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Interview with Michal Broža, head of the UN Information Centre in the Czech Republic

Mr. Broža, you have been working at the United Nations in various positions since 1995. What brought you to work at the UN? Do you remember when you decided on it? And what topic did you deal with after joining the UN?

It was a coincidence of many different circumstances. I studied information science and political science at Charles University, and at the University of Amsterdam I studied a wider range of social sciences, including international relations. I had travelled to foreign countries and learned about various cultures. At the time the offer came, there was war in the former Yugoslavia, and the UN was being discussed a lot in Europe in relation to that – for better or for worse. I found working for the global system a great challenge. The opportunity presented itself – it wasn't a dream job, but it seemed cool given my interests and experience. Big, global, beneficial, and controversial at the same time. From the very beginning, my task was to find ways to communicate complex topics connected with a global organization; in that first phase it was mainly the aforementioned war in Yugoslavia.

You worked in a number of foreign missions. Is there anything that surprised you that sticks out the most from these missions?

Missions are a specific job. Often in difficult, sometimes extreme conditions, far from everything. From one's own way of life, from family, friends, culture. UN missions are mainly about helping the civilian population in extreme economic, social, and political situations. You can't avoid feeling like a real missionary doing good and saving the world. The sooner this feeling is gone, the better

for everyone, including you. It is a professional job that requires not only practical or technical skills, but also the ability to empathize and show solidarity with those you help and those you work with. And these are people literally from all over the world. You must have the ability to adapt and be resilient enough. This is the only way to do your best and contribute, at least in a small way, to the stabilization of countries affected by war or some other disaster. What struck me the most was how many fantastic people you get to meet doing this kind of work. Both among local residents and among collaborators from the UN and international non-governmental organizations.

Within the UN, you specialize in the issue of global risk communication, which undoubtedly includes the protection of water and water resources. Can you assess where this communication has moved during your tenure at the UN?

Water is one of the three main things necessary for survival. Its meaning is obvious to everyone. In rich countries, we have become accustomed to the fact that the availability of quality water is not a problem. But it is a problem for 800 million people and almost 2 billion people use water from unsafe sources. The water problem has worsened dramatically in recent years due to the climate crisis. If we fail to prevent warming above 1.5 degrees, so-called water stress will affect us all. Somewhere and sometimes it will be too little water, other times and in other places too much. Flooding, increased ocean levels. Ten per cent of the world's population lives in low-lying coastal areas. If the current trend continues, they will have to find new homes. Some places on Earth will become uninhabitable due to temperature, but also due to the unavailability

of water. Water must be a reason for greater cooperation between countries, but we often see the opposite. This means that the issue of water also has a strong security aspect. The situation of the water ecosystem is also critical. In the last 300 years, 85 per cent of the world's wetlands have disappeared.

At the 34th UN-Water Meeting, member countries agreed that the theme for World Water Day 2023 would be "Accelerating change through partnerships and cooperation". What do you personally expect from this theme, and how can the discussion about it further advance the global perception of water protection and water resources?

It follows from the development of recent decades that in a connected world, it is impossible to exist without global cooperation. However, the reality is different. Covid has shown that countries tend to deal with common problems either individually, or bilaterally, or in coordination with allied countries. However, it is no longer sufficient for the problems of the 21st century. Russia's war with Ukraine or the long-term increase in tensions between the two main powers – the US and China – reinforces the risk of geopolitical confrontation. The world needs more cooperation and coordination and stronger global institutions. Certainly the UN, more powerful and in line with the current world. Therefore, we need to improve, deepen and expand cooperation, including water protection and management. Cooperation is the key word for the 21st century.

One of the main topics of today is the SARS-CoV-2 and the epidemiological situation. During discussions at the UN level, have you noticed an increased interest in the topic of wastewater monitoring as a medium for estimating the development of epidemiological situations?

Covid, but also the climate crisis and the growth of global population is related to an increase in the risk of threats to global health. And this is also connected with the topic of wastewater. Wastewater cannot be viewed as waste, but as a resource. Again, we are literally condemned to work together to actually solve common problems. The development of cooperation in the field of wastewater, hygiene, and sanitation is key. After all, 3.6 billion people in the world either live without a toilet or use toilets that are not connected to a safe sewage system. This is a huge problem for human health and the environment.

Another topic is the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In this context, much is also written about environmental damage. Is it possible to describe to what extent the UN is currently involved in the issue of the environment, i.e. the protection of water and water resources in this conflict?

This is a huge topic for a separate interview. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) released the first report mapping the environmental problems related to the war last autumn. This is a preliminary summary for now and work on the evaluation and solution plan continues. Due to the war, Ukraine is facing many simultaneous environmental crises, whether it is the issue of chemicals, ammunition and military equipment, pollutants, damage to infrastructure, including water management, energy and waste systems, but also, for example, fuel storage. Just assessing all the damage will be a huge task; as well as developing recovery plans. I must add that the obligation to protect the environment in times of armed conflict is reflected in international law, including the UN Charter or the Geneva Conventions, and it is desirable that justice be achieved in this area.

It is well-known that you are involved in educational activities at the school level. You are a long-term partner and supporter of the "Success for every pupil" conference, which includes, among other things, the topic

"Children as co-creators of the future". Do you see a shift in the development of the topic of environmental protection at the level of secondary and primary schools? Namely, what, from your point of view, would be appropriate to change in the school curriculum in the field of environmental protection?

The shift is significant in terms of both quality and quantity. In particular, there has been a boom in climate change education. New books are being published (a new one on climate solutions is to be printed soon, I am looking forward to it), programmes and methodologies are being created, there are a number of active teachers (including the "Teachers for the Climate" initiative), many schools have taken up the topic very actively. But are we already where we should be? Far from it. Climate must rise to the top of the political agenda before we can see the desired impact on climate education.

Please tell us what you are currently working on and what awaits you in 2023.

Our priorities for this year will remain similar to last year. Ending the war in Ukraine, including the protection of refugees from Ukraine, but also other conflicts in the world, climate change – in March we will hold a press conference with our Czech partners to publish the final synthesis of the 6th IPCC assessment report – biodiversity protection. Furthermore, the equality of women and men, the issue of violence against women and girls, human rights protection – this year we will commemorate the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Sustainable Development Goals and many other topics. The never-ending war in Syria, the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Within the Czech Republic, we will continue to maintain and deepen cooperation primarily with schools and non-governmental organizations, but also with other institutions and enterprises of the state and private sector.

For all of them, I will mention one project that makes me very happy. At the end of this year, together with the Learned Society of the Czech Republic, we will award the Climate Change Communication Award for the fifth time. It is intended for scientists and experts for their educational activities. It is our small contribution to strengthening climate action, to bridging differences of opinion and to supporting the culture of critical discussion within various scientific fields in the Czech Republic.

Thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

Ing. Josef Nistler

Michal Broža

Michal Broža was born on 13 May 1965 in Sušice. He graduated from Charles University in Prague and also studied at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Since 1995, he has worked at the UN in various positions. Since 2004, he has been the head of the UN Information Centre in Prague. He participated in missions in Africa and working stays in the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East. He also worked as a World Bank consultant and researcher in the private sector. He specializes in UN issues, communication of global risks and megatrends. He is the author and co-author of publications and articles related to these areas, and he also gives lectures.

