

Laudatio

Prof. Luigi Vero Tarca

Honourable Rector, Distinguished Colleagues and Participants,

I am honoured to have been invited by the Rector, as Director of the Centre for Human Rights in Ca' Foscari, to eulogize the work that Dr. Irina Bokova has done over the years, in particular since 2009 when she was appointed as Director-General of the UNESCO, the United Nations educational scientific cultural Organization. She is the first woman and the first Eastern European to lead the Organization.

Her curriculum is astonishing. Born in Sofia (Bulgaria), she graduated from Moscow State Institute of International Relations, and studied at the University of Maryland (Washington) and the John F. Kennedy School of Government (Harvard University). Irina Bokova then joined the United Nations Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria in 1977. In charge of political and legal affairs at the Permanent Mission of Bulgaria to the United Nations in New York, she was also member of the Bulgarian Delegation at the United Nations conferences on the equality of women in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). As Member of Parliament (1990-1991 and 2001-2005), she advocated for Bulgaria's membership in EU and NATO and participated in the drafting of Bulgaria's new Constitution.

Irina Bokova was Minister for Foreign Affairs, Coordinator of Bulgaria-European Union relations and Ambassador of Bulgaria to France, Monaco and UNESCO and Personal Representative of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria to the "Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie" (OIF). As Secretary of the Council of Ministers for European Integration and as Foreign Minister, Irina Bokova has always advocated for European integration. She is a founding member and Chairman of the European Policy Forum, an NGO created to promote European identity and encourage dialogue to overcome divisions in Europe. Irina Bokova is Executive Secretary of the Steering Committee of the UN Secretary-General's Global Education First Initiative (GEFI) and co-Vice-Chair of the Broadband Commission.

Bokova has been the Director-General of UNESCO since 15 November 2009, and was successfully reelected for a second term in 2013. As Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova is actively engaged in international efforts to advance gender equality, quality education for all, and combat terrorist financing by preventing the

illicit traffic of cultural goods. She is a leading advocate for ensuring quality education for all and has championed gender equality, making this her own personal priority for the Organization. Other fields of action include enabling scientific cooperation for sustainable development, such as early warning systems for tsunamis or trans-boundary water management agreements and global advocacy for the safety of journalists and freedom of expression.

At the international day of peace last year, she posited:

“This must be our starting point – the individual rights and dignity of every woman and man. The UNESCO Constitution states that the defenses of peace must be built in the minds of women and men – through education, through freedom of expression, through intercultural dialogue, through respect for human rights and cultural diversity, through scientific cooperation. Drafted in 1945 after a terrible and devastating war, this message has never been so vital in societies that are transforming and are ever more diverse”.

These are difficult times, where conflicts, natural emergencies, human suffering, huge violations of human rights occur: violations that shake us as scholars of different disciplines. In the spirit of interdisciplinarity that characterizes our centre for human rights, we discuss a lot on the challenges that the world faces today: the prohibition of torture and of genocide, the protection of cultural heritage, gender equality, refugees’ rights; we have wondered about the existence of a right to philosophy. How to react as an academic to contribute to building the foundations for a better world?

I found in the declarations and statement by Irina Bokova several interesting aspects that I would like to mention. Around some pillars, some priorities, she has indeed constructed her vision of UNESCO for a new world. In her 2013 mission statement, she has mentioned three priorities. She said that the first priority is human dignity, which is inextricably linked to human development and to poverty alleviation. A sustainable human development is at the core of the Agenda 2030, elaborated by the United Nations. Bokova has stressed that sustainability means quality of education, and culture, which she defined as “our strongest social cement”. Let me mention here her strong affirmation after the destruction of cultural heritage in Syria:

“The systematic destruction of cultural symbols embodying Syrian cultural diversity reveals the true intent of such attacks, which is to deprive the Syrian people of its knowledge, its identity and history. One week after the killing of Professor Khaled al-Assaad, the archaeologist who had looked after Palmyra's ruins for four decades, this destruction is a new war crime and an immense loss for the Syrian people and for humanity”.

With regard to culture, she has also defended the cultural heritage of religious minorities. Last September, she posited:

“Heritage means everything to minorities – fundamentally, it belongs to all of us. This is not about protecting stones. This is about defending people, identities. This is about defending human rights and the humanity we all share”. She also added that she was in Timbuktu last year (I quote) “for the opening of the 14 mausoleums we rebuilt that had been destroyed by violent extremists – this is how we must respond, by bolstering confidence and restoring expressions of identity. We must halt the illicit trafficking which contributes to financing terrorism”.

Here you can understand the importance of the link between the protection of cultural heritage and human rights.

Her second priority is equality, which is both an institutional and a personal priority. She considers the empowerment of girls and women as the new frontier for human rights in the 21st century. Empowerment means school, quality education and access to culture and information. Eradicating gender inequalities is an instrument to eradicate violence against women, to promote dialogue, and to recognize the role of women in the protection of cultural heritage.

Her third priority is learning to live together. I quote her view from the mission statement: “The borders of peace are shifting within societies, in the perceptions that every person holds of their own culture and those of others. Making peace with others implies being at peace with ourselves, with multiple affiliations and with painful memories that demand our respect”.

These are only few examples of her work to endorse the values of dialogue, diversity, human dignity and human rights.

This fellowship is a way to recognize her commitment, as expert and as woman, at the international level, a way to acknowledge the importance of international experts that work independently, with passion, and courage to face multiple challenges. Her work will be of inspiration for many of our students, who are willing to take the challenge and contribute to the promotion of human dignity and peace in their country and worldwide.

We are honoured to have you here, Dr. Bokova, and to have the unique possibility to listen to your *lectio magistralis* on “Fostering cultural diversity as a shared heritage to build peace”.

I will now give the floor to the Honourable Rector to award the fellowship to Irina Bokova.

Thank you very much.