

*Mr. President of the Republic of Bulgaria
Prof. Anastas Gerdjikov, Rector of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski
Authorities
Colleagues
Students
Ladies and Gentlemen*

Sofia 8 December 2018

it is a great pleasure for me to be here today to celebrate the 130th anniversary of this university and I would like to thank very much Rector Gerdjikov for having invited me as President of the UNICA network of the universities from the capitals of Europe.

UNICA is a strong a network of 51 universities from the capital cities of 37 European countries, very much engaged in the internationalization of education, research and innovation by sharing good practices, in agreement with our motto “sharing, learning, adding value”.

Anniversaries are very good occasions to reflect about the past, the present and the future of our universities. When UNICA was founded in 1990, its mission contained a statement about the facilitation of the integration of universities from Central and Eastern Europe into the European Higher Education Area. In 2015, we decided to remove this statement because we realized that the integration was fully accomplished.

However, our beloved European Union is going through a difficult period despite the great successes and the very relevant achievements obtained since the Treaty establishing the European Community was signed in Rome in 1957. Above all, we should remember that we have been living in the longest period of peace after the Roman Emperor Augustus. In the last few years, we observed the rise of populism in many European countries, which in my opinion is based more on perceptions rather than real facts. I think that we have to admit that European universities are not doing enough to make sure that all citizens of our societies have the necessary information to take positions on all different issues and challenges in the so-called “post-truth” society. I feel that it is our responsibility to educate students who, besides being knowledgeable in their specific subjects, will also be citizens conscious of what is happening in our societies and in the world, thus making wise (*sapiens*) political choices based on real facts rather than perceptions.

Another reflection is related to the way we teach at our universities. Since 1993, the internet revolution made available for universities students and professors an increasing amount of information and data. After 25 years, in most cases, we still teach in a very traditional way while I believe that we should change, making the students to learn the main elements of the subjects without asking them to learn by heart details that they will be able to easily find on the internet. As already happens in some excellent universities, students could be allowed to use computers connected to the internet during the exams, formulating complex questions which require a very good knowledge of the subject without necessarily knowing all technical details. Indeed, any professional during his or her career will use the internet to search for information to prepare for any activity. Internet allows also to easily “flip the classroom”, i.e. to ask the students to prepare at home before coming to the class just to ask questions to the teacher and discuss with the other students about the assignment.

Another revolutionary phenomenon is artificial intelligence (AI) which is already providing new powerful tools in many field such as medicine, engineering, architecture, etc. AI machines will soon perform many activities done today by humans and that should be taken into account when preparing our graduates. Very soon, surgeons, radiologists and many other professionals will benefit from AI machines in such a way that even if “machines will not replace immediately humans”, most probably, humans using intelligent machines will replace soon humans NOT using them”. Of course, these developments will create soon huge ethical and philosophical issues and that is why the study of the humanities and social sciences might be even more important in future universities. Indeed, removing as much as possible technical information from the curricula might allow again future scholars to have a profound interdisciplinary knowledge, mastering different fields like Leonardo Da Vinci or René Descartes did in the past.

Congratulating again Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski on this very important occasion, I thank you very much for your attention and I wish you a very nice evening.

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