the intertwined global crises, three things must be considered.

First, **hunger is not a natural phenomenon that only affects “others” in the Global South.** It is a systemic problem largely tied to our consumption. Where cocoa and coffee grow in monocultures for the European breakfast table, millet cannot grow for the local population. Secondly, **hunger is political.** It is a consequence of conflicts, but also often their cause. Fighting hunger in the short and long term is much more than an act of goodwill—it is in Europe’s security interest. **Where we withdraw international aid, dubious actors move into the vacuum.** Lastly, the solution to hunger is the same



Photo: Paul Martinet

as to global food security in times of climate extremes. Part of this solution must involve reactivating the resources we already have. These include small-holder farmers and climate-adapted, regional agriculture that revitalises soils and, consequentially, ecosystems. This creates food, brings CO2 back into the ground, and forms the (survival) basis for global economic and social prosperity. This principle is as true for the WFP’s programmes in the Sahel as it is in Europe. When our frozen pizza consists of 10 widely traveled ingredients that consume many resources in their production, it is bad for us, for nature,

and for the climate. The same principle applies here: **regional agriculture on a manageable scale helps the climate and is also healthier than highly processed food.**

Changing such a complex system is undoubtedly a task for generations. However, if we start with soil and head in the right direction, innovation and economic incentives can accelerate this process. We simply need to understand That high olive oil prices are not only a tolerable nuisance, they are also a harbinger of the necessary change in how we feed ourselves. ■

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EU Enlargement at a Crossroads

Bumps on the Road to EU Membership in the Western Balkans

Kristijan Fidanovski

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Can we imagine the collapse of Europe? What would it look like? How would it take place (and how would we know it took place)? And, to adapt Henry Kissinger's truism, who would turn out the lights?

As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes point out in their seminal book *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*, popular culture abounds with fictional representations of the collapse of the United States. Humankind. Our planet. But we never (dare to) imagine the collapse of Europe. Could it be because – almost 80 years since the last all-European war and 35 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall – we are still not clear what Europe is?

We often remind ourselves of George H.W. Bush's proclamation that **Europe is at its best when it is "whole and free"**. The fact that one of the most heavily quoted European mottos was coined by a non-European is not so much an exercise in irony as it is a trivial yet illustrative reminder of our continent's chronic lack of strategic vision. For a continent politically embodied by an organization as strategically ambitious as the European Union, the frequent mismatch between unfettered symbolic grandeur and blatant practical shortcomings of its bureaucratized institutions can lead to unmet expectations, simmering frustration, and ultimately, a weaker Europe.

EU enlargement at a crossroads: fatigue, double standards, and a different union

Nowhere has this mismatch been felt more acutely than in the so-called "Western Balkans" – a term coined by the EU itself at the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003 to designate the laggards in the EU accession process. Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, were never included in this company (hence the "Western" in Western Balkans), and Croatia, which started out as a "Western Balkan" country, graduated from the label after its 2013 accession. On the other hand, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have now resided in the EU waiting room for decades.

To be sure, the prolonged and by now often satirized accession journey of these six countries (WB-6) has not been all pain and suffering. As candidate members, the WB-6 have benefited tremendously (Kosovo is not a candidate member, but it is eligible for assistance) from the EU's instruments of pre-accession financial support. Politically, the promise of EU membership has facilitated the democratization of the WB-6, as their overwhelmingly pro-EU (with the partial exception of Serbia) electorates have nudged their political elites to at least begin aligning national legislation with EU standards.

The EU would like to see a stronger relationship between the accession



process and democracy, as sometimes the less-than-democratic WB-6 leaders only pay lip service to European values. Yet, overall, the EU influence is positive, as one can easily imagine a much more authoritarian WB-6 today in the complete absence of the incentive of membership and the plentiful pre-accession funds.

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Which brings us to the (threefold) current political moment, where the carrot unfortunately seems further out of reach, more arbitrarily offered, and ultimately less appealing than ever – all at once.

Start with the increasingly elusive accession promise. Of the four WB-6 countries whose accession talks are already in progress, Montenegro and Ser-

bia have been negotiating the longest (since 2012 and 2014, respectively). Their negotiations are already lasting about twice as long as it took Croatia to complete the entire process (six years) and Montenegro and Serbia have (provisionally) closed only three and two of the 35 accession chapters, respectively. The crux of the matter remains the slow de facto movement of the legislations and societies towards the EU.

If the snail-like rate of progress by the apparent frontrunner Montenegro makes for somber reading, North Macedonia's membership prospects are surely even grimmer, as its (slow but generally positive) reform process has been nullified by a series of political ob-

EU actors in the public and civil sector alike and amplifying the WB-6's overall sense of powerlessness.

The crux of the matter remains the slow de facto movement of the legislations and societies towards the EU.

Finally, even if the most optimistic scenario of membership by 2030 materializes, being an EU member might come to mean something very different by then. In light of the increasing appetite for enlargement into the ex-Soviet space, the leading EU officials are increasingly flirting with ideas around a multi-tiered union, where new additions might not enjoy the full privileges of membership. Should these peripheral tiers entail the lack of a commissioner spot, limited voting powers, or smaller financial benefits than those enjoyed by past East European additions, the EU membership would begin to leave an even more bittersweet taste, potentially discouraging the WB-6 from joining altogether.

