

For whom the Bled bell tolls?

It tolls for you and me and each of us

When Slovenia launched the Bled Strategic Forum way back in 2006, we were aiming for something valuable, different and relevant, not just for our foreign policy, but for **the wider world**.

We had the enthusiasm of a new-born country that wanted to leave its mark on the global map of policy ideas. In today's highly connected world, there are many ways one can contribute to common efforts. Since "*no man is an island*", we always felt that the only bell at our only island, here at Bled, **should resonate globally** and for each of us.

Our mission statement, our key priority and the reason why every September we invite more than a thousand participants from all over the world to join us here at Bled is one concept in two words: **sustainable development**.

Although this idea is shared and supported by almost everybody in the international community, be it individual countries, regions, governments, corporations, or citizens, we are **still very far from translating these two words into practice** – because every idea comes at a cost. Are we ready as a society to pay this cost, which at the end will be far less than the cost of not doing anything? Climate

change is not something that you can push into some box or some region and leave there – climate change is and will be affecting everybody, including you and me.

This is why we need to talk about the responsibility to put words into practice. It is not going to work if the burden of going sustainable and green falls on the shoulders of those who are already struggling now to cope with the changes in the globalized world. We have so **many comprehensive deals, from Kyoto to Paris. What we need is the will to implement the deal – to incorporate sustainability into every pore of society.**

That is why this year at the Bled Strategic Forum we will not only discuss the need to go sustainable, but also **propose clear plans how to act accordingly.** We can not discuss clean water without acknowledging the right to it – and that is why we have enshrined this right in our Constitution. Democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights are not an appendage or consequence of development, they are the fundamentals of any serious and effective debate on climate change.

Slovenia's most important natural environment is – the European Union!

Do not get me wrong – I am not preaching some cheap euro-centrism to our global friends and competitors, but the fact is that Slovenia feels the EU to be its natural surroundings, its *habitat*. This is why the state of the European Union will be at the centre of discussions during the forum. The newly elected EU leaders need to show determination and responsibility during a time of growing uncertainties in the global arena, Brexit and challenging internal issues.

This is why we need political wisdom, leadership and European solutions, which will also include countries with prospects for EU membership.

The “B” in BSF of course stands for ... Bled. But it could also stand for Balkans: being bold about the Balkans and its EU enlargement has always been a special feature at the Bled Strategic Forum. It is in Slovenia’s vital and strategic interest for the countries of the region to achieve irreversible stability and prosperity and become members of the EU as soon as possible. We are aware that in the current geopolitical context, with major powers seriously weighing up the region again, **enlargement will be under immense pressure** and the need to deliver on the reforms of candidate countries will be greater than ever.

However, when the region delivers, the EU should also be brave and daring enough to move forward. A negative decision regarding enlargement can have a negative cascading effect all across the Western Balkans. **Yes, the EU should be strict, but first to ourselves – and we should stick to our promises and pledges when the time comes.** If we do not act in this way, it will be our failure and responsibility if we lose the region!

What we need is a region that is reforming, that is developing and adopting European values and norms. It will be very difficult – if not impossible! – to reignite the European passion among the citizens of the region if we blow out the candle of prospects for EU membership and hope. Other actors, other players are more than ready to fill this void. In a way, this is already happening. **The Western Balkans is a geostrategic arena, and the EU cannot afford to lose.**

Migration flows are one of the issues where the EU will stand or fall. Nobody is under the illusion that migration is not a serious issue and consequentially a generational one, but we need to look at it in a comprehensive and objective manner. Of course, this is a security question, but in equal terms it is also a question of demography and opportunities. In solving these issues, Slovenia, as a Schengen country, respects European norms and values.

As one of my fellow foreign ministers said: **you first need to control your borders – to decide how open they are.** We must be aware that people of the world will continue migrating – what we need to insist on is **the respect for democratic standards and the respect of our culture.**

When talking about geostrategic questions, we must mention a gradual but irreversible **reshaping of power in the international arena**, which will have long-lasting consequences for our common future. **Multilateralism is in danger.**

For countries like Slovenia, a functioning multilateral framework is essential in order to safeguard and guarantee our sustainable and secure livelihood. However, this does not apply to small countries only – even the biggest powers rely so heavily on multilateralism that by thwarting it we thwart the destiny of the world as we know it.

There are many more challenges and questions that you will discuss at this edition of the Bled Strategic Forum. Looking at **the impressive list of speakers, panellists and important guests**, I am very proud that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the Centre for European Perspective, was able to combine all of these in a two-day agenda.

If you find a moment to go to the island and ring the bell for luck, please do not forget that “*no man is an island*” – we create our common future only together, respectfully engaged. So, do not ask for whom the Bled bell tolls: **it rings for the planet!**

Only through **diversity of thoughts and responsible attitudes** can we arrive at comprehensive and viable solutions for our common future. **Welcome to Slovenia**, where discussion and debate are valued, and different opinions are shared and cherished.