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S stands for Slovenia, solidarity and stability

Solidarity and stability are more than just buzzwords. They are values we live by and cherish, and want to promote globally.

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 up their basements, of numerous ad-hoc initiatives for donating money, food and sanitary equipment appeared not only as ‘the sun that always shines after a storm’, but also as a glimpse of hope and reassurance that the damage will be repaired.

Solidarity has many faces and alongside the ‘national solidarity’ and genuine will to help, demonstrated by so many Slovenians in the past I write these lines, it has been mistreated, exploited and abused, and which may already be unrecognizable by superfluous things in an instant, and the whole world around us seemed different than before. Everything that I had suspected, doubted and been convinced of suddenly unfolded differently before my eyes; it had happened to my country, to our people.

Slovenia enjoys an exceptional geographical position, where the Alps meet the Adriatic Sea, which makes us a special, hidden treasure of Europe. In a couple of days, devastating floods affected two-thirds of the country, with thousands of homes destroyed, hundreds of bridges demolished, hundreds of kilometres of roads washed away, and parts of the landscape literally wiped away. Never in our imagination could we have foreseen such incredible scenes of destruction. Still, Slovenians are a resilient nation and, when the going gets tough, we get going: we come together and join forces to help, whether to defend ourselves from a foreign invader or deal with the consequences of a natural disaster. This one was the worst in recent history and the way people have responded to it has by far been the greatest yet, one might even describe it as epic. This time the EU rose up for us like never before, both quickly and efficiently. Together with the rest of the international aid we received, we have been given hope and a good chance of emerging from this disaster even stronger. Yet it will not be easy.

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 unrecognizable by superfluous things in an instant, and the whole world around us seemed different than before. Everything that I had suspected, doubted and been convinced of suddenly unfolded differently before my eyes; it had happened to my country, to our people.
Recognizing and addressing the erosion of human rights and democracy in Europe

A way forward

/ By Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe

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, disinformation, 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 must live up to these commitments.

In order to do this, the states should prioritise 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.
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 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 suddenly seem natural. The EU has now financially 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 tack, 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.

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 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 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 important future challenges?

I don’t pretend to have all the answers to such questions yet. But we cannot and will not bury our heads in the sand, and the political discussions on the future of the EU that began in Uppsala will continue during the Spanish and Belgian presidencies.

Don’t forget the fundamentals of our cooperation

Still, as we embark on this journey of reform and renewal, it is important to bear in mind that some things don’t need a radical makeover.

For instance, it is not necessary to revise our treaties. At a time when the EU needs to stand united, becoming consumed by a debate about treaty change risks dividing the member states. Instead, Sweden believes that the flexibilities that already exist in the treaties could be used to a greater extent. Qualified majority voting could be used more often in foreign policy, and Sweden recently joined the Group of Friends on QMV in EU Common Foreign and Security Policy to explore this further.

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.

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. In fact, if the EU is to enlarge to 35 member states or more, rule of law and jurisdictional independence becomes even more important in the future.

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 meeting 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 and interventions 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, not 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 and industrialized countries 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. They are 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 bought to the Russians, to Europe, to humanity? There is only damage and suffering, tragedy, ruin, misfortune and grief. How much damage has been done to nature and our climate by a war that broke 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 humanity 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 cessation 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 bought to the Russians, to Europe, to humanity? There is only damage and suffering, tragedy, ruin, misfortune and grief. How much damage has been done to nature and our climate by a war that broke 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 humanity dramatically further away from the goal of healing this planet, saving it, and in turn saving ourselves.

Together with my counterparts from Germany and Poland, I travelled to Skopje for 2 days in July to hold talks with representatives of the North Macedonian government. Taking the format of the ‘Weimar Triangle’, this visit was just one of many steps we are taking together to strengthen European relations right now – at a time when war is raging right on our doorstep in Europe. This horrific war against a sovereign country – with the accompanying unleashing of violence and atrocious crimes – is not only trampling the European Union’s core values, but calling into question the very foundations on which the EU was built and upon which it has thrived. The myth of the ‘end of history’ no longer exists. The belief that liberal democracy will prevail in the world, that trade will promote peace and prosperity for all, has been shattered for several years; slowly at first and with the greatest intensity since the war began. While Moldova, Georgia and the countries of the Western Balkans – not to mention Ukraine – have for years been suffering from Russia’s corrosive interference, we should firmly anchor them in our area of stability and democracy, in the prospering success model of the EU. This is in their interests as well as ours.

