

Martin Bútora
Founder and Honorary President
Institute for Public Affairs

Bratislava, November 17, 2021

Mr. Kenneth J. Bombara
Vice Chairman
Friends of Slovakia
Washington, D.C.

Dear Ken:

It gives me great pleasure to send you my heartfelt congratulations as you gather to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the founding of Friends of Slovakia. Zora joins me in extending our warmest greetings to all FOS board members past and present, along with our sincere hope that FOS continue its important work for many years to come.

I remember well the meetings we convened back in 2000-2001 to plan the creation of an independent, nonprofit organization that would promote friendship, cooperation, and mutual understanding between Slovakia and the United States. I will never forget the enthusiastic efforts of Ambassador Ted Russell, the founding chairman of FOS, to turn this idea into reality. And I express deep gratitude to our all dear American friends who have invested not only their time and experience, but also their hearts into this noble endeavor.

The Slovak Republic at that time had less than ten years of existence as an independent country and was working to consolidate the democratic reforms that followed the decisive elections of 1998. The country itself was not well known back then, even in professional circles in Washington, D.C.

Even as my staff and I worked tirelessly to prepare the grand opening of our beautiful new Chancery in June 2001, we never lost sight of Slovakia's most important foreign-policy

objective of the day: securing an invitation to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the second wave of enlargement.

Working independently or in close cooperation with the Embassy, Friends of Slovakia organized numerous conferences, seminars, dinners, and meetings that brought together policy makers, elected officials, business leaders, academic experts, and so many others from our two countries for fruitful discussions of a wide range of topics. And yes, thanks to the hard work of Friends of Slovakia and numerous other Slovak-American fraternal and cultural organizations, the Slovak Republic became a member of the Atlantic Alliance in 2004. Shortly thereafter we were also pleased to raise the flag of the European Union over the embassy building in Washington, D.C.

But your good work extended far beyond politics. Over the years FOS has organized countless lectures, book presentations, musical performances, art exhibitions, and much more. By so doing you have helped bring the riches of Slovak culture to so many Americans in Washington and beyond.

In calling to mind these many accomplishments of the past 20 years, I do not mean to suggest that your work is done. History moves on, so that even as some issues are resolved, new challenges arise. From my vantage point in Europe, one of the biggest challenges we face is protecting our democracies both from internal and external threats.

Democratic norms do not endure without careful and continuous cultivation. It is sobering to think that many of today's college students were not even born when I served as ambassador in Washington. That is why I am especially pleased to know that one of the signature projects of Friends of Slovakia today is your series of international student summits focusing on key challenges to democracy, such as disinformation, freedom of the press, and the rule of law.

I wish you continued success not only in working with our young citizens but in all that you do, and I look forward to the next 20 years of Friends of Slovakia.

With very best wishes,
Martin Bútora

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Republic to the United States of America, 1999-2003