Protecting a Europe whole and free

At present, of course, none of these obstacles are necessarily fatal. Efforts to reform decision-making on enlargement might curb the veto powers of individual member states, precluding future bumps on the road such as the WB-6 countries blocking each other should their enlargement not occur simultaneously. Geopolitical incentives might add up to advancing enlargement across the board through lower benchmarks for closing accession chapters, while maintaining meritocracy in the process. Finally, regardless of any internal reform the EU might undergo by the end of the decade, given their population size and economic performance, the WB-6 countries are highly likely to remain net recipients of EU funds. They should also be able to continue the trend of former socialist countries (with the notable exception of Hungary and Poland) reaping democratic dividends from joining a club of mostly established democracies.

Will the EU play its cards right and address the challenges adequately and timely? If it does, Europeans might be able to continue enjoying the luxury of not having to ever bother imagining what the collapse of their continent would look like. ■

Sharing is not Always Caring

Digital Democracy as a Cultivating Space for Transparent and Active Participation

Jernej Grahor

Project Manager at the Centre for European Perspective together with the European Digital Diplomacy Exchange Team



Hyacinth, per tradition, concludes her lunch break with a peak into the digital environment she's artfully cultivated for herself

over the years of active and passive engagement across a variety of platforms, publishers, and people. Aside from her active and voluntary engagement with financial news, integral to her career in investment banking, or the news shared by her closest circle of friends and family, these small social media snapshots inform her conception of and facilitate her connection to international news and geopolitics. Compared to her parents, who prefer established and traditional print and broadcast media, Hyacinth's outlook seems worlds apart. She recalls a recent World Economic Forum survey results from 2022 that found that not only do 72% of users in the European Union seek their news online, but a surging number of younger users rely on social media as their first and primary source. It's a generational shift that may herald a larger societal transformation, she ponders. Can this more interconnected world remain cohesive? "It's a fast-paced environment", she smiles "Especially in the world of finance."

Her passive swiping and scrolling pauses as she hesitates over a provocative and sensational title that immediately catches her attention, heightening her sensations - and she clicks "share" with a sense of satisfaction. The news article acutely resembles the most prominent independent national news provider - sharing its sterile-yet-modern aesthetic that is favored by newsrooms the world over. As if that wasn't enough to convey a cache of credibility, the article was shared on the news feeds of several of her closest, most trusted friends. As Hyacinth returns back to her busy day feeling good about her swift, active, low-cost citizenship engagement, what she does not (yet, or may never) realize is that the news article is a carefully-tailored information piece prepared, perhaps by a local organization or a global actor specifically to deceive individuals like Hyacinth. The perfidious webpage and news article might be removed in due time, but the damage is done - to Hyacinth's



Photo: Paul Martinet

attitude or beliefs and to the attitudes and beliefs of all those she may have inadvertently exposed to it.

Let us take a step back and start at the beginning, clarifying how the digital environment impacts states and their citizens. As the impacts of digitalization on our society can be seen across various social and cultural disciplines -including economics, governance, politics, and education- it is indispensable to examine jointly the opportunities and challenges that digitalization presents to our society. Concerning opportunities, the digital revolution has expanded growth and development in the above-mentioned sectors exponentially. From a perspective of access to information and education, increased informational accessibility, producibility, and accountability contributed to a more level informational playing field, with the potential to increase the availability of educated human capital worldwide. The presence of an interconnected information environment has eroded the previously constraining temporal and geospatial limitations, causing the world to resemble a global village, as media theorist Marshal McLuhan pointed out.

If understanding and addressing disinformation is a method of remedy for the wound, then fostering a proactive approach through education and societal discourse provides for a healthy democratic immune system.

Such seismic changes in access to information, however, present challenges. The inhabitants of this global village must navigate an overflow of information that makes comprehension more demanding or even overburdening. We are at the centre of every story publishable, but it is harder for us to feel centred

among them. Equally important are the challenges of disinformation and misinformation. This pervasive development undercuts informational integrity and hinders our ability to leverage a set of common principles, facts and truths that are essential to the productive exchange of information.

While we seek answers to these challenges, the digital environment continues to grow and evolve whether or not we are prepared for what comes next. The rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence is a case in point. Digital transformation is not a distant future, but our current reality. And we better be equipped for it.

Why is addressing Disinformation only the tip of the iceberg (and how do audiences perceive persuasion)

Disinformation and misinformation present a distinct threat to the development of personal attitudes and beliefs of citizens and to the health of the democracies in which they participate. Governments, non-governmental organizations, factcheckers and other stakeholders provide an important line of defense, with innovative educational programs and information sharing practices. The inoculation theory developed by William Mcguire in the 1960s draws comparisons between the biological resilience against a virus one experiences upon exposure to a vaccine and the resilience against manipulation tactics when exposed to counter-measures. For the "inoculation process" to kick in and build resilience to persuasive messages, one must first be aware of the threat, followed by a refutational pre-emption, bolstering the tools, and motivation to actively defend positions, attitudes and values. Awareness of risks that disinformation entails, selecting credible information among a variety of sources followed by critical assessment of trustworthiness, its message and po-

tential aim, or correcting non truth with a response at times where values and beliefs that form the foundation of our democracies are at stake, can provide for resilience building on an individual and societal level. As the productive exchange of information is the lifeblood of any democratic society, immunity to a harmful virus promotes the health of the democratic corpus.

