Our Earth, our responsibility

A call for global solidarity to save our planet
/ By Dr. Robert Golob, Prime Minister of Slovenia

As I write these lines, Slovenia is dealing with the devastating consequences of the worst natural disaster in the country’s history. Extreme floods, caused by severe weather conditions and heavy rain, killed at least six people, cut off bridges, roads, electricity and water supplies, ruined buildings and houses, forcing tens of thousands to leave their homes. Two-thirds of the country was affected by unimaginable and unparalleled damage.

Following this unprecedented natural disaster, we saw equally unprecedented solidarity. Slovenian soldiers, police officers, representatives of the Civil Protection Service, firemen and volunteers all risked their lives in order to save the lives of others. Pictures of women and children being carried out of flooded houses, of elderly being rescued by helicopters, of daughters and sons assisting parents to clean their houses, of people helping neighbours and friends clean up their basements, of numerous ad-hoc initiatives for donating money, food and sanitary equipment appeared not only as ‘the sun that always shines’ and the ‘international solidarity’ once again showed that ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed’. All of these friends were also there last summer and unparalleled damage.

We are all in the same boat, and that boat is our planet, which has been mistreated, exploited and abused, and which may already be un-
Significant achievements in the protection and promotion of human rights have been made since the end of the Second World War. However, the past two decades have served as a cautionary tale, reminding us that these achievements in the field of human rights should never be taken for granted.

This period has seen a rise in attitudes and actions by state and non-state actors that undermine the rule of law, democracy and human rights. One can argue that this erosion began with the fight against terrorism, where security concerns took precedence over human rights. It continued with the 2008 financial crisis and widespread austerity measures that weakened public investment in critical aspects of life, such as social security, housing, health care and education. A decade after, it was further accelerated by the restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, war crimes and mass atrocities have returned to European continent with Russia’s war against Ukraine, which has resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians, the displacement of millions, the abduction of children, and numerous cases of torture, extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention and sexual violence.

Russia’s illegal and brutal war against Ukraine is the tragic epilogue to years of disregard for agreed human rights standards. The continuing impunity for serious human rights violations resulting from the war in Chechnya, the repression of dissent and freedom of expression, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine are a tragic reminder of what can happen when a state defies international law, ignores human rights standards, and undermines the established rules for the maintenance of international peace.

While Russia is an extreme case, there are alarming signs of a wider tendency among member states towards failing to uphold our Organisation’s human rights standards. This requires serious attention and decisive action.

In many states, the space for civil society and the exercise of fundamental freedoms increasingly continues to be restricted. State and non-state actors are repressing dissent and critical voices, resulting in severe restrictions on the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

The situation of journalists and human rights defenders is of particular concern. These individuals play a crucial role in promoting and protecting democracy and human rights, and state authorities have a legal obligation to ensure their safety and to create an enabling environment for their work. However, journalists and human rights defenders often face violence - sometimes fatal-, intimidation, administrative and judicial harassment, smear campaigns and other forms of reprisal for their work.

The treatment of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in Europe is another long-standing and systemic problem, presently reaching its negative peak. Many states consistently fail to meet their international human rights obligations in this area. Pushbacks, refusals to rescue boats in distress, inhumane reception conditions, and ill-treatment have become common features of a security-oriented approach to migration that disregards human dignity and human rights.

The full realization of women’s rights and gender equality also remains a pressing issue. The persistence of gender-based violence against women, the increasing attempts to restrict women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender inequality, particularly in the workplace and political decision making, are the most visible manifestations of this problem.

Furthermore, the prevailing climate of intolerance, hostility, and violence against LGBTI people continues to severely affect the human rights and well-being of millions of people in our member states. On-line smear campaigns, judicial harassment, and violations of freedom of expression and assembly create obstacles for LGBTI people and those who defend their rights. The political exploitation of issues related to their human rights further fuels hostility, discrimination, and societal polarization. Transgender people in particular are increasingly targeted in this toxic climate.

These are just some of the issues I have consistently raised with state authorities throughout my mandate. While there are no easy solutions, these trends can be reversed through laws and policies that reinforce democratic institutions and promote inclusion and participation, and prevent the rollback of hard-won progress.

Recognizing and addressing these issues should be a priority. States should recommit to the values and standards of our Organisation and become robust defenders of human rights and the collective system established to protect, promote, and fulfill them.

The recent Council of Europe Summit held in Reykjavik, where the Heads of State and Government pledged to reaffirm their commitment to the norms and principles of our organisation, is encouraging. They recognized the urgency to act in key areas, in particular to address the human rights violations caused by Russia’s war against Ukraine – with a particular focus on children’s rights, to secure and strengthen democracy and good governance, and to strengthen action on the human rights aspects of the environment throughout Europe.

They also recognized the important work of national human rights institutions, civil society organisations, human rights defenders and journalists in realizing human rights and strengthening democracy.

Now, a swift and full implementation of these commitments is critical.

In order to do this, the states should prioritize four main areas of intervention:

First, they should better integrate the standards of our Organisation into national legislation, case law, and practice. This includes the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, as well as the conclusions and decisions of the European Committee of Social Rights, and the recommendations of monitoring and advisory bodies, and Council of Europe institutions, such as my Office.

Second, it is essential to prevent violations and ensure effective remedies at the national level. This requires enhancing cooperation with national human rights institutions, NGOs, and civil society, and respecting and strengthening the independence and impartiality of the judiciary.

Third, it is important to engage in issues related to the environment and Artificial Intelligence. Environmental issues, such as climate change and pollution for example, may have far-reaching implications for human rights protection. At the same time, as AI technologies advance, it’s crucial to ensure that their development and deployment is compliant with human rights standards.

Finally, there is a crucial need to engage and to enable full participation of youth and their organisations in all future discussions. Governments should empower young people to make choices and meaningfully influence their future.

The core principles of the Council of Europe, including respect for human rights and the rule of law, are not abstract concepts but the lifeblood of democracy, indispensable for just and prosperous societies. These principles remain as relevant today as they were when our Organisation was founded. Member states must strengthen their commitment to the founding values and institutions of the Council of Europe, and to the universal protection of human rights.

This is a way forward to win the hearts and minds of young people in Europe and build a society that values and protects human rights for all.
Enlargement is back on the agenda
First and foremost, this new geopolitical reality requires EU enlargement. For many years, enlargement stalled due to a lack of political will both in some member states and in candidate countries to make the necessary reforms. However, the war in Ukraine has led to a new ‘enlargement momentum’ which will define the EU for the years to come.

The fact that there is now such strong support for enlargement, even from countries who have previously been sceptical, highlights that the issue is now viewed through a different lens. Today, enlargement has become an existential matter essential to the security of our continent, especially for countries haunted by the spectre of Russian imperialism such as Ukraine and Moldova.

Therefore, there will be considerable efforts to make sure that the EU is ready for future enlargement. Just as this Commission has spent a great amount of time trying to make the EU ‘Fit for 55’ (decreasing our greenhouse gas emissions by 55 percent by 2030), the next Commission will have to work to make the EU ‘Fit for 35’ (member states).

Obviously, enlargement raises many questions. For example, how should we construct the Common Agricultural Policy in the future given that Ukraine’s farmlands cover an area greater than Italy? Ten years from now, what would be the ideal distribution of the EU budget to deal with our most pressing needs? For instance, it is not necessary to revise all agriculture policies in the EU and in the member states. The fact that there is now such strong support for enlargement, even from countries who have previously been sceptical, highlights that the issue is now viewed through a different lens. Today, enlargement has become an existential matter essential to the security of our continent, especially for countries haunted by the spectre of Russian imperialism such as Ukraine and Moldova.

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Moreover, even in a world increasingly defined by great power competition and conflict, the EU’s influence will still derive from two main sources: our economic strength and our fundamental values. Going forward, we must protect these pillars of our cooperation.

The Single Market is one such pillar, which forms the foundation of the EU’s economic and geopolitical competitiveness. As the world’s largest integrated single market area making up 15 percent of global GDP, it helps the EU punch above our weight in world affairs and exerts a powerful pull on businesses, investors, candidate countries, and trade partners.

But we cannot rest on our laurels and take the magnetic force of the Single Market for granted. According to the European Commission, 60 percent of the barriers that businesses report today are the same ones that were reported 20 years ago. At the national level, many administrative requirements in the field of services prevent some workers and businesses from making full use of the Single Market.

The road towards an enlarged EU
How to maintain momentum after the Swedish Presidency

By Jessika Roswall, Minister for EU Affairs of Sweden

In late June, I had the privilege to host the ministers for EU affairs in my home county Uppsala. There, at an informal General Affairs Council which rounded off the Swedish EU presidency, we had the first of many political discussions to come on the long road towards a reformed, enlarged EU.

The reason why we need reform is simple: the EU needs to change because the world has changed. In particular, Russia’s awful, unlawful invasion of Ukraine showed the shortcomings of several long-standing policies in the EU and in the member states. As a result, developments that seemed unthinkable even at the beginning of 2022 now suddenly seem natural. The EU has now financed arms to a country under attack, a historic first, for over a year. Germany has gotten rid of its dependence on Russian natural gas. France has wholeheartedly embraced EU enlargement. Sweden has left more than 200 years of military non-alignment behind to apply for NATO membership.

Thus, when my colleagues and I gathered in Uppsala, there was broad agreement on what we need to accomplish to make the EU better equipped for a new geopolitical reality with war on our doorstep.

Furthermore, without an ambitious trade policy, the Single Market cannot serve as a geopolitical lever. An open trade policy should also be seen as a way to boost our resilience and avoid repeating the mistake of being too dependent on a single, potentially hostile supplier for vital inputs such as critical raw materials.

Another pillar that must be protected is the EU’s fundamental values and the rule of law. For the EU budget, European arrest warrants, the Single Market and much else to function, we need to have the trust that comes only from respect for the rule of law across the Union. Indeed, that is what makes our cooperation possible to begin with. Thus, making sure that we have effective tools to uphold the rule of law will be a key question in the next few years, because no enlargement will take place at the expense of the rule of law and the EU’s fundamental values.

Yet, as we wrapped up the informal ministerial in June, I could not help but marvel at how although we don’t yet agree on the route to get there, we do agree on the final destination: an enlarged EU. We all want Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans to join us some day.

How far away into the future that day is I cannot say. Sometimes, integrating a country at war and the size of Ukraine looks almost impossible. However, as the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev has said, the only thing that looks just as impossible is not integrating it.
able to bear the weight of humanity. Every human error begins by denying the facts, and when we are in denial with respect to nature, catastrophes occur. It is only when nature strikes back and resists man’s actions that we begin to ask why us, why Slovenia? Let me be clear: denying that humans have contributed to overheating our planet is not leading us to solutions, but straight to our doom! No other species on this planet is destroying it with greenhouse gases, exterminating animal species and forests and responsible for all kinds of brutal pollution like us humans, homo sapiens, a creature distinguished from all others for our ability to think. But do we really think? It should be very clear to all of us that we, humans, are solely responsible for this planet: we can either destroy or preserve it. While yesterday Slovenia was hit, and before it was many others in a host of other locations, tomorrow it will be others elsewhere in the world. Therefore, we will either act together or disappear separately. David Attenborough, Stephen Hawking and several others warned us for decades that our planet is nearing the end of its strength and capacity. And since we probably will be unable to move to another habitable planet for quite some time, our only option is to try to fix Earth. We now know for certain that we can influence the state of the planet, like with the ozone layer, the state of watercourses, and greenhouse gas emissions. While we can have a reliable impact on reducing the planet’s overheating, an even more important part will be adapting our societies and economies to the new climate conditions. The key to this will be future policy decisions made by responsible politicians, now, today. This is why politics and businesses must enter this battle hand in hand, in a concerted and deliberate manner, to save the planet.

In a recent interview with CNN, I was asked whether the floods were partly caused by Slovenia’s failure to act promptly and effectively enough to tackle the causes of climate change. I responded by explaining that last summer in Slovenia we were battling high temperatures, drought and the biggest wildfires in our history, whereas this year we are facing the greatest floods in recent memory. If the scientific explanation that high sea temperatures have created a more humid atmosphere over the Alps, and thus unusually high and, most importantly, sudden rainfall in places below the Alps, is correct, then Slovenia’s impact on this has been proportional to its size. We ourselves are more to blame when it comes to neglecting to clean up our watercourses, forcing rivers into artificial channels, and building in inappropriate places. Climate change is not a local problem but is, above all, a global problem that affects every part of the world, albeit differently, still, no one remains unaffected. It can therefore only be tackled successfully on a global level. However, of course, everything starts on the local level and, even before then, with the environmentally conscious individual. In this regard, I believe it is critical to include lessons about climate change and the impact humans have on nature in school curricula everywhere around the world. We will also need to increase knowledge about climate change by investing even more in education and science. But if we do not raise awareness among our children and, right now, among ourselves – and by this, I mean the global political class – then it may indeed be too late. Educating young people is the best answer to those who deny or underestimate the human impact on climate change.