The number of authoritarian regimes in the world is growing and the struggles for strategic spheres of influence are worsening. This adds to the geopolitically urgent need for the EU to assert itself as a more robust democratic power. To do this, the EU must expand – but also reform. This is what the ‘Zeitenwende’ means for the European Union.

The rule of law as the guiding principle

We must make a decisive effort to open the EU to the neighbouring candidate countries. And since we are no longer in the early 2000s, when openness and democratisation seemed to be becoming the dominant model, we need to seriously reconsider our enlargement methodology.

While we must keep the rule of law as our guiding principle, we must also reinvigorate the path to membership to avoid disappointment and transform our European Union to be able to face the challenges of the 21st century.

The rule of law must be protected as comprehensively as possible across the entire European continent: strengthening the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, ensuring the diversity and independence of the media, fighting corruption and the proper functioning and financing of political parties are the non-negotiable foundations of a functioning rule of law at the service of democracy.

To avoid the frustrations that the accession process sometimes creates when it is perceived as being too slow, we – the Member States and the Commission – should give much greater support to the reforms needed for EU accession. We also have to show new ways so that candidate countries are not discouraged but continue their reforms. Successful reform progress must bring them concrete advantages such that the path to EU membership is perceived as a positive dynamic. Symmetrically, these advantages should be scaled back in the opposite case.

Show initiative to enlarge and transform the EU from within

At the same time, we in the EU need to transform ourselves. In order for the enlarged European Union of tomorrow to be strong and flexible, we require an in-depth analysis: we must examine the governance of our European Union, its policies and its budget to ensure that the EU can integrate new members and simultaneously function in an ever more conflict-ridden world.

This is also the task of the working group of independent experts from Germany and France, which we set up during the Franco-German Council of Ministers at the beginning of the year. Its aim is to propose options to improve our policies and the functioning of the European institutions, thereby providing answers to the challenges of the 21st century.

Preparing a solid, stable and confident Union means securing the future of European citizens. If this does not happen, then one is giving in to Russia’s attempts at division and destabilisation. Embarking on this road together towards a renewed Union is the best guarantee for our future: that of a united and strong and flexible, we require an in-depth analysis: we must examine the governance of our European Union, its policies and its budget to ensure that the EU can integrate new members and simultaneously function in an ever more conflict-ridden world.

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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 that 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.
In January 2024, when our 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 and moved forward 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 membership in the UN Security Council in the late 1990s. In the latter role, we were instrumental in stabilising the Western Balkans through 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 trustworthiness 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.

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.

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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 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.

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 have to connect between progress on reforms and enlargement.

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 enlargement.

Consequently, one pragmatic approach to promptly reconnecting 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 these ideas into action.

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.
The only constant is change

How Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine has impacted the European security architecture

/ By Dr. Damir Črnčec, State Secretary at the Ministry of Defence of Slovenia

S
		

n 24 February 2022, Russia’s ag-

gression towards Ukraine was a de-
molted during the years of the Cold War. Al-
					or, and although not strict-
					ly defence-oriented but still at their core
					working for a safer Europe, other regional
					richments of the past, preoccupied with in-
					in the early 2000s, particular–several
					Strategy for Europe (OSCE) was created, cul-
					together, and with more wanting to join.

The cold War to the present day

With the dissolution of the Soviet

Union, the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist; how-

to pursue peace was through a rules-based

order, held by mutually-accepted interna-
tional organisations. After this, Eu-
eriod of relative peace that began to crack in the 1990s.

The rough blueprint for Europe’s securi-
ty architecture can be traced to the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945. It gave states a platform to solve their differenc-
es in a peaceful manner, yet also outlined key principles that formed an institutional basis for states’ behaviour in international relations, and tied states to a rules-based or-
der. Central amongst these principles is the prohibition on the use of force in interna-
tional relations, equally as important as the principles of the sovereign equality of states

and the principle of the self-determination

of nations.

Notwithstanding this new platform for safeguarding peace, the competing ide-
ologies and visions of a post-war Europe pushed states towards two different poles, resulting in the Cold War. Both poles and their spheres of influence were built around their respective security organisations – the pro-Western North Atlantic Treaty Organi-
zation (NATO), and the pro-Soviet Union Warsaw Pact. In an effort to bring the two poles closer together, and finally to put in

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.

