

Distinguished guests,
Presidents,
Prime Ministers,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Slovenia, welcome to Bled! I am sincerely grateful for your participation at the 15th Bled Strategic Forum. I want to stress that we find it so important to hold a real, physical Forum and celebrate its important anniversary.

It is always a challenge to keep an event going on for more than just a few years and it is rewarding to see the event grow in size and importance. Year after year, the Bled Strategic Forum proves its value and potential, so I simply must take this opportunity to thank all the individuals, institutions and partners who have made 15 editions of the Forum possible.

Dear friends,

A year ago, this Forum focused on challenges to global stability, sustainable development and economic progress. The possibility of a pandemic stopping the world in its tracks was contained to dystopian novels and blockbuster movies.

And yet, here we are. “New normality” is a phrase with which we try to describe the enormous changes that keep happening – from international politics to completely personal decisions like should I elbow-shake my old friend or I rather stay distant...

But is this new normality a product of pandemic? Or is it the other way around – the pandemic is the result of our old patterns of behaviour?

In my opinion, the changes in the international environment do not come as a surprise. Sure, the pandemic has enhanced and sped them up, but it did not create them from scratch.

The way we tackle the pandemic reflects the altered world that was already there. We could see it in the lure of unilateral actions, in the disregard of established international order, law and commitments, in questioning our own model of governance. International organisations have been challenged too and suddenly had to switch to digital platforms.

Economic and trade relations became strained, more competitive, protectionist and unpredictable. The notions of self-sufficiency and economic independence are getting stronger. There is a danger of a purely transactional approach to international relations. In many circles, globalism became a curse word.

The global security environment has been changing as well. The conventional threats were joined by terrorism and illegal migration, and we no longer have the moral comfort to treat illegal migration as a humanitarian issue only.

The threats also became hybrid, slowly penetrating our democratic processes. They moved to the cyber sphere – hacking is not just a hobby for adventurous teenagers, it is a new form of international warfare. And a so-called ‘deepfake’ produced by an activist has a potential to stir up even an international conflict.

The European Union, our second home, has been struggling too. It was hit by Brexit, migration crisis, divisions regarding the principle of solidarity, diverging views and misunderstandings on the rule of law. A more assertive role on global political stage remains a challenge for the EU.

At the same time, its citizens called for more accountability and transparency. The Union, built upon very tangible common interests, is often a victim of diverging positions of its Member States. The key test for the Union remains: to be seen by its citizens as a shield against the negative side effects of globalisation. The pandemic is a case in point.

The future is not linear anymore. We need a multidimensional approach. This is why we are here today.

On so many levels, there has been a growing need for change. To make the changes happen, there must be a strong political will. The radical game-changer in the form of a global pandemic is perhaps an incentive we all did not want, but since it is here, it has definitely become a trigger.

An incentive that nearly left us without the 15th edition of the Bled Strategic Forum. Still – here we are, hoping that our discussion panels will provide answers, guidance and ideas on the above-mentioned challenges.

The Leaders' Panel will discuss the future of Europe – this discussion will of course be very valuable as we head towards Slovenia's second Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2021.

The EU should improve its crisis management mechanisms to better respond to crises and challenges, arising from pandemic, cyber threats, or demographic dynamics. We should increase our resilience to migration pressures, stemmed by conflicts and climate change.

We should focus on protecting our democracies, values and freedoms, while also paying respect to our different historical experiences. At the same time, Slovenia firmly believes that the continuation of the EU enlargement process towards the countries of Western Balkans should be a part of the vision of a Union that radiates its attractive power.

We are truly encouraged by the strong agreement on the next Multiannual Financial Framework and, even more importantly, on the Recovery Fund. It proves that political will, common interest and the leading principle of benefit for all are as strong as ever and that the EU can deliver when it is under pressure. But we should be able to be effective also when not subject to such pressure.

With my fellow Foreign Ministers we will discuss the role of regional cooperation and new forms of multilateral engagement. With global international organizations weakened, the tendency goes towards smaller, regional frameworks. As for Slovenia, our eyes are again on the geographic and cultural space that has shaped us through centuries – the Central Europe.

This is not nostalgia. It is about concrete projects to better connect our countries, primarily with transport and energy infrastructure. There is also room for cooperation with partners outside the region. The Three Seas Initiative, connecting 12 European nations with other European partners and the USA on a very project-based agenda, is an excellent example of such new mechanism.

No economic recovery or resilience regarding health, climate or social crisis is possible without stability and security. European security is of paramount importance and we must engage more regarding European Common Security and Defence Policy.

European security does not exist without Trans-Atlantic Alliance. Even when we do not see exactly eye to eye, or have competing interests, security – together with our values and democratic standards – is the cornerstone of our partnership. We must safeguard it, also by accepting the concept of fair burden-sharing, however unpopular it may be with our Ministers of Finance or public opinion.

Security comes at a price – we know it from automotive industry, where decades of investments in safety resulted in so many lives saved on the streets. Our investment in national security is saving lives too. In addition, combining the resources and skills of both EU and NATO will provide a solid base to face both conventional and new security challenges.

Cyber security and digitalization will be addressed in the final two panels. In this regard, three issues come to my mind.

The first is the importance of effective, affordable and accessible digital tools, as demonstrated during the pandemic. Diplomacy moved to online platforms. Business meetings are conducted from private kitchen tables. In an ironic twist, we had to tell our children to stay home and turn on the computer – because that is where the school is taking place. The good part is that for the first time they opted for playing with their friends – outdoors.

Of course, digitalisation has been on an unstoppable rise for quite some time. Slovenia is honoured to host the first UNESCO International Research Centre on Artificial Intelligence. We see it as an immense opportunity in terms of science, innovation, education and – as a final result – development.

Second, the threat to our cyber assets is probably higher than a threat of armed conflict. We must address the delicate balance between the open character of cyber space, benefits of wide cooperation, and protecting key digital infrastructure. We need trustworthy suppliers to build up our critical ICT infrastructure.

Thirdly, we need to think about European solutions, European autonomy in cyber space. This is both an issue of cyber-security as well as of new Europe-wide industrial policies that may become a key to Europe's continued prosperity.

To sum it up: today's post-Covid world may look different. But the changes are not a surprise – the virus has just helped us see them in a clearer, albeit very painful light. I want to pay my respects to more than 800,000 victims of the virus worldwide. They are the wake-up call that we simply must hear. We must see it as an incentive to adapt, to be inventive, and to find mutual interest with our closest and most reliable partners.

BSF has been a highly respectable discussion forum for 15 years. It remains so even in the times of Covid-19. My thanks go to Peter and his team, to the Centre for European Perspective, strategic partners and sponsors, who all made BSF 2020 a reality – and not a virtual one.

It is so good to see you all here – I wish you all a fruitful discussion, and I already use the opportunity to invite you to 2021 Slovenian EU Presidency edition of the Bled Strategic Forum.

Thank you.