

Dear Colleagues,

Let me congratulate you – you are now members of the family of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”!

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, close to the spot we are standing at right now, the foundation of Bulgarian higher education was laid down.

Let me remind you that this took place only 10 years after the Russo-Turkish War of Liberation (1877-1878), during which tens of school buildings were destroyed and hundreds plundered. But at the very beginning of 1879 there were already more than 1 400 schools in our country. The local government of the burnt down Stara Zagora, when endorsing the plan for the new town, decreed that the revenue from the forty shops at the centre of town should go for the designing and construction of new schools.

This happened only three years after Bulgaria fought to protect its Unification in the Serbian-Bulgarian war of 1885. Let me remind you that at the time literacy did not exceed 5 to 6%, but the rulers of the country had a clear vision of the future.

In 1888 the first university course was launched with 43 students, all men, all wearing moustaches. At present there are about 24 000 students at the university. More than half of them are female students. Since that first course Alma Mater has given Bulgaria more than 270 000 bachelors, masters and doctors habilitatus. More than a quarter of a million!

Dear colleagues, you have been admitted to the University at a very complicated time. A time at which we are surrounded by evil, distorted from mutual hatred and faces baring their teeth for no obvious reason.

A time at which the politicians gladly attend our days of celebration, but unheedingly abandon us in our daily lives.

A time at which in Bulgaria new bingo halls, night clubs and the occasional sports hall are opened or ribbon-cutting ceremonies are held for the launching of new highways, but also a time marked by the fact that for more than a quarter of a century no new university building has been erected anywhere in the country.

There are new buildings for the General Directorate "Combating Organized Crime" (CDCOC) or for the State Agency "National Security", but for universities – there are not!

A time when actors gain their fame not by playing Hamlet, but by appearing in commercials and participating in “Big Brother”.

A time when politicians are trying with astounding impudence to convince us that we are simpletons, so that they can easily manipulate us, so that they can make us lose faith in our own abilities.

A time when by singing hymns to education and science, the rulers managed to chase away tens of thousands of young people and to turn “abroad” into a cherished dream for those who remained behind. It seems that they do not like those who know and those who can, because they are an obstacle for them; an obstacle that hinders them from croaking passionately in their own swamp. Do not let them mislead you. We want you to be knowledgeable and skilled.

A time when all political parties are promising the moon to you, but do you trust them?

A time when patriotism has fallen out of fashion and has been substituted by a trend for degrading our motherland. And most ardent and vociferous are those who have not done anything for it.

They are trying to convince you that you are living at a time of scoundrels. It depends entirely on you whether you will live in better times. Don't trust them, good people are always more.

The time belongs to you, not to thugs, footballer's wives, and dabblers in politics, but to make it really yours you'll have to work hard.

Today, for us, your teachers, your parents and your relatives, for you as well, is the day to celebrate hope! Spirited hope! Because the university throws a bridge between different eras and looks forward to better and more intelligent times.

At present, in the words of a recent minister of education we are trying to attain European levels with African financing.

But we do not calculate education by sliding the balls along the wires of the abacus. We do not want your only aim to be obtaining a diploma. There are numerous printing houses in Bulgaria and we print all kinds of diplomas. You should aim at high quality education and should demand exactly this from your teachers and mentors.

Dear colleagues, you do not simply become students today, you are given the right of free choice. Free choice from four hundred bachelor's programs, taught in five languages. Try out everything that Alma Mater has to offer, including one of our sixteen joint programs with foreign universities, the exchange possibilities offered by the Erasmus program, which gives you the opportunity to compare your views of the world with the reality out there. Enjoy the concerts and exhibitions organized by the Cultural Centre and the plays staged by our theatre. Take a walk to the Observatory and look at the stars. Put efforts in your studies, and seize the opportunity as master or PhD students to visit the university base in Antarctica.

I firmly believe that you will not only study, but will fully enjoy yourselves. And this is how it should be. But students can enjoy themselves only if not burdened by re-sits. Believe me. I know this from personal experience.