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Security Policy, 10(3), 131–142.
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 have 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 a 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. In

Climate’s just another word for everything left to lose

Climate change is globally impacting Human Security

By Niels Annen, Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany
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, 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. Senegal, Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, 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)

As the global landscape evolves from a bipolar to a multi-polar world, the international community is also undergoing a transformation. After over two decades of robust development, the global economy is now facing a recession following a pandemic lasting 3 years whose nature has not been seen in nearly a century. The pandemic has laid bare daunting issues: the gap between advanced economies and developing countries, rising populism, the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the climate crisis along with the potential risks of emerging technologies like generative AI.

These global challenges make it imperative that China, the United States and Europe, as the top three economies, form a kind of ‘G3’ mechanism for regulating globalisation and new paradigms of global governance.

The three major players possess the ability to put issues on the agenda and discuss solutions in areas of common concern and global challenges and to effect change.

This ‘triumvirate of powers’ will most likely be the decisive factor in how globalisation and new paradigms of global governance are developed and implemented.

There are several issues the three major players must work together on making joint decisions in order for the world to progress in a peaceful and productive way.

First, in terms of impact on the climate, China, the EU and the USA account for around 40% of global greenhouse gas emissions and consume nearly half the world’s energy. Therefore, they hold the lion’s share of the responsibility to lead the change in sustainable development and, although they have set their own goals for carbon neutrality, the road to a net-zero society is still long, particularly in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which has led to soaring energy prices.

Second, against a backdrop of both huge economic potential and security concerns, there is a growing consensus that countries should pursue digital sovereignty. The EU was the first economic entity to act in this area by launching the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which entered into force in 2016. This was followed in the USA by the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in 2018 and China’s Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) in 2021. However, while these are steps in the right direction, the world also requires more normative agreements and regulations to manage the thriving and dynamic digital economy.

Third, instability in the international community is impeding the effective regulation of global markets. The scarcity of international public goods has to a certain extent led to a widening of the gap between developing and developed countries. China, the USA and the EU recognise this problem and have responded with their own programmes – the BRI, B3W and Global Gateway – in an attempt to resolve the global infrastructure deficit. Yet, the good being done through these programmes could also result in a squandering of resources in the absence of efficient coordination.

Alongside these issues, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has loomed large. The Chinese government states that China plays a more active role in mediating between the two sides because it is an independent and significant third party. Originally a conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the involvement of NATO member countries, including European countries and the USA, meant that Russia was also essentially fighting the West. In contrast, as a country not involved in the war, China has considerable room to mediate.

Recently, a Chinese special envoy visited five countries as well as the EU’s headquarters, following which there was a big push in favour of China playing a major role in mediating the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Why not hold a Seven-Party Talks summit? Such a summit could include the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus the EU and Ukraine, which could help to develop a peaceful solution to the Russia–Ukraine issue.

Considering all the myriad issues involved, we at the Center for China and Globalization believe there are seven areas in which a G3 mechanism – with China, the USA and the EU at the core – could focus on in terms of regular high-level dialogue.

Promoting reforms of the WTO

While bilateral or multilateral investment and trade agreements are on the rise, the WTO will remain a central institution for promoting investment and trade facilitation, reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, and eliminating differential treatment in international trade. Today, it still plays an irreplaceable role in promoting trade liberalisation, optimising global resource allocation, and expanding the production and flow of commodities. WTO reforms would boost the international communi-
ty's confidence in the multilateral trading system and multilateralism itself.

In the future, we hope a G3 can take the initiative in WTO reforms to ensure that the WTO once again gives full play to its role in maintaining and mediating international multilateral trade. First, reforms of the WTO could begin with plurilateral agreements in place of multilateral agreements to improve efficiency and implementation. Second, a reformed WTO should fully consider the demands and capabilities of developing countries, and endeavour to find common interests among disagreeing parties, which must also practise patience and maintain a win-win mindset to avoid a zero-sum outcome. Finally, as we enter an era of digital trade, the WTO should take advantage of the potential to promote e-commerce negotiations, enhance digital transitions in cross-border goods and services trade, narrow the digital gap, strength- en privacy protection and ensure fair com- petition.