Nonetheless, identifying foreign perpetrated information narratives and highlighting their danger remains on the reactive side of action, the defense. Ultimately, it is up to every citizen and stakeholder who digests received information to proactively exercise critical thinking and act based on their judgment. Supporting a healthy information environment through media literacy and (dis)information literacy can have a decisive impact on individuals' thinking and actions by providing tools and skills that allow a more proactive citizenship and sound decision-making. If understanding and addressing disinformation is a method of remedy for the wound, then fostering a proactive approach through education and societal discourse provides for a healthy democratic immune system.

The harmful effects of disinformation are a destabilizing force within our democracies

What is at stake

A reactive focus on the effects of disinformation tends towards confrontation. Disinformation can destabilize communication among structures, diminish trust in institutions and society, and exacerbate social cleavages. In short, the harmful effects of disinformation are a destabilizing force within our democracies. Democracy, drawn from the Greek word demokratia, referring to demos (the people) and kratein (to govern), lays out the terms clearly. Individuals govern and disinformation's corrosive capacities hinder that fundamental principle. Furthermore, in the midst of varying methods of defin-



Photo: Paul Martinet

Individual responsibility in active citizenship must be paired with a whole-of-society approach

Using the term, “democracy can be defended on the basis of reaching one or more of the following basic values and benefits: equality, freedom, moral development, public interest, private interest, societal benefit, the fulfilment of wishes and effective decisions” as outlined by David Held. Whereas disinformation in the short term strives towards creating confusion and disagreement, and in the long term destabilizes processes and cooperation among stakeholders. That is why a strong foundation for active citizenship must be predicated on championing the opportunities of informational integrity and informational engagement presented in the digital era, all while overcoming the challenges presented by it, including disinformation.

The way forward

The only path forward is if everyone sweeps their own doorstep and joins forces to address this common challenge. Individual responsibility in active citizenship must be paired with a whole-of-society approach, where

every piece of the collective puzzle contributes to the collective societal resilience. The governments and main institutional actors must build on transparency, active engagement and supported dialogue with citizens to reach societal agreement and better policies for all. Citizens, non-governmental organizations and youth associations need to challenge one another and share their needs and vision with the state, who can then enact structural change for the benefit of the demos. Media, the third branch of democracy, must continue providing verified information to the public and must increase vigilance in their work as guardians of the checks and balances, which is why free and independent media is pivotal for democracy. Academia needs to provide support through innovative and impactful research, whereas the private sector must adjust products based on a collective agreement on ethical principles. Together, all stakeholders can provide an intricate balance of knowledge, skills and credibility. Cooperation in addressing the shared challenges to amplify the shared opportunities can encourage the development of healthy and engaged active democracies in the digital era. ■

The EDDE Approach to Promoting Democratic Resilience

The European Digital Diplomacy Exchange (EDDE), a project jointly administered by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs’ Office of Press and Public Diplomacy and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP), strives to identify strategies for building democratic resilience in the digital era through communications and engagement between governments and their citizens.

The commitment to strong communications is a commitment to a strong citizenry. A concerted rededication to this principle is all the more important in the digital era - in which the invention and proliferation of digital information communication technologies significantly, and perhaps forever, altered the model by which we conceptualize the productive exchange of information between and among individuals. Such a consequential shift necessitates a shift in institutions and their practices, like public diplomacy and public affairs in order to remain relevant and to maintain the social contract between citizens and their governments.

The European Digital Diplomacy Exchange was launched in 2017 to build and bolster the digital strategic communications and counter-disinformation capacities of partner governments in a manner that resulted in the systematized adoption of the policies, procedures, and practices necessary to leverage digital channels effectively for government

communications. Importantly, it did not aim to do so through simple instruction, but through the development of a network of practitioners that could continue to jointly develop and exchange novel solutions and best practices to common challenges that arise through operating in a fluctuating and often unfamiliar digital information landscape.

It is a testament to the program’s original vision and subsequent evolutions that, even after seven years of work, EDDE’s efforts cannot be more timely or more relevant. In many ways, the same concerns that spurred EDDE’s launch seven years ago remain concerns currently.

For some, digital technologies are a source of optimism. They have an exceptional capability to connect our world, bringing news, events, experiences, and, most importantly, people closer together than previously possible. For others, digital technologies are a source of pessimism. They have an unrivalled capacity to obscure truth, create competing realities, and fracture communities along ideological, political, and social cleavages.

EDDE believes that both can be right simultaneously, but that all of us, as government communicators, have a critical role in determining whether digital communications technologies become something beneficial or detrimental to democratic resilience globally.

