

Château Béla

Central European Strategic Forum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Forum Description

Château Béla Central European Strategic Forum, organised by GLOBSEC, is a three-day closed convening that brings together around forty high-profile political figures and issue experts from the Visegrad region, wider Europe as well as United States to discuss foreign, economic and security policy challenges that are currently influencing developments in the region. To encourage frank and dynamic talks, each year only a limited number of representatives are invited to participate. The setting is kept intimate and informal and the Chatham House Rule applies for the event's entire duration. The Forum guests are expected to contribute to policy-making and policy-shaping in Central Europe and beyond. This Forum is traditionally co-organised by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and supported by the International Visegrad Fund, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic and NATO Public Diplomacy Division.



Topics

The eighth annual Château Béla 2016 Central European Strategic Forum will provide a regional perspective on a number of issues set on the front burner of the political, security and economic agenda in Europe and North America. The influx of refugees, raise of populism and extremism and the United Kingdom referendum has put the EU under enormous stress. The debates will therefore focus on internal and external challenges the region and European Union face, all in context of the then-concluding Slovakia's EU Presidency. The result of the presidential election in the United States and its impact not only on Central Europe but global development itself will also feature prominently in the agenda. The Forum will not omit a discussion about NATO priorities, especially how the tasks and commitments from the Warsaw Summit are transforming into reality.

A Touch of History

The Strategic Forum is traditionally organised outside the bustle of Bratislava in the calm of the historical Château Béla, which significantly contributes to the event's intimate and informal atmosphere. The Château is situated in southern Slovakia, close to the Slovak-Hungarian border formed by the Danube river, 10 km from the Slovak city of Štúrovo – only a bridge away from the Hungarian city of Esztergom. The salons of the Château offer an opportunity to debate in a small circle of old and new friends. The informal atmosphere and exceptionally pleasant family environment has been the key to the success of the Forum over the past seven years.



Age of Disinformation: Democracy at State

The debate about Age of Disinformation: Democracy at State discussed how the current Zeitgeist is defined by the dissatisfaction with the status quo of many people in Western countries and the erosion of trust towards authorities and hierarchies. Technology and social media and the platform they have provided for the spreading of unverified information have contributed to the undermining of the foundations of democracy. The discussants, however, emphasized that we need to collect more data and understand better why people believe in false information and how these beliefs impact the society. Furthermore, it is crucial to decouple the reasons and agents that spread false information. There are indeed noticeable and harmful disinformation attacks by foreign states who abuse freedom of speech and use information technology for malicious purposes. And there are websites and social media groups that only exist because there is a financial clickbait incentive: the more people click on the post with untrue but eye- and mind-catchy information, the more money is earned from ads. Western media also should admit that standards of journalism need to be maintained and improved in many cases. Misleading headlines, focus on entertaining rather than meaningful issues and problems with fact-checking contribute to the formation of the post-truth and post-fact world. The participants suggested that we should focus on the increasing of media literacy, monitoring of foreign misused influence, taking on board of influential members of the public to spread more truthful narratives, and removing of financial incentives and cutting off ads from the websites that spread falsified information. The participants also highlighted that the proper understanding of the dissent vote is missing. The fact that many people voted for the previously unimaginable candidate or option does not necessarily mean that they are not rational or are misinformed. Political elites and parties who stand for the democratic order and competent decision-making need to engage the public more and make politics more interesting and understandable for people. Otherwise, this role is taken on and misused by populists.



Rethinking Security in an Increasingly Unpredictable World

Rethinking Security in an Increasingly Unpredictable World was another topic preoccupying the minds of the Chateau Bela 2017 guests. The discussion on NATO Adaptation in and beyond 2017 was opened by the premise that never before has the Transatlantic community faced so many interconnected and complex security challenges like the rise of illiberal powers, extremism and radicalism, crime-terror nexus, breakdown of stability in the Middle East, Pakistan-India tensions and many others. The rise of these challenges signifies the end of the golden age for the Transatlantic community. The participants stressed that normally the broader West would have been able to address them but given the current populist drift in its midst, it finds itself looking inward, and spending most of its energy and resources on addressing domestic, and not always security related, challenges. In order to alter this state of affairs, and to help decision makers with their policy choices, GLOBSEC put together GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative which debuted with its first, Steering Committee Scoping paper, shortly before the Chateau Bela. This is to inspire a reform of the Alliance and help it thrive in the second and third decades of the 21st century. NATO needs preparedness and a constructive agenda which would allow the new U.S. administration to fully appreciate the merits of the Alliance. It must adapt to new challenges and fully move into the cyber sphere, and its European members must spend more on defence. Given that some of the Allies are extremely concerned with the threats emanating from MENA, NATO could perhaps envision and then operationalise a more profound role in the MENA region. The time, as was underlined by the discussants, for decisions on the aforementioned issues is now.



Reforming intelligence after ISIS – Where Do We Go from Here

To address the interconnected security challenges, the Transatlantic community also needs to step up its intelligence efforts. Therefore, the lunch session on Reforming intelligence after ISIS – Where Do We Go from Here presented the history behind the establishment of the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative (GIRI) which came to life in the aftermath of the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks conducted by ISIS. The GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative entails a High Level Steering Committee with an outstanding working group which put together the Initiative's first output – a report titled Reforming Transatlantic Counterterrorism. This report was consequently launched at the GLOBSEC TATRA Summit 2016 and included the following four recommendations: 1. establishment of a permanent Core Transatlantic Counter-Terrorism Hub, which would represent the first step to provide a secure space for linking existing national CT centres with high degrees of mutual trust; 2. introduction of operational Case-Based Task Forces be set up within to the Hub, designed to react ad hoc to emerging CT challenges; 3. development of a single search interface to enable real time information exchange; 4. setting up a transatlantic CT Centre of Excellence, which would enable joint standardisation and training, as well as create a much needed bridge between intelligence and law enforcement professionals around the issues of CT issues. The session also outlined the future evolution of GIRI in 2017 which will veer in four directions: continuation of the focus on counterterrorism and monitoring of the process of implementation of the original report's recommendations; feasibility study of the recommendations from a technological point of view; research on the crime-terror nexus; and development of the cyber pillar of the initiative.



"Save Plan" for Europe

In the "Save Plan" for Europe debate, dynamic exchange of views was provoked by kick-off remarks painting deliberately negative scenario of a continued EU disintegration. Is the EU in a free fall amidst volatile public opinion and populist movements turning against Europe even in core countries? Brexit was not an isolated development, rather a symptom of a wider problem. EU becomes an easy target to blame for negative effects of globalisation on vulnerable segments of societies across Europe. What happens, for instance, if the upcoming French presidential elections lead to Frexit? First thing, as dust settles, populist leaders who had caused it would be helpless as what to do next. Second, people would not have the likely consequences and chaos that can follow explained. The future of single market is in danger, with dire consequences for our economies.

What can be done to prevent it? Passion and emotions in defence of Europe stirred in the room during our debate should be heard more often also on the leadership level. This communication vacuum needs to be filled in. We need more leaders who make a case for the EU anchored in national self-interest, and would be able to shape public opinion in their countries not just follow it.

In conclusion, a more likely scenario seems to be EU gradually moving towards more differentiated, multi-speed arrangement after the super-electoral year of 2017. Sort of Europe à la carte, with some countries opting for more integration in certain areas, and others drifting towards the margins. Suddenly realisation that 'exit doors' are wide open could have a positive psychological effect awaking more enthusiasm for Europe among people and electorates in some countries to save the EU project.



What to Expect from the New US President

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