

The Respected Face of UNESCO Higher Education



UNESCO, Farewell Reception for Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić – COL Focal Point at UNESCO, 7 July 2011

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Remarks by Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning (Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO, 2001-2004)

Transcript

Dear Colleagues and Friends:

I hate to interrupt this lively party but it is my most pleasant duty to welcome you and make a first tribute to Stamenka.

This is a very special event because we are in the presence of four generations of Stamenka's family: her mother Mela Uvalić, her husband Davor, her children Tea and Damjan, her son-in-law, Kris, and her grandson Leo, who is not yet five months old and has just arrived from Washington, DC. Let's give them a round of applause.

I make this tribute wearing three hats: first, on behalf of former ADGs; second, as representing UNESCO's partners, especially the Commonwealth of Learning where she is our Focal Point; and, third, speaking for the global higher education community.

It was clear from her infancy that Stamenka was destined to walk the halls of UNESCO. Her father, Ambassador Uvalić, a most distinguished economist, academic and diplomat, bought Stamenka her first pair of shoes when he was attending UNESCO's 5th General Conference in Florence in 1950. Stamenka was one year old and those tiny shoes were a symbol of what she was destined to become.

Since then UNESCO's General Conferences have marked the milestones of Stamenka's life. She has attended no less than seventeen General Conferences in various capacities. I doubt there is anyone else in the House today who comes close to that record – which gives you some idea of the institutional memory that she encapsulates.

Those of you who study the history of UNESCO will know a book that Richard Hoggart, a former ADG for Culture, published in 1978. Called 'An Idea and its Servants: UNESCO From Within', it an excellent account of life at UNESCO. Although the 1970s were a particularly complex time, much of Hoggart's description remains true today.

He paid a warm tribute to that special group of his UNESCO colleagues who, despite the international politics, the individual rivalries and the often dysfunctional organisational processes, devoted themselves single-mindedly to advancing UNESCO's founding idea.

Colleagues and friends: Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić is one of those dedicated servants of the idea of UNESCO. This theme recurs in the tributes of all the former ADGs and senior colleagues who wrote to me.

Son ancien directeur, Francisco Komlavi Seddoh, dit : « Je garde un excellent souvenir de Stamenka et de son dévouement pour les idéaux de l'UNESCO. Elle a apporté une contribution exemplaire au développement de l'Enseignement supérieur. Elle ne doit pas oublier que l'Enseignement supérieur aura encore besoin d'elle ».

Colin Power, who preceded me as ADG, writes that: “Stamenka is truly a world citizen. In a world that is increasingly borderless, UNESCO and its Member States sorely need first-rate professionals like her to be credible with those leading higher education”. He too hopes that she will continue to be active, adding that “there is life after UNESCO”.

Colin also reminds us that Stamenka has not had an easy life. She was working as Secretary-General of the Association of Universities of Yugoslavia, a job that she enjoyed enormously, when, as the Berlin Wall came down and Europe came together, her own country of Yugoslavia came apart. Suddenly, Stamenka and Davor were no longer just two Yugoslavs but a Serb and a Croat.

She had already worked with UNESCO through Yugoslavia's National Commission so she applied to join the organisation and moved with Davor and their two children, Tea, then aged 10, and Damjan, aged 8, to CEPES, UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education, in Bucharest.

To quote Colin again as he recalls those days: “Stamenka and I go back a long way – for we lived through the dark years when life was tough for the staff at CEPES and especially those who came from the ex-Yugoslavia. But Stamenka was the ultimate professional, and I was delighted to be able to have her come to work with me in Paris. She triumphed in the face of adversity”.

Stamenka's triumphs included all of UNESCO's most significant achievements in higher education over her twenty years of service. Nick Burnett, who was ADG before Qian Tang, wrote to me that: “Her track record of results compares strongly with so many others' records of intentions only. She always managed to maintain the highest professional standards and pull off real achievements – like the OECD/UNESCO Guidelines and the 2009 World Conference – even when the surrounding circumstances would have daunted most people”.

Both Colin and Nick evoked her crucial role in the Sector as whole. Colin calls her ‘a tower of strength’ and Nick talks of her as the ‘calm, capable centre in a sea of activity’. Each ADG noted how much he enjoyed working with Stamenka to help her to achieve things.

I often saw my own role as ‘reassuring Stamenka’, a word that became a joke between us. She took the word ‘innovation’ in the name of her Section seriously, and seized on my casual comment that ‘new need not be bad’ to ease UNESCO out of its comfort zone. This meant working with the private sector, inviting

for-profit universities to meetings, poking the wasps' nest of university rankings and partnering with the OECD and the World Bank at a time when many UNESCO folk regarded both bodies with suspicion. I simply reassured her that it was alright.

In her turn, Stamenka has reassured many others. Governments are eager to provide her Section with extra-budgetary funds because they know they will be spent effectively. Partner organisations, including my own Commonwealth of Learning, want her involved in their joint projects with UNESCO because they know that she always delivers. Her Section colleagues like her – I would even say love her – because she works them hard but stands up for them resolutely and treats them like friends.

Colin Power referred to the outstanding leadership role that Stamenka has played internationally. Observing UNESCO from the outside, as I do now, I worry that that our Sector does not project itself strongly enough outside these walls. Stamenka's great strength is that she has combined consistent internal effectiveness with a tremendous presence in the global networks of higher education.

In her long association with UNESCO, as measured by her 17 General Conferences, she has become the admired and respected face of UNESCO Higher Education around the world. A recent high point of her work was the organisation of the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education. Later that year she was voted International Higher Education Professional of the Year by her peers across the globe. This was a signal honour to her personally and to UNESCO as a whole.

So, having paid tribute to her on behalf of her ADGs and in the name of UNESCO's partner institutions, I end by expressing the warm appreciation of the international higher education community for her tremendous contribution. Members of that community will compete with each other to keep her busy once she steps down from UNESCO.

Meanwhile, however, please join me in showing your appreciation for a dedicated professional, an inspiring manager and a truly lovely person.

Thank you, Stamenka!