Dear colleagues, you become students at a university where it is believed that knowledge is power, that knowledge and those who possess it are the guarantees for the freedom and independence of our country.

Dear colleagues, you become students at a university that is struggling to remain fully socially committed, that is trying to teach you to retain and sharpen your sensitivity to social infirmities and evils, to teach you not to turn away your eyes in contempt when you see a fellow Bulgarian rummaging the dustbins, but to try, within the limits of your abilities, to help those in need.

Dear colleagues, you are at the threshold of the university boasting the highest achievements in research. We, your teachers, to use the words from Foreigner's song, are blinded by science. This is the reason why we fight so furiously and should the need arise, we are ready to call you to join us in our protest to defend our right to European science and education in the framework of the operational programme for science and education, because developed science is a warranty for quality education.

You are entering a people's university, which has traditionally been upholding spiritual and intellectual aristocracy, which is testified in the ranking of our university, both locally and internationally. Alma Mater ranks highest in ranking systems, but those register solely your possible

utility for society. We will try, and hopefully succeed, to build up your personalities, to install in you what wiser contemporaries of ours have called the culture of the heart, the culture of morals and independent thinking.

We want you to become people brave enough to defend their fair opinion be it directed against the university's management or the order in our country. Be the barometer of our mistakes. But do not forget that the right to demand is granted only to the one who gives.

You are about to start your education at a university whose name the rulers of the country have always held sacred but at the same time a university in which they have felt uncomfortable. Because it has always served as a corrective, because it has always been one of the central symbols of intellectual dissent, and you the students, and your teachers, are the ones who express this dissent.

You begin your education, which I hope you will successfully complete, at a university that has always believed in Bulgaria. If this faith goes away, we will all vanish.

Just a week ago we celebrated the independence of Bulgaria. You are the ones who can guarantee this independence. Not the ones who scribble in forums and urge everyone to leave this country, but you, the ones who clench their teeth and do their best to make their motherland a better place to live, a place where dreams come true.

Dear freshmen, let us bow to the Bulgarian people. Never in the public eye has there been a grudge against expenses for education. Against the high salaries of deputies in Parliament – always. Against money dedicated to wiretapping – always. Against money dedicated to education – never. Because people have always been aware that money for education is not expenditure, but an investment in the future. We, people at universities, are the business of the future.

The University and science do not need declarations of respect during election campaigns or on days of celebration, what we need is acknowledgement and space to work in post-campaign and post-celebration times.

Bulgaria started its independent development on the Balkans considerably late, but thanks to the vision of its rulers, only thirty years later it was the fastest developing country in the region. Have we had such rulers in the past few years?

The young generation expects high morality from politicians, but sees none, the young generation demands caring for the future, but gets none, the young generation wants to take active part in our society but is denied the chance, the young generation longs for absurdities to be stopped but witnesses their perpetuation. Instead of the desired changes the young generation sees only petty brawling.

We are constantly reminded that our country is a small one. But in the sphere of higher education and science, there are no big and small countries, only successful and unsuccessful ones. I wish for you to do anything within your powers to help us become one of the successful countries.

We get tired from the constant lack of understanding, we despair, we feel the urge to wave it all away and let complacent vulgarity and stupidity win over. But we should not. Just as king Simeon did not let our patron, the tired St. Kliment withdraw. He told St. Kliment "Withdrawing is allowed only for the unworthy." Let us be worthy.

We do not have any choice – we need to seek perfection. Not that we will ever attain it fully.

Look around you. See how many you are. The power is with you. The power to change our motherland. Not just anybody, but we. Not to the benefit of this one or the other, but to the benefit of all of us, of everybody.

Today is a day of celebration not only of Sofia University, but a day to celebrate Bulgarian free intellect. At a time of wide-spread vulgarization, the intellect functions as a guiding light. This same intellect that has been abused, ridiculed, neglected, crushed, and ultimately driven to seek relief abroad. Without the rebirth of free intellect, there can never be a revival of our nation.

Long live Bulgaria!

На многая лета!