NAVIGATING THROUGH THE EU’S UNCERTAIN WATERS: GLOBSEC 2019

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As Globsec’s 2019 forum in Bratislava kicked off, EURACTIV went along to listen to world leaders from politics, civil society and business on the Future of Europe. Here we present a summary of the main talking points across the forum.
Contents

Europe’s ambitious but uncertain future on show at Bratislava forum

GLOBSEC Forum: ‘No reason to protest, people have a great life’, Babiš says

US ambassador: Europe should forget Huawei, embrace Western tech

Fuelling the Fire: Weaponizing Islam in Europe
Europe’s ambitious but uncertain future on show at Bratislava forum

By Samuel Stolton | EURACTIV.com

As Globsec’s 2019 forum in Bratislava kicked off earlier this week, EURACTIV went along to listen to world leaders from politics, civil society and business on the Future of Europe. Here we present a summary of the main talking points in the field, across the first two days.

Western Balkans. Kosovo’s president Hashim Thaçi and Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić locked horns on Friday, as the pair disagreed over the best way to proceed as part of the Belgrade-Pristina talks, with Vučić saying that according to the Serbian constitution, Kosovo still belongs to Serbia.

“Serbia only did its job by fighting against the membership of Kosovo to Interpol and UNESCO, because we do not recognise and we do not see Kosovo as an independent state,” Vučić said.

While Thaçi hit out at Vučić for blocking Kosovo from joining such international institutions, he attempted to strike a more positive tone with regards to the progress of the talks in the run up to a scheduled Paris meeting on July 1. “I believe that in the following weeks we will create a more positive environment to overcome these obstacles that we have in front of us, to continue the dialogue,” he said.

In terms of possible EU accession for Serbia, Vučić said that his country

Continued on Page 5
would continue to maintain close economic ties with China and Russia, irrespective of its path towards EU membership. He added that he is due to hold talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel over the weekend, in a bid to rally the importance of Serbia’s EU membership, for both the country itself and the bloc.

Barnier backs Weber. The EU’s lead Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, revealed on Friday that he supports the EPP’s Manfred Weber in the German’s attempt to become the next Commission President, following reports that the he himself would like to take up the role.

Responding to a question from EURACTIV as to whether he would support Weber in his campaign, Barnier confirmed that he would back the German for the EU’s top job. More broadly, the Frenchman reaffirmed his commitment to delivering an orderly Brexit, and repeated that the integrity of the EU’s single market will not be compromised. He added that defence is a vital future area of cooperation for the EU and the UK.

Fidesz’s future. The debate over the controversial workings of Hungary’s governing party continued on Friday, after the country’s Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó came out on the defensive following accusations levelled at Fidesz’s track record in upholding the rule of law.

Speaking as part of a panel on the EU’s new political landscape following the recent parliamentary elections, Vice-President of the Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, Maria João Rodrigues, said that “it’s very important to base national sovereignty in sound democratic standards…such as the rule of law.” In a veiled reference to Hungary, she added that the EU faced a challenge going forward, in ensuring that the rule of law is upheld across member states.

Szijjártó struck a conflicted tone as to the future of Fidesz inside the European Parliament’s largest group, the EPP, accusing party chairman and Commission presidential hopeful Manfred Weber of treating the Hungarian people like “second class citizens” following the decision to suspend Fidesz’s membership of the EPP group. Meanwhile, Mikuláš Dzurinda, President of EPP’s thinktank The Martens Centre, said that the reality of the situation is that Fidesz has “one leg out of the family.”

On the subject of the Hungarian government’s moves to undermine the independence of the judiciary, and by extension the EU’s common principle of the rule of law, Dzurinda said that the “EU’s values are not at our disposal to be negotiated,” as part of the ongoing talks between the EPP and Fidesz.

Russia. On Thursday, Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash said that one of the most explicit challenges currently facing the EU emanates from the Kremlin. “Russia as we know it today is determined to dissolve the European Union,” he said.

However, Garton Ash added that the EU needs to find unity amid its divergent political landscape. “We need the EU to defend our values, interests and shared way of life,” he said. “We need it for ourselves in Europe to explain to next generation what the EU is for. Europe needs to discover its new story.”