Resurrecting the China–EU Investment Agreement

Although China and the EU share ex- tensive economic complementarity, there is a solid foundation for cooperation, over the past 2 years China–EU relations have deterio- rated rapidly and an impasse has been reached on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (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, Chi- na's Three-Pronged Position, the International Labour Organisation's 1930 Forced Labour Convention and the 1957 Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, all with a view to resolving the China–EU BITE, the resumption of communication would promote negotiation and the lifting of sanc- tions, allowing the CAI to go into effect as soon as possible. This would be a boon to Chinese and European enterprises.

Cooperation on infrastructure projects

At the right time, a G3 could also work to achieve some level of reciprocity in global infrastructure development by coor- dinating between the Belt and Road Initia- tive, the EU's Global Gateway, and the new Group of Seven Partnership on Global Infra- structure and Investments (G7 I&I), which has been under these initiatives are uncoordinated and shaped by geopolitical competition, there is danger they could lock coun- tries 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 rehashing the BRI into a G3 could allow for multilateral endeavours in the promotion of global gov- ernance and development and also become a necessary step in the next phase of its de- velopment.

The global demand for investment in infrastructure is clear, but the lack of fund- ing, along with the issue of matching supply and demand, are structural issues that have existed for years in international develop- ment 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 norm- ative standards, and been recognised by multilateral organisations. In the face of new de- cisions, it would be possible for the AIIB to cooperate with development banks from the EU and the USA such as the Europe- an Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Inter-American Development Bank to focus more on expanding the scope and regional distribution of infrastructure investment, thereby providing a dialogue on long-term needed funding for eligible infrastructure investment projects around the world.

Cooperation on green development

In somewhat more of a bright spot, green issues may offer a more promising field to forge consensus and meaningful reform. Specifically, China could work with the EU to promote the conven- tion of a dedicated UN institution focused on climate change as an issue that is unique to all aspects of global cooperation. This would not decouple digital and climate change, which is already playing a leading role in addressing climate change through the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Green development will also reshape the way we deal with products across their en- tire life cycle, from design and production through to use and end-of-life disposal or recycling. Redesigning this whole process calls for new business models and forms of collaboration across industries and regions. Pressure to reduce carbon emissions and the environmental footprint of products will drive the greening of supply chains and encourage multinational companies such as China, the USA and the EU to adopt green technologies and business models, creating new prospects for cooperation.

For example, the rapid growth in the EV industry will generate increasing demand for lithium-ion batteries. China's Contem- porary Amperex Technology Co., Ltd. (CATL) is currently the world’s largest EV battery maker, accounting for about 30% of the global market. CATL cooperates closely with other MNCs such as America's Tesla for new EV production, and works with Chinese and European battery maker BASF for cathode active ma- terials and battery recycling.

Industry will play a major role in achiev- ing our environmental goals. Enterprises are responsible for a big share of carbon emissions, but it is also their innovation and cooperation that will help to develop the technologies that will make the green transition possible. To fully exploit this po- tential, more can be done to orient firms towards responsible business prac- tices and corporate governance (ESG) by enhancing green innovation and develop- ing ESG-oriented financing and account- ability mechanisms. Governments can also provide a platform for dialogue to boost green trade and invest- ment.

Cooperation on global data security

Finally, as the ‘petroleum of the’ 21st century, data is driving the world economy, but it also brings many challenges. Cross-border data flows are critical, yet complexities such as national security, geo- politics, and privacy protection have kept countries from agreeing on promoting free data flows and enhancing data localisation. A G3 could take the lead to establish a D2O that provides countries with a platform to reach a consensus on cross-border data flows in countries with relatively advanced digital economies. In addition, establishing a ‘global data organisation’ would lead the way in creating standards for global data se- curity. A key use case since the world has yet to reach a comprehensive multilateral solu- tion to either issue.

It is our firm belief that economic coop- eration and global governance is not a zero-sum outcome. Finally, as we enter a new era of digital trade, the WTO should take advantage of the potential to promote e-commerce negotiations, enhance digital transitions in cross-border goods and services trade, narrow the digital gap, strengthen privacy protection and ensure fair com- petition.

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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.

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

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, she 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 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 understand 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.

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 ‘in wolke’ 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 annoy, 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...
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 based on four foundations. First, knowledge and critical thinking skills. Second, on social skills and intercultural competence. 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 civilisation 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.

Hatred is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture.”

Yoda

Johanna 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 from the lessons of the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment.

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.

“Hatred is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture.”

