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BLLED STRATEGIC FORUM: THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IS UNCONCEIVABLE WITHOUT THE WESTERN BALKANS

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First launched in 2006 under the initiation of the Slovenian government, the Forum's purpose was of a vision bringing together decision-makers from different fields, while encouraging an open debate on contemporary political security and development challenges, and by searching for new ideas and solutions. Over the years, it provided the space for building unprecedented relationships with the aim of facing the complex and interdisciplinary challenges of today's globalized world, thus requiring for comprehensive approaches. By giving a voice to diverse positions, views, and understandings, it remains determined to strive towards innovative thinking and forward-looking strategies.¹

This format was an excellent opportunity to debate about future ambitions, common goals and the aim pursued through the EU, while bringing immense benefits to all European citizens. Particularly, the need of injecting new energy in the enlargement process was outlined in the recent 16th edition, while reminding that the future of Europe needs to be inclusive, whereas a weak EU would bring uncertainty only.

The 2-days event hosting key participants at the EU and global level, with more than 170 panelists, encouraged an open dialogue on the future of Europe and its main challenges, by calling on its resilience. Also, the Bled Strategic Forum's key debate addressed the stalled EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. Held in the Slovenian city of Bled, it called for a continuation of this process remaining of key strategic importance, by recognizing its stagnation. Taking place on the 1st and 2nd of September 2021 this format echoed that there is no alternative to it. All, but Vucic showing less enthusiasm, confirmed its relevance for the entire region.

President of Slovenia, Boruht Pahor, when opening the forum, recalled that this venue has traditionally been devoting special attention to the Western Balkans, and this year is not exception considering that the leading theme is the future of Europe: 'The Western Balkans are part of Europe and should be able to engage in discussion about its future', so Pahor. Also, he reminded that it would be beneficial for both Europe and the Western Balkans if all the countries in the region join the Union as soon as possible. In other words, delaying or postponing the enlargement could have unforeseen and unwanted consequences for both sides.²

Importantly, the forum enhanced the need of having a vision of where we want to see the EU in the future, by pinpointing that the question of enlargement is about its own existence. Besides that, it stressed the importance of making this process to the Western Balkans a priority, by giving an end to false promises, which would create new problems only. Also, it recalled that when the Union was established the founding fathers did not divide it on East and West.³ Even more, it reminded that the countries in the region are part of Europe with its members sharing a common identity. To be said otherwise, a real geopolitical Europe should start at its borders, with its partners and closest friends, and particularly with the region. Therefore, it is urged to commit

¹Announcing Bled Strategic Forum 2021. Available at: <https://www.cep.si/bsf/bled-strategic-forum-2021/>

²BSF2021 – Leaders' Panel – Future of Europe – Enlargement. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdNfHg3txJ8>

³Bled Strategic Forum 2021. Available at: <https://slovenian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/bled-strategic-forum-2021-with-record-attendance-and-open-dialogue-on-the-future-of-europe/>

oneself to the accession process to be reviewed. Any further delay can play into the hands of others.⁴

Charles Michel, President of the European Council, particularly evoked that the EU is a project of values and prosperity, by also recalling that the European Union is unconceivable without the Western Balkans.⁵ Furthermore, the need of discussing how the region will be part of the European Union both in terms of economic, political, and security architecture has been especially stressed.⁶

Voices from the region: all but Vucic show enthusiasm for enlargement

Among regional leaders participating in the Forum Albin Kurti, Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, meeting with the President of Slovenia, Mr. Borut Pahor, expressed his gratitude for his support to Kosovo on its path to Euro-Atlantic integration. Kurti also met Prime Minister of Croatia, Mr. Andrej Plenkovic, and they discussed economics, security, and ways to further strengthen their exceptional bilateral relations and deepen their cooperation. In a tweet the Kosovar premier said: 'we discussed the future of EU enlargement. I believe for WB6 to progress, four principles need to be implemented: rule of law, democracy, dealing with the past and equal minority rights.'

Also, the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama assured that a Europe without the Western Balkans is an unthinkable scenario, whereas there is no future for Europe leaving the countries out of the EU.⁷ Yet, whether all other regional leaders showed interest in further discussing about enlargement, the Serbian Prime Minister Vucic displayed to be less keen about it; 'We were very enthusiastic about the accession process - today we are not. We don't care anymore', so Vucic.⁸ The Forum ended by awarding Slovenian priest and missionary Pedro Opeka for his humanitarian work and fight against poverty in Madagascar. Yet, it remains to be seen if the priorities of this year's edition with a focus on the Western Balkans will be turned into deeds from now on. Should they stay just on paper, such a scenario would send a negative signal about the EU's past promises, by reinforcing currently univocal disappointments with spillover effects across the region. Otherwise said; if Europe closes its doors, a Pandora box might open again.

⁴16th Bled Strategic Forum: speech by David Sassoli, EP President at the Leaders' Panel "Future of Europe – To Stand and Withstand". Available at: https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/da/16th-bled-strategic-forum-speech-by-david-sassoli-ep-president-at-the-leaders-panel-future-of-europe--to-stand-and-withstand_l209940-V_v

⁵Speech by President Charles Michel at the opening session of the Bled Strategic Forum. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/09/01/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-opening-session-of-the-bled-strategic-forum/>

⁶BSF2021-Leaders' Panel – Future of Europe – Enlargement. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdNfHg3txJ8>

⁷PM Rama: There is no future for Europe without the Balkans in the EU. Available at: <https://euronews.al/en/balkans/2021/09/01/pm-rama-there-is-no-future-for-europe-without-the-balkans-in-the-eu/#!>

⁸Serbia is Now Less Enthusiastic about Joining the EU, Vucic says. Available at: <https://www.bloomberquint.com/politics/serbia-is-now-less-enthusiastic-about-joining-the-eu-vucic-says>

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