

The Beauty and the Beast Paradigm: Is it good or bad to be competitive? An Interview with Professor Márta Fülöp

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Paradigma “Lepotica in zver”: Je tekmovalnost dobra ali slaba? Intervju s profesorico Márto Fülöp

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Prof. Márta Fülöp, Ph.D., is a social and cross-cultural psychologist. She is a scientific consultant and head of the research group Social and Cultural Psychology at the Institute for Cognitive Neuroscience and Psychology, Research Centre of Natural Sciences. She is also a professor of Social Psychology and head of the research group Social Interaction: Competition and Cooperation at the Institute of Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology and Education, Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary.

Prof. Fülöp currently serves as a Secretary of the International Affairs at the Hungarian Psychological Association and as the Secretary General of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology. She is also the chief editor of the journal *Hungarian Psychological Review*, published by the Hungarian Psychological Association. She received many national awards for her outstanding work as a psychologist. In 2018 she was awarded the Ranschburg Pál Plaque of the Hungarian Psychological Association for her outstanding contribution to scientific research. She is also a recipient of numerous research grants and fellowships as well as visiting professorships, including a Lindzey Fellow fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study

in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, USA (1997–1998), a fellowship of the Japan Foundation (1996–1997) and a visiting professorship in Kansai University, Osaka, Japan in 2004. Between 2013 and 2019, she has been appointed Visiting Professor at the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) Summer School in Beijing, China.

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Her main research interest is psychology of competition. She studied the components of constructive and destructive processes of competition, cooperative competition, cultural construction of competition and attitudes towards competition between different generations in a post-socialist transitional context. She conducted extensive research in Japan and China and established a high-quality collaboration with researchers in the field of competition around the world. In the late 2000s, she conducted an in-depth comparative study of cooperation and competition in England, Hungary and Slovenia entitled “Teachers’ professional and personal discourses in the areas of competition and cooperation” in collaboration with Dr. Marjanca Pergar Kuščar and Dr. Cveta Razdevšek Pučko from the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education. Based on that collaboration and my close relation with both colleagues mentioned above, I was honoured to have recently started a prospective research collaboration with Prof. Fülöp on competitive profiles of outstanding adolescent competitors. This gave me the opportunity to get a closer look at her valuable research as well as to get to know her as a friendly, open-minded, critical, hardworking, devoted to her research area, and highly creative colleague who is happy to share her knowledge and experiences and to pursue them further collaboratively.

At the 15th European Congress of Psychology in Moscow (ECP, July 2019) she delivered a keynote lecture entitled “Patterns of Competitiveness - What kind of competitors are we and what are the potential implications in our life?” This occasion motivated the decision to conduct the interview.

The interview is divided into three main parts. It begins with the introduction of Prof. Márta Fülöp and with the description and classification of psychology in competition in the context of general psychology. The second part discusses Prof. Fülöp’s research results, looking at the structure and dynamics of competition and at coping with winning and losing. The conversation is concluded by discussing the application of psychology of competition in education, psychological research, and practice in general.

Professor Fülöp, congratulations again on your ECP keynote address in Moscow. All in all, it was an impressive odyssey of empirical findings on competitiveness from your extensive research in the last three decades. Indeed, you presented many important scientific findings in the presentation. Which one do you personally value the most?

Well, it is hard to name only one or which one the most. I could probably name four different main research ... let’s say, areas. The first one is the reconceptualization of the relationship between competition and cooperation. In contrast to the existing conceptualization, which considered these two phenomena dichotomic and being extremes on one dimension and, in this respect, competition as a unidimensional concept, I elaborated on the multidimensional nature of competition and described the components of constructive and destructive competition and the conditions of the so called cooperative competition. The second is the cross-cultural research on competition, an understanding from a cultural psychological

perspective that competition is not one phenomenon but it is culturally constructed, meaning that different cultures understand it in different ways, and this has significance for how competition manifests itself in everyday human relationships, situations in workplace or in school, or in the family. The third research area is related to the fact that I come from a post-socialist country and, competition being a key concept of the political changes, I carried out research on how different generations perceive the role of competition in Hungary and how this perception differs from the perception of those who were not brought up in such transitional societies. The fourth area, which does not mean that it is fourth in significance on my priority list, is what I presented in Moscow, that is, how competition relates to our psychological and mental health. These four research lines are very important to me because in all of them I somehow manage to question prevalent views on competition. Namely, the view that competition is more of a negative and destructive element in our human functioning rather than healthy, constructive, and contributing to our development. Of course, competition can be both. Those who hold negative views are not wrong, they just do not see the other side. Without a balanced picture, I am sure the destructive versions of competitions cannot be prevented. If we do not see what the conditions of the constructive competition are and what we need to have or what we need to do in order to make it constructive, it is hard to prevent the destructive manifestations.

