

Mr. Rector, Dear Professors

Dear representatives of the local authorities,

Dear guests, dear students,

Thank you for the invitation and I am happy to be back here, as this is such an important place for me.

I rarely speak in public because I don't think that is my role. However, Babeş Bolyai University is a place where I have wanted to speak, an area of academic normality at European-level. This is a place where performance is desired, and academic performance is being achieved.

This is a model based on which the academic reputation of Romania can be improved. Congratulations, Professor David and the team around you.

I have always been afraid of the wooden language, of the institutional and celebratory discourse. Implicitly apologizing to the other guests, I would like to address the students first.

I will tell them some personal thoughts. These are the honest thoughts of someone who believes we are living a historic moment, a threshold of opportunity we haven't reached very often. I will try to briefly tell you who I am and how I see what is happening around us, through the lens of the experience of a UBB graduate.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I was born when the country was still called the Socialist Republic of Romania, in 1974. The events of 1989 caught me when I was 16 years old, which is about your age now. I was, during the communist period, a "hawk of the homeland" and a "pioneer" – your parents can tell you what that means. At that age, I used to live in a gray apartment block of a small town in northern Transylvania. The changes of December 1989 were exceptional moments, which I remember

well. I remember my dreams as a young man, I remember how I listened to the radio at night to hear the anti-communist news.

I remember the books I used to read, and that I was getting under the counter in order to understand the great Romanian literature, including the one banned by the dictatorship. I also remember the efforts made to get access to magazines, to music, to any form of freedom of thought. I remember all that time, I remember my teachers, my thoughts, my dreams of freedom.

I confess that what we were dreaming of back then was a different kind of freedom. While today, we have got much further than we hoped 30 years ago.

Here I am now, more than three decades later, in front of you, speaking freely from the position of director of the Romanian Intelligence Service. And I am in front of other people born not only in the Socialist Republic of Romania - as is the case of your teachers or your parents, but also in front of people born in a free country, in a European and democratic Romania.

And we are talking about the way the world looks today and, above all, about the way it will look tomorrow, when you will be directly responsible for the directions Romania will take.

With such a discussion, in such a moment, we are always turning back to our roots. Family education, school, life experience form and shape us, but often, we are so deeply anchored in the everyday life and in the routine that we forget to look at the bigger picture.

You are preparing to build your career and your life in a reality that you may have become accustomed to interpret through the eyes or the clichés of others. After all these years that have passed since I was in your place, I want to give you a perspective on reality that you may not have thought of. And I want to talk to you about freedom.

As I have already told you, I was 16 years old in December 1989, when the communist regime fell. That was a moment that may not mean so much to you, although it is the zero moment of democracy in Romania, the moment when everything became possible - including the fact that we are speaking freely today, and that we can hope endlessly.

Since then, a few stages have followed shaping the world we live in now. These are stages that can be divided into three decades. And I will go through them, very quickly, now, to better understand the present moment ...

First, it was the stage of freedom tainted by insecurity and mistrust. The 1990s - 2000s were like the first years of someone's life - full of naivety, uncertainties, big mistakes, but also strong emotions.

It was then that the foundations were laid for the search for freedom, for the road to Europe and democracy, the road to economic development. Then, it was also the start of some problems that are still haunting us today - the accusations against foreigners, the discourse "we are not selling our country", the messages against those who had lived or worked abroad.

Those were the years when we began to learn that we were not alone, and that we were no longer isolated. The relationship with the West and with the Americans in particular was paradoxically simple: we needed them, but we didn't trust them. We didn't trust them enough and they didn't trust us enough.

The second stage was that of the freedom to build. The decade that began in 2000 was under the sign of construction. That was when Romania's big projects took shape: joining NATO and the European Union, and that was when the young generations began to hope.

It was a decade that began under the sign of the possibility to dream. This optimism and the transformations forced by the two goals were the reason why many young people stopped thinking about leaving the country, instead they stayed here to build something sustainable. I am one of them. Throughout these years, Romania has learned to trust the West more, and the West began to trust us more.

The third stage was that of freedom in the process of coming of age. Between 2010 and 2020, as a society, we have sought to soften shocks, to adapt illusions to realities, to mix pure enthusiasm with calculated projections.

In other words, we have tried to grow up. We went from "alone against everyone" to joint projects with partners from Europe and the USA. We began to be their equal. And we achieved good results in many areas.

