

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Opening of Panel on 'Multilateralism in the "Me-First" World' at GLOBSEC 2018
17 May 2018 | Bratislava, Slovakia

Good afternoon, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

I am standing here, for one main reason: I want to call for a multilateral renaissance. Our main multilateral body, the United Nations, was created in 1945 - more than 70 years ago. And, a lot of change has happened, since then. Some has been shocking: from the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, or the 9/11 terror attacks, in New York, or the financial crisis of 2008. And some has happened in more subtle ways. War started to be fought more within, than across, borders. News began to spread from newspapers to smartphone screens. Globalisation sped up. And technology transformed almost every part of our lives – from what we eat, to how we communicate. With these changes have come new challenges. Challenges I do not think we could have imagined, 70 – or even 10 – years ago.

Now, we have a planet that is melting around us. We have conflicts with no end in sight. We have threats of nuclear war, hanging in the air. We have seen hatred push out humanity. We have watched inequality grow. And we have had to adjust to the reality that a terror attack could hit anywhere, and at any time. We use different words to describe these challenges. Daunting. Concerning. Alarming. But, actually, they are, simply, scary. We are scared. We just don't like admitting it. Maybe, however, it's time to start calling a spade a spade. There are red warning lights flashing. There are threats on the horizon. And we are all looking for a way to respond.

But, as far as I can see, we have the solutions – right in front of us. All the tools are there – in our multilateral toolbox. We just need to start using them properly. That is why we need a renaissance. A rebirth. A revival. A move back to basics – but with new passion, and commitment. And I want to suggest a few different ways this could happen...

First, I believe there must be a cultural shift. As the saying goes, it's not what you say – but how you say it. And, when it comes to multilateralism, there is some room for improvement. Here, I want to focus, in particular, on how we talk to – and engage with – each other. Because, dialogue is at the core of multilateralism. It is the most basic – but most powerful - tool in our toolbox. And, frankly, we need to dust it down, and start using it again. And, I am talking about real dialogue. The kind that happens between people. The kind that can go in unexpected directions. The kind that sparks new ideas and new perspectives. And, this is not as common, as we might think. Too often, we choose monologue over dialogue; prepared scripts over real interaction; rhetoric over recommendations. And sometimes it is not only how we say it, but, also, why.

And this must also be part of our cultural shift. Are we talking, just, to talk? Are we negotiating, just, to negotiate? Do we want to be seen, to be engaging? Or do we really believe, in the end goal? Do we want to achieve tangible results? And in talking about how – and why - we engage, I want to be very clear: Multilateralism is not here, to mirror our own priorities. It is not here, to further our own goals. It is not here, to make each of us feel like we have won, every time. That is not its job. That is not why we created it. It is here, so that we can all win – over the long-term. Even if that means that we have to make individual compromises; even if we have to move more towards the middle. And, that is a concept we can understand. Because many of our biggest successes have been based on compromise, solidarity, and reciprocity.

Just look at the European Union. Years ago, the idea of a single market was hotly debated. And it was not, simply, a win-win. And, to make it work, there have been both benefits, and compromises. If we want a barrier lifted, we need to bring down one of our own. If we want concessions, we need to offer them, to others. And if we want to benefit – we need to allow others to do so, too. We all bought into this. And it transformed our continent. Yet, we have been slower to apply this to our foreign policy. Instead, we – the members of the international community - have set red lines. We have often come to the table, determined not to give anything away. We have, sometimes, failed to realise that if multilateralism wins, we all win. Or that a “me first” policy might work, for one, at first - but overall, we all lose out. We created our multilateral system for a reason. We made it for real dialogue, real engagement, real compromise, and real results - for all, not just one. It is capable of delivering. It can produce solutions. But only if we use it the right way. So, we need a shift.

And, my second point is that we need this shift to come from the top – and the ground. The gap between institutions and the people they are there to serve is getting bigger. This is no secret. And, it is leading to confusion, disillusion, and cynicism. We need to close this gap – and fast. It does not matter how much good is being done, if people do not know about it.

And, when it comes to the United Nations, good work really, is, being done. Its humanitarian operations are often the first to reach those in dire need. Its missions on the ground are working to protect civilians – and to keep fragile peace together. Its development partnerships are helping to transform societies. And it has been the birthplace of some of the most important frameworks of our time – from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the Sustainable Development Goals.