The spirit of Sibiu. Romania’s European Affairs Minister George Ciamba said on Thursday that political cohesion should remain a priority for the Finnish Presidency of the Council, to whom it hands over the rolling leadership of the institution. On Friday, he reaffirmed that, saying that “cohesion means convergence,” and that the bloc should now look beyond its borders in terms of future enlargement opportunities, adding that the EU’s “soft power” may diminish if it fails to adopt a proactive stance on its future expansion strategy.
A s GLOBSEC’s 2019 forum in Bratislava kicked off last week, EURACTIV went along to listen to world leaders from politics, civil society and business, on the EU’s place amid unstable political contexts. Here we present a summary of the main talking points in the Future of Europe stream at the forum on Saturday (8 June).

Babiš on the backfoot. Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš came under pressure on Saturday (8 April), following mass protests in his country over alleged corruption and misuse of EU funds.

“There is no reason for people to protest in the street, because they have a great life,” Babiš said in response to questions about recent demonstrations in Prague. He added that “the Czech republic is not going to change the government because of protests in the street.”

Tens of thousands of citizens in the country had taken to the streets on Tuesday (June 4), demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister following the allegations.

Before evoking Trumpian parlance in declaring that his legacy was to “make the Czech republic great again,” Babiš went on the attack against Continued on Page 7
journalists in his country, imploring the Bratislava audience not to “believe their lies.”

In terms of EU affairs, Babiš laid out his cards in saying that the European Commission had too much legislative influence, and that the ‘coalition government’ of the EU should be the European Council, who should “meet every two months.”

Šefčovič for a top job? Sharing the stage with Babiš on Saturday was Slovakian Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, who insisted on “geographical balance” in dishing out the EU’s top jobs for the new five-year mandate that begins following the May European elections.

This means there should be at least one central or eastern European representative, he indicated, adding that current Commission Vice-President for the Energy Union, Maroš Šefčovič, had the backing of the Visegrad Four member states – the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary.

Moving on to wider geopolitical considerations, Pellegrini considered it was the EU’s fault that China had been given a free pass to invest in the Western Balkans, saying the EU was not “present enough” in the region.

Freedom of movement essential. The role Central and Eastern European states play in the future of the EU was also debated on Saturday, 15 years after the eastward expansion of the bloc.

Slovakia’s Foreign Secretary František Ružička highlighted the importance of freedom of movement as a fundamental EU principle, irrespective of the fact that Slovakia has lost many young workers to northern European states. “This is about the attractiveness of the environment,” he said, “You need to create the conditions for people to come back or to stay.”

Macron advisor Clément Beaune chimed in by saying that along with freedom of movement provisions, there comes the necessity for convergence with central EU values and principles.

Meanwhile, Thomas Wieser, fellow at the Bruegel think-tank said that across Central and Eastern Europe, the “retention of talent” was of prime importance in ensuring economic competitiveness in the area. The director of GlobSec Policy Institute, Jakub Wisniewski, added that the EU should look for regional policy reform in developing its centres of economy and production, rather than investing in commercial hubs located only in cities located in Western Europe.

Multi-polar narratives. The last five years have not been good for the Juncker Commission, according to Slovakia’s Minister of Foreign & European Affairs, Miroslav Lajčák, who said on Saturday that pledges to deal with high levels of unemployment across the bloc were never addressed, due to the fact that internal challenges such as immigration and Brexit have meant that EU progress had been dogged in priority areas.

In addition, Lajčák said that the structure of the world order is changing to represent “multi-polar” narratives controlled by domineering nations, such as the US and China.

Jon Allen, President of the Brookings Institution, said that the US’s strategy to contain China by banning the sale of technology equipment to Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei was ultimately a “failed” strategy that could result in a “bifurcation” of technology standards, that may in turn lead to interoperability issues in the future.

On the subject of cyberwarfare, Michael Chertoff, Chairman of the security consultancy, the Chertoff Group, drew attention to the growing concern on both sides of the Atlantic, on issues relating to the “use of cyberspace as a domain on conflict,” adding as a side note that disinformation is a particular area in which Russia has been known to flex its muscles during critical political moments in the history of the West.

Along this axis, Allen described Russia as an “adversarial threat,” and called for a transatlantic relationship established on a value-based community of nations, with a “capacity for a political vision for the future,” a notion also echoed by ex-MEP Marietje Schaake.

