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New venues of public diplomacy: between nation-branding, place-branding and regional-identity building

To some extent replicating the Davos Summit format, the calendar of events “to attend” and “to be seen” in East-Central Europe (CEE) has filled substantially over the past 26 years. In many respects, these venues serve as a demonstration of the region’s political and intellectual elite’s political and economic aspirations. Given those events’ international orientation, they also serve as a measure of third parties’ interest in the region. In the mini-series of *IEŚW COMMENTARY* that this issue opens, the main features of these new venues of public diplomacy that have emerged in CEE will be discussed.

The scope of public diplomacy has broadened substantially over the years, so the number of stakeholders involved in the implementation of public diplomacy agenda has also increased. It has therefore become necessary that new venues (a forum, a conference, a congress) be established for the diverse stakeholders to regularly come together and engage in dialogue. Table 1 gives an overview of the arguably most important and/or most skilfully promoted new venues of public diplomacy that have emerged in CEE over the past 26 years. Interestingly enough, apart from frequently becoming successful levers for public diplomacy making, increasingly, these venues also play an important role in the processes of place- and nation-branding.

Unlike the Trilateral Commission or the Bilderberg Group, the organizers of the events in CEE are not obsessed with secrecy. Still, these events remain quite elitist and it is not always easy to secure a seat in the audience or even more so among the speakers. Undoubtedly, a criterion to assess a forum’s prestige and perceived influence is the interest that high-calibre politicians and business sector representatives express in attending a given event. However, an over-supply of speakers, and especially of high-level politicians may at times capsize the rationale and objectives of a forum putting at risk the specialized content of the debate.

One of the oldest events of this kind in CEE is the Economic Forum, organized in Krynica Zdrój in Poland since 1990. Celebrating its 26th edition this year, it has successfully established itself as a venue of debate on current economic, social and political issues specific to the region. Probably the success of that Forum and the growing demand for similar venues led to their mushrooming across CEE. Poland, as the largest country in the region, has turned into the leader when it comes to the number of events held annually.

The competition among events and the need to avoid being crowded out have led to a considerable specialization of these venues; even if a considerable overlap in names is discernible. Markedly, one of the biggest challenges that the organizers of these events face is the development of their coherent identity and of a coherent and recognizable brand. In fact, for the purpose of their effective branding, several of the events held in CEE either employ a geographical indication in their names, e.g. Tatra Summit, Bled Strategic Forum or Warsaw Security Forum; or a direct indication of their objective, e.g. Economic Forum, European Economic Forum or Eastern Europe Initiatives Congress.

It is possible to divide the variety of conferences, fora and congresses that have emerged in the region over the past 26 years into three broad categories, i.e. events that (i) seek to bring together politics and the business community, e.g. Economic Forum (Krynica Zdrój), European Economic Congress (Katowice), and European Financial Congress (Sopot); (ii) seek to open up to foreign policy and/or security or specific aspects of security, e.g. Warsaw Security Forum, Wrocław Global Forum, GLOBSEC, European Cybersecurity Forum; (iii) by addressing a specific challenge, create a broad forum of discussion open to representatives of politics, business sectors, municipalities, and NGOs, e.g. Bled Strategic Forum (Slovenia), Eastern Europe Initiatives Congress (Lublin, Poland), Prague European Summit (Czech Republic).

As events of this kind can only survive if considered as relevant and attractive by all stakeholders involved, i.e. local, regional and government authorities, and especially by the sponsors, be it public or private ones, the question arises what factors contribute to the success of these events. The location matters, i.e. events organized in countries' capitals attract considerably more attention. As it is faster and easier to reach capital cities, it is also easier to build a bigger audience there. Nevertheless, the exclusivity of a given location may be an equally helpful factor, e.g. Bled Strategic Forum or Château Béla. Each of these cases highlights a different objective that the organizers seek to accomplish. For instance, in the case of the Bled Strategic Forum, it seems that the location is well-inscribed in Slovenia's nation- and place-branding strategy emphasized by the slogan 'I feel Slovenia'. The latter builds not only around the notions of the beauty of nature, green landscapes, but also around innovation and sustainability and their strategic importance. The selection of the place where a given event is held is never random.

The right selection of the focus of discussion is equally important. In this respect, conferences addressing security concerns or their specific aspects, e.g. cybersecurity as in the case of the European Cybersecurity Forum, replicate the dynamics of the security environment of a given year. Similarly, events that seek to bring together politics and the business sector are not particularly challenging with regard to the selection of the general topic of the debate. Nuances matter, but the questions of building and maintaining business and investment friendly environment will always arise and therefore will always attract the attention of the business and politicians interested in building their image. The convenors of events of the open-ended format, such as the Prague European Summit or the Bled Strategic Forum, are forced to look for their competitive advantage elsewhere. For the Prague European Summit, it will be the location and essentially lack of competition at home because the conference "The Czech Republic: The Shape We're In", organized by the Aspen Institute Prague and by Forbes, does not seem to be a true contender. For the Bled Strategic Forum, the source of its competitive advantage is its location, both geographically (the picturesque lake of Bled) and strategically (the heart of Europe, at the Balkan's doorsill), as well as the very careful selection of topics discussed each year. Finally, the case of the Eastern Europe Initiatives Congress demonstrates how the notion of Lublin branding as "the city of inspiration" resonates with the historically-grounded aspirations of Lublin to serve as a hub for a broadly understood region of Eastern Europe.

As mentioned previously, the right selection of participants is the key to keep a forum relevant and attractive to the audience today and in the future. The speakers themselves and the audience, depending on their status, professional orientation etc. are vitally interested in appearing in a social setting and among individuals they consider important, both on and off the stage. What follows is that networking opportunities are a vital component of a successful forum and are valued by the events' participants.

| Table 1: New venues of public diplomacy in CEE | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| Country | Name of the forum | Location | Month | Since |
| Poland | | | | |
| | Economic Forum | Krynica Zdrój | 09 | 1990 |
| | Economic Forum: Investment Forum | Tarnów | 06 | 2008 |
| | Economic Forum: European Congress of Local Governments | Kraków | 05 | 2015 |
| | European Economic Congress | Katowice | 05 | 1999 |
| | European Financial Congress | Sopot | 06 | 2011 |
| | Eastern Europe Initiatives Congress | Lublin | 09 | 2012 |
| | Warsaw Security Forum | Warsaw | 10 | 2014 |
| | European Cybersecurity Forum CYBERSEC | Kraków | 09 | 2015 |
| | Wrocław Global Forum | Wrocław | 06 | 2015 |
| Czech Republic | | | | |
| | Prague European Summit | Prague | 06 | 2015 |
| Slovakia | | | | |
| | GLOBSEC | Bratislava | 04 | 2005 |
| | GLOBSEC: Tatra Summit | Bratislava | 11 | 2013 |
| | GLOBSEC: Château Béla Central European Strategic Forum | Château Béla | 12 | 2012 |
| Hungary | | | | |
| | think.BDPST | Budapest | 04 | 2016 |
| Slovenia | | | | |
| | Bled Strategic Forum (BSF) | Bled | 09 | 2005 |
| <i>Source: Authors' own compilation.</i> | | | | |