Solidarity, which has helped us Slovians to overcome hardships, is emerging ever more strongly as a vital value not only within individual societies, but also as the key to combating climate change on a planetary scale. Or, to put it even more directly, I am calling for planet-wide solidarity in order to save our planet. This is not just about the material and technical dimensions of the response to global warming, measuring carbon footprints, financial compensation for the more diligent and penalties for those less engaged, it is about finally addressing the need on this planet for the more developed to understand and help the less developed, for the less affected to help the more affected. We must not give up our ambition to heal the Earth, to repair this boat we are sharing and in which we travel through time. An appropriate response to the situation in which we find ourselves today would be strengthening the Green Climate Fund (GCF). We urgently need to further adapt all our international organisations, starting with the United Nations – that would be the appropriate response – and all the regional alliances of countries, all the economic and financial alliances and institutions, right down to the last village in Patagonia or Siberia, where people care deeply about doing something good for our planet. Slovenia will be a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2024 – 2025. In our campaign for membership, we made it clear that the central programme guidelines of the current Slovenian Government would also be the guidelines for our work in the UN’s most powerful body, that holds primary responsibility for the
maintenance of international peace and security. Alongside solidarity, which is our main guiding principle in working for the well-being of Slovenia’s inhabitants, we are also guided by the principle of including the widest possible range of people and organisations in decision-making, including civil society. Sustainable economic growth and sustainable stewardship of the planet at our disposal are especially important for us. We will strive to translate all of this into our actions on the global level, including our firm determination to help others just as others have always helped us and are helping us now that we have found ourselves in a tough spot.

We also have another big ambition for the UN Security Council: to do our best to help end the suffering of the Ukrainian people caused by the Russian aggression. As a time when Slovenia is fighting with nature, people in Ukraine are fighting for their very existence in their own homeland, which is the victim of Russian aggression. I wonder what the Russian nation has to gain from such aggression against a neighbouring country and a neighbouring, closely related people, what has the crude violence achieved, what has the brutality of war brought to the Russians, to Europe, to humanity? There is only damage and suffering, tragedy, ruins, misfortune and grief. How much damage has been done to nature and the climate by a war that has broken out suddenly and seemingly cannot come to a stop? What does it mean when food becomes weaponised and warships are blocking the flow of grain to the African population? All I know for sure is that wars are taking humanitarity dramatically further away from the goal of healing this planet, saving it, and in turn saving ourselves.

I do not want to give up hoping that it may be possible to agree with Russia on how to build our common future. The cessation of Russian aggression would be the most telling sign it would represent the moment when we could achieve a cease-fire and give diplomacy and negotiations a chance to achieve a lasting and just peace. In Europe, we can provide mutual guarantees, including, of course, guarantees on the forms of future energy and climate cooperation. In particular – and this is a great desire of many Europeans – Europe and Russia should cooperate on space programmes. Three decades ago, there was every indication that this might be the case. The whole world remembers how Metallica held a concert in Moscow in 1991, in front of 1.5 million young Russians who were looking at the future with joy and hope. In Slovenia, we also remember how in 1992 the avant-garde Slovenian art collective NSK, or Neue Slovenische Kunst, opened its ‘embassy’ in the Russian capital. Several years later, it even performed a ballet on the replica of the Mir space station in Star City, the training centre for Russian cosmonauts just north of Moscow, in preparations for a dance in Earth’s orbit and the beginning of a joint ‘culturalisation’ of outer space. After half a century, Europe was united in diversi- ty and looking forward to future challenges. It is now time to re-establish that spirit and give both us and our planet new hope.
Putting people at the heart of the reconstruction of Ukraine

Striving towards a human-rights-based recovery and reconstruction

By Michael O’Flaherty, Director, EU Fundamental Rights Agency, (the views expressed in the article represent his personal opinions)

International human rights law is a comprehensive road map concerning how to show respect for everyone in our societies. It addresses every aspect of our lives. Ukraine is on the pathway to membership in the Union, with a high degree of compliance with human rights required of it before accession will take place.

What’s more, it is law. It is binding on Ukraine as well as on all states that will support Ukraine’s reconstruction.

Putting human rights at the heart of planning for reconstruction would require three things:

First, to bring human rights expertise into the room. The governments and organisations that are imagining what the Ukrainian future might look like need to work with the human rights expert colleagues that most of them have.

Second, they need to bring all human rights to bear – for sure, it will be about respecting civil and political rights, but the rights that guarantee social, economic and cultural well-being are no less important.

Third, a human rights approach requires that pathways to the future be worked out in full, deep and respectful consultation with the Ukrainian government and other national institutions, including the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights. It is no less important to engage with Ukraine’s rich and diverse civil society.

There are two regional institutions with a key role to play.

The first is the European Union. It is already clear that it will make an enormous contribution to reconstruction, reportedly to the value of at least EUR 50 billion. As a matter of law, it is bound to respect human rights in how it disburses the money: it should look now at what would require in practice. Moreover, Ukraine is on the pathway to membership in the Union, with a high degree of compliance with human rights required of it before accession will take place – much of that compliance will ultimately be tested in the very institutions, like the justice system, that will benefit from reconstruction.

As the EU and Ukraine look to put human rights at the heart of their efforts, they can be supported by the agency that I direct, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency – the Union’s human rights advisory body. However, this would require that Ukraine seek observer status with the agency – something that I hope happens soon.

The other critical regional player is the Council of Europe. The Council is the guardian of human rights on the European continent and the outcome of its recent Reykjavik Summit shows that it recognises its special responsibilities to Ukraine. Its initiatives will include establishment of a Register of Damage and the implementation of a “resilience, recovery and reconstruction” action plan. To get these right from a human rights point of view, and to keep a close eye on everyone else’s reconstruction work, the monitoring and guidance role of the Council of Europe will be essential.

Human rights law is no panacea. Just addressing it in reconstruction plans is no guarantee of a stable peaceful future. But experience has long shown that its integration puts humans at the heart of the attention and delivers better outcomes that are fairer and more trustworthy. Ukraine, for all the suffering inflicted on it, deserves no less.

nevitably – and despite the ongoing aggression against Ukraine – there is now much discussion around what reconstruction of the country should look like, including in recent weeks, a major study of the RAND Corporation, co-authored by the recently deceased and respected US diplomat James Dobbins.

There is obviously much merit in all this thinking, yet what I have seen shares a big gap – attention to the role of human rights. For sure, there is acknowledgement of how economic and other reconstruction strategies are in large part about improving human well-being; there is a welcome focus on the recovery of abducted children and other prisoners; there is strong attention to criminal accountability.

There is obviously much discussion around what reconstruction of Ukraine as well as on all states that will support Ukraine’s reconstruction.

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when the Slovenian-Italian Karst region was hit by huge wildfires, revealing that no country is immune to climate change and extreme weather and that natural disasters know no boundaries and cannot be addressed without combined efforts. Nor without solidarity.

In the past year and since the last issue of Bled Strategic Times, I have been busy travelling around the world and campaigning for our bid to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2024–2025. Our slogan “Building Trust. Securing Future” has been reflecting the era where, in the 30 years of our existence, Slovenia has already proven to be a credible partner in international relations. With “Building Trust”, we are referring to respect for international law, particularly with respect to accountability; conflict prevention, transparency and the women, peace and security agenda; with “Securing Future”, we are focusing on climate and security, water diplomacy, food security, and children in armed conflict.

If I had to pick one common issue emphasised in my numerous discussions with representatives from around the globe, it would be security understood not simply in its most blatant, ‘physical’ form, but also as climate security, food security, water security etc. This explains why we have gone a step further with the title and topic of this year’s Bled Strategic Forum, introducing “solidarity” into the equation of “global security”. As we know that solidarity, an often-overused word, would - unfortunately - be such a key factor in Slovenia these days.

Stability is another value that means a lot to us. Throughout its history, Slovenia has been a stable and reliable member of the international community. Despite a brief 10-day war on our soil following the break-up of Yugoslavia, Slovenia has emerged as a determined promoter of stability. We selflessly share our experiences on a wide range of issues in the hope of fostering stability and prosperity in our immediate neighbourhood. Our upcoming membership in the UN Security Council in the 2024-2025 term means that Slovenia holds additional responsibilities in assisting with global problem-solving through cooperation with all UN member states.

Slovenian society as a whole has matured every respect since our successful political and economic transition that led to our integration into major international structures. Today, Slovenia is not only part of the developed world but also ranks among the most desirable countries to live in. According to the Human Development Index, which takes account of factors like life expectancy, education, and living standards, Slovenia is ranked 23rd out of 191 countries. This is a remarkable achievement, one that we are proud of.

Another fact we are proud of is gaining recognition as a problem-solver rather than a troublemaker in the international arena. For instance, we have helped address regional, European and global challenges both as an individual country and via our engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Montenegro. Additionally, we were elected to the UN body ECOSOC last year. This gives us an opportunity to address social and economic challenges.

In January 2024, when our membership in the UN Security Council commences, our responsibility for contributing to the resolution of global problems will grow exponentially. Our election to the UN Security Council is testament to the worthwhilenss and reputation Slovenia has built among the UN membership. It highlights our commitment to international peace and stability, as well as the constructive approach we have cultivated over the past three decades. At a time of global divisions, our historic win with 153 votes in favour of Slovenia further adds to our success story.

Still, we remain fully committed to the continued progress of Slovenia, both domestically and internationally. Our government is determined to continue implementing the necessary reforms. In the international arena, we are resolute in maintaining Slovenia as a credible and constructive member of the international community, one that supports international law, human rights, and promotes global peace and stability. Holding a seat in the UN Security Council is the most important foreign policy project of our government’s mandate. While holding such a prominent position means that we have an opportunity to address global issues, it also entails an enormous responsibility towards our citizens and all UN member states to excel in our work.

Even though our membership in the UN Security Council will be a significant focus of Slovenia’s foreign policy, it is not the only issue we will be addressing. Relations with our neighbours, the Western Balkans, the Mediterranean, and Central Europe, along with EU-related affairs and a variety of other matters, will remain at the top of our agenda. Resilience, energy security, the green transition, and environmental protection, among others, will also be key priorities. Our plate is and will remain full, if not overflowing.

This being said, it is indeed concerning to witness the emergence of numerous global problems. Moreover, many existing issues remain unresolved or even seem to be resurfacing, which is equally disheartening. As an outward-looking country, Slovenia aims to share its achievements with others. While we cannot offer a one-size-fits-all formula to our partners, we are always ready to assist them in their progress. Likewise, we are open to learning from others so that Slovenia can further advance in every respect. The Bled Strategic Forum serves as a platform that embodies our two aspirations: to share our experiences, and to learn from others. Bled brings people together to engage in dialogue on a broad range of problems. It raises questions, presents new dilemmas and proposes solutions. In essence, it encapsulates our vision of Slovenia as an open-minded, progressive and generous country that goes beyond stereotypes and values continuous learning. It represents the story of Slovenia’s success.

For Slovenia, solidarity and stability are more than just two words. They are concepts, values we live by and cherish, and principles we want to promote globally. Slovenia is determined to continue implementing the necessary reforms. In the international arena, we are resolute in maintaining Slovenia as a credible and constructive member of the international community, one that supports international law, human rights, and promotes global peace and stability. Holding a seat in the UN Security Council is the most important foreign policy project of our government’s mandate. While holding such a prominent position means that we have an opportunity to address global issues, it also entails an enormous responsibility towards our citizens and all UN member states to excel in our work.

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Welcome to Slovenia and welcome to Bled!

And do not forget to make a wish. It might come true – so the legend goes – if you ring the ‘wishing bell’ in the church tower on Bled island at least three times.
EU enlargement in Western Balkans: a question of necessity

The only way to ensure peace, economic prosperity, and stability for future generations in the region is full integration into the European Union

/ By Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues

2022 was one of the most interesting years for EU enlargement in the last decade. Russia’s brutal war of aggression in Ukraine, despite all of its horrors and human tragedies, has effectively revitalised EU enlargement. The war has not only made decisions on advancing EU enlargement, long relegated to an afterthought, possible again, but also rekindled its geopolitical significance. For far too long, the enlargement process had been reduced to an exercise of ticking boxes and meeting benchmarks for technical criteria. This changed in 2022. Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia Herzegovina were granted candidate status, Georgia conditionally so, and the long overdue accession negotiations were launched with Albania and North Macedonia. Kosovo was finally given the green light for visa liberalisation and submitted its application for EU membership at year’s end. While some of these decisions were well overdue, others stemmed from the realisation that Europe cannot be truly united, prosperous and at peace with so many of our closest partners still left out. It has become clear that only through EU membership can we achieve what we are aspiring for Europe.