Closing the forum, GLOBSEC forum founder Robert Vass hit a foreboding but nonetheless aspirational tone for the future of Europe.

“We live in a disrupted world,” he said. “There is an explosion of data, a crisis in our western institutions.”

“But we have to navigate through these uncharted waters.”

Continued from Page 6
America cannot have close security, intelligence and technology ties with Europe unless the EU cuts ties with Chinese tech giant Huawei and embraces “Western telecom industry”, the US ambassador to the European Union told EURACTIV in an exclusive interview.

Gordon Sondland also said the EU is “quite protectionist by nature” but added he expects the new European Commission, due to take office in November, to “start on a fresh page and on a new footing with the United States”.

Gordon Sondland has been the United States Ambassador to the EU since July 2018. Following his appearance at this year’s Globsec forum in Bratislava, EURACTIV’s Alexandra Brzozowski caught up with him.

**Mr. Sondland, you once compared Brussels and Washington to competing businesses, but competitors can easily become foes. How would you describe the current EU-US relationship?**

I don’t think we’re foes any more than General Motors and Ford are foes. They’re friendly competitors, they’re each trying to gain market share – and

Continued on Page 9
Continued from Page 8

I think so do the US and the EU. They are each trying to gain market share and currently the EU has a greater percentage of the US market share, than the US does of the European market – and we’re trying to rebalance that. It makes total sense to me.

But we in Europe see the transatlantic relationship restrained. Do you think that China could become the uniting factor for the EU and the US?

It should become a uniting factor, because I think, I have never questioned the intent of the EU and I don’t believe the EU ever questions the intent of the United States. At the end of the day, we all want to get a better deal. We all want to do better on trade.

China, on the other hand, I think both of us question the intent of China. They’ve built their country over the last 30 years through theft of intellectual property through forced technology transfer. They did it the old-fashioned way – they took it. And we don’t do that to each other and we don’t want the world to operate in that way, so I think when we’re together as partners in dealing with China we’re much stronger.

But would you agree with Huawei’s recent statement that the US is putting ‘unprecedented’ pressure on EU governments?

No, we’re not putting unprecedented pressure on them. What we’re doing is, we’re saying ‘your technology, you can do what you like’. First of all, we don’t tell people what to do. We tell people what our perspective is and what the future looks like in terms of their relationship with us vis a vis information sharing, intelligence cooperation and a whole host of other interconnections that we currently enjoy today.

As the world becomes more and more reliant on this 5G technology, which it will, one’s entire country will operate on 5G – not just your telephone, your cell phone, but the cars, the aeroplanes, the buildings, the hospitals, the schools, the government, the military – everything will be interconnected. And to this extent, our friends want to be as closely interconnected with us as they are today.

We can’t risk being interconnected with someone who has vulnerable technology. So we’re telling them ‘this is our perspective, we don’t want you to put yourself in a position where we can’t continue to be closely tied as we are today because you made the wrong technology choice’. So that is really what we’re talking about.

How exactly do you feel the EU should deal with Huawei then?

The EU should subscribe to what is now being developed by what I would call the Western telecom industry, which is sort of akin to a good housekeeping seal of approval. It is producing a list of criteria that any country considering a purchase of this equipment or management of their equipment should comply with this sort of checklist of best practices. And as long as the countries buy equipment or engage with companies that comply with this list, they should be fine. And there are going to be a lot of companies that comply with that list.

Mainly American ones?

No. European ones, Korean ones, American ones, companies from all over the world will comply. I am not sure Huawei will ever comply with that list – but it could. We never know. The hope is that governments would adopt the list as a standard and this is not so much about a country or a supplier, but an objective list of criteria you set.

You recently said President Trump is patiently waiting for a new EU Commission. Earlier you described the current Commission as out of touch. What are your expectations for the next term?

A lot of what needs to be said by both sides, has been said and is well documented in the public record including some old quotes that you just pulled up. I think, what is more productive now is to let the European Union continue with its process to select its new leadership and then start on a fresh footing with that leadership. Because as you recall, when President Trump took office, he took office with the EU having an incumbent leadership already in place, now they’re starting fresh.

I believe everyone I have spoken with, who could be a potential leader of the Commission or who could have an important portfolio within the Commission, every single individual that I’ve spoken with, wants to start on a on a fresh page and on a new footing with the United States – and we welcome that.

