

CHÂTEAU BÉLA

CENTRAL EUROPEAN STRATEGIC FORUM

2023 TAKEAWAYS



Château Béla, located near the strategic border of Slovakia and Hungary, traditionally hosted the **15th edition** of the GLOBSEC's Central European Strategic Forum. An exclusive group of policymakers, thinkers, and experts from Europe, North America, but also from the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific region gathered in Slovakia once again in order to discuss the most pressing challenges that Europe, the West, and the global community need to face. The **2023 Central European Strategic Forum** was held at Château Béla during a period of European fragmentation and polarisation. The ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine persists, accompanied by a rising war fatigue exacerbated by pivotal elections that will shape the future of the European Union and the transatlantic partnership. Beyond that, terrorist actions and Hamas' violence have escalated to another military conflict between Gaza's separatists and Israel. Instead of seeking a permanent and stable security architecture in the Middle East, another bloodshed rages in the region. At the same time, the enormous importance of the upcoming election in the US weighs around the world.



Paving the way for strategic autonomy or responsibility: How to keep Europe at the table, not on the menu?

During the Château Béla 2023 Central European Strategic Forum debates, defining Europe's role in the global arena was highlighted as the priority topic. There is a pressing need for the continent to proactively carve out its strategic autonomy and take greater responsibility on the global stage. Europe needs to be a more considerate and engaged partner, cautioning against taking its relationships for granted. Moreover, it should actively engage in supporting and cooperating with countries of the Global South, as well as demonstrate a proactive stance in maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Now, more than ever, the European Union stands at a crucial juncture where proactive measures are imperative to solidify its global influence and partnerships. A key area that demands immediate attention is the strengthening of ties with the Western Balkans. Failing to do so may risk these nations seeking alternative alliances and partnerships, potentially shifting their geopolitical alignments. To address this, the EU should prioritise a comprehensive and strategic engagement plan with the Western Balkans, focusing on both economic and political cooperation. This includes fostering trade

relations, investing in infrastructure projects, and providing support for the region's socio-economic development. Simultaneously, the EU should emphasise shared values, democratic principles, and the rule of law to promote stability and align the Western Balkans with the broader European vision.

The importance of moving beyond a historical reliance on a peace economy urges Europe to invest significantly in security measures at both national and global levels and prioritise investments in security measures to enhance Europe's influence and presence.

Concerns were raised about the absence of a clearly defined mission for Europe over the past 15 years. The debate also brought attention to the perceived lack of unified leadership representing Europe on the global stage. Without a robust military strategy, foreign policy risks might become a nebulous concept, potentially relegating Europe to a passive role in international affairs. Europe must conduct a thorough assessment of military production capabilities, address disparities to ensure self-sufficiency, as well as develop comprehensive plans for food and pharmaceutical security to enhance overall crisis preparedness.

European governments face critical challenges in securing public support for their proposed solutions. Communication strategies are poor, particularly in addressing sensitive issues such as migration. European leaders must enhance internal communication strategies to ensure transparency and the understanding of government policies. It is necessary to establish mechanisms for ongoing public engagement and feedback.



Recommendations were made to shift from an emphasis on regulation to fostering innovation and production. The presented vision entailed Europe evolving into a dynamic force on the global stage, leveraging its capabilities in technological advancements. The EU should reform its regulatory policies to create an environment that fosters innovation and production, and develop initiatives to showcase and leverage Europe's technological and manufacturing capabilities on the global stage.

The era of cheap security is over

Europe still finds itself in peace mode. It observes war, it comments on war, and it supports its Ukrainian allies, but it still sees war as something far-fetched. The current situation and geopolitical instability emphasise the need for change in our thinking about European security. The truth is that there is already a war conflict taking place in Europe, perpetrated by one of the global superpowers through aggression against a sovereign and democratic Ukraine. Europe is at war and must activate its war mode.

