

Welcome address

Dear Minister Balas,

Dear colleagues and friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome you in Prague.

We meet over these two days to discuss, from various facets, the very serious issue of gender-based violence in higher education and research.

It is a huge issue, one the undercurrent of which has been compromising the integrity of our research and higher education institutions. Gender-based violence seriously hampers trust in academic and research institutions and their credibility.

Some of us studying and working in academic settings have experienced offensive and totally inappropriate remarks, others unwelcome solicitations, pressure but also rape. Often, this does not come in peer relations on campuses or in the class, but in highly hierarchical, ritualised relations between students and teachers, PhD candidates or postdocs who are in completely dependent positions toward their supervisors and team leaders. We may tell ourselves, as we often do, that these are adult people and that it is consensual but, really, this is so disingenuous, and we know it!

The first case our Centre for Gender and Science here in the Czech Republic was dealing with was that of an associate professor who specifically targeted women coming to Prague from smaller towns, without social support and networks here, and he bragged about this highly functional approach to a colleague, certain of his total impunity. What he did, was not marginal: he held consultations in his apartment that went on into the night where he pressured women to disrobe and get in front of a camera for picture taking, with the argument that if they want to study media, they need to know what it is like to be on the front end. After disciplinary procedure, he had to leave but without an official reprimand, by agreement, and he found employment at another higher education institution.

It may be that it is a smaller number of such serial predators that commit violence out of the total academic workforce but it is the organisational features of higher education and research institutions that allow this to continue. Institutions close their eyes when the people bring in grant money, when they have international collaborations, when they have outstanding publication track records. They close eye for reputational reasons; they close eyes because it is their colleague and it can't be all that serious.

But it is serious.

We, all of us, must make the problem of gender-based violence matter. Academic institutions play a vital role in society, including the education and professional training of the new generations. Leadership and top management have a special responsibility for ensuring that the institutions they run are safe and ensure dignity and respect for students and staff.

We must also realise that the students who come to higher education institutions may have a history of abuse and violence. So what is at stake is not only concrete violent situations that occur but the fact that negligence, downplaying cases and silencing may result in revictimisation or in triggering post-traumatic stress disorder.

It appears that we are now poised to move forward. The issue is now clearly spelled out as a policy concern to be tackled at the EU level and in many national policies in European countries; student

mobilisations – some directly linked to the MeToo movement – are pressuring institutions to take action, refusing to be silent no more. The research is there, and we also now have pan-European prevalence results thanks to the Horizon 2020 project, UniSAFE.

I am extremely proud that the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is addressing this issue within its Presidency programme. Thank you, dear Minister Balas.

I feel encouraged that the ERA Forum has agreed to set up a subgroup for ERA Action 5, one of which outcomes is to be related to combatting gender-based violence.

I am really honoured to see the interest and dedication of all our speakers and the institutions they represent.

I want to thank our Scientific Committee for their incredible contribution, and my whole team without whom this event would not be possible but especially Ananke Nebeska and Jarmla Lancosova.

I am immensely hopeful, and trust that with the joint effort of all the actors that meet here over these two days, we can start making serious progress.

People often go to universities and to research because of their passion for knowledge. We must nurture this passion and create conditions in which passion for knowledge and understanding and research collaboration can thrive.

So let's get down to it, together.

Thank you.