2023 also started promisingly. Bosnia and Herzegovina saw the formation of a new government, Montenegro elected a new president while Kosovo and Serbia – under EU facilitation and with the strong support of Germany, France, Italy and the USA – reached the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of their relations. This achievement is a milestone in the EU-catalysed Dialogue on the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, a key pillar of the EU’s engagement in the Western Balkans. The Agreement redefines the Kosovo–Serbia relationship, placing it on a more sustainable basis and providing a clear path to EU integration. The security, stability and prosperity of the entire region is ultimately the benefit. However, while the groundwork for its implementation has been laid, its execution is still pending and we instead find ourselves once again in crisis management mode. Fast forward to August 2023 and the rapid transformative action in the Western Balkans we were hoping for has not taken place. The momentum generated 1 year ago is fading and, as things stand today, the countries of the Western Balkans are not taking the quick and resolute steps needed to ride the pro-enlargement wave. It has been disappointing to see that the positive developments on the EU side have not resonated in the Western Balkans. While siding with us in words condemning the war, our partners in the region have failed to undertake the necessary actions to bring them closer to the EU. We observe too little progress in meeting the criteria for accession, implementing reforms and resolving bilateral disputes in a decisive manner.

On the contrary, the region’s political landscape is arguably less ready for EU membership than it was 5 years ago. We have witnessed worrying backsliding, political instability and the resurfacing of toxic issues of the past. The region today shows more divisions, greater volatility and escalating tensions between neighbours.

Instead of renewed commitment and rapid progress with reforms, the region is increasingly blaming the EU for its slow progress on the path to membership. The many challenges presently encountered by the region are negatively impacting all aspects of life. It is concerning that these challenges, compounded by the lack of progress in EU accession, could slowly lead to the stagnation of societies and economies in the Balkans. We see little reconfiguration, no overall feeling of justice, and a lack of opportunities for the next generation.

People are voting with their feet, opting to leave the region in search for a better future elsewhere. It is no secret that the Western Balkan countries continue to face structural challenges and socio-economic hardships caused by high unemployment rates, comparatively low wages, and weak education systems coupled with low social security and widespread corruption – the very areas the EU criteria and reforms are designed to address.

The key questions for the region today are thus:
- How can these negative trends be reversed effectively?
- How can the development of the Western Balkans in all areas be put on a sustainable track?
- How can the region be helped to become ready for EU membership as soon as possible?

In my view, it always comes back to enlargement. Enlargement is a question of necessity, but we need to rethink our approach. Business as usual is no longer an option. A fundamental rethink is essential for ensuring that the accession negotiations actually follow the pace of reforms and are aligned with our foreign and security policy.

Looking at the accession negotiations of the latest members and current membership candidates, it is obvious that the length of accession negotiations has increased. This also means that if the accession process as presently designed remains unchanged, no candidate will be acceding in the next decade.

What makes it almost impossible to join the EU in the current conditions is the gap between what the EU says and how the process actually proceeds. There is a clear disconnect between progress on reforms and progress in accession.

Consequently, one pragmatic approach to promptly reprioritising the accession process would be to bridge this gap by showing that it is possible for countries that satisfy the accession criteria, as objectively evaluated by the European Commission, to become members.

This starts with a collective recommitment to enlargement by both the EU Member States and their Western Balkan counterparts. Efforts are also needed to overcome the ‘fear’ of enlargement – a process the EU invented and continues to control with Member States setting the rules.

Such an approach also means seriously looking for practical interim solutions on the road to full membership – such as staged accession without changing the treaties. Many good papers have been produced by think tanks, scholars and others. What’s needed now is a strategic policy discussion to turn them into innovation.

For me, the answer to the current challenges of the Western Balkans is full EU integration. That is the only way to ensure peace, economic prosperity, and stability for future generations in the region. There is no credible alternative. Let’s make sure that we act now and do not miss another opportunity.
Architecture, which had been transforming global community as well, that the system is now clear, not only to Europeans but the terconnected world, especially in Europe. It

Union in the 1990s.

largely intact until the collapse of the Soviet

in the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. The two

ference on Security and Cooperation in

poles closer together, and to finally put to

pro-Western North Atlantic Treaty Organi-

ologies and visions of a post-war Europe

of states' behaviour in international

uty architecture can be traced to the creation

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Commonwealth, grew into the supranational

which initially concentrated on industrial

right of states

of the United Nations (UN) in 1945. It gave

ties states a platform to solve their differenc-

stated as the Helsinki Final Act, is the principle of

state's security cannot come at the expense

ecies in a peaceful manner, yet also outlined

protection of human rights sought, and still seeks,

right architecture was emerging.

The Council of Europe with its focus on human

and to restore the equilibrium the Collec-

turalisation, which saw it transform into the Organisa-

in the OSCE; by the mid-1990s. The main premise

of the Helsinki Final Act, is the principle of equal

as neutrality, as they evolve as states.

States finally came to a firm consensus that

he gravity of Russia's actions; it will not end on the

field, it will end behind a negotiating

table, with both sides having spilled blood for

better negotiating conditions, and a changed

security structure. It is too early to say when and

how that will be done, but one thing is certain – it will end with Ukraine firmly on

the path of Euro-Atlantic integration, and as an integral part of a changed European secu-

rity architecture.

Second, Russia's invasion, which could be perceived as a stark warning against any

the NATO enlargement, has triggered the

exact opposite reaction. Sweden and

land, two historically neutral states, de-

cided to join NATO. Defence spending has increased across the board in countries of

the Alliance, with many states speeding up their efforts to achieve the 2% GDP in-

vestment baseline, Slovenia included. The

armament of states has increased in the

aftermath, while NATO has strengthened its
deterrence and defence posture.

Third, not only NATO, but the EU as well has altered its approach to defence. Although
defence matters still remain firmly in the hands of Member States, the 2022 Strategic

Compass represents the EU's first-ever defence strategy. Actions taken within the EU in the past year show consider-

able unity, as exemplified by the European Peace Facility being successfully modified to assist Ukraine with its needs; a serious push for common procurement within the EU1, and the establishment of a new mis-

sion, the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine, to strengthen the
capacity of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Further, Denmark, which for 30 years had
decided to opt out of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, decided by referendum to start participating in it.

In conclusion, the only constant in life is change. Everything changes, and so must the
current security architecture. Wars end; this war will end as well. It will not end on the

battlefield; it will end behind a negotiating table, with both sides having spilled blood for

better negotiating conditions, and a changed security structure. It is too early to say when and

how that will be done, but one thing is certain – it will end with Ukraine firmly on the

path of Euro-Atlantic integration, and as an integral part of a changed European secu-

rity architecture.
When people hear the term “climate crisis” they usually think about melting ice caps, unbearable hot temperatures and untameable wildfires in faraway places. These consequences of the climate crisis are clearly visible, even tangible. Less visible and less tangible – especially from a European perspective – are the effects on global food security, people’s social and economic situations and even human security.

The climate crisis is a clear and present danger to the world’s food and water resources. It threatens to erode the livelihoods of millions of people. And it will ultimately lead to more violent conflicts, causing distributional tensions, displacement and migration. These are the challenges facing international development cooperation.

And these are some of the approaches and solutions that Germany has developed together with its partner countries to address these challenges.

Not just a drop in the ocean: food and water security

Droughts, floods and ocean heatwaves are just some of the environmental consequences of climate change. They pose a risk to water availability and food security worldwide. Extreme weather events and slow-onset processes such as desertification has increased overall, climate change has slowed this progress globally over the last 50 years.

Mid- and low-latitude regions like Kenya are particularly affected. In order to address these issues, German development cooperation supports partner countries in protecting water resources and enabling access to safe and sustainable water supply. On this basis, we encourage the creation of resilient, low-emission agricultural and food systems.

What does this mean in concrete terms?

Water is becoming more and more expensive. Guaranteeing the human right to clean drinking water and sanitation all over the world would require three times as much investment as we have today – over USD 110 billion a year. More money is needed, and the money that is available must be used more efficiently to make the water sector more sustainable and more crisis-resistant.

Which is why Germany, along with the EU and the Netherlands, has developed a new funding mechanism: the Urban Water Catalyst Initiative. This initiative supports urban water and sanitation providers in the Global South with technical expertise and investment in operations and infrastructure. Such providers are then able to gradually increase their performance and become more attractive to other investors. Private investments make the providers financially independent, which in turn helps them to provide the population with adequate access to drinking water and toilets.

When it comes to food security, more information about the impact of climate change is needed to create resilient forms of farming. Therefore, German development cooperation – together with its partner countries – is focusing on the effective use of data and its accessibility to farmers. In Madagascar, for example, around 19,000 smallholder farmers are receiving agricultural advisory services and access to means of production. What the farmers learn from these programmes, they go on to teach to their peers. Haova, for instance, is a farmer in southern Madagascar who is also president of the Farmer Field School. She is teaching her colleagues new farming methods that are more resilient to climate change. By way of smartphone, the farmers are informed in real time about the weather, can access crop-specific information and receive recommendations on crop selection and water and fertiliser use. A cropping calendar hotline has also been created.
the last 3 years, Malagasy farmers have consulted the hotline over 1.3 million times. Preventive measures like these are helping to secure food for the future.

**Not just a transition, but a “Just Transition”**

The climate crisis also requires new approaches to energy production. Jobs in the fossil fuel sector will dwindle, whereas new jobs in the renewable energy sector will emerge. The environmental and economic potential of renewables is huge – as are the challenges of distributing the profits evenly across societies. If these challenges are met, the result will not just be a transition, but a Just Transition. To achieve this goal, our Ministry has established ambitious bilateral climate and development partnerships (P+) and multilateral partnerships within the G7 framework, called Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs). These partnerships offer cooperation, guidance and resources aimed at climate-relevant sectors.

Let’s take a look at some examples of our cooperation projects.

One promising project is Energising Development (EnDev), implemented in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Since 2005, EnDev has provided access to renewable energy for around 26 million people, 82,000 small and micro enterprises, and nearly 31,000 social institutions like schools and health centres – mostly located in rural areas. The project also provides energy-efficient cooking stoves and solar heating systems.

In Rwanda, the EnDev project promotes off-grid solar lighting and has given 630,000 people access to energy for modern lighting. Four hydropower plants are providing electricity to 45,000 people, and 25 mini-grids are providing electricity to a further 10,000 people. Altogether, 14,800 poor households have been connected to the grid.

The JETP with South Africa aims to phase coal out in South Africa by 2035 in a way that is sustainable and acceptable to society at large. To achieve this goal, investing in professional opportunities for women and young people and in future innovation hubs is key. Through the construction of solar and wind power plants and transmission lines for green electricity, new jobs will be created, in particular in former coal regions.

**Better safe than sorry: warning signs, rapid relief and resilience-building**

Every year, around 13 million people die due to climate change. Their deaths are caused by air pollution, storms, fires, floods and starvation. A further 250,000 people die every year from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress caused by climate change. In 2022 alone, more than 30 million people had to leave their homes because extreme weather events had made them uninhabitable.

Development cooperation attempts to counter this with information services and access to emergency funds. Since information leads to risk reduction, our ministry supports the Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems (CREWS) initiative. The initiative facilitates investments in 60 countries worldwide. In Burkina Faso, one million people can now be reached through early warning services in the event of a climate emergency. Smallholder farmers in particular now have sufficient time and means to secure their crops and protect their livelihoods. When it comes to comprehensively managing climate risks, risk reduction is one very important element – but alone it is not enough.

To ensure that people and countries can recover quickly from a climate disaster, financial protection instruments need to be in place. They allow destroyed infrastructure to be rebuilt and permit farmers who have lost their harvest to buy food or new seeds. To increase this kind of financial support, Germany – together with the V20 Group of Vulnerable Countries and a number of donor countries – created the Global Shield against Climate Risks. The Global Shield aims to provide substantially more and better pre-arranged financing for addressing losses and damage caused by extreme weather events. The initiative will become operational in the initial set of countries soon. Ghana, Pakistan and the Pacific Small Island Developing States will be the first to receive comprehensive protection packages tailored to their needs.

**No more excuses**

If climate is just another word for everything left to lose, then it is the international community’s responsibility to save what can be saved, and to protect people from the hazards of climate change. The good news is that this necessary transformation holds the potential to establish new and better structures. To create profits that can be shared equally. To reduce inequalities. And to create better, healthier lives for people worldwide. This is what we – together with our international partners – are fighting for at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. Because it’s the right thing to do.

**NOTES:**

1. Benin, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda
2. Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal
3. Duration: 2005-2025, €470 million (€134 million of which is Germany’s contribution)
A G3 mechanism for dialogue and cooperation

China, the USA and the EU: working towards the recovery of the world economy and the governance of international affairs

/ By Wang Huiyao, Founder and President, Center for China and Globalizations, and Counselor, China State Council (2015–2022)
Resurrecting the China–EU Investment Agreement

Although China and the EU share extensive common interests, there is also a need to build a solid foundation for cooperation, over the past 2 years China–EU relations have deteriorated rapidly and an impasse has been reached on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment Protection and Innovation (CAI), which has been hailed as the impetus for a second wave of reform and opening up in China. The agreement contains many conditions and benefits not even previously enjoyed by the USA and establishes a more open and high-er level standard for European companies. In an effort to overcome this impasse, China’s President Xi Jinping, who has been at the forefront of the International Labour Organisation’s 1930 Forced Labour Convention and the 1957 Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, all with a view to reversing the China–EU BRI. The resumption of communication would promote negotiation and the lifting of sanctions, allowing the CAI to go into effect as soon as possible. This would be a boon to Chinese and European enterprises.