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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 creating 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 unipolarity of the USA, with groupings like BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) being formed, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank being established and thereby highlighting the reform failures of Western-led international financial institutions, while new multilateral groupings like the G20 seemed both more representative of the global distribution of power and better equipped to deal with crises affecting the global economy. The GFC also ignited debates concerned with the desirability of unfettered globalisation which, although reducing inequalities between countries and lifting millions out of poverty, had added massively to socioeconomic disparities in 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.

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 (democracy vs. autocracy) and gravitated around the growing rivalry between the USA and China. The pandemic was often portrayed in terms of competition (‘which political system is best equipped to deal with major global challenges?’) while also showing that effective results hinged on aggregate efforts and hence multilateral responses. The same is true of other transnational challenges like climate change, artificial intelligence and non-proliferation. The pandemic also put the spotlight on another contradiction: on one side, the growing connectivity and interdependence of the world whereas, on the other, the push for deglobalisation, protection, redundancy and to shorten supply chains.

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

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.

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. Sad as it is, the war has brought greater honesty into the international debate.

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 are living. This clarity has also revealed incongruities in the nature and distribution of power as well as in the centrifugal and centripetal 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 zigzagging 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 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 whatsoever. 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 doorsteps 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 ethno-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.
Pursuing a window of opportunity.

A critical aspect in adapting to these new threats and reinforcing European defense spending. In Vilnius, NATO leaders made a lasting commitment to investing at least 2% of GDP annually on defense 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, 30 of the 32 Member States were spending 2% of GDP or more on defense. In 2023, according to estimates, 11 NATO Member States should reach and surpass this limit. This reveals the positive trend of substantially increased defense spending in the last few years. It is estimated that in 2023 Member States’ defense 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 reaffirmed, in providing a specific timeframe or deadline for achieving the 2% target of GDP for defense 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 defense expenditure. The 2% of GDP benchmark for defense spending is not ideal – it is criticized because GDPs continue to grow, and thus the percentage allocated to defense leads to considerably different military capabilities. Notably, 8 of the 11 countries spending over 2% of GDP on defense are located on NATO’s Eastern flank, while most of the NATO countries allocating less than 1.5% of GDP to defense come from NATO’s Southern flank.

While the 2% of GDP guideline is an important step, it is not a guarantee that NATO countries will spend the money in the most efficient way to strengthen the Alliance’s military capabilities, for NATO it remains both a symbolic 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, and Romania – serve as notable examples. These countries show that with a comprehensive grasp of the developing security situation in Europe and robust political will, defense spending can be increased substantially and swiftly, often moving beyond the 2% of GDP benchmark.

Between accomplishments and unresolved needs

While acknowledging the accomplishment of increased defense 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 militaries in defense will be a time-consuming and arduous task.

As noted as 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 fulfill the Alliance’s primary mission: deterring adversaries 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.
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

There have been two brief outbreaks of armed violence related to water between waters since early 2022 – involving Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the use of transboundary waters along a non-delineated section of the border dividing the two states, and Afghanistan over the use of Helmand River water. There were casualties in both cases, most seriously in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where dozens were killed and wounded, and some 500 others affected, with many being 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 in this of ‘water diplomacy’, i.e., the use of diplomatic tools in conflicts over shared water resources with the aim of solving or mitigating water-related tensions or conflicts? Many studies argue that non-normal 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. This points to the risk while employing a deterministic and reductionist lens in isolating and confining that potential risk for vulnerable population. There is strong evidence that such maladaptation especially affects already marginalized 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- 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. 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.

How do these perspectives inform our understanding of the armed conflicts between neighbours referred to above? They are both contexts with a history of inter-state tension and sometimes open and violent conflict. To understand the role that contested waters play, we need to consider the origin of these tensions. This leads us to observe that occasional or regular conflicts over shared and transboundary water resources are generally the outcome of deep-rooted political and social determinants, rather than the other way round. ‘Water use and management are inevitably subordinate to political processes’.

In both cases, the fact that we are dealing with decades-long unresolved transboundary water use leads support to the view that the nature of water by itself does not necessarily lead to peaceful settlements between states.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are former republics of the Soviet Union that became independent in the early 1990s. Almost half the border between the two countries has not been delineated, which mattered little when both were part of the Soviet Union. In many cases, cooperative land-use has continued across the border. Yet both regimes aspire to strengthen the national state and their national identities, fuelling tensions over water and other natural resources. In the past 10 years, there have been around 150 episodes of such tension or violence. Many unresolved post-Soviet issues to do with the control of resources remain. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), uniting seven former Soviet states, does not have mechanisms in place to resolve disputes between member states. Tajikistan is siding with Russia in its war against Ukraine, while Kyrgyzstan is staying neutral, leading some analysts to claim this confirms Russia’s involvement in the Kyrgyz–Tajik conflict.

