



President's Letter

16 September 2016

Dear Friends and Colleagues,



It gives me great pleasure to extend my gratitude, appreciation, and admiration to our outgoing President Petr Hausner. I know he poured his many talents and energy into the challenging task of steering the SVU. As a result of his initiatives and endeavors, the organization has grown and found new vibrancy during his tenure. I am sure I speak on behalf of all your friends and admirers, Petr, when I say — Thank you!

I confess that I trembled as I came to terms with the realization that it was now my turn to step into the breach. But I knew that I would be able to rely on your help, your ideas, and your generosity. After all, we are bound together by our love of the Czech and Slovak cultures, and our commitment to understanding their history, politics, and language.

No one possesses a magic wand for solving all of the challenges the SVU faces in our fast evolving political, cultural, and technological environment. Cognizant of this, our objectives should be realistic and practical because we must be focused on deeds, not abstractions. It might be helpful for us to start by asking a simple question — what do we want for the SVU? Let me volunteer and take the lead by putting forward the following four points:

One. I would like the SVU to be a challenging but also joyful and informal intellectual forum, a social space for those who treasure Slovak and Czech cultures. Anyone interested in the language, politics, and history of the region is welcome.

Two. The SVU should make it possible for people to meet like-minded people. Medical doctors profit enormously when properly guided by others who have already established themselves here. The same is true for young academics hoping to reach tenure, inventors seeking investors, artists applying for grants, parents looking for language courses or reliable child-care. In short, networking is crucially important for any new arrival, and the SVU can enable profitable interactions among its members without much difficulty.

Three. In my view, the organization works best on the local level. I've spoken before the New York and Washington branches of the SVU, and each of those visits was memorable for the high standard of the intellectual discourse and friendly atmosphere. We don't need top-heavy centralized and distant "government". What we need are events that bring us together and enrich us. That's best achieved on the local level. Anything could serve as an excuse for getting together: an interesting person passing through the area, a new film or book, any of the countless Slovak and Czech national anniversaries.

Four. The SVU must be, of course, an inclusive and strictly non-partisan organization. However, neither the SVU nor we live outside the world of politics. One of the main reasons why the organization came into existence in 1958 was that its founders had discovered that the totalitarian regime that had seized power in Prague a decade before was there to stay. This meant that the SVU was not only an organization for cultural and scholarly endeavors; it was also a political platform that allowed our predecessors to behave as responsible citizens. In light of this, I would argue that the SVU should—when appropriate—publicly reaffirm its founders' enduring belief that their old country belonged among Western democracies, and nowhere else.

Dear fellow SVU members, please share with me your views regarding the central challenge: In what direction should the organization evolve? How can it defend the value of human *conversazione* in the world of Facebook and Twitter? How can it maintain its relevance in the eyes of new generations? I'm looking forward to your input. Please write to my email listed below.

Cordially,

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SVU Website