



Publisher: [Slovenska tiskovna agencija](#), Ltd., Ljubljana, Tivolska cesta 50, in cooperation with the Slovenian Foreign Ministry, E-mail: desk@sta.si

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On the web: [Eye on Slovenia](#) * [Slovenija v žarišču](#)

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Display Issue No. 19 (03.09.2007) ▼

BLED STRATEGIC FORUM DISCUSSES TOPICAL CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Bled hosted on 26 and 27 August an international conference at which numerous senior office-holders, business executives and academics debated at multiple panels, workshops and bilateral meetings the challenges faced by the European Union. The topics of the second conference organised by the Bled Strategic Forum - EU enlargement and the future of Western Balkans, the future of European integration, the global balance of power, climate change and energy security - are related to preparations for Slovenia's EU presidency in the first half of 2008.

The first Bled Strategic Forum conference last year was dubbed "Caspian Outlook", this year the title was "European Union 2020: Enlarging and Integrating". It was organised by the Centre for European Perspective (CEP) in conjunction with the Foreign Ministry and the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISS) and featured over 400 participants from 50 countries and six international organisations.

The participants included the Slovenian prime and foreign ministers, Janez Janša and Dimitrij Rupel, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, Lithuania's Gediminas Kirkilas and Macedonia's Nikola Gruevski, as well as Special envoy for future status process for Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari, the Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, and Ana Palacio, Senior Vice President at the World Bank. The conference also featured ten foreign ministers, ten deputies of heads of state or government in the region and executives of 95 companies, of which two-thirds were from Slovenia.



Prime Ministers of Macedonia and Croatia, Nikola Gruevski and Ivo Sanader, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša, Lithuania's Gediminas Kirkilas and Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel attending the second conference of the Bled Strategic Forum. (Photo: STA)

BLED STRATEGIC FORUM A PROGRAMMING PREPARATION FOR SLOVENIA'S EU PRESIDENCY

Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel expressed great pleasure over the second conference of the Bled Strategic Forum. "By all indicators the Strategic Forum is the largest foreign policy conference in Slovenia," he said. Minister

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATED AT BLEB STRATEGIC FORUM

The participants of the Bled Strategic Forum conference also discussed energy and climate change. Ana Palacio, Senior Vice President at the World Bank, told the panel "Energy and Climate Change" that energy issues had been at the very heart of the process of European integration. Yet whereas they used to be a means to achieve the goal of united Europe, they are now a distinct challenge that the EU needs to face. The panel also featured Slovenian Economy Minister Andrej Vizjak and Ernest Petrič, the Chair of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Energy also featured high at the round-table discussion "Economic and Political Trends in the South Caucasus and Central Asia: The Role of the EU and the OSCE", where most of the participants agreed that the EU should not be interested solely in energy sources in this region. Peter Semneby, EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, emphasised that due to the region's proximity to the EU, the Union was fundamentally interested in the stability of the South Caucasus.

The panel "Global Preponderance" meanwhile highlighted the importance of global in the international community, stressing that the scales in international relations were tilting towards levers of "soft power". In particular, the participants explained that the sense of "ownership" of political decisions was very useful in the successful tackling of global challenges. The EU can play an important role in that process, they stressed.

BLEB STRATEGIC FORUM AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BILATERAL MEETINGS

Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel used the Bled Strategic Forum conference for numerous bilateral meetings at which he presented the priorities of Slovenia's EU presidency in the first half of next year. In addition to bilateral and economic cooperation, talks also touched on the Western Balkans.

In talks with Foreign Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sven Alkalaj, Minister Rupel said that as the presiding EU country Slovenia would make efforts for a European perspective for the Western Balkans, which Alkalaj said was highly appreciated in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić, too, expressed pleasure after talks with Minister Rupel that the Western Balkans would be one of the priorities of the Slovenian EU presidency. Ministers Rupel and Jeremić also discussed the future status of Kosovo. In the meeting with Macedonian Foreign Minister Antonio Milošoski, Minister Rupel expressed the expectation that the autumn report of the European Commission would be favourable for Macedonia. Minister Rupel also took part in a meeting between the Slovenian and Croatian prime ministers, Janez Janša and Ivo Sanader.

Rupel stressed that the forum was also important in that it was part of programming preparations for Slovenia's presidency of the European Union in the first half of next year. According to him, the conference is an excellent opportunity for numerous bilateral meetings.

Commenting on the debates at the conference, Minister Rupel assessed that "considerable unity regarding EU integration" had been achieved in terms of both deepening and expanding the Union. "We believe - especially in the light of our EU presidency - that EU enlargement is necessary, that it is useful for Europeans and all EU member states," he said and added that this "brings political stability and economic growth."