The clashes between Iran and Afghan border guards in May this year were ostensibly triggered by a dispute over rights to 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.

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The clashes between Iran and Afghan border guards in May this year were ostensibly triggered by a dispute over rights to
A provocative fence-sitter

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)

Brazil 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 an emerging player, Brazil seeks to carve out its place on the global stage by adroitly capitalising on moments of international crises. By offering its mediation services, Brazil not only aims to contribute to conflict resolution but to bolster its international prestige and demonstrate its diplomatic acumen.

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 reassert 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 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 Brazilian-Belarusian 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 its perceived neutral stance, representing a stark contrast to Western nations. This stance epitomises the duality of Brazil’s identity – acknowledging its limitations as a middle power in global security while simultaneously striving to carve out a more prominent role on the world stage.

This fence-sitter position has extended to Brazil’s role in the Ukrainian conflict. Both Bolsonaro and Lula adopted a neutral stance, eschewing explicit alignment with any party. While Bolsonaro’s approach demonstrated passive non-alignment, Lula took a more active route by advocating a cease-fire. Nevertheless, shared hesitancy in openly criticising Russia’s actions and perceived biases on the Western side has led to questions about Brazil’s suitability as an impartial mediator.

On the other hand, for Lula, the motivation was intertwined with his vision to uphold and broaden a multipolar framework that stands independent from Western influences. In this vision, the BRICS coalition assumes a pivotal role. Lula and his advisor, Celso Amorim, perceived a robust Russia as indispensable to the success of this multipolar order. In their view, the realisation of such an order hinges upon Russia’s strength. Evenly, 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 – pursuing 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 ensnared in geopolitical complexities and concerns about bias, the outcomes of its endeavours will have reverberations 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’s involvement marks 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

In Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass, both Alice and the Red Queen have to run forward to stay in place. This scene of two rivals inspired the name in biology of the “Red Queen” hypothesis—which asserts that in co-evolutionary interactions between species, species must continuously 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 adaption and counter-adaption whereby adversaries must continually adapt in their attempts to win.

The principles of the Red Queen hypothesis might also be applied to modern information wars. The ongoing push and pull between authoritarian nation-state propaganda apparatuses and defenders of information integrity online lead to similar reciprocating cycles of adaption. Although Russia’s use dates back decades, it has evolved over time. Moreover, the Kremlin’s strategy of testing influence tactics at home has allowed it to refine its techniques before launching campaigns targeting spheres further afield, like foreign elections.

In response to this evolution, defenders of information integrity on the Internet have also adapted to catch up with authoritarian opponents. Democratic governments, tech companies, and civil society organizations have increased their investments and improved their tactics for detecting, assessing and disrupting foreign influence operations through efforts like robust fact-checking, social media network takedowns, and sanctions 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 sanction. This moderation action, as one example, appeared to slow the consumption of Russian state-sponsored propaganda outlet Russia Today (RT) online across the EU. According to Microsoft’s AI for Good Lab’s Russian Propaganda Index (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 defense mechanisms—regularly creating new accounts, rebranding state-sponsored channels, 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 democratic institutions realized 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 campaigns. But the Kremlin assumes that the nature of open and democratic societies will allow Russian disinformation to regain a foothold among foreign audiences. In the evolutionary information race, the Kremlin believes its propaganda and affiliated infrastructure can simply outstrip adversaries by flooding the Internet and social media with its content—relying on the sheer scale and volume of information to overwhelm and outflank the West’s first round of digital defences.

This has been evident in Russia’s influence strategy throughout its war in Ukraine which, despite setbacks, has never stopped adapting and innovating its content creation and dissemination. Simply put, Russia 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 information operations with the aim of continuously grinding down audiences and defenders. Such as with the years-long disinformation campaign surrounding the downing of Flight MH17 in 2014, Russia will seek to wearily create confusion and discursive processes to manage narratives about the war and international support for Ukraine over the long term. Events like the March 2022 Bucha massacre or the ongoing forced displacement of Ukrainian children will be met with persistent and relentless computational propaganda, active measures, and political 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 formulate 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.