For example, the University that is hosting us today has become more and more connected with the most important universities in the world. Teacher or student exchange programs, access to scholarships, access to research results – allow Babeş-Bolyai University to be, at present, a research pillar not only for Transylvania or Romania, but also for the entire Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are now in the fourth stage, which unfortunately has begun and continues with several shocks – it began with the 2020 pandemic shock and continued with another shock that we would not think likely in our lifetime – a war waged in our proximity. Then, as an effect of these shocks, came the risk of an economic crisis which represents a threat to the quality of life of many Romanians.

But it is a stage that entails more maturity, more wisdom and it will help us grow even faster. It is a stage where we will need a new major project to ensure prosperity and development.

How do we define this stage? How do we build this new project?

It's up to us – but even more so it's up to you to achieve that...

I would like to think that this will be the stage of freedom and balance. Why? Because we have capitalized on the previous stages, we have gained enthusiasm, and building experience, and recovery experience, and we can build whatever we set our minds to. But we will be guided by the values defining us and in which we believe.

During these three decades, we have tried to recover almost 6 decades of pause and historical regression. We skipped stages, we invested energy.

I think that, basically, in reality, we recovered the lost time, in three decades we lived as much as others live in three generations and we did in three decades as much as others do in three generations. We have added up experiences that our Western partners appreciate – because many of them do not have them directly. The experience of a democratic transition, for example, which they know from books, but many of us know from practice. And this experience is necessary in many countries around us.

We should be modest and understand that such things do not happen very often. This was, from my point of view, a quantum leap that Romania made in the last 30 years. A leap that, today, it

allows us to enjoy opportunities that no one dreamed of in 1989. A leap that can give us energy for new opportunities generated by you.

I know this optimistic outlook is the exact opposite of how we are used to seeing immediate reality.

It is different from the universal criticism and perpetual self-criticism that seem to define the domestic public discourse about Romania at present. But the general picture, which I invite you to think of carefully before becoming critics yourselves, shows us that Romania is a stable country, with social peace and a lot of economic prosperity, a country where many young people from other areas of the world wish they could live in.

We are not yet functioning as well as the old democracies of Europe, but we are getting close to them. There is room for building, for improving, for getting to the next level.

It helped me a lot to look at Romania also from the perspective of foreigners with whom I talked both during the years when I represented the country as a member of the European Parliament, and especially during these 8 years as director of the SRI.

And Romania, from the perspective of foreign officials or analysts, has 3 great advantages – stability, opportunities and dynamism. The dynamism belongs to the people, the Romanians who create, work, and invent solutions where there are no open paths. The dynamism is yours, the ones who have the power to transform this reality as you will, to a greater extent than all generations before you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know, it's hard to focus on what is working because there is an automatism to always cling to what is stuck or imperfect. Good things, most often, are scarcely visible. Good news doesn't make good ratings. And positive messages can seem boring. We get used to only noticing what doesn't work or what we feel is wrong, and we forget to notice what works.

I am speaking now also from the position of director of the Romanian Intelligence Service, an institution that, in recent years, has performed well, has been reformed and modernized, and has results that national and foreign institutional partners appreciate. But here, in the country, it is difficult to talk about the progress made by an institution still perceived by some as the heir of the Securitate.

And rightly so, it is hard to believe that we have escaped the ghosts of the past especially when our public life is still dominated by them.

Even now, I fear you will label what I am saying as hypocrisy. But I want to use this example, which is very close to me, to illustrate the above mentioned plea for an honest interpretation of reality.

I also want to talk about SRI, about our values and achievements, because this institution is a good example of slow but decisive transformation, of gradual but sustainable modernization, of overcoming a development threshold beyond which we no longer talk about improvisation and logjam in practices of the past, but of innovation and high-level performance.

You may see it as a symbolic illustration of Romania's transformation as a whole. Which we often do not understand as it is, because we are used to perceiving it in a paradigm of absolute disaster.

And if reform could be done in such a complex institution, with such historical background, I am optimistic to say that it can be done in other places as well.

Of course, SRI has also made mistakes. A lot of them, during the recent 32 years. To amend the mistakes is a complicated process that needs time, expertise and great effort. A manager's mistake affects an entire department and, frequently, most of the people in that department are honest. To change people's opinions about a secret service is even more complicated. We are trying to do it gradually, but it is still not enough.

Some of those mistakes, made before my tenure, were major and my critics will definitely find plenty of them during my tenure as well. I sincerely apologize for them – for all of them, including for those made before I came here.

But I am permanently led by the will to build, not to destroy. I am aware of the sins that the institution is being accused of, some of them real, others unfairly attributed to us.