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Strengthening Democracy in the Digital Age

Democratic Defense and Resilience in the Face of AI-Enabled Threats

Amy Larsen

Director of Global Field Engagement & Strategic Projects, Democracy Forward, Microsoft



An impromptu scroll of your news feed can quickly remind you that democracy is under threat in the digital age. New technologies pose unprecedented challenges to the integrity of information and elections, which are cornerstones of democratic societies. From deepfakes and disinformation to cyberattacks and hacking, the digital landscape is rife with risks that can undermine public trust, distort political discourse, and manipulate the information environment leading up to and during an election. How can democracies protect themselves from such threats, and what is the proper role for technology companies to play in strengthening democratic resilience in the age of AI?

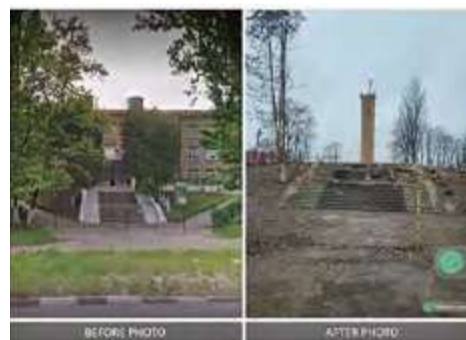
During this Vote-a-Rama year of elections in which over two billion people have the opportunity to vote in nationwide elections, Microsoft is committed to enhancing the security and resilience of elections by developing innovative solutions and tools for voters, candidates, political campaigns, and election authorities. In February 2024 at the Munich Security Conference, Microsoft joined over two dozen technology companies in signing on to the Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections. This voluntary pledge by technology companies focuses on combatting deepfakes that take the form of video, audio, and images attempting to fake or alter the appearance, voice, or actions of political candidates, campaigns, or election officials. The Tech Accord commitments are intended to make it harder for nefarious actors to use legitimate tools to create deepfakes, to bring the tech sector together to detect and respond to deepfakes in elections, in part by enabling political candidates to immediately report concerns of deepfakes of themselves, and by advancing transparency and societal resilience.

Nation state threat actors are also upskilling, leading to the potential for increasingly sophisticated and scalable cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.

Over the past several months, Microsoft has worked to rise to the occasion and implement our Tech Accord commitments to combat AI-enabled deepfakes and disinformation across various regions in order to safeguard elections taking place around the world. In the

United Kingdom, European Union, India, South Africa, France, Belgium, and the United States, we launched initiatives like the “Check. Recheck. Vote.” deepfakes public awareness campaign to empower the public to critically evaluate digital election content and sources, and to build their AI literacy skills through tools like the Real or Not deepfake quiz. We also launched Election Communications Hubs to support election authorities with direct access to our security and support teams leading up to an election. These build on existing security programs like Azure for Elections offerings available to state and local election agencies and their partners in the United States. In the first half of this Vote-a-Rama year, Microsoft has also undertaken over 110 deepfakes training sessions for political stakeholders in 20 countries reaching almost 3,300 participants, while our deepfakes public awareness campaigns across EU, UK, and U.S. have helped educate hundreds of millions of people.

We have also expanded our Content Integrity tools available to political candidates in the U.S. to those in the EU and UK, as well as to newsrooms globally, which allow them to add secure “content credentials” to digital content showing who created the content, where and when it was created, whether it was created by AI, and if it has been edited or tampered with since its creation. This tool leverages the open-source industry standard published by the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), of which Microsoft is a founding member. This is the same open standard that underpinned Project Providence, a partnership Microsoft and TruePic developed in Ukraine to document the destruction of cultural heritage sites by allowing for end-to-end operability between the capture, storage, and display of images, ensuring the provenance of such images.



These Content Integrity tools exist alongside our longstanding cybersecurity protections for high-risk, highly targeted stakeholders of democracy. For example, AccountGuard, a threat detection and notification service that protects over 5.4 million inboxes in 35 countries, helps keep election officials, political campaigns, journalists, think-tanks, nonprofits, and human rights organizations safe. These tools also exist alongside new efforts to enhance societal resilience inspired by the Tech Ac-

cord, such as the Societal Resilience Fund recently launched by Microsoft and OpenAI to advance AI literacy among voters, election authorities, and vulnerable communities in the U.S. and abroad.



Despite these efforts, democracies still face new and evolving challenges in the digital age. Nation state threat actors are also upskilling, leading to the potential for increasingly sophisticated and scalable cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. As our Microsoft Threat Analysis Center (MTAC) noted in a recent reports, nation-state threat actors like China and Russia are improving at using generative AI tools as they continue to exacerbate political and social divisions in the United States and other democracies. Even as we work to drive and democratize the benefits of AI and other emerging technologies, which can enhance voter participation and engagement, lower the barriers and costs of voting and campaigning, and provide access to authoritative information to voters, we must be mindful of how antidemocratic actors may deploy these same technologies against free and open societies.

Democracy in the digital age, as in every age, requires constant vigilance, defense, and advocacy from all stakeholders, including governments, technology companies, civil society, media, and citizens.

