

Opening address

Ambassador Jan Kára, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic to the United Nations in Geneva

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the organizers, and prof. Dušan Drbohlav in particular, for enabling me, for a short while, to return to my home turf... It is a great honor for me to be here.

As geographer at this Faculty in my previous career (previous „life“), I may have helped to introduce the study of international migration within Czech geography. And as diplomat since more than 20 year, now the Head of Czech Mission in Geneva, I am exposed to the issue of migration and refugees on daily basis. Because migration is one of the most „defining“ phenomenon of contemporary world.

So I take it that my role at this conference might be to connect a little bit the realm of academic study of migration and the reflection of migration in global diplomacy and politics.

But let me first return briefly to my geographic years. Czech geography was traditionally preoccupied with internal migration, in the context of urbanization or demography. There was not much of international migration behind the Iron Curtain anyway; and if it was, it was rather one-way – like the „political“ emigration after August 1968. The study of which would be politically highly incorrect.

When we were starting in all modesty some 30 years ago, I felt migration is an issue, but it was not until very recently that I realized how super-complex issue it is. It is as complex as life. It connects and separates, it brings hope and despair, and it supports development but can also cause social and political turbulences, or feed conflicts. It changes countries of origin, transit and destination. Infinite combination of push and pull factors. And a diverse range of emotions and perceptions.

For researchers and academicians a fascinating topic. For politicians and others a major challenge.

In Geneva, the prevailing perception of migration and refugees is led by institutions like IOM, Red Cross, UNHCR or OHCHR – and is primarily humanitarian. Geneva is not preoccupied with definitions. Geneva sees the people in need – be they migrants, refugees or other people on move. Geneva seems to underestimate the transformative power of large scale movements of people.

And this is at odds with other perceptions. Unfortunately, at least in today's Europe, migration is too often linked with anxiety and fear; it gained negative connotation and as such serves as a political tool for all kind of populists. It has become a synonym of a „problem“. We often ask ourselves: Can we stop migration? Can we stop refugee flows? And how? Personally, and as a geographer, I do not think this is the right question. Migration has been here since ever.

A more appropriate question (at least for this conference) could be: How much of „development“ is needed to get the migration right? „Development“ in a sense of overcoming inequalities.

Last year's migration-refugee crisis was an awakening moment, and the world seems to have realized the scope of the challenge. We see a new boost of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, now led by Bangladesh (my friend Ambassador Ahsan of Bangladesh will join this conference on Saturday), we see energizing of the IOM, whose Council meets in Geneva just today to approve strengthening its ties with the UN system; and ultimately energizing the very United Nations – which is organizing Summit on Migration and Refugees this September in New York....

But it is equally important to get the narrative of migration more balanced – which, in my view, means stripping migration of most of the negative connotations. It is a daunting task, but you can perhaps do your part on it during this conference

I wish you most successful deliberations....