China, the EU and the USA joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)

The intensified economic and technical competition between the two superpowers in the global market has led to a bigger push for the Biden Administration to rejig the CPTPP, which may provide an opportunity for both countries to come together. China’s membership would help reduce friction by bringing the country closer to progressive trade norms, while also adding a new dimension to the relationship between China and the USA that could drive a rebound in US-China relations and establish a new channel for China and the USA to resolve trade disputes. Following the UK’s formal accession to the CPTPP, if the EU, as a united market, were to join the current high-standard trade agreement, the impact would be even greater. China and the USA have economic and trade agreement between China, the EU and the USA within the CPTPP could also provide a template for WTO reform. Last but not least, in the context of the China in Asia Pacific countries, China has also applied to join the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) initiated by New Zealand, Canada and Singapore. It would add an bonus if the USA were to join the pact to promote regional digital economy in conjunction with China.

Cooperation with the Global South

A G3 should also emphasise cooperation with global south countries to balance the gap between developing and developed countries. China, as a member of BRICS, has engaged heavily with developing countries in commerce and trade. The BRICS New Development Bank has seated a force in the global financial sector and political security. Sub-Saharan African countries have long been economically low on global industrial chains, supply chains and value chains, which means they have had less of a voice in political matters. An established G3 could unleash Sub-Saharan economic potential, including its rich natural and human resources, to close the gaps in regional development. Similarly, as they continue to modernise, Latin American countries can benefit from the foundations and achieved a high degree of global integration. A G3 should assist Latin America in getting out of the middle-income trap, given the region’s warning due on global affairs, especially in the context of the climate crisis.

Cooperation on infrastructure projects

At the right time, a G3 could also work to achieve some level of overlap and allow for the global infrastructure development by co-ordinating between the Belt and Road Initiative, the EU’s Global Gateway, and the new Group of Seven Partnership on Global Infrastructure (7GIP). This would ensure that under these initiatives are coordinated and shaped by geopolitical competition, there is a danger they could lock countries into high carbon paths for decades to come. Since being launched in 2013, the BRI has become a vector of globalisation, growth and investment in many regions, yet reshaping the BRI into a more multilateral endeavour in the promotion of global governance and development has also become a necessary step in the next phase of its development.

The global demand for investment in infrastructure is clear, but the lack of funding, along with the issue of matching supply and demand, are structural issues that have existed for years in international development financing. Since its launch in 2015, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has operated according to the model and principles of multilateral development banks, adhering to international, high normative standards, and been recognised by multilateral organisations. In the right context, it would be possible for the AIIB to cooperate with development banks from the EU and the USA such as the European Bank for Reconstruction’s pact’s common umbrella. China’s membership would help reduce friction by bringing the country closer to progressive global trade norms, while also adding a new dimension to the relationship between China and the USA that could drive a rebound in US-China relations and establish a new channel for China and the USA to resolve trade disputes.

At present, even though dialogue between China and the USA is strained, it remains very important. The creation of a G3 would provide an alternative path for resolution when relations between the two countries encounter difficulties. While Europe’s values are more oriented to those of the USA, it must also consider China’s political values. China needs to take advantage of Europe’s relative neutral position on Sino–US relations to play a more active role in coordinating the Ruddish relationship. In any case, it is possible that a trilateral platform that leverages the strengths of both of the world’s existing and emerging powers would bring the greatest benefit to global governance, as a whole and maximise the potential for success in resolving a number of common issues that face the world today.

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Climate and security
Now on every foreign minister's to-do list
By Ann Linde, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden

The picture appeared in newspapers all over the world at the end of June. One of the great political leaders of our time, President Zelensky of Ukraine, and the young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg together with a small group of international politicians. Why was she in Kiev with them?

The reason is that President Zelensky is not only a president who will forever be remembered for the courageous way he led his country during the devastating, illegal, terrible war that Russia started in February 2022, but he is also a president who realises how the war is destroying the environment and the long-term consequences for his country. And he wants to do something about it.

At the G20 meeting held in Indonesia in November last year, Zelensky reiterated Ukraine’s formula for peace that he had presented at the UN General Assembly in September 2022. And that is not only what is needed to win the war on the battlefield, it is also a list of all the work that will need to be done to restore Ukraine.

Point 8 on the list is about ecocide, the need to immediately protect the environment. He points out some of the devastating effects of the war: “Millions of hectares of forest were burned by shelling. Almost two hundred thousand hectares of our land are contaminated with unexploded mines and shells. Dozens of coal mines are flooded, including the mine in which an underground nuclear test explosion was carried out in 1979... Thousands of hectares of soil are contaminated with harmful substances – most of them are fertile soils. Were fertile soils.”

It is for this reason that Zelensky is forming an International Working Group on the Environmental Consequences of War. The group should assess the consequences of war for the environment – both today and in the future; to develop recommendations for punishing the aggressor state for environmental crimes. Greta Thunberg is a member of that group and offered strong remarks concerning Russia’s deliberate environmental warfare in Ukraine.

The co-chairs of the group are Andrij Yermak, Head of the Office of the President, and my predecessor as the foreign minister of Sweden, Margot Wallström. She was also the European Commissioner for the environment.

As Chairperson of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2021, it became evident to me while visiting OSCE member states that the risks of geopolitical competition over scarce resources are imminent in many places and that climate change indeed holds clear security implications on the ground. The current and future consequences of climate change and the rapid loss of biological diversity mean there is no doubt that we have entered unknown territory. No region and no human being will be left untouched. We must base our policies on top-notch research and analysis.

At this very moment, Russia’s aggression against its peaceful neighbour is contributing to a severe food crisis around the world. We should remember that rising food prices cause tension no matter whether they are caused by a war or climate change. We saw this already ahead of the Arab Spring.

The links between climate change, environmental degradation and security are increasingly recognised by the vast majority of countries. Such recognition is also growing stronger within regional organisations, and I am really proud that Sweden together with partners was able to give this agenda a strong push during our time in both the UN and the OSCE.

In the Security Council, where Sweden held a non-permanent seat between 2017 and 2018, we initiated the UN Climate Security Mechanism, an example of how Sweden and its partners are trying to take a holistic approach and combine the best forces of the UN on climate change, the environment, development, and peace and security.

The UN, UNEP, UNDP and the UN Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs are pooling their knowledge and providing climate security advisors in the field. This is in order to enhance understanding and the action in the most exposed and vulnerable countries of the joint challenge of climate change and security.

Under Swedish chairpersonship, the Ministerial Council Decision in December 2021 on climate and security was ground-breaking as these links were clearly recognised for the first time and gave the OSCE a mandate to work with the issue. The OSCE held a high-level conference on climate and security in July, and it is important to see how the OSCE along with its instruments for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation can enhance its role also in tackling climate-related risks.

Addressing the climate and security nexus is about analysis, action and cooperation.

So, what should we do next?

We must improve our capacity to assess the role of climate change and environmental degradation as a risk multiplier and, at times, as an opportunity for risk-reducing cooperation.

- We must move from analysis to action – on both the national and international levels
- There must be clear and outspoken political leadership
- Inter-organisational cooperation must be promoted, not least between the OSCE, the EU, and the United Nations
- There must be accountability for countries and actors engaging in environmental warfare
- Governments should appoint Ambassadors for Climate and Security.

Climate and security entails an ever more salient topic on the political agenda. Let us hope that this will become as common as more traditional topics at all future meetings of Foreign Ministers.
The Finns are pragmatic people. They like to tell the story of Leonid Brezhnev’s visit to Helsinki, sometime in the mid-1970s. As it was a high-ranking state visit, Soviet protocol also suggested laying a wreath at the monument to the Unknown Soldier. No problem, said the noble Finns, and Brezhnev was taken to a pine grove on the shores of Lake Tuusula, some 30 kilometres from the capital. There the Soviet leader laid a wreath with all pomp on a modest marble plaque.

As he strode back to the waiting Finnish President, Urho Kekkonen, Brezhnev remarked, somewhat confused, that the plaque read Jan Sibelius. “Wasn’t that a well-known composer?”, he asked his Finnish colleague. “Yes”, replied Kekkonen, "Sibelius was a well-known artist, but a completely unknown soldier".

This story, even if most likely not entirely true, nicely illustrates the difference between two understandings of culture, one embodied by Sibelius, the other by Brezhnev, and his successors, all the way to the current occupier of the Kremlin. And the plethora of like-minded nationalists and populists who are popping up all across Europe and the world. There is nothing wrong with heroes, of course, known or unknown, and many fully deserve our tribute and gratitude and the monuments erected in their honour. But there is a sea of difference between the understanding of what culture is, by genuine democrats on one hand, and nationalists and populists on the other. On one side, we have artistic creation, and on the other, we have ‘culture’ reduced to religion, race and skin colour.

There is a sea of difference between the understanding of what culture is, by genuine democrats on one hand, and nationalists and populists on the other. On one side, we have artistic creation, and on the other, we have ‘culture’ reduced to religion, race and skin colour. The former is defended by talent and creativity, as well as by the attention and support of the society, while the latter is defended above all by intolerance of others and of the different.

On the one hand, then, we have culture as artistic creation, which transcends political, ideological and all other definitions and divisions. Which is left or right or neither left nor right? Institutional and institutionalised, revolutionary and subversive, professional or amateur, rural and urban? Commercial or its most unsellable opposite? The kind that goes down easily and the kind that doesn’t. A culture that can be progressive and deeply humanist, or not. A culture that inspires and one that ‘disturbs, offends or disturbs’, as the European Court of Human Rights calls it. The culture that we like and the culture that gets on our nerves. The one that carries important social messages and the one that – quite legitimately and socially useful – is an end in itself.

On the other hand, we have ‘culture’ that is not culture, but a myth- and stereotype-laden baseball bat with which nativist and nationalist populism divide people into ‘us’ and ‘them’. A ‘culture’ reduced to an ‘ethnol’ identity that does not tolerate and is afraid of creativity, openness and freedom. A ‘culture’ that serves as an adrenaline rush for people without empathy, courage and imagination. ‘Culture’ as a hammer with which to beat the Others and the different. A ‘culture’ that not only annoys, offends and upsets, but above all and solely hates. A barbed-wire-protected cesspit without any currents, inflows or outflows, just silt and stagnant water. No oxygen.

Culture and art have been the catalysts of progressive social progress since, well, ever. Still, every time we should really acknowledge their essential contribution to human freedom and dignity, we somehow manage to ignore them.

In 1954, Council of Europe member states adopted the European cultural convention, the first major Council of Europe treaty after the European convention on human rights and fundamental freedoms. This was no coincidence, but a deliberate political act. The founders of the European project were well aware that, just a few years after a devastating war, this project had little chance of success without a democratic European environment, a sense of unity...
that would bring Europeans together, an identity based on progressive values, one that came in addition, not as a substitute to their national or other identities. And they knew exactly how to go about creating such an environment. Through culture, art, heritage, history, language learning and education. And it worked. For a while.

Where we are today, as a society, 74 years after adoption of the European cultural convention, is beautifully illustrated by Donald Trump’s infamous statement from the early COVID days that the solution lies in a “herd mentality”. He probably meant to say “herd immunity”, but this Freudian slip says a great deal about his views on the social order. Even though Trump may be American, many politicians in Europe wholeheartedly agree with him. The herd believes and does not think. The herd does not know, does not dare and does not want to know. The herd follows and does not protest.

“Hated is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

If knowledge is treated badly, culture has it even worse. “Today, to put it mildly, many people understand it differently from the way Goethe viewed it. We are a long way from the lessons of the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment. We are a long way away from the values on which the modern age of human civilization was built and from which we defend with intolerance and hatred. A ‘culture’ that we associate with intolerance and hatred. A ‘culture’ that we associate with the Other and the different. A ‘culture’ that we associate with the ‘them’ and their ‘national identity’. This is not a healthy development. It is a sign of the times.”

Critical thinking as an immune system against deception and lies has been replaced by a herd mentality.

A few years ago, Gerfried Stocker, the long-standing Director of Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria, delivered a keynote address at the Conference of European Ministers of Education in Paris. The topic was education for a digital society. It was not simply Gerfried’s crumpled T-shirt and ponytail that surprised many ministers. He believed that preparing for a high-tech society should be based on four foundations. First, knowledge of the basic structures of the digital world, without which we cannot understand technology. Second, on social skills and intelligence and humanistic values that enable us to participate and contribute to social life. Third, on knowledge and critical thinking skills. And, fourth, on creativity, which we acquire primarily through the arts, without which there is no imagination, no innovation, no economic success, no competitiveness, no social progress.

I would say, very quickly, that we are not doing a very good job of looking to the future. We are all dependent on black boxes all over the place, which we use without understanding them. Instead of people controlling technology, technology is being used to control people.

Ethical scepticism and the doctrine of respect for all different opinions without moral judgement equate, in the public’s eyes, the fundamental values of civilisation and democracy with their opposites. As a society, we reject openness and solidarity and are building our future on intolerance and selfishness towards our fellow human beings.

