



Academic Speech

Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

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On the occasion of awarding Doctor Honoris Causa UNWE

25th of October 2019 |

University of National and World Economy | Sofia

Mr. Rector,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great **honour** and **pleasure** for me to accept the title *Doctor Honoris Causa* from your University today.

My pride is all the bigger as I happen to have a very close **bond** to **Bulgaria**, having a personal and very special **emotion** that binds me to it.

Even though I have completed my studies in Moscow, right from the first year I have focused on the study of **Bulgarian language**.

With increasing familiarity with the **language**, my interest in the **history**, **culture**, and **current events** in Bulgaria had also grown.

I would read books in Bulgarian, learning the history of your country and I have even selected it as the topic of my **diploma thesis**.

Back then I was writing about relations of Bulgaria with the Near and Middle East countries, while I also passed a State Examination from Bulgarian.

During those times, my experience with diplomacy was purely **academic**.

I have obtained my first real - **practical experience** right here, in your Capital city.

As a student of the fifth year of international relations I have arrived to a 3-month **internship** to the then Czechoslovak embassy in Sofia.

I had been collecting here material for the diploma thesis and consulting my conclusions.

But at the same time, that was my first **live contact** with the work of a diplomat, one that I will always **remember**.

Namely, it had **bolstered** my **decision** to dedicate my life to foreign service.

A service I have been applying myself to for more than 30 years now, I perform it with full sincerity, responsibility, and dedication.

And primarily, I do it **gladly**.

The world has been literally changing **before my eyes** over those 3 decades.

Both of our countries had passed through an extremely **intense** historic path.

We realise it even more during these days, when we remember the 30th anniversary of events that have liberated people from the **absence of freedom** across our continent.

Indeed, while back then I have come to the internship from **Czechoslovakia** to Bulgaria - both countries veiled by the iron curtain, today I come from **Slovak Republic** to a **European Union** partner state.

Both our countries had demonstrated much **resilience** and **ambition** to be a part of united Europe.

That, which seemed a very **distant dream** during the period of absence of freedom, is a reality for us today.

One large, **European round table**, a space in which our citizens have been enjoying the **4 freedoms** and are experiencing a period of **growth** and unprecedented **possibilities**.

They are the result of **sacrifice, courage, and determination**.

However, that does not mean they are **unthreatened** and **unchanging**.

On the contrary. They have many enemies.

Every **generation** must realise that none of what we have today was **free** or is **self-evident**.

The past must be remembered and learned from, otherwise we create a risk of **repeating** it.

And here is where **education** plays a very important role.

Education is the way to overcoming **prejudice** and **simplified judgments** that greatly burden our society today.

It is a way to **tolerance**, a way how to avoid repeating historic mistakes.

And it is the starting point of an important formula, **I'd like to talk about today**. This formula.

I. Begins with knowledge.

We live in some kind of strange period, in which the value of **true knowledge** is made relative.

A time of inexplicable disregard of **facts**, when we frequently see **logic** and **science** losing the fight to **emotion** and **manipulation**.

It is a **paradoxical** world, one in which people were never better **informed** while being more **confused** and **cynical**.

Perhaps it was never easier to **obtain** information, while it is much harder to **judge it critically**.

Perhaps we were never more **connected** in the **online** space but in real life we have a problem to lead a **dialogue**.

Hence, precisely during this period, your work is becoming even more important.

Mostly **universities** are becoming a particularly **important place** where **facts** still remain the fundamental working instrument.

Standing here, accepting the honorary doctor title is therefore extraordinarily valuable for me, as I recognize it in this perspective as well.

University is a place, where young people learn not only **languages** or **empirical** facts.

It made me very glad when I had read how many partnerships, international programs or mobility your University offers.

Because this is the best way to **discover**.

Through **experience**, **external** view, through different **perspective**.

That teaches us to open our **minds**, to see the opposite **opinion**, to make a **compromise**.

And hence leading us to understanding. The second part of the formula.

II. Understanding

System of international relations that we have been building in our part of the world since the **demise of the iron curtain** has been based specifically on **understanding**.