How do you see the developmental variables of competition in this respect? Are they less or more important than societal ones?

I believe that the developmental issue is very interesting as well. If you ask whether I value the cross-cultural perspective more than the developmental one, then yes, I do, one way or another. I’ll tell you why. Because the cross-cultural research made me understand much better the different levels and different constituents of competitive processes by looking at other cultures and what they contribute to the phenomenon of competition. It gave me a more theoretical and wider understanding. When I look at different age groups, for instance, there is very, very little research on old age and competition. This research interest is almost non-existent. You may remember that in my talk in Moscow I showed the brand new Cambridge Handbook on Successful Aging. It was edited by a very well-known and highly respected Spanish researcher of old age, Prof. *Rocío Fernández-Ballesteros*. She is a kind of queen of old age psychological research, but if you look at this almost 650-page handbook, you will not find even a word about competition in relation to old age.

I very much value developmental research on competition as well, especially because it provides understanding of how competitiveness changes over the life-course, but so far it did not bring a new theoretical understanding about competition. For example, with my study on competition in old-age, I opened an almost unknown territory, because the existing notion was that competition is not really present in old age, it does not have significance. However, my research on competition brought new understanding about how

competition functions in old age and what are the differences and similarities to other age groups. In addition, it explained what can be benign in competition in old age and what can be a kind of its risk in old age. So, the developmental aspects give further knowledge about different age groups and how competitiveness changes, for example, by age – still, they do not suggest new theories or broader theoretical understanding of the phenomenon.

I see, thank you. Therefore, you went much broader with this approach ... Actually, today you are among the leading experts worldwide in the psychology of competition. Would you please explain to the readers of *Horizons of Psychology* why did you become interested in this field of psychological science?

First, I was very much interested in human functioning all my life. At the beginning, the focus was more on biological functioning and I was very much attracted to medicine and medical sciences, especially to understanding what went wrong, and understanding complex processes that contribute to an illness and how you can treat it. Then my interest turned towards psychological functioning. As we are all social and psychological beings, the same focus appeared again: understanding what motivates people and how can different kinds of behaviours be explained. Specifically, if one understands those motivations and behaviours, one can predict people's behaviour or actions in the future, and if something goes wrong in the system, then you have the chance to repair it. At the beginning of my studies, therefore, I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. I hold a clinical psychology degree and a degree in psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy. As I was mostly interested in clinical work and looking for motives behind people's behaviour, I noticed that, in many cases, the motive in social relationships is competition. People want to be better than others and/or they do not want to be worse. There are envy and jealousy that are competitive emotions. People compare themselves to others and these comparisons can be benign or they can be malicious. I first wanted to understand when the motivation of competition is the main source of a behaviour, and second, I wanted to understand why it often goes wrong and why competitive elements destroy human relationships. In what cases can competition be beneficial for both actors that compete with each other? How can one keep all of the positive sides of competition without the danger of potential negative processes? Competition is a phenomenon that people often do not speak honestly about. That is to say, very few people speak explicitly about their intention to overcome others in their environment. This is a kind of a very personal inside motivation and it is not that easy to detect, but it frequently guides our behaviour and can contribute to numerous positive and negative outcomes. This internal and ongoing process is always there. It develops throughout our lives from early childhood to old age, because we are social beings and are always surrounded by others, e.g., peers and non-peers, colleagues, classmates, and many others ... To understand how competition operates, what its rules are, what guides it, what its consequences are, and how one can influence it ... this is what interested me.

You have developed a research problem, your niche in the topic of competition with an analytical step-by-step approach, right? Could you, please, tell us who or what encouraged you most in your research so that you were able to persevere all these years despite the conflicting opinions about the usefulness of competition research? On whom do you rely for this strong motivation to make such progress?