- Fault: The Kremlin assumes that democratic defenders will simply not have the resources, capabilities or persistence to sufficiently oppose state-sponsored campaigns and malign influence networks.

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 disinformation is resistance to the current campaign, preparation for the next Russian information innovation, and persistence in fighting a relentless opponent. Ukraine, the EU, and NATO partners will be well positioned to adapt to Russia’s advances in tactics and techniques by routinely reflecting on successful deterrence strategies, anticipating future innovations propelling propaganda and disinformation, and proactively employing defense. After each success, Ukraine and its allies must forge ahead—proactively—seeking 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’ malicious use of technology and platforms. Microsoft’s “Four Ds” framework—Detect, Defend Against, Deter, Disrupt—provides one such roadmap for hardening defenc es against threat actors across the digital sphere. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Microsoft has published several reports highlighting our detection of Russian cyberattacks and the Kremlin’s multi-faceted information campaign to sow confusion and discord to undermine support for Kyiv. We are also anticipating how Russia might adapt propaganda yet again. In our May 2023 “Governing AI: A Blueprint for the Future” report, we offered ways in which Microsoft will help power the defence of a healthy information environment through information-sharing and research partnerships to help anticipate how authoritarian 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 environment for all.
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 esamitigate 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 further 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, 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: 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 to the improvement of weather and seasonal forecasting. Traditional numerical weather prediction models are often faced with the challenge of accurately forecasting weather patterns beyond a few weeks due to their sensitivity to initial conditions. Yet, however, by integrating AI techniques, such as recurrent neural networks (RNNs) or convolutional neural networks (CNNs), researchers have demonstrated enhanced prediction accuracy for longer-range forecasts. AI-enabled models can identify hidden patterns in historical climate data, helping to capture and 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 and enhance 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 the 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
either amplify or redurecramp the effects of climate change. AI-driven climate mod-
els can better account for these feedbacks, providing a more comprehensive understand-
ing of how the Earth’s climate re-
sponds to external forcings. Furthermore. Moreover, AI facilitates data assimilation, which involves integrating observational data, like such as satellite measurements and ground-based climate observations, into climate models. Data assimilation tech-
iques, combined with AI algorithms, allow for real-time integration of observational data, improving the accuracy of climate model predictions and lowering reducing uncertainties.

**AI-Powered Solutions for Sustainable Resource Management: Best Practices**

Sustainable resource management is vi-
tal for pivotal in addressing climate change and enhancing environmental sustainabili-
ty. The integrating of AI technologies pres-
ents transformative solutions that optimize
resource utilization, minimize waste, and reduce environmental impact.

**Smart Grids**

Modern society’s electricity grid faces challenged by the need to meet meeting ris-
ing energy demands while curbing green-
house 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 con-
sumption patterns, aiding efficient resource alloca-
tion. Machine learning anticipates re-
newable energy fluctuations, decreasing re-
ducing reliance on fossil fuels. Incorporat-
ing AI into grid management lowers reduces
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 that, 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/preserva-
tion.

**Sustainable Urban Planning**

As urbanization surges, AI-driven ur-
ban planning minimizes city environmen-
tal impact. A best practice is the utiliza-
tion of AI to analyze real-time traffic, energy, and reliability data to optimize transport and easerect reduced congestion. Smart traffic management adjusts signals in real-time, cutting emissions. AI-managed buildings enhance energy efficiency. Urban planning guided by AI designs eco-friend-
ly cities with mixed-use areas and public transport. AI streamlines waste manage-
ment and transportation, decreasing reduc-
ing emissions.

These examples demonstrate how AI is advancing sustainable practices in re-
source 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 but also brings some poses challenges and ethical dilemmas.

**Data Privacy:** AI relies on extensive data, including climate observations, satellite imagery, and personal information, rais-
ing concerns touching on data privacy and security concerns. Climate data often con-
tains sensitive details 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 information. Balancing climate research data collection with individual privacy pro-
tection calls for demands meticulous data pro-
tection and ethical guidelines.

**Algorithmic Bias:** AI algorithms mirror training data biases. Biased data can perpet-
uate inequalities in climate research, caus-
ing resulting in unjust resource distribution and biased risk assessments. AI-driven cli-
mate 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 im-
pacts.

Environmental Impact of AI Technolo-
y. Despite aiding climate change mit-
igation, AI has its own carbon footprint. AI's integration presents a pivotalmo-
taneous opportunity to address climate challenges comprehensively. Its potential to decipher 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 for AI’s role in our battle against climate change.