But we don't always hear this side of the story. There are bubbles around our institutions. And, they need to be popped – by those of us already inside. Think about our history. Think about the times, when people have come together, for change. Mostly, it has been led by leaders with a vision. Leaders who could relate to people. And leaders who used the same language, as everyone else. Somehow, I do not think we can achieve the same results with scripted statements...from inside buildings with restricted access.

But the shift cannot be top-down only. We also need ideas, perspectives and solutions from the ground. It is hard to have a finger on the pulse from Brussels, Geneva or New York. That is why we need to listen to those closer to the action. And that is the only way we can stop being taken by surprise. We have, repeatedly, failed to anticipate major shocks and crises. And we have been left, responding – rather than preventing – crises. This has been seen - from the spike in migrant and refugee flows, to the deepening crisis in the Middle East. But, although, we might have been taken by surprise, others, on the ground, were not. They had seen the warning lights flashing, and they had felt the tremors in the ground.

I have used my Presidency to call for a stronger focus on people. Not just because it is the right thing to do. But, also because it is the smart thing to do. Our multilateral institutions were built for people. Not bureaucrats. Not diplomats. Not dignitaries. But people. If we lose sight of that, we lose sight of our overall mission. And we are left in the dark –with no capacity to act earlier and faster, to prevent - rather than react to –conflicts and crises. This must all be part of our multilateral renaissance. And the United Nations must be its epicentre. Because, this body is the lifeblood – the vital organ – to our multilateral system. It gives us the biggest, most inclusive stage. We cannot, however, ignore all the other actors on the stage too. National stakeholders. Civil society. Academia. Businesses. And regional organisations.

And, for my third point and last point, I want to focus on the last group... the regional organisations... and, in particular, the European Union. Its work is felt, not only by European citizens, but millions of others around the world. And it is a crucial part of our multilateral system. In fact, there is a whole Chapter in the United Nations' Charter – namely Chapter 8 – dedicated to regional actors. In many cases, the United Nations and the European Union are working towards the same goals.

Just read through the priorities in the European Union's Global Strategy. You will find: Peacebuilding. Conflict prevention. Mediation. Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Prevention of violent extremism. Addressing climate change. And promoting human rights. These are, also, at the top of the United Nations' priority list. So, the European Union, and the United Nations, really, should be working in a very close - and very integrated - partnership. But this is not always the case. At least at the policy level. I see more opportunity at the United Nations General Assembly. The European Union does engage. In fact, its representatives are very active in the Assembly's processes and negotiations. But, I believe there is scope to ramp this up. If we want to bring about a multilateral renaissance, we need the European Union to speak up, louder than ever, on the international stage.

Excellencies – dear friends,

I am delighted that we are focusing on multilateralism today... That we have a chance to remind ourselves of why we created the United Nations, in 1945, and to call out the risks of moving away from it - towards a “me-first” world. But let me stress one thing: multilateralism is not black and white. We might see something as right - or as wrong - but someone else might argue a different case. And what do we do, then? Clear and blatant violations of international law are taking place, as we speak. And we must be brave enough to tackle them, head-on. And we need to condemn them - without reservation. But we cannot end there. We cannot only call out - only criticise - only condemn. We must look for solutions. We must think outside the box. We must look at the facts now - but also look ahead, to the future. That is why dialogue was the key message, at the start of my statement. And that is why I want to end on the same note. Because it is at the core of every single issue on the agenda, today.

Finally, before I conclude, I want to point something out. We have some great thinkers, and practitioners, here, in this room - and at this conference today. But, together, we do not represent all of the people our multilateral system is here to serve. Most are not in the room. They do not sit in our meetings in Brussels or New York. And, they do not get to raise their voices, from podiums like this one. So, if we want a multilateral renaissance, it can start in here. But it cannot stay here. Instead, we need to gather the ideas and perspectives we gain, in here. And we need to bring them, out there. To spark discussion. To balance the narrative. To mobilise. To inspire. And to ensure that we all have the tools to stand up – and speak out – for the system we have spent more than 70 years building. The system we cannot afford to weaken. And the system we need – now, more than ever.

Thank you.