Critical thinking as an immune system against deception and lies has been replaced by a herd mentality. Knowledge is getting on our nerves, conspiracy theories are dearer to our hearts than reason and rationality. Art, as the expression and driving force of creativity, ingenuity, innovation, self-reflection, comment, criticism, openness, daring, exploration and freedom, has become a distraction. Many of those who are said to be deeply concerned that European civilisation and national culture are under threat feel that culture is a waste of money, so they send artists into the marketplace to compete with entertainers on the commercial stage for the public’s affection and survival.

Enlightenment thinkers – so says Wikipedia, lest you say that I am making this up – advocated freedom of expression, criticism of religion and a progressive society, and stressed the importance of reason, science and the value of human life. More than two centuries later, we are clearly tired of the light. The values on which the modern age of human civilization was built are increasingly starting to annoy. Yodas are boring and irritating. Darth Vaders are now in vogue. Welcome to the age of the Endarkenment, but remember, once it becomes dark, it might be dark for a very long time.
Crisis, rupture and future of the international order

The elusive quest for effective global governance

By Nathalie Tocci, Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy

We have known for some time that the old order is on the way out. While the crises that have dogged the international system since the turn of the century are very different in nature, they have all been connected to each other and point in the same direction. However, the direction indicated contains inbuilt contradictions that still must be resolved. This makes reaching coherent agreements on the future international security architecture fundamentally elusive.

The new century began with the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Especially the latter became associated with both the excesses of American hegemony and, thus, the start of its demise. For the last two decades we have at least known that the days of Pax Americana were numbered. What we didn't know is what this would be replaced by.

Only a few years later, commencing in 2008, the global financial crisis (GFC) and ensuing eurozone crisis appeared to provide the first answers. The GFC was a crisis of the West, revealing the deep vulnerabilities of the hyperliberalism permeating Western capitalism. This led to debate on multipolarity as an alternative system to the USA and China. The pandemic was a new form of bipolarity, with the closer transatlantic relationship and cooperation within the G7 Plus, and a strategically diminished Russia increasingly being relegated as China’s vassal. At the same time, the world also displays features of multipolarity, with authoritarian countries like Vladimir Putin’s Russia explicitly portraying themselves as leaders of an illiberal world.

Then came the pandemic crisis that made it very apparent that the international system was indeed fragmenting once again. Yet, rather than a clear multipolar structure, a new form of bipolarity was emerging, one in which the nature of political systems was central to the dynamics of democracy. While the USA and China moved toward an autocracy in some respects, the US democratic institutions were tested and revealed as inadequate for the complex challenges facing the West. The GFC, especially its mishandling in Europe with the 2011–2013 sovereign debt crisis, established fertile grounds for a third crisis – the crisis of democracy – as accentuated by the ‘migration crisis’ in Europe. The crisis of democracy, featuring the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit referendum, the nationalist populist wave in Europe and the wider world, from Turkey to Brazil, as well as the rule-of-law crisis in the EU with the democratic backsliding of Hungary and Poland, revealed a world in which the promotion of democracy was long gone and liberal democracies were in the business of protecting democracy, with authoritarian countries like Vladimir Putin’s Russia explicitly portraying themselves as leaders of an illiberal world.

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The invasion shows that the world is both bipolar, multipolar and non polar all at once. Yes, there is indeed a growing form of bipolarity, with the closer transatlantic relationship and cooperation within the G7 Plus, and a strategically diminished Russia increasingly being relegated as China’s vassal. At the same time, the world also displays features of multipolarity, with the agency of mid-sized powers holding ambitions of greatness that have refused to align with either the West or Russia preferring to seize opportunities by working with both sides. India, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and to some extent Turkey, rather than fence-sitters have all acted as deal-makers intent on exploiting fully the gains accrued by global confrontation. Nevertheless, the world has also demonstrated that it is non polar, with the broad majority of abstentions on UN General Assembly Resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion essentially being made in an effort not to get involved in the conflict, and primarily concerned with its global consequences rather than its regional causes. This refers to countries in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia which believe they have enough on their domestic and regional plates and are simply unwilling to be dragged into a war they do not consider to be theirs. They are preoccupied with their own local affairs and not bound to one another by some global ideological glue. In this sense, today’s fence-sitters are fundamentally different from the Non-Aligned Movement countries during the Cold War.

Finally, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, by touching on so many dimensions of security, (de)order and global governance, is completely exposing the contradictions of our time.

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Related to this, the war also reveals that the world is at once more integrated and more fragmented. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is both a European and a global war. What makes it global are both the principles at stake, from international law, colonialism, democracy and rights, and its repercussions from the energy crisis to food security and nuclear proliferation. The weaponisation of energy and food have emphasised in their starker form the security risks of an ever more interdependent world. Yet, the war has simultaneously plainly shown that universal ideas like sovereignty and territorial integrity actually have relatively little traction globally, with countries far away and unlikely to be directly affected by the violation of such principles simply being unwilling to pay a price in their defence.

The war, coming on the heels of other crises that have scarred the 21st century, enables us to see with greater clarity the world in which we live. This clarity has also revealed incongruities in the nature and distribution of power as well as in the centrpiral and centrifugal forces driving it. These contradictions are nowhere near being settled, making the search for effective global governance centred on existing, reformed or new institutions, ever more elusive. Reading through the fog of war, we are destined to muddle through for some time still, alternating between competition and ad hoc cooperation, and inevitably zig-zagging as we seek to provide tentative and generally suboptimal solutions to the biggest challenges of our age.
It is actually not easy to talk about peace these days. The ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, the renewed rivalry between great powers, the continuing loss of livelihoods driven by the climate crisis, and the effects of rapid and often uncontrolled technological change are dramatically impacting security and stability around the world. As a consequence, efforts to facilitate peace and transform conflict increasingly find themselves in deadlocks in a fragmented world characterised by unpredictability due to multiple and complex crises.

According to the Global Peace Index 2023, the global level of peacefulness has deteriorated for the ninth consecutive year, making 2022 the deadliest year for armed conflict since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Accordingly, about 2 billion people live in regions affected by armed conflict while over 100 million have been forcibly displaced.

Those of us working to promote peace found ourselves in quite a commotion when many of the assumptions we had been relying on, many of the initiatives we had pinned our hopes on, were seemingly shattered in February last year.

Still, many trends, apparently leading to a shrinking space for dialogue and mediation, were already observable before February.

In many contexts, conflicts are framed as ‘bargaining chips’ between great power rivals and mediation efforts become part of international competition. We thus see growing degrees of internationalisation and the resulting instrumentalisation of conflicts. This means that even the United Nations Security Council is struggling to issue strong mandates, causing a minimalistic approach to negative peace rather than transformative peacebuilding efforts. The outcome of these dynamics is often a deadlock in official peace processes and negotiations.

Another dynamic witnessed in some contexts is that conflict actors often seem to favour war over peace – based on thinking that war benefits them more than peace. If political will is lacking, there are clearly limits to what states and civil society can do to influence conflict actors. The protracted and long-term conflicts in different parts of the world sadly testify to such dynamics.

Now back in Europe after February 2022, we find ourselves in a very particular situation. When a major country in the East invades a neighbouring country, crosses so many borders, to the point of threatening to use nuclear weapons, takes so many irreversible steps like annexing entire territories, it can only be perceived as a threat against us and our values, values we have considered to be the values of the entire international system. This context indeed makes it difficult to remain impartial, even less so to be perceived as such.

And, yes, bolstering security, organising resistance against such a threat is legitimate self-defence, and the support given for that, is legitimate. Legitimate and necessary. If in doubt, consult the United Nations Charter.

Yet, most independent analyses tell us that we won’t see a clear winner emerge from this war. The risk is thus that a one-dimensional approach focused solely on increasingly building up military deterrence will create a security system that is hardly sustainable. And perhaps even more impor-
tantly, it is simply not desirable to live in a system marked by constant fear – as those of us bordering the former Iron Curtain may well recall.

Therefore, for anyone seeking an exit from the current spiral of escalation, driven by zero-sum thinking, an approach like this can be part of the answer – but not the full answer. Indeed, the missing part of the answer is understanding whether any conflict actors manage to step out of their security zone to put their immediate interests to the side.

While there is no magical solution to make this happen, there are some points we should consider.

Lasting peace needs a basis. It cannot be reached from one day to the next. After a violent and brutal conflict, such peace is a long-term project and needs a lot of courage, while it will encounter many obstacles and setbacks.

Nobody can be asked to agree to peace with a gun pointed at their head and it is especially difficult to talk about peace when the pain caused by all the violence is still continuing. It might in fact be re-traumatising for those affected to be confronted by the perspectives of the perpetrator. I have seen many colleagues in the field of peacebuilding become disillusioned by the very idea of peace in the face of such a situation. And I might be too if I were personally concerned by violence and suffering.

At the same time, for those of us fortunate not to be directly affected by violence, one aspect we must acknowledge is that any conflict is always looked upon from subjective perspectives. To arrive at a better answer, we namely need to take a large range of perspectives into account, including those directly concerned, and those concerned but in the middle. Here it is necessary to reach out to a different worldview and try and find commonalities rather than engaging through seemingly opposing frames and reference points which unnecessarily compete with each other.

In the process, one immediate conclusion might be that threats and pressure do not work in all contexts and with all actors. Indeed, it appears from today’s perspective that raising the cost of war, by way of sanctions and military support, is not bringing the desired results. A relevant question could therefore be how to create ‘mutually enticing opportunities’ to end the war, and thereby avoid waiting for the scenario of a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’, which might only end in a protracted conflict.

Yes, we have seen that cooperation and engagement are no guarantee of peace whatever. However, it is evident that moves which cause further polarisation and escalation are certainly doing the opposite. The growing distance is adding to the divergence in world views, in turn increasing the risks of misunderstandings and hence risks even further escalation of the conflict.

Finally, we need to prepare for the day that the circumstances are right for negotiations. If we want any negotiations to lead to comprehensive and sustainable security – assuming that peace is still too distant a proposal – we must keep the doors open for informal exchange and dialogue that needs to happen in order for all sides to get a stronger grasp of the different perspectives mentioned above. We might need to continue the approach of compartmentalisation by looking for entry points for cooperation on specific issues of more or less mutual interest – such as what occurred with the Black Sea Grain Initiative that then benefitted many parts of the world. We might indeed need to recall that there are dynamics more threatening than any war.

July 2023 was the hottest month ever recorded on our planet and the ever-worsening effects of the climate crisis, which have started to reach our door-steps in Europe can only be addressed collectively. There is hope that even actors in deep conflict with each other would understand this.

While many countries most affected by the climate crisis also suffer from armed conflict, our research and practical work in such places increasingly shows that the nexus of conflict and climate change is both a double burden and an opportunity. Since climate change affects everyone beyond national and ethos-political borders, it can in fact act as an ideal entry point, including in situations of deadlock, for building trust between conflict parties and agreeing on common goals.

While peace remains a word for the more distant future, we will need to define a modus vivendi. One that takes the perspectives I mentioned before into account. The stakes are too high to do otherwise, the alternatives too dark.
Adapting NATO’s military capabilities to the evolving security realities

Securing tomorrow: NATO’s defence investment needs

By Justinas Kulyšys, Policy Analyst and Project Manager at the Eastern European Studies Centre, Lithuania

Urs Winston Churchill famously said, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” This quote acquires greater importance when considering the current situation and future prospects of European defence, especially from the Lithuanian point of view. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has changed the security situation in Europe, and this major security crisis is one that Europe should not waste if we want to safeguard the security of our continent.

The security situation in NATO’s neighbourhood has been marked by persistent instability over the past few decades. However, the events of 24 February 2022 presented the Alliance with arguably its greatest security challenge since 9/11. This sobering reality denotes a pivotal moment by being the first instance since the Cold War when a large-scale military conflict in Europe involving the confrontation of nuclear powers appears to be less of a dramatic conjecture and more a tangible concern. This evolving situation warrants careful attention and unwavering commitment to preserving peace and stability on NATO’s Eastern flank and the European continent generally.

Considerable strides were made at the NATO Summit 2023 held in Vilnius, Lithuania to address pressing security concerns. Key decisions with respect to Euro-Atlantic security were made at the summit, including positive developments regarding Sweden’s potential NATO membership, the confirmation of the most comprehensive picture of developments in Ukraine, the release of the NATO Strategic Concept 2022, and the recognition of the most comprehensive and formidable military force adopt at operating in the European theatre.

This highlights the concerning state of European militaries stemming from substantial cutbacks over past decades. Recent developments in Ukraine have dispelled long-standing debates about the continuing relevance of military assets like tanks and artillery. Open-source researchers from Oryxhave revealed that Russia had lost over 2,000 tanks in Ukraine by July 2023. Despite these losses, the Russian Armed Forces continues to attack. Russia’s tank losses exceed the number of in-service tanks that Germany, France, Spain and the United Kingdom could hypothetically field together. The ongoing military actions in Eastern and Southern Ukraine point to the significance of field artillery systems, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and demining vehicles, which the Ukrainian Armed Forces employs against well-fortified Russian positions. Still, this equipment, so crucial in Ukraine, remains in poor supply in many European NATO countries.