Beyond this election year, we must continue to look around corners and protect the public broadly from abusive AI-generated content that can undermine trust, spread misinformation, and harm individuals and communities. In a recently published white paper, Microsoft outlined our approach and policy recommendations to address this issue. We recommended requiring providers of AI systems to label synthetic content and use content provenance tooling to track sources and history. We also recommended that governments enact laws and regulations that combat deceptive AI content in elections, fraudulent AI scams, synthetic child sexual abuse material, and non-consensual intimate imagery. Finally, we encouraged governments to publish and update best practices, fund national research programs, and support education campaigns for various audiences and demographics.

Microsoft is committed to playing its part in strengthening democracy, by providing solutions and tools that help

enhance the security and resilience of elections; protect vulnerable and targeted members of society such as children, women, the elderly, and individuals running for office; and bolster the integrity of the information ecosystem. Our vision is for technology to support and defend democracy, and to help people reach their potential and achieve their goals.

Democracy in the digital age, as in every age, requires constant vigilance, defense, and advocacy from all stakeholders, including governments, technology companies, civil society, media, and citizens. While nation state threat actors continue to wield cutting-edge technologies against democratic societies through AI, cyber, and other digitally enabled threats, we must each contribute to protecting the democratic systems that enables our individual and collective flourishing. ■



Microsoft and Truepic have partnered to develop and pilot Project Providence, the world's first interoperable system using Truepic's authenticating camera SDK and the Microsoft Azure cloud platform to maintain the provenance of images captured, from storage to display. The Project Providence platform leverages the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA) open standard to allow end-to-end interoperability between the capture of documentation, storage, and display. In the first several months following this project's launch, our partner on the ground, the Anti-Corruption Headquarters (ACHQ) has captured over 1,200 images documenting damage to more than 600 unique cultural heritage and civilian infrastructure sites in eight major cities across Ukraine. A subset of these images has been accepted as evidence in ongoing criminal investigations led by District Prosecutor offices in Ukraine, addressing violations of Customary Law and the Law of War.

A New Era of Opportunity

The Development of Artificial Intelligence in Telecommunications



Boštjan Košak

President of the Management Board,
Telekom Slovenije



The world is in the midst of a technological renaissance. Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI, is spearheading the transformation of industries and redefining our understanding of what is possible. For telecommunications, a sector already defined by rapid change and innovation, AI presents a unique opportunity for development, growth, and enhancement of the user experience.

Before delving into the specific ways that AI is reshaping telecommunications, it is crucial to understand the core areas of AI that drive this transformation. These are the building blocks for the foundation on which the advanced applications are built: machine learning, natural language processing and computer vision.

Machine learning is the heart of artificial intelligence, enabling systems to learn and improve from experience, much like humans do. This learning is based on data analysis, from which the system extracts patterns and rules that it then uses to make decisions and predict future events. Machine learning utilises various methods, depending on the type of problem and the available data. Supervised learning is much like learning from a teacher, where the system receives labelled data (input and desired output) and learns to map between them. Unsupervised learning, on the other hand, is more akin to self-discovery, where the system searches for hidden patterns and structures in unlabelled data. Deep learning is based on neural networks with multiple layers, and is particularly effective in modelling large amounts of complex data, such as images, sound, and text. Re-

inforcement learning is a method in which the system learns through interaction with the environment, receiving rewards for correct decisions and penalties for incorrect ones, which is key for developing autonomous systems.

Natural language processing (NLP) focuses on the interaction between computers and human language. NLP makes it possible for machines to understand, interpret, and generate human language in various forms, such as text, speech, and even sign language. NLP is essential for the development of chatbots, virtual assistants, translation systems, and sentiment analyses, which are used to understand opinions and emotions expressed in text.

Computer vision is a field of AI that allows machines to “see” and understand visual information from the world around us. Computer vision is used for analysing images and videos, recognizing objects, tracking movement, and even developing autonomous vehicles that can navigate traffic independently.

Utilising Artificial Intelligence in Telecommunications

Now let us explore in more detail how the AI technology is being used to transform the telecommunications industry. Here are some key applications of artificial intelligence that already present opportunities for significant improvements in network operations, customer service, security, and efficiency.

One key application of AI is optimisation and automation of networks and information systems. The AI algorithms can analyse the vast amounts of data in real-time, enabling automatic network optimisation, predictive maintenance, and the prevention of faults before they occur. If issues do arise, AI can help to resolve them more quickly, ensuring even more reliable services.

Cybersecurity is another important area of AI application. Artificial intelligence assists in detecting and preventing cyberattacks by analysing traffic patterns and identifying anomalies. At

Telekom Slovenije, we have been using AI to achieve this with great success for quite some time.

In customer support, the AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants provide fast and efficient customer support, improving customer satisfaction while reducing costs.

Artificial Intelligence has the capability to increase productivity by automating routine tasks, allowing employees to focus on more complex and strategic activities where the human factor is crucial and adds value.

Last but not least, artificial intelligence is a game changer in the area of personalised marketing and sales. AI can analyse data to provide offers completely tailored to each and every customer. This improves sales and customer satisfaction, and positively impacts customer loyalty. With the help of AI, sales staff can offer the best services to customers, adding their human touch, understanding, and empathy. After all, we conduct business with people and will continue to do so in the future.