Beside the intellectual path, which I already explained, I was also guided by a very personal experience. As a university student, I always wanted to be successful, I was always competitive, and I always competed with my best friends during my school years and at the university. With my friends, I was always able to be competitive and cooperative at the same time. However, when I was studying at the university, my experience was very different. In a well-functioning, cooperative, and competitive friendship, my friend suddenly and unexpectedly became dishonest and unfairly took advantage during an exam. As a person and a future psychologist I felt compelled to find an explanation and trace the stages of hidden processes and motivation, untold feelings that may have led to the breaching of implicit rules of our cooperative-competitive relationship. In addition to this personal question, one should not forget that this was a time when Hungary was still a socialist country and consequently people did not talk much about competition, it was not something that people used as an expression in everyday life and competition was not encouraged in economic life, and much less in political life. Just like in human relationships, however, it was still present in many different life arenas. There were contests in schools, nationwide, and for students, there were different tournaments on television, and, obviously, in workplaces there were numerous competitions for promotion and leadership positions. Competition was present, but it was present in such a way that it was not explicitly acknowledged. This is what really intrigued me at the individual and the societal level. Then, when the time came for me to choose a topic for my master's thesis, my professor of social psychology, prof. György Hunyady, who by now is a regular member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a highly distinguished position, listed, among several other topics that students could write a thesis about under his supervision, also cooperation and competition. This miraculously coincided with my intellectual and personal interest. In addition, I really admired this professor, he was very smart, very knowledgeable, and he brought the field up to date by introducing new literature, American social psychology. Moreover, he had a very good sense of humour and he really appreciated my intellectual interests and curiosity. Although I did not have any kind of intellectual knowledge about competition at that point, I decided to deal with this topic in my master's thesis. The professor did not really guide me on what to read or how to think about the problem, but very much encouraged me to think and write about it freely. In fact, the thesis that I wrote as a master student contains thoughts and questions that have been leading my research ever since. I went through them often during my research.

When I started reading literature for my thesis, I expected that American researchers will be very positive about competition, USA being a highly competitive society and a free market economy. I was really shocked that “no, they weren’t”. However, they were very positive about cooperation. I was also very shocked that they divided competition and cooperation as totally separate and opposite processes. I was sitting there in the library, I was 22 years old, reading all this, and I felt like “There is something really wrong with this”. I knew from my life experience that they could be present in human relationships at the same time, I just could not “buy” the dichotomy. Of course, there are situations when they are separate, but there are many situations in which they are not ... literature, however, supported only the division, and the authors were established researchers publishing in prestigious American psychological journals ... I was there, a Hungarian university student, basically coming from nowhere, and I wrote a master thesis, which argued that there are different competitive processes which have different relationships with cooperation, and this was very well received. After graduation, I got a researcher position at the Institute of Psychology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to deal with this topic and continue with research.

Yes, thank you for this personal insight. Let us move now from your early career to the present. How would you, based on your expertise, assess the current interest of psychological science in the research and practice of competitiveness?

I would say that the research on competition, surprisingly, has almost never been one of the central topics in psychological research. There were several relatively short periods when competition received more attention. For example, the very first social psychological experiment by Triplett in 1898 was related to interpersonal competition and performance. In the 1930s, there was an increased interest in the USA whether competition is inevitable in society. The Social Science Research Council assigned the task to a sub-committee called Competitive and Cooperative Habits of the Personality and Culture led by Margaret Mead and her colleagues to examine how competition and cooperation is present in the so called “primitive societies” in order to be able to answer to what degree can competition in American society be considered universal or a cultural product, and in order to provide a scientific standpoint in a heated political debate. The main conclusion was that no society is exclusively competitive or exclusively cooperative. After the Second World War, Morton Deutsch, the famous American experimental social psychologist devoted his attention to the effects of cooperation and competition and he set up a paradigm that I call “Beauty and the Beast Paradigm”, which, very simply put, claims that competition is bad and cooperation is good. Deutsch became a very influential social psychologist. Later, he became interested in the psychology of conflict and conflict resolution, in which he identified competition with conflict. He still dealt with competition, but he labelled it as conflict and, even later, his interest in conflict resolution turned him towards peace psychology. His interest in competition and cooperation were

grounded in his participation in the Second World War and he came to consider war as the worst example of competition, which should be avoided at all costs, and cooperation was a kind of the best way to avoid competition and ultimately to avoid war. He strongly advocated cooperation in order to replace competition. He had the societal mission to avoid this awful destructive type of competition, which is war, avoid conflict, and promote cooperation, promote peace.