I am also aware of the problems generated by some SRI ex-employees, either positioned behind various kinds of people, or gravitating around state-owned companies. I can tell you that we are aware of those problems and that we are going to do our best to solve them. However, the great gain of this tenure is the separation from politics, which is absolutely normal in a democratic society. Politics and the intelligence gathering activity should not overlap. Too many times, nonetheless, past mistakes also affect the behavior of people nowadays. Too many politicians, in previous decades, got used to receiving "indications" or "suggestions" as to what they had to do.

Politicians are elected by people to think with their minds, invested with their confidence to make decisions on how Romania will look like in the future, not only to put out the fires of the

present and to implement the plans designed by others. Nevertheless, too many want others to make decisions for them, too many even expect to receive suggestions from the services.

We will only strengthen democracy when we prompt each institution to assume its own mandate, without abuses and without excesses.

I know that there is a lot of mistrust in the society with regard to the number of "covert agents" and their agenda in various strategic fields.

I can assure you that since the beginning of my tenure, their activity has been carried out strictly according to the law. I know there is legitimate concern regarding the situation of the PhD and Masters diplomas endorsed by us.

In this respect, we have certainly succeeded in having a major reform and I hope that others will consider the measures taken during these years as a best practice guide.

We audited and reformed the entire doctoral school, we removed what was not working and, today, the National Intelligence Academy is a better and a more honorable place.

Personally, I also encouraged the organization of courses on totalitarianism so that our officers can learn, from the beginning, what the horrors of the abuses were during the communist dictatorship. Last but not least, I stimulated the institution to organize new courses that would allow students to access the most modern technologies.

I know that the ghost of the Securitate is still associated to our image, as it has come back many times in the Romanian public space during those decades. But here too I did things that I am happy with. During my tenure, we handed over the entire Securitate archive to CNSAS. And we are the only Romanian secret service that did this.

We should have done it sooner, but I am still very glad that my colleagues and I took it upon ourselves and did this absolutely necessary thing.

The declassification process will continue, including by providing investigators declassified information on events that also took place after 1989. Healing the past can only be possible by stating the truth.

Of course, errors can be sometimes made. And I also know that there will be new intense discussion about the new national security legislation. And at this moment I reiterate my previous statements. We want up-to-date legislation, but we want this legislation to be more like the ones in the Western countries. And since we are here, it would be preferable for the Romanian society and the political decision makers to determine the function they want to

assign to the intelligence services. We cannot be both some kind of firefighters that are called to put out the fires generated by others and be at the same time accused of putting them out. This is in fact the elephant in the room and this conversation cannot be indefinitely avoided.

The SRI personnel are still referred to as Securitate staff.

And this is completely unfair. But those who are working today in this institution deserve to be referred to in correct terms. Most of them are young, being 30-40 years old, and they learnt about the former Securitate from books and archives.

There was a recent article in the media about the putting up, in a cemetery in Pitești, of a wayside cross dedicated to all-time intelligence officers. The author of this enterprise, as well as the young people who took part in the inauguration ceremony have definitely not heard about the Pitești experiment, about the horrid things the former Securitate committed in the fifties and I think this has been a mistake. Heroes must be looked for anywhere else but with the totalitarian regime in the past. With all due respect, SRI is an institution that honors its heroes who sacrificed themselves for the foundation of the democratic state, and only them.

Today there are a lot of extraordinary people in SRI. They deserve to be encouraged and appreciated, because their daily activity is difficult and important.

These are people that would earn much more by doing less elsewhere, but they work in this institution without being known, without a public presentation of their successes, people who are animated by honesty, honor, patriotism, duty and loyalty.

These are big and pompous words, but I think we need to get used to naturally own them again, because these are values we need to guide our future.

And thus, we are back to the discussion about values and about the projection of the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Romania's future comes with opportunities and risks. And the most important risks come from polarization and involuntary blockage in the past. These are difficult times, but we are not alone in this situation.

The Western democratic countries also face the same crises and we will find the solutions together. We strongly need to rebuild trust among those people who honestly want Romania to function as well as the most successful Western democracies.

We are more and more polarized, and polarization, as well as extremism and populism, represents a great risk. Polarization is used by those who want Romania to be corrupt and unstable. During hard times there is always a great temptation to use extreme solutions. Quick vetting, easy explanations, needless spectacle are part of the arsenal used by those who search to destabilize a society that still has no trust in itself. The antidote is the focus on work, building, results and permanent appeal to values. Thus, balance becomes the antidote to extremism.

One of the challenges of the present times refers to the identity theme. About who we are, as people, as well as nation, and about how proud we are of our identity. I don't want to preach to you and please consider the following sentences as thoughts that a political sciences graduate conveys to you. You are already growing in a society where a false thesis is built, the thesis regarding an artificial dispute between national and European or global identities. Our national identity, as well as the affiliation to an open, tolerant and global rights preoccupied society are reasons to be proud of.