"Yet we see that some European concepts, such as the Thessaloniki Agenda, will have to be refreshed. We wish for EU expansion to Western Balkans to become more attractive," he said. As for the status of Kosovo, Minister Rupel announced that as the presiding EU country Slovenia would try to maintain unity in the EU regarding this issue. He also endorsed the plan of special United Nations envoy Martti Ahtisaari, which envisages supervised independence.

Prime Minister Janez Janša meanwhile said in his keynote address that Europe needed a fresh vision, a new story that would appeal to more than 30 European nations over generations. He also stressed that Europe needed to efficiently adapt to the changing global reality. Prime Minister Janša added that being close to setting a renewed common institutional basis, Europe was regaining its boldness. This is important for Slovenia, he said, as the improved atmosphere brightens the prospects for Slovenia's EU presidency.



Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel at the Bled Strategic Forum conference. (Photo: STA)

BLED STRATEGIC FORUM PANELS DEBATE FUTURE OF EU INTEGRATION

The Bled Strategic Forum conference featured a series of panels and round-table discussions on the future enlargement of the EU. The panel "The Future of EU Integration Process", which saw the participation of Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, agreed that the future of integration laid in a "Europe free and united" and the deepening of cooperation; however, Europe needed to be brought closer to the citizens.

The Western Balkans also featured in talks that Minister Rupel had with Italian Interior Minister Giuliano Amato and the Hungarian and Cypriot counterparts, Kinga Göncz and Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis. Whereas the meeting with Minister Kozakou-Marcoullis touched on the resolution of the future status of Kosovo and the Cyprus issue, the agenda of talks with Minister Göncz included preparations for a joint session of the Slovenian and Hungarian governments.

The meeting with Peter Semneby, EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, revolved around the current situation in the region and the resolution of open issues there, with the pair calling for tighter cooperation during Slovenia's EU presidency. Frozen conflicts in the region topped the agenda of Minister Rupel's meeting with his Armenian opposite number Vartan Oskanian. Minister Rupel also met Secretary at the Indian Ministry of External Affairs Nalin Surie, who confirmed good and friendly relations between the two countries.



Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel and Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić at the sidelines of the Bled Strategic Forum conference. (Photo: STA)



The speakers also stressed the importance of enlargement onto the Western Balkans. They said enlargement needed to proceed, yet the responsibility for that lied in the countries themselves and their ability to fulfil entry criteria. Minister Rupel underlined that EU integration was a blessing, something which Slovenia had experienced first-hand.

Similar views were expressed by the participants of the panel "The Next EU Enlargement", who stressed that previous rounds of enlargement had been beneficial to the bloc so the doors of the EU remained open for new candidates, albeit under the well-known preset conditions. The prevailing opinion was that enlargement needed to go hand-in-hand with deepening within the EU. The countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey were highlighted as the likely candidates for membership.

Turkey in Europe was the topic of a round-table discussion at the conference where the participants were split as to the issue of religious and cultural diversity, and its impact on Turkey's accession to the EU. Whereas some experts and politicians from different countries expressed the view that Islam was an obstacle to Turkey's membership, others insisted that in this case "religion has withdrawn from politics" and played no role.

At the opening panel of the forum, dubbed "Vision for Europe", Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski pointed out that the resolution of the Kosovo issue was crucial to the future of the EU. He said this was neither an easy nor an impossible issue, but it would require the EU to speak with a single voice. The panel also featured Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša, Croatia's Ivo Sanader and Lithuania's Gediminas Kirkilas, as well as Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.



The panel "The Next EU Enlargement" at the second conference of the Bled Strategic Forum. (Photo: STA)

Cypriot Foreign Minister Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis and Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel at the sidelines of the Bled Strategic Forum conference. (Photo: STA)

EU ACTIVITIES OF THE FOREIGN MINISTRY

CHRONOLOGY

6 August, Strunjan - Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel hosted a dinner for Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt.

17 August, Maribor - Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel met Montenegrin Foreign Minister Milan Roćen.

25 August, Jable Castle - Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel hosted the second meeting of the Advisory Committee of the Centre for European Perspective (CEP).

26-27 August, Bled - Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel hosted the second conference of the Bled Strategic Forum.

28 August, Paris - Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel was guest speaker at the consultation of French diplomats at the invitation of French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, where he presented the priorities of Slovenia's EU presidency. French and Slovenian diplomats are cooperating closely in preparations for the presidency, as about 110 French ambassadors will represent Slovenia during its presidency in countries where it does not have diplomatic representations itself.