Washington accused some EU members of an anti-US agenda, who was addressed by that?

Well, the EU is by nature quite protectionist. The EU has a different philosophy on trade than the United States does and that some countries do. And in fact, a lot of the member countries themselves, were they able to operate on a bilateral trade basis, which they are not, being a member of the EU, would probably have a view more closely akin with that of the US than the EU itself does.

Who are you referring to?

I’m not going to say, but good try!

One of those countries seem to...
be France, who recently told the Commission it should not sign trade agreements with countries that don’t respect the Paris Agreement. How does Washington feel about that?

We are more interested in substance rather than form. The Paris Agreement is all about form and not about substance. What is about substance is, are you talking the talk, which is the Paris Agreement or are you walking the walk.

There are signatories to the Paris Agreement that are not really engaging today in sustainable practices yet they tout the fact that they are a member of the Paris Agreement. We, on the other hand, have eight or nine of our 50 states that already exceed Paris standards, many of them are on their way. One of our states, Texas, is the fourth largest producer of wind energy in the world – just that one state.

We are the centre of sustainable innovation – not Europe, not Asia – the United States. Most innovation that occurs, that will create green energy, comes from the United States. So we’d rather focus on the results, than clinging to a failed agreement that disadvantages certain countries and advantages others.

Coming back to EU-US trade relations. Do you expect a negotiated solution between the US and the European Commission when it comes to the Airbus-Boeing dispute?

I think that’s very possible. Once the appraisal or the verdict is rendered as to the amount of damages, I think we’re certainly prepared to discuss how the European Union wants to handle those damages.

Would you agree with Mr. Trump that the UK is better off outside of the EU?

What I think the president has said is that this is really a sovereign decision of the UK. He has his personal feelings. Everyone on the planet has their personal feelings about it, whether the UK should or should not be part of the EU. But once the people of the UK have spoken and have made a decision to leave then it’s really up to them to figure out how to leave.

What is in the US interests though once they have left, regardless of what pathway they choose, is that they don’t do anything to prevent themselves from entering into new agreements with both the EU and the US, or to prevent the US from entering into new agreements with them and with the EU. We want them to keep as as many options open as possible, whichever pathway they pick to leave.

There is also discord between Brussels and Washington when it comes to security and defence. Isn’t the fact that the EU steps up its development of defence projects actually something that Washington was asking for a long time?

Yes, but with several provisions. Number one: We want everyone who has not made their commitment to NATO to fulfil it. In other words, if you’re a member country and you haven’t hit your 2% but somehow you’re able to find money to do a European project, first pay your bill that you owe and then, if there is money leftover, then go ahead and do it.

The second provision is, once you do spend money on non-NATO types of things, make sure they’re NATO compatible and compliant. Because at the end of the day, whether it’s a NATO asset or an EU asset, when a conflict breaks out, you’re gonna want them all to be able to operate harmoniously. And if European member states and the EU as an entity are developing weapons systems or transportation systems or whatever that are not NATO compatible, that don’t fit the box, then what you’re doing is you’re creating essentially a whole parallel system which in our lifetimes, yours and mine, will never have the capability that NATO has.

It’s a foolish expenditure and it really doesn’t help NATO, which everyone is now at that point contributing their 2%. So they’re sort of going at cross purposes. That’s what we don’t want to see.

But have you received signals from from the EU side that there is a prospect to allow that country participation in those projects?

We received the exact opposite signals. We received signals that third country participation – and I am speaking of research and development dollars – third country participation in European projects is going to be very problematic.

And when you say ‘third country’, what we’re really talking about is the United States. Yes, there are other countries involved, but the United States is the primary country that collaborates with the EU in the United States using US R&D dollars.

We want our companies to be treated the same way in Europe as European companies are treated in the United States – no better no worse.
“Fuelling the Fire: Weaponizing Islam in Europe” was the title of a panel at this year’s excellent GLOBSEC conference.

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After an unprecedented wave of jihadist terrorism, since 2015, in France, the UK, Germany, Spain among others, now is the time to reflect on how Western counter-terrorism strategies might miss the point. Indeed, while going after the operatives is a must, the West needs also to have an arsenal to target the ideological terror masters.