A unified foreign policy of the European Union towards the most pressing global challenges has been the subject of discussion for many years. However, it is clear now that no discussion about European foreign policy is incomplete without considering the imperative to strengthen military capabilities. Europe must constantly produce more military equipment and create a friendly environment for the development of defence-industrial cooperation. The current inability to produce the required amount of military equipment is a serious concern. Now, supporting production and increasing military capabilities is what counts. This is the only way to establish a functioning institution of deterrence.



Security and peace in Europe can no longer be taken for granted. The cost of life in peace and prosperity is very concrete, and even 2% of GDP on defence will no longer be a flat-rate panacea. In parallel with increasing and strengthening the defence capabilities of the European states, it is a must to invest more in innovation, research, and development. While increased defence spending across Europe is welcomed, strengthening the defence industrial base of the continent cannot be achieved separately by the European states. European allies must spend more, but collaboratively.

NATO allies are aware of the potential threat of war escalation on the Eastern Flank and its consequences. The Russian aggression against Ukraine opened the eyes of many, and allies started to prepare plans for a war scenario. Concrete regional defence plans were presented at the Summit in Vilnius this year. The key question is how to put these plans into practice. That is something on which the Alliance must elaborate. Nonetheless, the strengthening of the Eastern Flank remains a crucial tool of NATO's deterrence policy.

Europe must stand with Ukraine, not doubt it



Ukraine has been fighting both for its own freedom and defending our democratic values for 22 months. The situation on the front is very complicated but under control, as the Ukrainians claim. However, war fatigue is constantly spreading across Europe, and a series of elections has accelerated this phenomenon. Indeed, it has been difficult to maintain the same level of support - political, military, and financially - in 2023 as in 2022.

Amidst a wave of crucial elections across Europe, support for Ukraine emerged as a hot topic during the campaigns. Recent election results in Slovakia, Poland, and the Netherlands perfectly proved this and that polarized societies are common in Europe. Despite negative political statements regarding future military support, the new Slovak government has approached the issue of support for Ukraine in a pragmatic manner so far. No one is more exhausted and devastated from the war than Ukrainians. It is natural that war fatigue has increased in European societies, and the need for peace negotiations is being inflected more and more. However, there is only one feasible scenario – designed and written by Ukrainians - and Europe is obliged to persist in its support. Yet, the political will is and will be questionable.

President Zelensky's Peace Formula has been recognized as a base document for just peace after this war and has been discussed at many multilateral meetings on various levels, with the participation of countries like China and India. Most importantly, there has not been significant pressure on Ukraine to give up territories in exchange for ending the war so far.

The war will last longer than many anticipated. There is a high probability that no decisive moments will come before the Presidential election in the US. Russia was able to switch to a wartime economy and increase its production of military equipment. It also received significant material support from North Korea and Iran and is well-prepared for winter. Attempts to cause damage to critical infrastructure during winter can be expected. On the other hand, the vision of a European future fills Ukrainians with hope. It goes without saying that the accession process will take years and will transform both

Ukraine and the EU. However, Ukraine's future in the EU must not be doubted anymore.

Ukraine's journey to becoming a NATO member seems more complicated. No major decisions about the accelerated accession process regarding Ukrainian membership can be expected from next year's 75th Summit in Washington, D.C. Instead of exaggerated expectations, the dialogue about security guarantees for Ukraine must inevitably take place. The Alliance and Kyiv must find the most efficient way to incorporate Ukraine into the Eastern Flank and set up a new security architecture in the region.

US innovates, EU regulates: How do we switch from regulation to innovation (competitiveness)?

In the era of "US innovates, EU regulates," the European Union must redefine its strategy, moving away from a predominantly regulatory stance and toward fostering innovation and bolstering competitiveness. First, the decision-making mechanisms within the EU demand adjustments. Streamlining processes and reducing bureaucratic hurdles will enable quicker responses to the dynamic global landscape.