The Convergence of AI and other Transformative Technologies

The true power of AI is amplified when combined with other cutting-edge technologies, such as 5G, quantum computing as well as robotics and automation.

The fast, low-latency nature of 5G networks provides an ideal platform for AI applications that require real-time data processing and communication. This synergy unlocks the potential for smart cities, autonomous vehicles, and other innovations that were once in the realm of science fiction.

Although still in its early stages, quantum computing promises an exponential increase in processing power. AI algorithms can optimise quantum processes, while quantum simulations could accelerate AI research, leading to breakthroughs in drug discovery, materials science, and financial modelling.

AI is crucial in the development of advanced robots and automated systems capable of performing complex tasks in various environments. In telecommunications, robotics can be used to automate network maintenance, equipment installation, and even customer support. Advanced robots equipped with AI can autonomously diagnose and resolve issues at remote locations, reducing costs and increasing efficiency.

Artificial Intelligence is an Opportunity You Cannot Afford to Miss

The integration of artificial intelligence into telecommunications is not just a technological trend but a fundamental shift that will transform the entire industry. AI is not merely a tool for enhancing existing processes but a catalyst for developing entirely new services, business models, and ways of interacting with customers.

Naturally, the path to full AI integration has some challenges. Issues related to data privacy, ethical dilemmas, and employee adaptation are real obstacles that need to be addressed carefully. However, the potential benefits that AI brings – from network optimisation and improved customer service to the development of innovative products and services – far outweigh the potential risks. Telecommunication companies that recognise and harness the potential of AI will be the ones shaping the future of the industry. By investing in development and implementation, they will create a competitive advantage, attract new customers, and increase their market value. The question is not whether AI will change telecommunications, but how quickly and effectively companies will adapt to this new reality. The future of telecommunications lies in the hands of those who are ready to embrace AI as a strategic imperative and use it to create a better future for all. ■

The Power of Technology: Shaping Tomorrow's Tourism Amidst a Rapidly Changing Environment

In an Era Defined by Rapid Technological Advancements and an Increasingly Interconnected World, Iztation (UN Tourism) Emphasizes the Transformative Power of Innovation in Shaping the Future of Global Tourism.

Natalia Bayona

Executive Director, UN Tourism



During the past months UN Tourism has delivered an investments framework for the tourism sector, focus on investing in People, Planet and Prosperity. In people through education; in planet based on developing sustainable practices, and in Prosperity, fostering it through innovation. Technological advances, especially data, have proven to be a powerful mechanism in developing the sector and finding new approaches. Moreover, leveraging data has become crucial in addressing economic uncertainties, geopolitical dynamics, security concerns, and to foster resilient, sustainable, and inclusive tourism sector.

The Role of Technology in Data-Driven Tourism

New technologies are rapidly emerging and changing our lives, reshaping societies in unexpected ways. Tourism was an early adopter of digitalization on a global scale, pioneering online flight and hotel booking. As information and communication technology (ICT) spread worldwide, tourism consistently embraced new technologies and platforms.

Technology has made tourism more efficient, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable. To remain competitive and contribute to sustainable development goals, the tourism sector must innovate and create new business opportunities.

In fact, during the past six years, UN Tourism has been identifying the trends on the sector through the Innovation in UN Tourism startup competitions. That has allowed the organization to identify those who are transforming the sector and those who are already working with those data and stay in touch with entrepreneurs and innovators that have highlighted in that competitions and now are part of the UN Tourism innovation ecosystem. Such as Geosure, that analyze and normalize security risk signals and safety data on a hyper-local, block-by-block basis, or Mize, that managed to utilize data-driven technology in the hotels market.

Digital transformation will impact tourism jobs by requiring technical and soft skills to implement and manage



smart initiatives. The tourism sector should support startups and small businesses driving innovation and entrepreneurship, prioritizing skills development for future job roles.

But this digital path should be also followed in the education. That is what UN Tourism is boosting with the Tourism Online Academy, a platform where innovation is prominent, not only because it is a digital initiative with the capacity to offer quality education accessible from anywhere in the world, but also because of the content of the courses themselves, which have a holistic approach, in which new ways of understanding the sector are included.

Economic Uncertainties and Tourism

The tourism industry is highly sensitive to economic fluctuations. Persisting inflation, high interest rates, volatile oil prices and disruptions to trade continue to translate into high transport and accommodations costs, influencing travel behaviour and prompting tourists to seek value for money and travel closer to home. By analysing economic data, tourism stakeholders can identify emerging trends and adapt their offerings to meet changing consumer demands.

On the other hand, economic impact studies can serve as an important tool in advocating for policies that support the sector's growth by demonstrating the contribution of tourism to local and national economies.

Data as the New Currency in Tourism

We refer to data as the new currency in tourism for its untapped potential to drive advancements in the sector. Data analytics provides exceptional insights into traveller trends, preferences and behaviours and can drive informed decisions. Through optimized marketing strategies, destinations can enhance visitor experiences and improve operations.

