

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Lectio Prima - Presentation of Doctor Honoris Causa
19 June 2018 | Bucharest, Romania

Good morning, Mr. Constantinescu, Dr. Bárbulescu, Dr. Pricopie, professors, students, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to accept the title of Doctor Honoris Causa. And it is an honour to address you all – the students, lecturers and professors of the National School of Political Science and Public Administration. In doing so, I want to make five main points:

The first one is more of a question: When the historians of the future, describe the times we are living in today – what will they say? This is a question I ask myself, constantly.

And one answer I have come up with is this: We are living in a time of great contradictions; a time of great paradoxes. There are a lot of trends that conflict with - or contradict - each other. For example, we have never had more tools for communication...But we seem to, actually, be talking to each other less. Living standards are on the rise...But so are the inequalities, between us. Transport, trade and technology are making our world smaller...But, in other ways, we are growing farther apart. Information has never been more widely available....But confusion and misinformation are spreading. We all accept that the Cold War was a dark period of our history....But we tolerate actions and words, which could bring it back. And here is the paradox that really worries me: We need each other, more than ever...But we have never seen more threats, to the systems that bring us together.

Which brings me to my second point, on multilateralism. Multilateralism has been around for 100s of years. From the Concert of Europe, after the Napoleonic Wars, to the League of Nations after the First World War. And, then.... the United Nations after the Second World War. Do you see the trend? Every time we nearly destroyed the world, we built it back up, with multilateralism. And, each time, we made our system stronger than the last - to prevent ourselves from repeating our mistakes. Clearly, our early multilateralism didn't work. There were too many gaps. The issues addressed were limited. And, membership was exclusive – limited to certain countries.

And that is why the United Nations dramatically changed the landscape of our world - for the better. It created the first truly global organisation. A forum which – in theory – had space for every country in the world. It established real multilateralism. Maybe I am biased, but I believe the General Assembly is the glue which holds this system together. No, it does not have the binding authority, of the Security Council. But it is, I believe, the most legitimate and most representative institution in the world. It is a place where all 193 countries - UN member states - can sit and meet. Power, size and wealth are left at the door. They cannot buy you a seat. And they will not give you more time on the microphone.

And, the General Assembly can – quite literally – deal with any issue on the world's agenda. We saw this, even over the last few days: Last Wednesday, the Assembly held an Emergency Special Session, on the protection of Palestinian people. This was an initiative that came directly from Member States – in response to events on the ground. The same week, I invited business executives to the United Nations. We brainstormed about ways to come up with the trillions of dollars needed... to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. And two weeks before that, young people from all over the world took part in our Youth Dialogue. The aim was to open the space even wider...and to make sure that the voices of young people are heard

– loud and clear – on the international stage. So, this is an insight into the role of General Assembly. And a glimpse into the history of multilateralism.

As my third point I want to go back to something I mentioned earlier. I really do believe we have never needed multilateralism more. Think about it. What are the biggest challenges to humanity today? The risks no longer come from invasions by enemy armies. Instead, they are far more complex – and far more global. They do not stay, neatly, inside borders. And they do not stop at defence lines or checkpoints.

And, here, I'm talking about climate change, the nuclear threat, international terrorism, and even war. It has been around as long as humans have. But even it has changed. It no longer involves one country fighting another. Today's conflicts happen more inside borders. But they also involve more regional – and global – dynamics. So even if bombs are falling in only one part of the world, other countries - near and far - can feel the ripple effects.

And so, it is very simple. We need each other – now, more than ever before. We need multilateralism now, more than ever before. But, paradoxically, it has never faced more threats. And, yes, here I am speaking about direct threats. There are voices speaking out, against the United Nations. Questioning its worth. Looking only at its flaws, while ignoring its achievements. And trying, actively, to weaken it, as an institution. I want to point out: these voices are in the minority. But they are loud. So, we should, still, be worried.

I also want to talk about indirect threats. The actions and the words of those who against everything the United Nations stands for. They shout others down, without listening first. They come to the table, not to negotiate, but to stick rigidly to their own positions. They freeze out – or bully - anyone who does not share their own views. They fail to see that true power lies in dialogue – not military force. And they think agreements and principles, which took painful compromise to reach, can be ignored, without consequence.

Our history books are very clear. They show that the greatest achievements of humanity have come from working together. Moving away from multilateralism might serve the interests of one person - or one country - in the short-term. But, in the end, it will expose us all to great risks.

And, as my fourth point, I want to give my own take – on why this is happening. Because, I think we are in a genuine - and an urgent - crisis of leadership. People, simply, do not trust their leaders. And, what are leaders doing, in response? Well, they are blaming others. Whether those “others” are political opponents, other countries, certain groups of society, treaties or laws, the European Union, the United Nations – or anyone or anything, except, of course, themselves.

