

Whither Europe?

Good afternoon distinguished colleagues, friends and students. My name is Sebastian Schäffer and I am the managing director of the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe and Secretary General of the Danube Rectors' Conference, based in Vienna. I would very much like to thank Penka Angelova and the team of the Elias Canetti Society for the invitation and all the effort that has been put into making this conference a reality. I am humbled to be part of such a wonderful programme. I would also like to thank Mimi Kornazeva, who has not only held a wonderful presentation, but has also been very helpful to me regarding this conference. Last but not least, I would like to thank Elisa Magris and Gloria Becerril, who have supported me in writing this speech.

I feel honoured to be part of the commemoration of the 160th birthday of Prof. Dr Ivan Shishmanov, who committed his life to the development of pan-European diplomatic and cultural institutions. I find it particularly poetic to be able to speak about this tribute in Ruse, for being a city that connects nations across the Danube, it has become the perfect metaphor for what Shishmanov sought to put into practice in the pan-European concept.

It is also worth mentioning the importance of the university as an institution that seeks to promote young generations' values and freedom of speech and thought. They have a crucial role in providing the means and tools to understand reality and foster one's own thoughts. In this way, the younger generations of students have the key to untangle realities with different nuances. These students are not only given the means to develop their own ideas, but also the way to deliver them in a context where freedom of speech and thought are key players.

The world of academia is a nest of ideas, knowledge and development. This is precisely the reason why we must work to install the values under which we seek to be ruled.

Following the Danube River, Dr Shishmanov was born in Svishtov, pursued an academic career navigating through Europe, acquiring his academic fundamentals in Vienna, Jena, Geneva, and Leipzig. This educational journey then brought him back to his homeland, where he became a major figure within the university and the country itself. He devoted his life to the foundation and consolidation of the Bulgarian section of the Pan-European Union. Thanks to his work he set the ground for the development of Europe.

His remarkable work has left traces and emphasises the importance of multilateral collaboration among nations, in order to reach common goals in the pursuit of European citizens' wellbeing. It is now clear, due to recent events, that European steadiness is at risk and that we are facing a delicate moment in history. In this sense, a major need for unity and freedom is required to partner up and keep on building bridges – metaphorically, but also physically as they are once again being destroyed in our neighbourhood and I am explicitly not referring to the incident that connects the Russian invaders to Crimea.

And while there is a simple end to the war against Ukraine – the complete retreat of Russian forces from the country and restoring the pre-2014 territorial integrity - we also need more dialogue. Not with the current regime in Moscow, but among us, the countries in Europe, regardless if they are EU members, want to become one or not. We need bold steps forward, not only as signal of reassurance for European democracies, but also as a joint undertaking for transregional and global cooperation.

To make such a meaningful and credible step, a lot depends on the institutional design, composition, mandate and resources of the new body. Together with my colleague and friend from the University of Osnabrück, Chairman of the Board of the German Foundation for Peace Research, Ulrich Schneckener, we have made such a proposal with the Greater European Council, which would serve as a multilateral institution for the EU-27 and non-member states. It should indicate the strong linkage to the existing EU architecture and include the WB6 and the Associated Trio of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, but should also involve others like Turkey, Norway, Iceland, the United Kingdom or Switzerland. It may be expanded in future to a democratic, post-Lukashenka Belarus.

We believe that this is much better suited than the current idea of a European Political Community proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron, however, I will leave that to your judgement. You can find the idea on the website of the IDM, but I also brought some physical copies with me.

There are also other concepts being explored right now and we need these different ideas, points of view and approaches. Consequently, this will only be possible by exercising our freedom of speech, which is one of the biggest challenges that we are facing nowadays.

There is no universal definition for what freedom of speech means, though there are some shared core values that remain constant in the majority of definitions. All the definitions share the fact that freedom of speech allows each kind of thought and perspective and that it is a fundamental human right. It has also always been a key point within democratic countries, with both its positive and

negative aspects. Therefore, it is instrumental to keep in mind that there must be a sense of responsibility behind every thought that comes out.

For this reason, although freedom of speech must be encouraged and claimed in order to protect the balance in society and our institutions' integrity, boundaries and restrictions in this matter are fundamental. We can all agree that there is a thin line between boundaries to protect people and censorship, which is definitely something worth a discussion. Within freedom of speech, communication and discussion are important elements when it comes to opening up people's minds and taking them out of their 'bubbles'. When facing opposite perspectives, citizens are taken into a rawer, but also more real world; and finding a way for these ideas to coexist will lead us closer to a more democratic system.

One of the challenges faced by freedom of speech is the balance between different points of view. How can so many different opinions coexist? And how can we find a common point among them? As discussed above, freedom of speech comes with boundaries and limitations, and this dichotomy of freedom-limitations has to be seen in a broader context where strong and insulting thoughts or opinions harm people.

