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SCIENTIFIC DEBATE: THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE: TOWARDS STRATEGIC AUTONOMY?

Michal Bazovský – Ivan Legrády*

The debate on the future of the European defence was held on the 16th of October 2018 in the Community Hall of the Economic University in Bratislava. The event was jointly organised by Slovak civil association *Esprit de Défense* in partnership with the French Embassy in the Slovak Republic, *Institut français de Slovaquie* and Faculty of International Relations of the University of Economics in Bratislava and attended by diplomats, expert public and a large number of students mainly from the University of Matej Bel in Banská Bystrica.

Already a second event in the project's series of discussions and conferences, the debate enjoyed the presence of high-ranked officials of Slovak and French state administration: State Secretary of the Slovak Ministry of Defence, **Róbert Ondrejcsák** and the Ambassador at the PSC of the Permanent Representation of France to the European Union, **Nicolas Suran**.¹ The round table was completed by two representatives of non-state sector, **Vladimír Bilčík** from Slovak Foreign Policy Association and **Jean-Pierre Maulny** from French think tank IRIS. **Samuel Goda** from the University of Economics in Bratislava acted as a moderator during the event.

The debate focused mainly on the common grounds and objectives of the French and Slovak security and defence policies, as well as on how the two

* Mgr. Ivan Legrády, LL.M. is the president of *Esprit de Défense*, a civil association under Slovak law and member of Committee on European Security of the French public think tank ANAJ-IHEDN, Case 41, 1 Place Joffre, 75700 Paris SP 07, France, e-mail: legrady.ivan@gmail.com.

Ing. Michal Bazovský is a vice president of *Esprit de Défense*, a civil association under Slovak law and member of Committee on European Security of the French public think tank ANAJ-IHEDN, Case 41, 1 Place Joffre, 75700 Paris SP 07, France, e-mail: michal.bazovsky@gmail.com.

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¹ PSC (COPS in French) or Political and Security Committee of the European Union is a permanent body of the EU and is responsible for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

states are positioning themselves in the current discussions regarding the future of European defence. Security and defence issues are very hot topics for Europeans in the recent years and thus the debate sought to clarify recent initiatives like Permanent Structural Cooperation of the EU in defence (PESCO), and newly developing notions like the one of Strategic autonomy of the EU.

Slovak side appreciated the dynamics of the bilateral relations between the two countries and the leadership position of the France in the security and defence area. State Secretary explained the causes of the current European approach, which is less idealistic and more realistic, and also pragmatic and focused on tangible results like the PESCO initiative, built upon binding commitments. On this topic, Mr **Ondrejcsák** underlined that it is necessary to build on the current momentum but not to have exaggerated expectations. To ensure the future of European defence, it is also necessary to keep the EU's many initiatives in complementarity to the NATO, as NATO remains the main guarantor of the collective and territorial defence, and to build on the strategic cooperation between the two; for example on the flagship project of the military mobility. We also need to resolve the financial issues of the common EU security and defence policy taking EU Battle Groups as an example. This is currently being addressed by pushing forward the talks on European Peace Facility proposal and the revision of the ATHENA mechanism.

The notion of the *strategic autonomy* of the EU was also discussed. State Secretary highlighted that it should be formed by a common perception of threats, real and well harmonised military capabilities and adequate financial resources. According to the French position, the biggest changes which catalysed the need for strategic autonomy are the political changes in the USA and the crisis of democracy in some EU member states. French president's notion of Strategic autonomy of the EU isn't based on isolationism or duplication of existing mechanisms (mainly within NATO), but on the need to increase the defence capabilities of Europe, to confirm to the allies that Europe is a responsible and reliable partner, and to ensure the defence of the neutral states of EU like Austria, Finland or Sweden. For all this to happen, however, we will need a functioning European defence industry (for the current one is too fragmented and uncompetitive even at the national level), military capabilities including adequate financial coverage, political will and common European strategic culture also making possible the operational deployment of forces. Mr **Maulny** added that the debate on strategic autonomy, even though initiated by the French, has to be discussed together and called for common European

perception of the priorities in the defence area within the principle of solidarity.

Mr **Bilčík** agreed that the EU is becoming an actor in the defence area as well, and added that the defence serves as “glue” to the member states and to the Europe. It is only natural that each of us has a different perception of threats and priorities, but it is crucial to keep on finding the things that we see in common and keep on working together. World is changing and it is already five minutes after midnight, we are in a dire need to reinforce the resilience of the Union and of the member states, and play a more active role mainly in our neighbourhood and not only by the somewhat passive means of financial injections.

Reacting on one of the questions raised from the audience, Mr **Maulny** emphasized that what we do now in communicating our activities is not enough. PESCO can't be in itself the face of the European defence when communicating to the wide public, as it is still not clear enough and it is in the spotlight of only a narrow community of diplomats and experts. We have to distinguish between the public and strategic communication. With the abolishment of the public military service the interest and knowledge of the defence issues diminished in the public. However, in France for example the efforts were made to include this topic at the elementary and high schools which could be in time beneficial to European talks on defence.

To conclude, all participants welcomed this opportunity to talk about these issues in the light of Franco-Slovak dialogue. We share many common priorities like solving the issues of financing our security and defence policies or strengthening the national and European defence industry, but we should also talk more on current proposals and topics such as strategic autonomy of the EU or the operational dimension of our forces and common strategic culture and communicate them better to the public. It was concluded that such a project that focuses on the strengthening of the Franco-Slovak and European dialogue on the security and defence issues is relevant and certainly has its place. At the end, it was alluded that the next debate will be focused on the cyber security and cyber defence, which is another topic of great importance in actual discussions on European security and defence.