Because both distinguish us from the societies where free elections, equality before the law, economic freedom or freedom of movement – which we consider natural - are not possible.

In this world, nationalism shouldn't be only the privilege of extreme speeches or approaches, but also a kind of instinct for those with democratic, liberal thinking who experience today the wrong tendency to move away from subjects as patriotism or traditions.

In today's world nationalism should not be just a speech or an extremist approach, but rather sort of an instinct of the people with a liberal democratic thinking who wrongly tend to distance themselves from topics such as patriotism and traditions. And, according to modern liberal thinkers¹, we should not do that

The privileges citizens have gained in the last centuries, as part of the social contract, are a reason to be proud of, but they are not to be taken for granted. They are not present in every part of the world, these privileges emerged in the societies shaped by tolerance, openness to difference, equality in front of the law, and limitation of the privileges pertaining to the most powerful.

This is why I believe that the support for democracy can co-exist with the attachment to traditional values, religion, and national identity. We are living in a community that has been struggling hard for centuries for the right to have its own country, its own language, borders

¹ In his book, *Liberalism and its discontents*, published in 2022, Fukuyama analyses the crisis of moderate liberal thinking, under the siege of extremism represented both by the conservative populists (the Right) and by the extremist progressionists (the Left). An interesting idea he promotes tackles the liberal thinkers' assuming nationalism. This is how we define the next paragraph...

and a flag. Moreover, by choice we are part of the strongest democratic family in the world and we are a pillar of the strongest strategic alliance ever in the course of history. We managed to keep up with the rapid rhythm imposed by developed countries in overcoming discriminations that are still present in some places.

Based on our open economy and liberal society, we are now an engine fueling growth, ensuring prosperity at a scale that has never been attained in the past 30 years; we are able to access new technologies and we are part of a world of culture and arts with a brand we can be proud of.

All the good things we desire, including those for which many of us migrate to Western Europe, exist due to the fact that the liberal democracies allow everybody to be successful, every person who wants to succeed, who works for this purpose and who obeys the rules. Unfortunately, as we are not yet at the end of history as Fukuyama was picturing the world 30 years ago, in terms of dominance of democracy and freedom, not all the countries are like this. Outside the Western family of states, there are way too many dictatorships, totalitarian regimes, marked by the lack of rights, by a ban to access technology, culture and development.

Liberal democratic societies have always been bruised by internal tensions. And sometimes democracy may seem chaotic, unordered, without a future. Still democracy is the framework that nurtures liberty and projects for a future that no other liberal society can sustain.

All the elements that allowed us to emerge in the last 30 years as a liberal, pro-Western, democratic society with a growing economy, all these are linked to our national identity. Therefore I don't think that national pride and the universal democratic principles can be separated in a blunt way. Based on these principles the European societies have become the development standard desired by millions of migrants. And cultivating national pride should not be left aside as a topic for extremists or populists.

I personally believe that a balanced moderate nationalism should be reassumed, redefined and re-nurtured by those with a democratic and balanced thinking in Western Europe and in the Romania of the future.

As open and educated people, you are the ones who can define a new sentiment of pride, a pro-Western patriotism, pertaining to the Romanian citizen connected to the European democratic values and global aspirations. Moreover, by personal involvement and participation, you can push the others, the institutions, and the entire society towards making happen all the things you believe in.

The most difficult thing is never to give up on your ideas and on the values you believe in and always fight for them.

Unfortunately, I witnessed many college friends who, for the sake of gaining power, gave up on the generous ideas we were supporting as students. This path should be avoided! Real politics is about supporting values and principles, rather than about gaining power.

You, nowadays student generations, are able to define the shape and meaning of the future decades of our country's development. You shall do that while living in a society where you have more options than people had 30 years ago, a more connected, free, prosperous, balanced society. I hope you will shape Romania with optimism and believing in your country and in yourselves.

There is an old saying of the Germans in Transylvania I used to hear a lot in my childhood and that I like to bring into my public speeches: The first generation must fight, the second must work and only the third generation will be able to eat.

I would hear this quite often when I was being told why I had to work and fight. I was also told that there would be a generation who would get to eat, but not mine.

I believe that, in the course of the Romanian history, you are the generation that could reap the rewards of these decades of efforts and accumulations.

You are the citizens with a Romanian, European and global identity altogether. Use this power wisely.

Thank you for the invitation and good luck too you all!