Urgent modernisation efforts are required, particularly in communications, mobility, reconnaissance, and cyber capabilities. Moreover, increased procurements of heavy weaponry are essential to address the gaps that have emerged post-Cold War. Addressing these shortcomings is vital for making European militaries more prepared and resilient.

The Quest for Increased Funding

A critical aspect in adapting to these new threats and reinforcing European defence spending is defence spending. In Vilnius, NATO leaders made a lasting commitment to investing in at least 2% of GDP annually on defence while acknowledging that “in many cases, expenditure beyond 2% of GDP will be needed in order to remedy existing shortfalls and meet the requirements across all domains arising from a more contested security order.”

Nearly a decade ago, in Wales, NATO leaders agreed to move towards the 2% guideline and reach it by 2024. In 2014, three NATO Member States were spending 2% of GDP or more on defence. In 2023, according to estimates, 11 NATO Member States should reach and surpass this line. This reveals the positive trend of substantially increased defence spending in the last few years. It is estimated that in 2023 Member States’ defence spending will rise by more than 8%—a record amount since the Cold War came to a close. Nevertheless, estimates also show that in 2023 at least seven Member States will still be closer to 1% than 2% of GDP.

During the NATO Summit in Vilnius, heads of state of the Members refrained from providing a specific timeline or deadline for achieving the 2% of GDP target for defence spending. To some extent, this cautious approach reflects the tensions observed in several NATO countries that make it difficult to expect any rapid increases in defence expenditure. The 2% of GDP benchmark for defence spending is not ideal—it is criticised because GDPs vary and thus the percentage allocated to defence leads to considerably different military capabilities. Notably, 8.1 of the 11 countries spending over 2% of GDP on defence are located on NATO’s Eastern flank, while most of the NATO countries allocating less than 1.5% of GDP to defence come from NATO’s Southern flank.

While the 2% of GDP guideline alone is no guarantee that NATO countries will spend the money in the most efficient way to strengthen the Alliance’s military capabilities, for NATO it remains a clear and practical figure, especially bearing in mind the massive needs of the present time. With the momentum stemming from the fact that over 60% of NATO countries’ citizens feel that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has affected the safety and security of their own country, there is a window of opportunity to add the much-needed funds to significantly bolster NATO’s military capabilities.

In this context, members of NATO’s Eastern flank—Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Estonia, Romania—serve as notable examples. These countries show that with a comprehensive grasp of the developing security situation in Europe and robust political will defence spending can be increased substantially and swiftly, often moving beyond the 2% of GDP benchmark.

Between accomplishments and unresolved needs

While acknowledging the accomplishments of increased defence spending and the evolving understanding of new military threats in Europe, it is essential to state that addressing the cumulative needs arising from decades of European military deficits will be a time-consuming and arduous task.

As noted by the chairman of NATO’s military committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, “Whatever the outcome of the war, the Russians will most likely have similar ambitions... therefore, the threats do not go away.” Given the potential for military conflict, NATO countries must invest in their military capabilities to ensure the Member States are fully prepared to fulfil the Alliance’s primary mission: deterring adversities and defending every inch of NATO land when necessary. A robust and resolute Alliance is vital for ensuring that NATO solidarity remains steadfast in the face of possible challenges.
There have been two brief outbreaks of armed violence related to water between states since early 2022 – involving Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the use of transboundary waters along a non-delineated section of the border dividing Central Asia's Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the use of Helmand River water. There were casualties in both cases, most seriously in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where dozens were killed and some 200,000 were displaced due to the fighting. These events have unfolded as the world is experiencing one unprecedented climate extreme after another. Waterways in Central Asia and Afghanistan are fed from glaciers that are melting and shrinking in size under the higher temperatures, with the water runoff shifting from summer to spring and considerably influencing agriculture.

Concerns have been raised that climate change may add to the risk of armed conflicts. Stronger competition over scarce water and other natural resources is often mentioned as a potential triggering factor. A whole research field has emerged in the past 10–15 years to investigate the links between climate change and armed conflict. Many of these studies considered historical statistical relationships between extreme weather and conflict. Yet, what about the two events mentioned here – have climate-related aspects contributed to the outbreak of violence? Can we expect such conflicts to become more numerous as the climate crisis deepens? If so, what can be done to prevent or mitigate them? What is the role of this ‘water diplomacy’, i.e., the use of diplomatic instruments in conflicts over shared water resources with the aim of solving or reducing them for the sake of cooperation, regional stability, and peace?

As regards the broader issue of climate-related conflict risk, the most comprehensive assessment is found in the recent IPCC Assessment Report 6 of 2022. In this report, the Working Group on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability summarised the state of knowledge on climate change as a conflict trigger relative to other factors. “While non-climatic factors are the dominant drivers of existing intra-state violent conflicts, in some assessed regions extreme weather and climate events have had a small, adverse impact on their livelihood severity or frequency, but the statistical association is weak.”

The promise and limits of water diplomacy

Is climate change contributing to armed conflict?

By Johan Schaar, Associate Senior Fellow, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden

If the evidence that climate change leads to conflict is weak, the reverse relationship is close to certain, viz. that conflict makes people and societies more vulnerable to impacts of climate change. In a sensationalist and drama-seeking media climate, we certainly see this happening. We should thus be sceptical of notions of ‘climate wars’ or ‘climate refugees,’ particularly as climate change is used as a convenient culprit for authoritarians, who thereby escape accountability for disastrous policies and practices of their own making.

This does not mean that there could not be situations where tensions are so great that the added strain of extreme weather events, directly or indirectly, e.g., through food price spikes or value chain disruption, may tip the balance from tension to violence. The fact is that a narrow search for what climate change may cause risks a deterministic framing bias, i.e., narrowing the description of a state of affairs in order to lead to a selected conclusion, to the detriment of finding appropriate measures to address the risk of conflict. The climate research community is increasing realising that the large statistical studies of historical data will not take us any further in understanding potential climate-related conflict risk, nor be useful as predictive instruments. More promising approaches are case studies and the use of a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to elicit the complex and dynamic interplay of social and biophysical factors, where human agency is the critical and often an intriguing element.

If the evidence that climate change leads to conflict is weak, the reverse relationship is close to certain, viz. that conflict makes people and societies more vulnerable to impacts of climate change. The precarious livelihoods of people displaced by precarious living conditions can provide society little adaptive capacity.

Climate-related tension can also result from investments in low-carbon development, leading to instabilities in oil-based development and the potential risk for vulnerable population. There is strong evidence that such maladaptation especially affects already marginalised groups, in turn reducing their capacity to cope with climate change and other stressors. The transition to renewable energy can be expected to increase investments in hydro-power and dam construction, evoking their long history of “dislocation, destruction, discrimination, danger and dependency,” if done without concern for those without a voice and influence who risk becoming uprooted, seeing their human rights violated.⁴ A just transition to a low-carbon society requires that those affected can influence decisions and that the costs and benefits are shared equitably. Power structures and political space will determine whether the transition process is just and peaceful.

The promise and limits of water diplomacy

As regards the broader issue of climate-induced socio-environmental factors, where human agency is the critical and often an intriguing element.⁴ If the evidence that climate change leads to conflict is weak, the reverse relationship is close to certain, viz. that conflict makes people and societies more vulnerable to impacts of climate change. The precarious livelihoods of people displaced by precarious living conditions can provide society little adaptive capacity.

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The strategy behind Brazil’s aspiration to facilitate a resolution in the war in Ukraine

By Feliciano de Sá Guimarães, Associate Professor, Institute of International Relations – University of São Paulo, and Academic Director, Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI)

A provocative fence-sitter

Brazili aims to highlight the need for a more inclusive and equitable global order.

This intriguing strategy carries a two-fold purpose. On one hand, it allows Brazil to preserve its reputation as a neutral actor genuinely invested in peace initiatives. This fosters an environment conducive to constructive dialogue among conflicting parties, as Brazil’s perceived impartiality lends credence to its role as a mediator. On the other hand, Brazil’s deliberate articulation of criticism against Western nations serves as a vehicle for asserting its own perspective on global affairs.

Through this dual-pronged approach, Brazil harnesses its fence-sitter status to both advance its diplomatic aspirations and subtly challenge established power dynamics. At its core, this strategy reflects Brazil’s intricate navigation of its international identity. As a nation positioned between the realms of a middle power and a emerging power, Brazil seeks to carve out its place on the global stage by deftly capitalising on moments of international crises.

Simultaneously, Brazil is leveraging its fence-sitter role to voice its perspective on Western actions in the global arena. This is particularly significant given Brazil’s historical position as a country from the Global South, often advocating for multipolarity and a more balanced distribution of power. By questioning the actions of Western powers within the context of the conflict, Brazil aims to highlight the need for a more inclusive and equitable global order.

In the wake of Lula’s inauguration, Brazil embarked on a journey to solidify its position as a prominent global player. This aspiration for international significance gained fresh impetus during Bolsonaro’s less favourable performance on the global stage. The desire to regain a strong presence in international affairs prompted Brazil’s interest in playing a mediating role in the war in Ukraine. As it positions itself as a mediator, Brazil seeks to display its diplomatic acumen and align with Lula’s ambitions for his administration.

Brazil’s role in this conflict is emblematic of its status as a fence-sitter, a role rooted in its strategic position within the global order. This position allows Brazil to maintain autonomy and wield negotiating leverage in its interactions with major powers. Middle powers such as Brazil traditionally assume regional leadership roles, foster multilateral diplomacy, and act as mediators in conflicts. The concept of middle powers encompasses both structural attributes and ideational dimensions, reflecting patterns of behaviour on the international stage.

However, Brazil’s classification as a middle power remains a subject of debate among scholars. Questions arise about its true alignment within this category. While some contend that Brazil’s characterisation as a middle power inadequately captures its unique behavioural and material attributes, others argue that its pursuit of regional leadership and active participation in global institutions such as BRICS paints the picture of an emerging power. Despite experiencing resistance from neighbouring states in its quest for regional leadership, Brazil’s proactive involvement in shaping global order reflects its dual identity.

The 2010 Tehran Agreement marked a pivotal moment in Brazil’s global engagement strategy. While the agreement itself did not yield the desired outcomes, Brazil’s response highlighted a perceived robust Russia as indispensable to the success of this multipolar framework. In their view, the realisation of such an order hinges upon Russia’s strength. Evidently, both presidents perceive Russia as a pivotal collaborator in shaping a global structure wherein Brazil holds a relatively elevated status.

Lula’s presidency ushered in a transformation of Brazil’s mediation strategy: His innovative proposition of a “Peace Club”, comprising major global powers, aimed to broker a resolution to the Ukrainian conflict. Yet, this visionary initiative encountered scepticism due to statements that seemingly undermined Brazil’s impartiality. This dilemma shows Brazil’s challenge in reconciling its dual identity – pursing global prominence while acknowledging the constraints of its power on the international stage.

In the Ukrainian conflict, Brazil’s fence-sitter stance mirrors its intricate identity as both a middle power and an aspirant for emerging power status. Its inclination to mediate is fuelled by its drive to re-establish global significance, despite its limitations in global security matters. While Brazil’s mediation efforts are ensnarled in geopolitical complexities and concerns about bias, the outcomes of its endeavours will have repercussions across international conflicts. These outcomes will not only shape its role in global conflict resolution but also influence its positioning and influence on the broader global stage. By embracing its nuanced identity, Brazil is embarking on a multifaceted journey that transcends traditional definitions of power and influence.
Russia’s Red Queen
Defending information integrity against Kremlin propaganda’s adaptations
By Max Glicker, Threat Context Lead, Microsoft Threat Analysis Center

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In Lewis Carroll’s Through the Look-
ing-Glass, both Alice and the Red
Queen have to run forward to stay
in place in Wonderland. This competitive
scene of two rivals inspired the name in bi-
ology of the “Red Queen” hypothesis – which
asserts that in co-evolutionary interactions
between species, species must continuous-
ly evolve and improve to keep ahead of the
adaptations of the other. The evolutionary
implication suggests that selective pressures
on species result in a cyclical arms race of
adaptation and counter-adaptation whereby
adversaries must continually adapt in their
attempts to win.

The principles of the Red Queen hypothesis might also be applied to modern infor-
mation wars. The ongoing push and pull between au-
thoritarian nation-state prop-
ganda apparatuses and defenders of information in-
tegrity online leads to similar reciprocating
cycles of adaptation. Although Russia’s use-
dates back decades, it has evolved over time
to leverage the Internet and social media.
Moreover, the Kremlin’s strategy of testing influence tacts at home has allowed it to
refine its techniques before launching cam-
paigns targeting spheres further afield, like
foreign elections.

In response to this evolution, defenders of information integrity on the Internet have
equally adapted to catch up with authoritarian opponents. Democratic governments, tech
companies, and civil society organisations
have increased their investments and im-
proved their tactics for detecting, assessing
and disrupting foreign influence operations
through efforts like robust fact-checking,
social media network takedowns, and sanc-
tions levied against disinformation outlets and
agents.