So, we have arrived at a ridiculous situation: No one is at fault. The mistakes are, always, made by others. There is now only one side to the story.....and that side is that we are right, and they are wrong. So, if we are all perfect – why are we not living in a perfect world? Because, of course, no one is perfect. That is not, always, easy to admit. And it is not, always, easy to self-reflect, to listen to criticism, or to be open to changing our actions, or our minds. But that is the only way we can find solutions. That is the only way we can rebuild trust. And that is the only way we can bring about real progress. Unfortunately, however, we are seeing more and more people, choosing the easier alternative - in parliaments, on campaign trails, in newspapers or on Facebook feeds. And, I am not talking, only, about our national contexts. I have also seen this, at the United Nations.

And, I will use one example in particular: Syria. This war has been a bloody one. A messy one. And, frankly, a shameful one. There are no two ways about it: we failed. As the UN, as the international community, but also as human beings. We failed to prevent it. We failed to mitigate its effects, on people. And – even seven years later – we are failing to resolve it. It is not us who pay for these failures. That burden falls on the Syrian people.

But what we can do, at the very least, is to ask ourselves what we have done wrong. And to explore what could be done differently. To try things we haven't tried before. Or, to think outside the box. And, are we doing this? No. We are pointing fingers everywhere but at ourselves. We are re-using the tactics that we have already seen fail. And, as the years pass, we are getting more and more cynical. And, this is happening, across the board. Not only is it stagnating our progress. It is also driving us further apart. It is widening national, religious or ethnic divisions. It is fuelling hate speech, and intolerance.

And, worryingly, it means that our multilateral system – which we have spent over 70 years building up – is under more threats, now - than ever before. Because, if we are all perfect, why would we work, with those who are not? If we are all right, why would we compromise, with those who are wrong? And this is how we can slide from cooperation to conflict.

This brings me to my fifth and final point: on what we can all do about it. Well, the first thing we can all do is to ask a simple question: what is the alternative? What will happen – if we tear up our treaties? If we isolate ourselves? If we pull up our draw bridges and bar all our windows? If we refuse to follow any rules but our own? Will this lead to peace? Will this grow our economies? Will this make all of our problems disappear? And, if so, how? Don't forget: we already tried this. This is how we did things, in the past. And it didn't work. In fact, it brought the world to its knees. Twice. So please ask this question: what is the alternative? And ask it loudly.

Another thing we can all do is to stand up - speak out – against the other voices. Because, this is our fight. And, I know this can be a hard fight to sell, to people like us. We are meeting, today, in a university – in a European Union Member State. We are not like our old parents or grandparents. Many of them had to fight for their basic rights... For democracy.... For the freedom to speak their minds, without fear for their lives. Our fight is different. It is a fight for multilateralism. For dialogue and cooperation, over shouting down anyone who doesn't agree. For self-reflection rather than a blame-game. For integration instead of isolation. For a world based on international laws and principles, rather than power and might. And, on that note - and since I am in an academic setting today - for the age-old principle of *pacta sunt servanda*. For sticking to the agreements we signed onto, in good faith - even if they require hard work. Not violating them, to suit our own needs. This is not a fight we have to risk our lives for. But that does not mean it is not vital, for our futures.

We are meeting today only a few hundred miles, from where some of the worst atrocities of this generation happened. And, as we all remember: they did not happen overnight. They came from a gradual break-down of principles and norms, which are there to protect us all. Now, I am not saying we should not criticise. We should! Loudly and clearly! We can and shall speak out, against what is happening in our governments...in Brussels....within the United Nations. There are many problems that need fixing. But, then we must engage. We must use the systems and mechanisms that we created. We must step outside our bubbles – to talk, to listen, to cooperate, and to drive this world forward – not back. And I mean all of us. Not just the politicians and the diplomats. But, also, young people, activists, journalists, or students, like

you all here. And particularly I am speaking to young women: You drove change in this country, and this region. And we need you now, for the cause of multilateralism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I conclude, let me stress how honoured I am to accept this doctorate – and to address you all. I have given you my perspective, on the state of the world today. I have outlined the role for multilateralism, in it. I have warned you that it is under threat. And, I have called for your help - in standing up for the United Nations and our multilateral order. Now, I will leave you on a sober note.

On this very day, in 1937, the same honour I am receiving today was given to Nicolae Titulescu. As you know, he was one of the best diplomats Romania, and indeed the world, has ever seen. And, actually, he received his doctorate from Comenius university in Bratislava – so we're doing things the other way around today! Anyway, I want to quote some of Mr. Titulescu's speech. He said: "We are living in troubled times, without precedent in history. People say that we want to prevent war, and war is very near to us, but our eyes refuse to see. People say that we want to live under the reign of international law, but the world assists impassibly to its repeated violation." So, this was a very strong warning. But, we didn't listen. And the Second World War broke out, just two years later. Now, here we are. Eighty-one years later. With far more horror, in our history books. And, I am sorry to say: the same warning lights are flashing.

So, the question is: will we listen, this time? Will we see these warning lights – and respond? Or, will we repeat the mistakes of the past? Will we run our multilateral system into the ground? Will we bring ourselves to catastrophe? Only to realise - too late - that working together is the only way? If we don't want to take this path, we need to act. We need to stand up, for a multilateral world. And we need to do it now.

Thank you.