France, for example, reacted swiftly militarily against the Islamic State striking targets inside Raqqa less than 48 hours after the 13 November 2015 Paris attacks took place. But for all the military response, a real counter-attack against extremists is a must.

Indeed, it has emerged that one of the suicide bombers in the Paris attacks had been radicalised in a Salafist mosque in Chartres. Also, the terror that tried to attack the Thalys...
Continued from Page 11

train between Amsterdam and Paris in August 2015 has been radicalized in a mosque in Spain, as the Barcelona jihadis were.

Fighting against jihadi terrorism cannot be just focusing on the “soldiers” but also on the “generals”. In fact, inciting terrorism has a multiplying effect: a smart preacher can “hire”/brainwash tens or hundreds or more recruits. In short, to make an analogy with drugs, should we go after just the user or the dealer or both?

Unfortunately, for the time being, authorities have mostly gone after the user, while there are only a handful of known leading jihadist father figures in each country.

As an example, the main global Islamist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna is a source of inspiration for many extremists. Coincidentally, most of the leadership of al-Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden, and Ayman al-Zawahiri started as Muslim Brothers but also Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the “Caliph” of the Islamic State.

The MB’s motto sums up its worldview, “Islam is the solution, the Koran is our Constitution, Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our Leader. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.”

Al-Banna viewed Islam as a superior religion, “It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its law on all nations, and to extend its power to the entire planet.” As described by investigative journalist Sylvain Besson, in November 2001, Swiss authorities stumbled on a document simply known as “The Project” at the house of Yusuf Nada, a top MB figure.

The Project is a roadmap to follow in order to install Islamic regimes in the West by propaganda, preaching and if necessary by war. One of the main points of the Project is to support all the movements engaged in the Jihad in the Muslim world.

Unsurprisingly, Mohamed Akif, the MB’s General Guide until January 2010 called on young jihadists to focus,” against the real enemy of the ummah, the enemy which occupies, kills, desecrates and plunders…in al-Quds, in Baghdad and in Kabul.” Hence, some of this MB propaganda led young European Muslims to go fight coalition troops in Iraq.

Djamel Beghal, an al-Qaeda operative who was sentenced to 10 years in jail for having plotted in 2001 an attack on the U.S. embassy in Paris, is allegedly the father figure that radicalised even more Amedy Coulibaly, one of the perpetrators of the January 2015 Paris attacks.

How many other vulnerable souls did Beghal brainwash while in jail or now for that matter? What is interesting is that al-Banna’s grandson, Tariq Ramadan, allegedly greatly influenced Beghal. The court papers from Beghal’s indictment actually show that Beghal “was in charge of preparing Tariq Ramadan’s speeches.”

The radicalisation is not only taking place in jails or Salafi mosques. It is also occurring in the education field. Indeed as early as 2004 a landmark report put together by Jean-Pierre Obin, the inspector general of French national education, was describing an alarming situation in French schools in terms of radicalization.

Even though the large majority of Muslim kids are French, a good number of them described themselves as Muslim citizens and hailed Bin Laden as their hero. In their eyes, he was the one who represented a conquering Islam winning over the West.

After his tour of French schools, Obin explains these disturbing findings mostly because of a clear indoctrination orchestrated by international religious organizations. The students are since their young age taught what to think, what to believe and their regular teachers are presented as “liars”.

Also, Obin notes that “the project of these blatant segregationist groups denouncing integration as an oppression” is to take these Muslims out of the French Nation and bring them instead in the “Muslim nation”.

But this does not stop with education. It also touches on culture. Another form of incitement commonplace in France goes largely unnoticed—namely, anti-French rap music. Several Muslim rap bands have been gaining fame and preaching for the jihadist cause.

For instance, D.J. Had (pronounced Jihad) sings: “The time of the revenge is now/Osama is going to strike again/He is going to tilt the scales/ by blowing up France”, or the band Kamikaze that sings: “Osama fights the war in the name of Allah/All with Osama/On the Catholics, there is the fatwa”. These violent calls to terror have no place in our societies.

The West has for too long closed its eyes on extremist ideology. But it now seems that the trend might be reverting a little. After the January 2015 attacks, then French Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced that radical mosques will be closed down and that the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology will be fought.

Coincidentally, three European countries, the UK, Austria and Sweden have been reviewing closely the Muslim Brotherhood’s dangerous ideology.

This is a good start.