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Report on the 2019 “To Be Secure” Forum in Montenegro

By Dr. Michael Haltzel, Chairman, Transatlantic Leadership Network

In less than a decade the annual “2BS” (To be Secure) Forum in Budva on the beautiful Adriatic coast of Montenegro has become the premier security meeting in the Western Balkans. I was privileged to speak at this year’s conference, which was a fascinating event.

Two days of intense discussions yielded three principal takeaways: the skill of Montenegro’s political leadership, the timidity in the Age of Trump of the remnants of traditional U.S. conservatism, and the refreshing ideas of talented younger experts from Central and Eastern Europe.

Milo Djukanović, President of Montenegro, has led his country of 640,000 people for a third of a century. Having secured Montenegro’s independence from Serbia in 2006, its membership in NATO in 2017, and its current European Union candidate status, Djukanović at 57 has assumed the role of elder statesman. He spoke twice at the conference, both times without notes and both times in total command of the facts and incisive in analysis. On the second day Djukanović engaged in a public dialogue with Hashim Thaçi, President of Kosovo, about a variety of Western Balkan topics. Of vital importance is Montenegro’s unique track-record of having successively integrated its 20% minority population of ethnic Albanians and Slavic Muslims into the country’s political and social life – a model for newly independent, majority-Albanian Kosovo.

Also speaking at the conference was Montenegrin Foreign Minister Srdjan Darmanović, a former academic and Chess Grand Master who earlier served as Ambassador to the United States. His tour d’horizon of the situation in Europe and beyond was of the highest order. Despite ongoing challenges in the areas of corruption, freedom of the media, and rule of law, Montenegro’s leadership team appears to have the country on track to EU membership within the next five or six years.

The conference attracted as panel moderators several veteran journalists and area specialists like *New York Times* correspondent Steve Erlanger and China and Russia expert Bobo Lo, both of whom kept the discussion flowing and on point. Many of the American participants at the conference were affiliated with the Atlantic Council of the United States, a venerable organization with a “BalkansForward” initiative. For whatever reason the speakers from their group displayed an unwillingness to criticize the policies of President Trump in any meaningful



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way. When Erlanger posed the direct question of whether Trump had harmed NATO's morale by his equivocating on U.S. adherence to the alliance's Article 5 mutual defense commitment, a member of the Atlantic Council delegation refrained from answering directly.

More than any other panel my session, "Rising Ghosts of Nationalism: Building Blocks of Democracy in Peril?" called upon speakers to analyze national leaders' behavior. I did so, strongly condemning Trump's undermining of fundamental institutions of American democracy like the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the intelligence agencies, and non-governmental pillars of democracy like the media. I also cited the president's reprehensible attempts to exacerbate existing societal cleavages by scapegoating minority groups and immigrants.

Damir Marusic, Atlantic Council Senior Fellow, did not dispute my analysis, choosing instead to divert the discussion to international relations by asserting that Trump's foreign policy displayed overwhelming continuity with Obama's. Implausibility aside, the old "he made the trains run on time" argument was beside the point. Even if Trump's foreign policy mirrored Obama's – which it doesn't – it wouldn't change the fact that the president has contributed to democracy's being in peril, the stated theme of our panel.

Nonetheless, I felt the need to respond and reminded him of Trump's announced withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change Accord, from the JCPOA Iran nuclear deal, and from the Trans-Pacific Partnership while launching tariff wars, to name but a few examples of stark discontinuity. Earlier I had made crystal clear that I had actively supported Montenegro's NATO candidacy and was similarly in favor of North Macedonia's.

Apparently my outspoken criticism of Trump unnerved some at the Atlantic Council. Damon Wilson, head of its delegation, hastily sent out a completely inaccurate tweet accusing me of having made a "dreary assessment of US." Of course my assessment was obviously of *Trump*, not the U.S. In a blatantly self-serving way Wilson went on to portray Marusic as "pushing back ... to underscore that DC retains strong bipartisan support for Western Balkans evidenced in our BalkansForward (program). . ." Again, "pushing back" was total nonsense since I had already pointed out that the only evidence of bipartisanship displayed by the U.S. Congress has been in foreign policy, most notably in the veto-proof 98-2 Senate vote confirming Montenegro's NATO accession.

The slavish behavior of my countrymen did not go unnoticed. An experienced yet mystified European privately asked me: "don't they understand how Trump is weakening NATO?" A prominent American simply used the word "whitewash." Not an edifying spectacle.



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On a more uplifting note, a number of extremely talented younger colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe stood out at the forum. (Ms.) Jessie Hronešová, a multilingual Czech from the London School of Economics, demonstrated a broad grasp of political and economic issues in deftly chairing my panel. Tomáš Kriššák from the Open Society Foundation in Bratislava cogently discussed internet and social media impact politics. He will soon make an extended trip to the U.S. to advise officials on cyber-bullying and related problems. Rufin Zamfir from the Global/Focus Centre in Romania unpacked security and asymmetric threats involving cyber warfare, radicalization, and terrorism. Making sense of these bewilderingly complex technological and societal issues was moderator Aleksandar Brezar, a well-known investigative journalist from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who speaks better English than I do.

This summary cannot do justice either to the depth of discussion or to the breadth of topics covered in Budva. For example, one entire session was devoted to the growing influence in the Balkans of Russia, China, and Turkey. The future of the European Union, especially of EU enlargement, was a recurring theme. Finally, it is painful to report that throughout the conference European participants bemoaned the retreat of the United States from global leadership.

With the settlement of the Macedonia name issue, the Western Balkans have briefly reappeared on the mainstream media's radar screens. Events like the To Be Secure Forum serve to keep specialists up to date on political, economic, and social developments and to showcase the Balkans' enormous potential. One hopes that their progress will not be disrupted by global forces beyond their control.