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Report: 13th Bled Strategic Forum: Bridging the divide

Thomas Greminger, PhD, Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE); Photo: Tamino Petelinšek/STA

Interview: Thomas Greminger, PhD, Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

In the long term we have to get back to rule-based security

By **Tina Drolc**, M.Sc., MBA

Ambassador Thomas Greminger, appointed Secretary General of the OSCE on 18 July 2017 for a three-year term, visited Slovenia for the 13th Bled Strategic Forum. As part of the forum's special panel he discussed the prospects for multilateralism and the EU's power. He explains the need to extend, reinvent and reform the multilateral approaches and communicate them better because "we have come to a stage where political military issues are back on the European security agenda – who would have thought this some ten years ago", highlighted Mr Greminger.

Q. **The global security environment has become unpredictable; violent extremism, cybercrime and the considerable movement of people fleeing war. To prevent crises from turning into conflicts and to confront transnational challenges, you have said that, "Trust is the glue that holds international relations together". How would you define trust within the larger vision of the OSCE as the guardian of European security?**

A The vision is that we all get back to rule-based security. In order to get there, we need to rebuild trust. We need to identify areas where the interests converge and then gradually rebuild trust. That is something we can do in the short term. In the medium term, we will need to resolve the crisis around Ukraine. In the long term, we will need to go back to the common understanding of the principles and commitment around rule-based security.

Q. **What exactly do you have in mind for the long term?**

A There have been serious violations of the principles and commitments, and it is obvious that we have a diverging understanding. If you access the recent history of how we have come since the cold war into the current situation of

distrust between the key stakeholders of Euro-Atlantic Security, you will identify at least two, if not three, different narratives. In the short term it is important to acknowledge that we have different narratives and now we need to try to come out of this current impasse. Again, in the long term, we will have to come to terms with these different narratives that we need to somehow reconcile.

Q **We often hear that sometimes it seems we do not learn from history...**

A There is the challenge over the risk of sleep-walking into a crisis and indeed, we have come to a stage where political military issues are back on our European security agenda – who would have thought that some ten years ago. We thought this had gone! So, these issues are back, we have conflict back and more and more military risks again, and these are signs of alarm that we should take seriously.

Q **How do you see the regional cooperation among the Balkan countries and what is the imperative for Slovenia and its role in the region, particularly with regard to Slovenia's central geographical position "in the heart of Europe"?**

A Slovenia is in a way a role model and a strong promotor of regional cooperation; I would very much hope that Slovenia continues on this path. Slovenia has just successfully chaired the forum for security cooperation, is contributing to the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, is supportive of my "fit for purpose" reform agenda at the OSCE and has been a champion in terms of promoting gender mainstreaming. I hope this commitment will continue with the new government.

Q **The crisis in Ukraine is widening the rift between Moscow and the West, raising significant questions about both European security and Russia's place in the world. The OSCE responds to the crisis in and around Ukraine with the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), deployed on 21 March 2014. What has been the main progress of the mission so far?**

A We have been fairly good in managing the conflict, making sure that the conflict does not

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escalate and spin out of control; the ceasefire violations and the victim figures have never been lower since the beginning of the conflict than in this summer. This, as such, is good, but it is not satisfactory because at the same time we are not moving towards resolving the conflict and there is the matter of political commitment by the parties to implement all of the provisions of the Minsk Agreement. Here, the margin for manoeuvre by the OSCE is quite limited if there is not enough political will.

Q **How many people participate the SMM?**

A Right now we have 714 monitors. 80% are active in the Donbas. The entire mission is 1,250 staff mission and it is by far the biggest operation of the OSCE.

Q **According to Chatham House (London), "The challenge of transforming Ukrainian institutions requires a smarter, more flexible and more differentiated approach to using EU assistance for individual projects." How do you approach it? Do you see it as a challenge?**

A We are a much smaller actor when it comes to the building of institutions in Ukraine. In a way, yes it is true, EU projects are not enough, but then again it is important that we bring in the technical know-how and then this needs to be combined with political messaging and the political commitment of the Ukraine to government push the reform through.

Q **What have been the main achievements by the OSCE in the area of cyber/ICT security in recent years?**

A I would see cybersecurity as one of those issues where the interests converge and indeed, the OSCE is the only regional organization that has managed to come up with confidence-building measures. We have identified 16 confidence-building measures and the focus is on preventing misperceptions and miscalculations regarding ICT use by states. If you suspect an attack by another state, you need mechanisms to identify whether you are right or wrong. The challenge now is to implement these measures in a climate of distrust, but I do believe there is a common interest by all 57 members to do that.

Q **Britain decided to leave the EU when the Union already faced multiple challenges. The remaining EU member states will now have to work closely together and define common strategies to tackle the challenges of migration, economic and financial uncertainty and of Euroscepticism. Could the challenge to maintain a strong EU voice within the OSCE context increase in the post-Brexit EU?**

A I would not applaud Brexit. Should Brexit come about, the EU will face a number of challenges; one is to continue security cooperation with the UK. The good news is what EU negotiator, Mr Michel Barnier, recently told us at the Bled Strategic Forum, that we will be able to maintain a high degree of coordination and cooperation in the fields of internal and external security. I am confident that the EU will manage to maintain a very strong and compelling voice, in particular, in the OSCE after Brexit. I would say there is a set of issues that go beyond Brexit as there is the more fundamental question of multilateralism. We need to extend, reinvent and reform the multilateral approaches and consequently communicate these approaches better; maybe to get an inspiration from the populists, how they communicate politics. We need to get better in explaining to the audience how we, as a multilateral institution, matter; why we make a difference for him or her. In addition, we need to be self-critical about our instruments and tools, do they have an impact or not and here comes the OSCE 'fit for purpose' agenda of which the main purpose is that our organization stays effective and efficient. ◄

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