In this regard, the definition of 'values' is to be taken into consideration as well. One would think that there is a universally accepted definition for 'values', something that everyone agrees on and that does not harm people's freedom of speech and expression. However, we have arrived at a stage where values are defined differently. This is a fundamental challenge to our democratic core principles and erodes everything that we have achieved over the past decades. And while I would always argue that a solid fundament of a democracy has to tolerate also different opinions, there are limits to this. Emotions can never trump facts. Science scepticism has seen a booster, especially in the recent years. Although also here we might need to adapt our tolerance for words. Because words become actions and these actions can already be seen throughout Europe. We are not dealing with a phenomenon of science scepticism. The very essence of science is questioning. But we are rather dealing with science denial. And again, personal feelings don't matter when it comes to academically reproducible results.

Jürgen Habermas, a contemporary German philosopher, suggested the theory of the 'ideal speech situation'. On one side, according to this theory, such an ideal situation can be reached through the exclusion of coercion with arguments based on reason and evidence. A true democratic and united system has to recognise and acknowledge the diversity and vastity of ideas or thoughts. It is important to mention though that this does not mean that every single idea and

thought must be taken into account or recognised as valid. Or as Karl Popper, a Vienna-born philosopher, argued that if a society wants to remain tolerant, it must have the right to be intolerant of intolerance, as self-contradictory as it might sound.

Nowadays – and please do not take this as a sign of me saying that everything used to be better in the old days, because it really wasn't – we find self-proclaimed philosophers, who write pop-science books arguing that the media is no longer a fourth power checking on the first three, but that rather wants to shape policy on their own. That we need “neutral” reporting – whatever that may be – and that if you have anything other than the current “mainstream” opinion, you will be cancelled. All this while earning a huge amount of money through book sales and appearing every other week in any existing media outlet in the country, while simultaneously using social media to drive the discussion and feeding their bubbles.

Now while we are not experiencing the end of history in the meaning of Fukuyama (but hopefully also not in any other sense, although it might feel like it currently), it was also clear that the virtual Garden of Eden will not exist because there have always been village idiots, just now without faces or names.

Social media also plays a big role in dictating what can or cannot be said, especially when it comes to harming people's freedom. In some ways they make such boundaries and limits nowadays even stronger than in the past and influence people's ideas. This, however, leads to a lack of trust in the institutions and to political instability: people realise that they cannot trust social media as a truthful or objective source, causing a detachment and distrust while at the same time again contributing to the erosion of our democratic principles through spreading fake news and creating echo chambers.

Again, here we face the thin red line between freedom of speech and censorship, although I am not sure if the no tolerance for intolerance approach would be able to close this Pandora's box.

'Inclusion' might be the key word for this issue. Different opinions must be acknowledged, even endured, in order to support and promote the generally accepted idea of democracy, because what if not debating alternatives is the essence of democratic processes. We kind of seemed to have unlearned how to debate with each other. Listening not only to be able to reply, but to comprehend. A good idea does not necessarily become bad, because it has been proposed by a person we do not like or disagree with. At the same time, an argument does not become more valid just because it has been made by someone we like.

But how can we agree on the same definition(s) for something this important? How can we detach the argument from the person? Communication and cooperation are indeed the biggest actors towards this goal. Transregional communication and international cooperation can lead to a more balanced approach.

But I do not have a good solution to offer, I'm afraid. There is not really a fixed formula that would help to handle this topic in the proper way, and communication and cooperation are not perfect means. They are surely the right path to be undertaken and it is our duty to rescue the integrity of institutions. Such institutions are in fact the foundation of our society, and we should aim to restore their condition of reliable instruments in our social and political system. At the same time, we must focus on continuing to promote freedom of expression and walk this tightrope.

Maybe Shishmanov can help us a bit? Surely public education, for which he was minister between 1903 and 1907, is one of the keys. But also, his positivist approach to research should be a guiding principle, relying on empirical evidence, logic and reason. And I would even go as far – allow me a bit of a stretch here – as to say he was ambassador to the Ukrainian People's Republic, which had the same national anthem as today's Ukraine, starting with "Shche ne vmerla Ukrayina" - Ukraine has not yet perished. We must continue to defend our values, because they are in real danger of further dissolving or even being annihilated. And while the war is being fought in Ukraine, it has been declared against all of us who believe in freedom, not only of speech, but as our fundamental value.

Pan-European integration along the Danube, the second river of European Integration as the late Chairman of the IDM and our friend Erhard Busek called it, is possible, but it will not come without a price. I sincerely hope that the sacrifices already made, and here especially the lives being lost, will not amount anywhere close to before the Rhine became the first river of integration and reconciliation. I also hope that we will not meander or stop, but continue with the flow and create more rivers of integration and reconciliation.

It will not be an easy goal to achieve, and there is a long way to go. But these times of great need and urgent decisions merit the effort to continue the search for unity and balance. And if we have to burn some bridges along the way, maybe they can enlighten the way for us.

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