Second, establishing robust collaboration with the private sector is essential to addressing the overarching challenge of competitiveness against global heavyweights, such as the US and China. By fostering partnerships with industry leaders, the EU can tap into cutting-edge technologies and insights, enhancing its innovation capabilities, and thus interconnecting several segments of its society.

The key message to the new European Commission should emphasize the imperative to shift focus from regulation to innovation. Encouraging a culture of creativity and risk-taking is essential for the EU to keep pace with its global counterparts. Criteria for competition must be redefined, acknowledging that innovation and technologies are a cornerstone of modern competitiveness. The EU, known for its prowess in regulation, particularly in areas like AI, industry, and countering disinformation, must now channel its expertise to leapfrog forward.

Adjusting the EU's attitude within the transatlantic context is vital. Recognizing and leveraging the strengths of both the EU and the US can lead to a symbiotic relationship in which innovation becomes a shared pursuit rather than a competi-

tive race. This attitude can prevent falling behind other tech leaders like China and India. Proactive measures investing in research and development, creating a supportive environment, and nurturing a skilled workforce are critical steps. Implementing safeguards to protect democratic processes from undue influence and ensuring the responsible use of technology should be central to the EU's agenda.

In the race for global tech leadership, the European Union has the potential to be a frontrunner. By embracing innovation, adjusting its regulatory approach, facilitating private-public dialogue and cooperation, and fostering strategic collaborations, the EU can position itself as a powerhouse in the ever-evolving technological landscape.

Middle East: No matter what our perspective is, it is still a regional conflict. However, the longer it takes, the bigger the possibility of a broader escalation.



The Middle East has long been trapped in the complexity of its conflicts, with perspectives on the matter varying widely. Despite the regional nature of the issues, the risk of broader escalation looms larger. As the saying goes, "We cannot sweep these problems under the rug." There was a pressing need for international attention in the region well before October 7th, yet global interest was lacking, as it was in Ukraine before Russia's full-scale invasion. A noteworthy aspect lies in the fact that Israel was caught relatively off guard by the terrorist attack as Hamas struck when Israel was susceptible and least anticipating a threat from adversaries. This underscores Israel's current stance in acting defensively against such acts of violence.

Within the region, there is an active dynamic, particularly between the Gulf countries and Israel. Fortunately, the dispute has not escalated into a full-blown conflict, but the potential for such an outcome remains ever-present. The question of ethnic transfers is relevant again after more than two decades.

- ▶ Iran, while seemingly not eager for full involvement in the conflict, strategically capitalizes on the situation politically. It does so carefully, ensuring that it does not attract unwanted attention from the United States and other global leaders.

- ▶ The Israeli government's lack of a clear political vision or strategy poses risks to its reputation both domestically and internationally. This void leaves room for uncertainty and hinders the pursuit of a sustainable resolution.
- ▶ If the Israeli strategy is to physically destroy Hamas, it may face challenges. Hamas represents more than just a movement; it embodies a complex narrative of resistance among the people. To dismantle Hamas, one must address the key narratives and messages that fuel its existence.
- ▶ Monitoring developments in Lebanon is crucial for maintaining regional stability and sustaining peace.

One potential answer for this conflict lies in a **two-state solution**, contingent on Israel's support. The long-term objective for resolving this conflict extends beyond a false peace that merely temporarily reduces tension. A complex peace with security guarantees is paramount. The supportive pillar for the two-state solution can be possibly found in the Abraham Accords, which normalise relations between the Arab countries and Israel. A top priority should be offering a similar pathway for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The use of force must be moderated, to prevent further loss of life as it is evident that the dispute cannot be solved solely by military means.



*This event receives financial support from the European Parliament. Sole liability rests with the organisers, the European Parliament is not responsible for the activity.

**Realizované s finančnou podporou Ministerstva zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky v rámci dotáčného programu medzinárodné vzťahy a zahraničná politika SR. Za obsah tohto dokumentu je výlučne zodpovedný GLOBSEC.

***The project is co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.

**** This project is (co)sponsored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