**Conclusion:**

AI’s integration presents a pivotalmo-
taneous opportunity to address climate challenges comprehensively. Its potential to decipher 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 for AI’s role in our battle against climate change.
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

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 many times since the country's independence: in 2005, 2010 and 2020. In January 2022, after over 200 protesters were killed during a war in Nakhchivan, a change of power came and reforms started to unfold. These are some recent examples, although we also note the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018, and many smaller-scale attempts in between.

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The complex mosaic of geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans

The EU’s role threatened by the presence of third powers in the region

By Bledar Feta, IR Specialist & Researcher, South-East Europe Program, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)
PhD Candidate in International Relations, Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece

Current developments on the geopolitical map of the Western Balkans have engendered a new type of tri-lateral strategic competition between the different players jockeying for influence in the Western Balkans, thereby raising serious concerns about the region’s security and stability. Coupled with the general instability that characterises the Balkan Peninsula due to rising ethnic tensions and open bilateral differences, this creates a conflicted 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 grounds 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 range 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 nationalistic 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 Balkan as a potential zone of influence. The current conditions create opportunities for Russia to develop a strategic advantage that enables the Kremlin to undermine the role of 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 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 between 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 Western Balkan’s economy, can and will maintain stability 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 changes in Bosnia. Whether Serbia will become a stabilising or a destabilising factor will depend on Brussels’ 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 Balkans’ 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 the Western Balkans’ 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 geopolitical 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 to create 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 become 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.

The systematic effort of other powers to influence developments 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 stabiilc terms.

The EU should address the flaws in the 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. 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.

The grand tour of Slovenia

Embark on the grand tour of Slovenia to immerse yourself in a rich tapestry of enchanting landscapes, vibrant cultural heritage, top-notch gastronomy, and the warm embrace of Slovenian hospitality.

Please note that some parts of Slovenia are currently inaccessible due to flood damage in early August. Also, some road and rail connections are still obstructed or interrupted. Before traveling, please check the information published on www.slovenia.info and www.promet.si/en.

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sional art of salt-making. If time allows, visit the open-air Lepa Vida Spa, located on the very spot.

But there is more to discover in the area: the Sutton Caves, the biggest cave system in Europe, will definitely show you the splendors of this area, including majestic stalactites and stalagmites - not to mention Postojna's most iconic inhabitant, the famous 'baby dragon'. Embark on a thrilling train ride that takes you through the vast chambers of this mesmerizing cave system, delving deep into its mystical depths. Get ready for an unforgettable adventure as you bear witness to the sheer magnificence of one of the world's most astounding caves. And if time allows, stop also at the UNESCO-listed Postojna Caves.

As you arrive in Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital, immerse yourself in its accolades as the Green Capital of Europe in 2016 and the European Best Destination of 2022. Experience the calm of a charming old town with its UNESCO-listed architecture by Jože Plečnik. Wander through picturesque streets or make your way up to the majestic Ljubljana Castle for panoramic views that will take your breath away. Indulge in the city's lively cafés and top restaurants. Don't miss out on the opportunity to visit unique workshops, such as Studio tipoljenesa, 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 streets 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 cafés and top restaurants. Don't miss out on the opportunity to visit unique workshops, such as Studio tipoljenesa, 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 very last stop of your grand tour of Slovenia is Postojna, 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.

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 rich 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.

Continue your journey eastwards, to another captivating destination in the Kamnik-Savinja Alps. Logar Valley is a mesmerizing glacial valley that will impress you with verdant meadows, enchanting waterfalls, and tranquil hiking trails. It is the ideal destination to escape into the embrace of pristine natural beauties. While in the region, don't miss the opportunity to experience the unique charm of Slovenian tourist farms.

If time allows and you would like to experience Slovenian-style pampering, then visit one of the numerous natural spa resorts in the eastern part of Slovenia. Among them are Rogaljka Slatina, famed for its mineral-rich springs that have been revered for centuries, Dobrna Spa, which offers a harmonious blend of modern spa treatments and historic charm, and Termel Olimia Spa, where guests can unwind in luxurious pools. Each spa resort promises an enriching experience, combining natural healing elements with state-of-the-art facilities, making it an ideal destination for seekers of holistic wellness.
To check out the latest Young BSF and BSF programmes, speakers’ biographies and other latest updates and news, scan the code below.

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 Lovčec (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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