UN Tourism advocates for data-driven approaches in tourism by promoting the collection, analysis, and dissemination of tourism statistics, to support evidence-based policymaking and strategic planning. This has been particularly crucial amidst the health emergencies, geopolitical tensions, and economic volatility that have significantly impacted travel patterns and tourism flows over the recent years.

Sustainability and Inclusive Growth

Sustainable tourism development is a key priority for UN Tourism, aiming to balance the needs of tourists, host communities, and the environment. Data plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability and inclusive growth in tourism.

Environmental data, such as carbon emissions, water usage, and waste generation, can help destinations measure their environmental footprint and implement sustainable practices. Social data, including employment rates, income levels, and community satisfaction, can assess the social impact of

tourism and ensure that the benefits are equitably distributed.

Furthermore, data can support the development of niche tourism products, such as eco-tourism or cultural tourism. By understanding the preferences and behaviours of niche market segments, destinations can tailor their offerings to attract responsible travellers and enhance the positive impact of tourism on local communities.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the power of data presents immense opportunities for the tourism industry, it brings about challenges, like data privacy and security, that require joint global efforts to ensure quality, compliance, and accuracy.

At the same time, technological advance enhances customer experiences, and drives innovation. That generate opportunities as the personalization and targeting. By analysing preferences, users can get personalized itineraries and activities. But data also provides predictions. With historical data, we can predict demand patterns, optimize pricing, and allocate resources efficiently.

UN Tourism is committed to bridging the digital divide and ensure equal access to advanced technologies and data analytics for destinations worldwide. To bridge this gap, we advocate for capacity-building initiatives, knowledge sharing, and technical assistance to support destinations in developing their data infrastructure and capabilities. ■

A Voyage Through Slovenian Arts and Culture

Discover Europe's Green Heart



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Slovenia is an “emerald in Europe’s jewellery box, glittering green and turquoise with natural forests, rivers, and famous lakes”, to quote the BBC. It is strategically located in Central Europe and boasts an exceptional diversity, both in terms of nature and culture. This green land, with over 60% of its area covered in forests, uniquely brings together the Alps, the Mediterranean, the Karst and the Pannonian Plain, making it the only European nation with such a remarkable geographic variety. This results in vibrant arts and culture, the main communicational theme promoted by the Slovenian Tourist Board for 2024-2025. Visitors can explore historic towns and sites, attend world-class performances and festivals and engage with local artists and craftsmen who keep Slovenia’s rich traditions alive.



Slovenian Tourist Board Photo Library

What ties all these thrilling experiences together is a commitment to sustainability. This dedication is evident in the country’s care for the environment and the preservation of tradition, as well as in its support of the well-being of both locals and visitors. Let us embark on an inspiring journey through the highlights of Slovenian arts and culture.

Slovenia’s Timeless Artefacts from Prehistoric Flutes to Ancient Grapevines

Some of the world’s most remarkable artefacts have been discovered in Slovenia, from ancient musical instruments and historic tools to the world’s oldest grapevine. These findings, each with its own story, paint a vivid picture of the region’s deep and diverse heritage.

One of the most extraordinary discoveries is the 60,000-year-old flute, located in the Divje Babe Archaeological Park on the Šebrelje Plateau. This ancient musical instrument, carved from a young cave bear’s thighbone by a Neanderthal, is now on display at the National Museum in Ljubljana.



Slovenian Tourist Board Photo Library

Equally impressive is the 30,000-year-old needle found in the Potočka Zijalka Cave on Mt Olševa. This decorated bone needle, discovered among the remains of Ice Age fauna and tools, is now displayed at the Celje Regional Museum, providing insights into the life and creativity of Ice Age people.

Continuing this journey through ancient history, the Ljubljana Marshes Landscape Park is home to a 5,200-year-

old wooden wheel with an axle, the oldest known of its kind. Unearthed from a pile-dweller culture, this artefact showcases early technological ingenuity and is exhibited at the Ljubljana City Museum.

In addition to these technological marvels, Slovenia boasts a 450-year-old grapevine in Maribor, known as the Žametovka or Modra Kavčina variety. Recognized as the world’s oldest grapevine, it still bears fruit and is celebrated annually at the Old Vine Festival. Throughout the year, the Old Vine House in Maribor offers wine tastings and an insight into Slovenia’s rich viticultural heritage.

Invaluable UNESCO’s World Heritage Treasures in Slovenia

Slovenia also boasts numerous treasures under UNESCO’s auspices. With two natural and three cultural sites on the World’s Natural and Cultural Heritage list and seven unique features on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Slovenia is a gem for those seeking both natural wonders and cultural treasures. The country also participates in UNESCO’s World Network of Biosphere Reserves, the Global Network of Geoparks, and the UNESCO Memory of the World List, highlighting its commitment to preserving its invaluable heritage.

Let us begin the UNESCO journey through Slovenia with the mysterious

Škocjan Caves, nestled in Slovenia’s karst region. Here, Europe’s largest underground canyon awaits exploration, while the surrounding regional park offers educational and biking trails.

If you want to venture further into Slovenia’s natural splendour discover the Krokav and Snežnik-Ždrolce primal beech forests, part of UNESCO’s heritage of primal beech forests, which showcase the development of beech



ecosystems since the last glacial period 12,000 years ago.