These efforts have achieved measurable
success. In the wake of Russia’s invasion
of Ukraine, tech companies removed Russian
state-sponsored media outlets following
the EU’s sanctions. This moderation action,
as one example, appeared to slow the con-
sumption of Russian state-sponsored prop-
ganda outlet Russia Today (RT) online across the EU, as shown by Microsoft’s
AI for Good Lab’s Russian Propaganda In-
ex (RPI) that shows daily page visits to the
site dropped by 70% after the March 2022
sanctions.

Russia’s propaganda and disinformation ecosystem has predictably further adapted
in response to these established defence mechanisms – regularly creating new ac-
counts, rebranding state-sponsored chan-
nels, and sharpening techniques for evading
detection on social media. With Ukraine’s
summer 2023 counteroffensive underway
and at least a dozen elections occurring in
democratic societies around the world in
the next year, ensuring a nimble response
to these changing tactics must remain a
priority for the defenders of information
integrity.

Only recently have many democrat-
ic institutions realised the scale of Russia’s
influence within politics, media, and civil
society – and even more recently have they
begun implementing policies that arm the
public and private sectors with the tools
to push back effectively against these cam-
paigns. But the Kremlin assumes that the
nature of open and democratic societies will
allow Russian disinformation to reemerge
in afoothold among foreign audiences. In the
evolutionary information race, the Kremlin
believes its propaganda outlets and affiliated
infrastructures can simply outrun adversaries
by flooding the Internet and social media
with its content – relying on the sheer scale
and volume of information to overwhelm
and outlast the West’s first round of digital
defences.

This has been evident in Russia’s influ-
ence strategy throughout its war in Ukraine
which, despite setbacks, has never stopped
adapting and innovating its content cre-
dation and dissemination. Simply put, Rus-
sia is hoping that its continual escalations
and barrages of disinformation will in time
cause Ukraine’s partners and allies to do
one or several of the following:
- **Fatigue:** The Kremlin relies on the
breadth and depth of Russia’s informa-
tion operations with the aim of contin-
uously grinding down audiences and
defenders. Such as with the years-long
disinformation campaign surround-
ing Russia-backed missile’s
downing of Flight MH17 in
2014, Russia will seek to wea-
pine freedom of expression
and civic processes to man-
age narratives about the war
and international support for
Ukraine over the long term.

Events like the March 2022 Bucha mas-
sacre or the ongoing forced displacement
of Ukrainian children will be met with
persistent and relentless computational
propaganda, active measures, and polit-
ical lobbying.
- **Forget:** The Kremlin hopes that it can
move quickly from one information
objective to the next, causing the rapid
speed of its operations to outpace the
international community’s ability to for-
mulate a response. Russia expects that
by the time Ukraine’s allies have decided
on a course of action in reaction to any
given attack, the Kremlin’s propaganda
networks have shifted the conversation
away from the country’s culpability.
- **Fail:** The Kremlin assumes that demo-
ocratic defenders will simply not have the
resources, capabilities or persistence to
sufficiently oppose state-sponsored cam-
paigns and malign influence networks.

Failing to respond quickly, the Kremlin
will proactively seek to outpace what will
be an immediate adaption by the Russian
propaganda machine.

The private sector can also support
governments and civil society and play a
critical role in deterring threat actors’ ma-
luous use of technology and platforms.
Microsoft’s “Four Ds” framework – Detect,
Defend Against, Deter, Disrupt – provides
one such roadmap for harder defenc-
es against threat actors across the digital
sphere. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion
of Ukraine, Microsoft has published sev-
eral reports highlighting our detection of
Russian cyberattacks and the Kremlin’s
multi-faceted information campaign to sow
confusion and discord to undermine sup-
port for Kyiv. We are also anticipating how
Russia might adapt propaganda yet again.
In our May 2023 “Governing AI: A Blue-
print for the Future” report, we offered ways
in which Microsoft will help power the de-
fence of a healthy information environment
through information-sharing and research
partnerships to help anticipate how author-
itarian nation-states might use AI as their
next information war adaptation. Together,
democracies and private-sector partners
can outlast Russia’s information war and
ensure a free and fair information environ-
ment for all.

**Through the looking glass**

While democracies should reflect on
their successes, they must remain diligent
in immediately returning to detection and
disruption. The key to democratic success
in combating propaganda and disinforma-
tion is resistance to the current campaign,
preparation for the next Russian informa-
tion innovation, and persistence in fight-
ing a relentless opponent. Ukraine, the EU,
and NATO partners will be well positioned
to adapt to Russia’s advances in tactics and
by routinely reflecting on suc-
cessful deterrence strategies, anticipating
future innovations propelling propagan-
da and disinformation, and proactively
employing defence. After each success,
Ukraine and its allies must forge ahead –
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Climate change stands as one of the most critical and multifaceted challenges facing humanity today. The escalating effects of global warming, driven by anthropogenic activities, the escalating effects of global warming have sparked an urgent need for innovative and comprehensive approaches to ease mitigate its impacts and foster climate resilience, where one of the solutions is artificial intelligence (AI) emerging as a powerful tool that offers unprecedented opportunities to address the complexities of climate change.

AI, characterized by machine learning algorithms and advanced data analytics, possesses unique capabilities to process vast and diverse datasets, recognize patterns, and make data-driven predictions. The fusion of AI and climate science has opened new horizons in understanding the Earth’s climate system, assessing environmental risks, optimizing resource management, and developing adaptive strategies. By optimizing energy consumption, enhancing efficient water usage efficiency, and enabling precision agriculture, AI promotes the efficient allocation of limited resources. AI also Furthermore, it facilitates the development of smart cities that prioritize sustainability and eco-friendly practices, reducing the overall carbon footprint. As climate change intensifies extreme weather events and impacts vulnerable regions, AI technologies play a crucial role in climate adaptation. AI-powered early warning systems can forecast extreme weather events with greater accuracy and lead time, thereby minimizing potential damages and protecting communities. In addition, AI-driven energy consumption, adaptive infrastructure planning, guided by AI analyses, can enhance resilience to climate-induced disruptions, ensuring sustainable development even in the face of changing environmental conditions. This contribution paper aims to delve into the vast landscape of AI applications in the context of climate change.

AI and Climate Modeling:

Modelling: Revolutionizing Understanding

Traditional climate models rely on complex physical equations that are computationally intensive and can struggle to capture the intricate interactions between various components of the climate system. However, the advent of AI and machine learning has brought a transformative shift to climate modeling, offering innovative ways to enhance our understanding and prediction capabilities. Machine learning algorithms, particularly deep learning models, have shown remarkable promise in addressing climate modeling limitations. By leveraging the power of neural networks and processing large volumes of observational and climate data, AI algorithms can identify subtle patterns, non-linear relationships, and feedback mechanisms that were previously challenging to detect using conventional methods. This capability allows AI-driven climate models to better represent the complexities of the atmosphere, oceans, land surfaces, and ice cover.

One notable application of AI in climate modeling is the improvement of weather and seasonal forecasting. Traditional numerical weather prediction models are often challenged with respect to capturing hidden patterns in historical climate data, leading to uncertainties in seasonal predictions. AI models can identify hidden patterns in historical climate data, helping to incorporate long-term climate trends into predictions. For example, the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) has successfully implemented AI algorithms to upgrade its seasonal forecasting capabilities. The utilization of deep learning techniques has led to more accurate predictions of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon, which influences weather patterns on a global scale. These advancements hold significant implications for disaster preparedness, agriculture, and water resource management, as stakeholders can make informed decisions based on more reliable climate outlooks.

Additionally, AI plays a pivotal role in improving climate simulations, enabling more realistic representation of climate feedback mechanisms. Climate feedbacks are complex interactions between different components of the climate system, such as clouds, sea ice, and vegetation, which can

AI at the crossroads of climate change

An AI-Powered approach to the mitigation process

By Aleksandra Palkova, Researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs
Albīne Hļopnicka, Junior Researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs

Bled Strategic Times, 28 – 29 August 2023
either amplify or reduce the impacts of climate change. AI-driven climate models can better account for these feedbacks, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how the Earth’s climate responds to external forcings. Furthermore, AI facilitates data assimilation, which involves integrating observational data, like weather satellite measurements and ground-based climate observations, into climate models. Data assimilation techniques, combined with AI algorithms, allow for real-time integration of observational data, improving the accuracy of climate model predictions and lowering uncertainties.

AI-Powered Solutions for Sustainable Resource Management: Best Practices

Sustainable resource management is vital for addressing climate change and enhancing environmental sustainability. The integration of AI technologies presents transformative solutions that optimize resource utilization, minimize waste, and reduce environmental impact.

Smart Grids

Modern society’s electricity grid faces challenges, with a focus on increasing energy demand while curtailing greenhouse gas emissions. A best practice here is the incorporation of AI-enabled smart grids, revolutionizing energy distribution and consumption. Real-time monitoring and data analysis optimize energy flow, balance supply and demand, and integrate renewables. AI algorithms predict consumption patterns, aiding efficient resource allocation. Machine learning anticipates renewable energy fluctuations, decreasing reliance on fossil fuels. Incorporating AI into grid management lowers consumption peaks by incentivizing off-peak usage, stabilizing the energy grid.

Precision Agriculture

Agriculture contributes to emissions and environmental degradation. A best practice is AI-driven precision agriculture, which optimizes farming, conserves resources, and boosts yields. AI analyzes data like soil moisture, weather, and crop health to provide real-time insights. Precision irrigation reduces water waste. AI-based robots and drones monitor crops, reducing pesticide and fertilizer use. This approach aids with climate mitigation and the preservation of biodiversity.

Sustainable Urban Planning

As urbanization surges, AI-driven urban planning minimizes city environmental impact. A best practice is the utilization of AI to analyze and optimize transport and energy distribution, reducing congestion. Smart traffic management adjusts signals in real-time, cutting emissions. AI-managed buildings enhance energy efficiency. Urban planning guided by AI designs eco-friendly cities with mixed-use areas and public transport. AI streamlines waste management and transportation, decreasing reducing emissions.

These examples demonstrate how AI is advancing sustainable practices in resource management, agriculture, and urban planning, highlighting best practices that contribute to a more sustainable future.

Challenges and ethical dilemmas

Integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into climate research and mitigation offers benefits, yet it also brings some challenges and ethical dilemmas.

Data Privacy: AI relies on extensive data, including climate observations, satellite imagery, and personal information, raising concerns about data privacy and security. Climate data often contains sensitive information about individuals and communities, risking privacy rights and personal safety. For instance, gathering data from vulnerable communities like coastal residents or farmers can expose exploitable vulnerabilities.

Algorithmic Bias: AI algorithms mirror training data biases. Biased data can perpetuate inequalities in climate research, causing imbalanced resource distribution and biased risk assessments. AI-driven climate models trained on historical weather data might inherit biases, marginalizing certain regions or communities. This can lead to inadequate adaptation strategies and worsen social disparities due to climate impacts.

Environmental Impact of AI Technologies

AI’s integration presents a pivotal momentous opportunity to address climate change comprehensively. Its potential to decarbonize complex climate systems and reshape resource management underpins a sustainable future. Yet, navigating these benefits and ethical concerns is essential as we seek to harness AI’s role in our battle against climate change.

Conclusion

AI’s integration presents a pivotal momentous opportunity to address climate change comprehensively. Its potential to decarbonize complex climate systems and reshape resource management underpins a sustainable future. Yet, navigating these benefits and ethical concerns is essential as we seek to harness AI’s role in our battle against climate change.

Environmental Impact of AI Technologies: Despite aiding climate change mitigation, AI has its own carbon footprint. Training complex AI models demands significant energy, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Manufacturing AI hardware generates electronic waste. AI data centers consume substantial electricity, mainly from fossil fuels. Addressing this requires prioritizing renewable energy and optimizing energy efficiency to lessen the environmental impact.

AI System Security: AI systems are susceptible to cyberattacks, jeopardizing data, and critical infrastructure.
No safe future without a strong civil society

How a strong civil society can change the course of history

/ By Olha Boiko, coordinator of Climate Action Network Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Ukraine

In 24 February 2022, I decided to leave my home in Kyiv and move to the western part of Ukraine. One month before, while planning an upcoming year with the network that I coordinate, we filled our calendars with many meetings with partners from across the region. This was a regular occurrence across the region at the start of the year, discussing how to work together to fight against the rising costs of living, and geoeconomic confrontation. The present system that has seen us roll over the past few decades is still largely in place. The EECCA countries are dominated by the old energy systems and laws which eat up a big portion of the resources needed to conduct successful reforms. The old energy systems and laws do not allow for quick and efficient energy transitions, while tensions in society are rising. I don’t think that any real change is possible without the active role of citizens monitoring the actions of their government on all levels. Eventually, the current young generation will become the new government. But they will have much less time than their parents. At the same time, we have seen examples of people using their collective power to protest and self-organise without this leading to change. Kyrgyzstan, for example, after having experienced three changes in power following revolutions, is still struggling with ensuring responsible policy implementation, human rights protection, freedom of the media, and combating corruption. Despite them fighting so hard for change, certain rights are still not guaranteed. Moreover, in case of the worsening climate conditions, when communities need to have the means for adapting to climate risks and the emitting industries must be controlled, we observe that most reforms tend to stay on paper. These are hardly the conditions in which EECCA countries can successfully deal with the multiple crises facing us.