- **Understanding**, that even though every one of our countries is different and unique, our national identity is not an obstacle to building a common European family.
- **Understanding**, that a cause at one end of the world has an immediate consequence on other. Therefore, we must act out of **solidarity** and **responsibility**, with regard to other members of the international community.
- **Understanding**, that even though we are not all equally large or strong, the **rules** that we have set up apply equally to all, and that makes the world fair to the small as well.

This **understanding** had enabled us in Europe to live through an unprecedented period of **peace**, security, and prosperity.

Unfortunately today, we must declare with both sadness and concern that this understanding has been **diminishing** from international relations.

- **Understanding in the European Union** for 3 years now has been **burdened by Brexit**, which is also a consequence of a broader problem of **nationalist and populist** forces that upset the unity and strength of the Union.

Perhaps more than by external actors, the EU today is mainly threatened by internal **extreme** thought directions that are dangerously multiplied by sources of **disinformation**.

- **Understanding is distorted by unilateral** tendencies that place **selfishness** before **responsibility**, narrow minded fast **gains** before long-term **goals**.
- **Understanding** of the system of post-war arrangement based on **rules** is doubted - rules are also violated by those who themselves wrote them.

Namely historically, **misunderstanding**, as between people so between countries, had been causing **disputes and conflicts**.

So therefore today many are returning to the past, looking for parallels with the current reality.

Yet, they find them in the periods of **rivalry of the superpowers** when humankind was not capable of - or rather **willing to know and to understand**.

However, one can find starting points and **lessons** in the same parallels.

And that is the third part of the formula -

III. Cooperation

Always, when humankind had brought this world to the precipice, we have rebuilt it again through a proven recipe: **cooperation, rules, institutions**.

In a single word: **multilateralism**.

The ideas of multilateralism have been reshaped into tangible results for more than 100 years now.

From the **Concert of Superpowers** after the **Napoleonic Wars**, through the **League of Nations** after the **1st World War**, to **UN** after World War Two.

Each new attempt was more **sophisticated** than the previous one.

Because our ancestors understood the historic legacy of **World Conflict**.

Which is, that we can **prevent** the next one only if we **cooperate**.

We know what devastation was brought by the **wars** of the 20th century.

The destructive ability of humankind was never greater than today, and I am afraid that civilisation may not survive the **third one**.

I, as a diplomat, consider myself a **multilateralist**.

And my appeal to the **values of true knowledge, understanding, and cooperation** on the background of ever fading global atmosphere is not only an empty phrase. On the contrary.

Standing before us are severe global challenges that are growing more complex.

Climate change, disinformation campaigns and attacks on democratic processes, terrorism, migration...

These do not **respect any borders** and no one - no superpower, no individual continent - is capable of responding to them alone.

However, we can only **find answers to them** in the **values of knowledge, understanding, and cooperation.**

On our continent they are mainly materialised by the **European Union.**

That is the best example of what can be achieved if understanding prevails in a part of the world that had been plundered by conflicts for centuries.

Integration of Slovakia and Bulgaria was a historic event that gave us the **chance** to join a family of European countries.

Benefits of this decision are experienced daily, so the greater my **disappointment** that a few days ago we have not offered similar opportunity to **North Macedonia and Albania.**

Personally, I am not capable of describing this situation in words other than a **mistake** and historic **failure.**

I am convinced that the EU must adhere to these three values in the Western Balkans as well.

And if we **upset the understanding** with countries of this closest neighbourhood of ours, we cannot complain if the situation in the region will not develop towards security and stability.

Dear colleagues,

Today, I wish to appreciate the work of **professors** of this University and encourage the **students**, to work on knowing their **country**, their **discipline**, and also **themselves.**

Because only with this background we can face the afflictions of this time.

Uncovering **lies** ... arguing against **deception** ... defending **truth** and by doing so protecting the **values** that we have fought for over a long time.

And only with this background we can cultivate within ourselves **empathy and tolerance** – indeed, people are mainly scared of what they do not **know.**

So we can understand each other - grasping the starting points of the other side.

This way we can speak with each other and not to each other.

Once more, thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today and to accept this doctorate.

I view it as certain formalising of a very personal and friendly relationship that I nurture with both your University and your country.