As you shift from natural wonders to cultural heritage, the historic town of Idrija beckons you with its rich mercury mining legacy. Alongside Spain's Almaden, Idrija's significance is immortalized as a UNESCO site. Explore Anthony's Underground Mining Tunnel, one of Europe's oldest mine entrances, and delve into the traditional mining methods that shaped the town's history.

In the heart of Slovenia, the Ljubljana Marshes unveil a treasure trove of prehistoric secrets. Renowned for its ancient pile dwellings, this intriguing area offers a captivating glimpse into early human life. Among its most notable archaeological finds is the world's oldest wooden wheel with an axle, a remarkable artifact we highlighted earlier.

The charm of Ljubljana is further enhanced by the architectural genius of Jože Plečnik. His transformative works, including the the Central Market, the Triple Bridge, and the National and University Library, are celebrated as part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site list.

Slovenia's intangible heritage is equally captivating. Beekeeping, a tra-

dition deeply ingrained in Slovenian culture, is celebrated with nationwide enthusiasm. Notably, Slovenia was the visionary country that proposed the establishment of World Bee Day.

At the historic Lipica Stud Farm, the centuries-old tradition of breeding Lipizzan horses continues. Recognized on the UNESCO list and shared with seven other countries, this heritage underscores the profound bond between humans and these majestic creatures.

Also featured on the list is the Škofja Loka Passion Play, Slovenia's oldest theatrical tradition. This remarkable performance unfolds every six years, with the next one scheduled for 2026. The play enchants audiences with its vibrant costumes and immersive historical reenactments, offering a truly unforgettable experience steeped in tradition.

In February, the traditional rounds of door-to-door Kurenti announce the arrival of spring. Rooted in Slavic mythology, these vibrant celebrations bring the Slovenian towns to life with colorful costumes and the ringing of cowbells, the most traditional and exuberant Kurenti celebration being held in the ancient town of Ptuj.

Bobbin lacemaking, an intricate and artistic craft, symbolizes Slovenian

identity. This age-old tradition of braiding and twisting threads into delicate lace is nurtured through dedicated lacemaking schools, ensuring its continued vibrancy.

In the Karst region and Istria, the art of dry-stone walling showcases traditional construction techniques that rely on the careful stacking of stones with-

out any binder. This skill connects eight European countries.

Lastly, Slovenia's commitment to midwifery highlights the enduring value of traditional knowledge and skills. With the first midwifery school dating back to 1753, Slovenia champions this practice, advocating for its inclusion in the UNESCO list. ■

Slovenia. It's All in Our Nature.

As you embark on your voyage through Slovenian arts and culture, you'll discover a nation that harmoniously blends natural beauty with cultural richness. This is also very well illustrated in the Slovenian Tourist Board's most recent promotional campaign, "Slovenia. It's All in Our Nature". The campaign utilizes the dual meaning of 'nature' as a lens to explore both the landscape and the character of the Slovenian nation. It combines Slovenia's breathtaking sites with the country's top athletes, showcasing the country as not only a travel destination, but also as a place where sport, healthy living and sustainable values are celebrated.



Nova Gorica and Gorizia: A Cross-Border Celebration as European Capital of Culture 2025

Nova Gorica and Gorizia will unite as the European Capital of Culture 2025, celebrating their rich cultural heritage and artistic vibrancy. As Slovenia's youngest city, Nova Gorica and its Italian neighbour Gorizia are set to highlight their unique fusion of history, creativity, and vision on the global stage. This special designation will spotlight Slovenia's diverse culture and creativity through a year-long celebration of the arts.

The European Capital of Culture initiative, supported by the European Union, showcases selected cities each year, with Nova Gorica and Gorizia sharing this honour with Chemnitz, Germany, in 2025. This marks the second time Slovenia has held the title, following Maribor's recognition in 2012.

The two cities, deeply interconnected through history and culture, will present their combined stories through the GO!2025 program, emphasizing their cross-border synergy. Central to this will be the ECoC district, a revitalized area along the former customs strip designed for eco-friendly and sustainable use, set to become a vibrant hub for events and social activities.

The cultural program will be extensive, ranging from fashion and art to sports and ecology, offering a diverse array of experiences. Venues across both cities, including cycle tunnels and mobile train carriages, will host unique events and exhibitions, reflecting the rich cultural panorama that stretches from the Alps to the Adriatic Sea.



Online



BSF and Young BSF programmes and other latest updates



Online Bled Strategic Times

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Getting around BSF: Map of Bled



- 1 Bled Festival Hall (Cesta svobode 11)
- 2 Hotel Park (Cesta svobode 15)
- 3 Grand Hotel Toplice (Cesta svobode 12)
- 4 Hotel Lovca (Ljubljanska cesta 6)
- 5 Kompas Hotel Bled (Cankarjeva 2)
- 6 Rikli Balance Hotel (Cankarjeva 4)
- 7 Hotel Savica Garni (Cankarjeva 6)
- 8 Hotel Astoria (Prešernova 44)
- 9 Vila Zlatorog (Veslaška promenada 9)
- 10 Vila Bled (Cesta svobode 18)

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