Considerable work remains to be done in developing civil society, but there truly is no other way. The civil society of EECCA countries must push hard against the status quo and authoritarian practices of their countries. Success is not guaranteed; we must fight for it with everything we have.

Today I feel safer and more confident in Ukraine than in many other countries in the world. That is because I know what our civil society is capable of fighting for.

The government in Kyrgyzstan has changed, so have the people. All these skills proved to be useful and helped us withstand the first big wave of shock. Similarly, in other EECCA countries, whereas more people know their civil rights, can coordinate volunteer work, engage citizens, fundraise, write articles and speak out, big shifts in society are more possible. And these skills or resources that authoritarian regimes do not want you to have. Through my work with environmental movements of the EECCA region, I can see that the new generation, born and raised following the fall of the Soviet Union, is much more politically active, ready to speak out and protect their freedoms. Of course, this generation doesn’t combine very well with the old institutions of EECCA countries where still today many people in power are ‘Soviet minded’. They are afraid of standing out, being innovative or too critical of the status quo as this is considered dangerous. They respect hierarchy overall and trust the government more than scientists or civil society. Last but not least, they have lived through some major geopolitical shifts and could be simply exhausted, thus craving stability and predictability in their life.

Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered a lot of societal discussions in the countries that were under Russian influence for over a century. Civil society and academia have reflected on the colonising practices used by Moscow during the Soviet Union and beyond. This entailed establishing a loyal local government, keeping the native languages from developing enough to overshadow the role of the Russian language in culture, science and politics managing the natural resources unsustainably, extracting coal, oil, gas and metals, dominating the local markets, and relying on cheap, socially unprotected immigrant work to develop its own economy. It seems as if a large share of EECCA civil society is waking up from hibernation and stepping back in their power back to develop their countries, as they consider best. Yet, is this enough?

Today I feel safer and more confident in Ukraine than in many other countries in the world. That is because I know what our civil society is capable of fighting for. I can see small changes in mindsets and progress happening every day as an outcome of public discussion, petitions, media campaigns etc. The reforms are literally occurring amid constant shelling and this is precisely why I am so certain that a strong civil society is the backbone of our power and democracy.
Current developments on the geopolitical stage have led to the multifaceted strategic rivalry between the different powers jockeying for in the Western Balkans, thereby raising the risk of a second Balkan war and exiting the region’s security to the spotlight. Coupled with the current instability that characterises the Balkan Peninsula due to rising ethnic tensions and open bilateral differences, this creates a complicated equation even for good problem solvers.

In the last couple of years, the delay in the Western Balkan’s EU accession process combined with the lack of attention from the USA have created fertile ground providing opportunities for other actors – like Russia, China, Turkey and Middle Eastern countries – to significantly increase their economic, political and ideological footprint in the region.

The Western Balkans presently rang-es between political instability in Bosnia, dubious democratic governmental tactics in Serbia and Albania, minority tensions in Kosovo, and anti-Western rhetoric in North Macedonia following adoption of the French proposal for a compromise with Bulgaria. In addition, in the absence of any meaningful socio-economic improvement for their citizens, all actors in the region are using nationalist and divisive rhetoric that could further destabilise the region.

This extremely explosive combination means that any crisis could not simply unleash new turmoil in the Balkans but also create room to be exploited by third players to expand their influence.

Moscow has always seen the Western Balkans as a potential zone of influence. The current conditions create opportunities for Russia to develop a strategic advantage that enables them to extend their power to the Western institutions, mainly that of the EU and NATO, as agents of stability.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has brought the fragile peace in the Western Balkans back to the surface. There is a legitimate concern that Moscow could use the structurally weak region to further destabilise Europe. Any conflict in the Balkans serves Russian interests. Such conflicts delay the integration of the region’s countries into Western organisations and, by extension, their inclusion in the Western sphere of influence. The Kosovo–Serbian dispute, for example, has become a privileged field for Moscow’s influence in the Balkans.

The fact that Serbia relies on Russia to achieve a more satisfactory resolution of the Kosovo dispute creates a state of permanent dependency in Belgrade and Moscow, giving Russia a valuable trump card in the Balkans. The million-dollar question is how Serbia, which is well integrated into the Russian zone of influence, can achieve the well-funded Western security structure in the Western Balkans.

Serbia remains a key country for maintaining stability in the region due to its influence on several neighbouring states. Belgrade holds the potential to influence the situation in Bosnia, Kosovo and Montenegro by generating crisis and instability/stability in the Balkans. By solving the issue that concerns Serbia, at least two more significant issues in the region would be solved – the status of Kosovo and the constitutional change in Bosnia. Whether Serbia will become a stabilising or a destabilising factor will depend on Russia’s strategy in the region and, above all, on how the EU will deal with Vučić’s regime.

Russia is not only supported by political leaders in the Western Balkans but also by societies there. In the region, one can find societal groups with strong Eurosceptic sentiments that see Moscow as an alternative option to ensure the Western Balkan’s stability. It is telling that several people from Balkan countries rushed off to fight as foreign fighters on the side of the Russians in Ukraine. Another red light that should concern EU leaders is the drop shown in support for the EU in the region from 62% to 59%, three points less compared to 2021.

Compared to Russia, China is more quietly advancing its interests in the Western Balkans. By developing stronger ties with the Western Balkan countries, China hopes to indirectly influence regional development by undermining EU policies on certain regional issues or by impacting trans-Atlantic alignments on issues of particular concern to Beijing. In this context, China’s strategy intends to question the dominant role played by the EU and the USA in the region. China’s four main tactics for promoting its influence in the Western Balkans are:

- pushing exports and investments to Balkan Western Balkan economies dependent on China;
- using Chinese state actors to build political influence and establish close relations with local personalities who have an influence on the developments in the region;
- fostering a positive image of China in Western Balkan societies;
- achieving a higher public media profile in the region.

This multi-level approach has produced some fruit. It has improved China’s image in the region, strengthened citizens’ interest in Chinese history and culture, and increased the coverage of China-related events by the local media. Lying at the centre of China’s strategy are mostly those categories of citizens particularly vulnerable to the narratives it promotes. Beijing targets specific societal groups, providing alternative versions of political, economic and geo-political realities.

China has achieved very good results in terms of image promotion, especially in countries like Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. Even in Albania which remains firmly anchored to its traditional pro-Western orientation, the investment made by Chinese leadership in improving China’s image has paid off perfectly in this country as well.

Turkey is also trying to expand its influence in the Western Balkans through active cultural, economic and religious diplomacy. Beyond the purely economic penetration in strategic areas, Ankara has also attempted significant cultural penetration via massive investments in education, while simultaneously providing political support to the region’s political leaders. Turkey is targeting countries with a Muslim population such as Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo. Yet, in recent years Ankara has made an intense effort to also move closer to Serbia.

The presence of the Gulf states has also increased in the last few years in the Western Balkans. Alongside the state actors active in the area of investment, there are non-state actors from the Gulf region that finance the education of self-proclaimed Imams to promote radical and extremist ideas, which puts the region’s stability at risk.

The systematic effort of other powers to influence the EU in the Western Balkans at the expense of the EU is deeply troubling for Brussels. Several member states are aware of the challenges any further penetration of other actors could bring to the region’s balance of power. With war raging in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood, enlargement is taking on a new dimension.

Still, this change in the enlargement context should not only rely on geopolitical considerations and stabilocracy terms. The EU should address the flaws in the design and implementation of its enlargement policy so that its democratisation and rule-of-law objectives are more effectively pursued. Delays in the integration process and the lack of a realistic roadmap for convergence between the Western Balkans and the EU are creating a space for action by other forces and actors. The Western orientation of the Western Balkans should not be taken for granted. Several actors in the region, while still professing their faith in a pro-Western orientation, have shown in practice that they can very easily move away from Western values to support anti-democratic and anti-European forces.

As Russia, China and other third countries are developing a regional presence in the Western Balkans, which not only does not support, but sometimes undermines the EU’s objectives for the region, it is important for the EU to see how it can neutralise the negative influences and help build up the resilience of the Western Balkan countries as some of the EU’s closest allies. It is important to understand to which extent and in which way these third countries present a viable alternative for their Western Balkan partners and whether they are likely to deter some countries from their EU path. Any deviation from the EU trajectory could turn the Balkans into a new source of unrest on an already shattered continent. ☞
Diversity within short distances

Slovenia stands as one of the world’s smallest countries; however, it boasts an extraordinary diversity. In fact, this green country, with over 60% forested land, uniquely serves as the meeting ground for the Alps, the Mediterranean, the Karst, and the Pannonian Plain, making it the only European country with such a remarkable geographic diversity. This comes in handy, as it will take you two hours to drive from the capital to the most remote corners of the country. Here, you will discover an abundance of activities, offering active holidays in diverse climates and terrains – from mountains to plains and seas – all in the same season. Moreover, you can indulge in nature exploration, spa pampering, explore cultural spots, and taste superb gastronomy and exquisite wines.

What all these exciting experiences have in common is sustainability, which is reflected in care for the environment, tradition, and taking care of the well-being of the locals and visitors alike. We also invite you to read 10 reasons why Slovenia is worth visiting in 2023.

Top hints for exploring Slovenia

Your grand tour of Slovenia will start in the captivating Lake Bled. With its idyllic island adorned with a picturesque church, and a medieval castle majestically perched on a cliff, Lake Bled is an absolute treasure. Embrace the magic by embarking on a boat ride to the island, allowing you to experience its serene beauty up close. Alternatively, hike up to the castle, immersing yourself in the rich history and enjoying panoramic views of the surrounding landscape.

Your exploration of the western part of Slovenia continues in the renowned Lipica Stud Farm, the historic birthplace of the world-famous Lipizzaner horses. Embark on a delightful carriage ride through the enchanting surroundings, allowing you to immerse yourself in the tranquil ambiance of the stud farm, and delve into the rich heritage of breeding and training these iconic white horses, which can also be found on the UNESCO’s Representative List of the World’s Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Your next stop is Slovenia’s coastline with a handful of sun-drenched coastal towns known for their production of wine, olive oil and salt. Piran will impress you with its Venetian architecture and its narrow cobbled streets and pristine Istrian villages in the hinterland will reward you with distinctively unique and authentic character. Be sure to also explore the Piran Saltpans, where you can delve into the tra-
your breath away. Indulge in the city’s lively cafes and top restaurants. Don’t miss out on the opportunity to visit unique workshops, such as Studio tipoRenesansa, where you can become a printmaker for a day. Experience the city’s rich cultural events, adding an extra layer of excitement to your visit.

The city, which was named the Green Capital of Europe in 2016 and selected the European Best Destination of 2022, boasts a charming old town with beautiful architecture, including the creations of Slovenia’s great architect Jože Plečnik, which have been listed among UNESCO heritage sites. Stroll through its picturesque Old Town, where history comes alive amidst quaint squares and colorful buildings. Make your way up to the majestic Ljubljana Castle for panoramic views that will take your breath away. Indulge in the city’s lively cafes and top restaurants. Don’t miss out on the opportunity to visit unique workshops, such as Studio tipoRenesansa, where you can become a printmaker for a day. Experience the city’s rich cultural events, adding an extra layer of excitement to your visit.

But there is more to discover in the area: the breathtaking Velika Planina plateau in the Kamnik-Savinja Alps, famous for its traditional architecture, picturesque wooden herder’s huts, and awe-inspiring alpine vistas lies just a short drive away. Indulge in a cable car ride, meander through the meadows. Get ready to be enchanted as you make your way to Maribor, the captivating capital of Styria and the second largest city in Slovenia. This charming destination is a cultural treasure, but it also offers a thrilling escape for active holidays amidst the stunning Pohorje mountains. Be prepared for a truly extraordinary sight – the world’s oldest vine. This remarkable vine, boasting an impressive age of over 400 years, serves as a symbol of the city’s viticulture heritage. Embrace the wine culture by immersing yourself in the Old Vine House, where you can explore the art of winemaking and indulge in a delightful selection of exceptional local wines. Maribor promises an unforgettable fusion of culture, adventure, and wine, making it an essential and memorable stop on your Slovenian journey.

The very last stop of your grand tour of Slovenia is Pomurje, a captivating region nestled along the banks of the Mura River. The landscape is characterized by gentle rolling hills, vast vineyards, and charming villages, providing a serene escape for nature enthusiasts and history lovers alike. Be sure to make a stop at Expano, an interactive pavilion, which with its cutting-edge technology, interactive exhibits, and captivating events, serves as an educational and promotional hub for the region.

As you reflect on your grand journey through Slovenia, you will come to appreciate the immense diversity within the short distances that this green and safe country has to offer. The country’s commitment to safety, its warm and welcoming atmosphere, and its dedication to preserving authenticity make it an exceptional destination to explore. Whether you seek outdoor adventures, wellness retreats, culinary delights, cultural treasures, or simply a peaceful getaway, Slovenia’s diversity and commitment to providing unforgettable boutique experiences will leave you with lasting memories and a longing to return.
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. Best Western Premier Hotel Lovec (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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