I would say that after Morton Deutsch there were no more central or leading figures in competition research, but there were many who worked on certain aspects of it up until the late 1990s, mainly in the context of the “Beauty and the Beast” paradigm. They did not necessarily devote their research careers to the topic of competition, but competition was more as a side interest. For me, this is very surprising, because I think that competition as an interpersonal and intergroup phenomenon is much more influential in our daily life and basically in all contexts of our life. I have an explanation for the lack of focus on competition. There is a kind of denial around competitiveness and this may also affect the researchers. Research on competition, for instance, goes under different umbrellas. For example, the theory of social comparison directly relates to competition. There is also a huge body of literature on motivation to learn in educational psychology. There is a differentiation between mastery and performance motivation, and performance motivation is basically the competitive motive, but these researchers do not call it competitive motive but rather performance motivation. In the last decade, Andrew Elliot from the University of Rochester and his colleagues started naming and researching competition in relation to learning motivation. If we take research on envy, it is also not directly connected to competition because envy is one of the main emotions, which initiates competition. Benign envy motivates one to develop, to reach, or to outperform the envied person, while malicious envy motivates more destructive competitive processes, for example, to do something against the envied person. Sheriff’s famous Robber Cave’s experiment was also about intergroup competition, but it became famous in literature under the label intergroup conflict. If we think about personality psychology, there was an American researcher whose work is rather systematic about competitiveness and who inspired my work on competitiveness and mental and somatic health. He is Richard Ryckman who was a professor of personality psychology at the University of Maine. I discovered his work because it is related to my research on the Japanese construct of competition. I found that Japanese conceptualize competition mainly to improve and develop themselves and each other with the competitor. Ryckman was the first to describe self-developmental competitiveness as a healthy attitude towards competition. Actually, he differentiated between two types of competitiveness, the self-developmental and the hypercompetitive, the latter being a less adaptive attitude, which rather goes together with neuroticism and more somatic health problems. He also examined personality traits that go together with hypercompetitiveness and with self-developmental competitiveness. His work was very important for me, because it was a starting point for the deconstruction of competitive attitudes and patterns. I also consider as relevant

my research goal to identify different types of competitiveness and to connect these different patterns of competitiveness to mental and somatic health.

You are addressing authors and trends in psychological research on competition in the United States, picturing competition as a controversial topic in psychology. However, in an article entitled *Competition's Role in Developing Psychological Strength and Outstanding Performance*, published in the *Review of General Psychology* in 2016, your research is cited as highly referential. American authors rely heavily on your work and hope to increase the research on positive effects of competition in the future. How would you comment on this?

I find social psychology of science very interesting, because in scientific life, there are normative ways to think about certain phenomena. In case of competition, Morton Deutsch's conceptualization had been normative for about 40 years. Most scholars did not fundamentally question that conceptualization but stayed within the provided conceptual framework. This was the case in the USA and in Western Europe. When somebody comes and speaks confidently and convincingly about another perspective or another approach, then they suddenly understand that they all know this, they just did not make it explicit or did not formulate it this way in their mind because of the social norms that defined the accepted ways to think about competition.

Something similar happened with the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan. They also dichotomized these motivations and considered extrinsic motivation as inferior and harmful. Competitive motives were grouped under the category of extrinsic motivation as well. This simplification was questioned by several researchers of motivation, for example, by Judith Harackiewicz and her colleagues, who proved that the competitive motive can also be beneficial under particular circumstances. Still the strong research tradition by Deci and Ryan persists and does not take these criticisms into consideration. Previously mentioned work of Andrew Elliot also highlights these simplifications about the role of competition in motivation to learn.

Now I better understand your logic about valuing cross-cultural research ... because this gives you an open or holistic view on the topic, right?

Absolutely. It opened the perspective that there are different ways, different modes of competing. Here I must mention somebody else as well. Barry Schneider is a Canadian professor of psychology, now working in Boston College in the USA. He researched how friendship and competition can go together. I found his work with an Italian colleague Fulvio Tassi extremely interesting. They differentiated between other-referenced competition and task-referenced competition. What does this mean? For instance, I tell you "let's compete to see which one of us can learn faster to ride the bicycle". If we do this we can have fun, we can enjoy, and if I fall down from the bicycle and it hurts and I see you are

still going further, then I will get on the bicycle and continue practicing, but if I am alone and it still hurts me, there is a bigger chance that I just go home. This is called task-referenced competition, which means that the main goal is to learn how to ride the bicycle, and therefore the task, the mastery of the given activity is in the focus and who wins is secondary. On the other hand, the other referenced competition is when I tell you, "ok, Mojca, let's compete which one of us can learn faster to ride the bicycle and I am going to defeat you". Then the focus is not so much on learning to ride the bicycle but on winning. Researchers explained that the first competition can go well together with friendship, and the second one can create conflicts in a friendship and can even destroy the relation. Schneider's work on adolescence, young people, friendship, and the quality of relationships is influential in the field and shaped my thinking about the constructive and destructive ways of competing.

Therefore, are we all competing in the same way or are there some intercultural and individual differences?

Well, going back to individual differences, no, we do not compete the same way. The question is not only how we approach competition but also how we try to avoid it. In our work, we were able to identify three different types of pro-competition patterns. I mentioned two of them when I talked about Richard Ryckman's work: the *self-developmental competitiveness* and the *hypercompetitive competitiveness*. The third type of competitiveness that we identified is called the *complex competitive attitude*. The complex competitive person is characterized by both self-developmental and hypercompetitive competitiveness. For this person, both development by competition and winning are important. Many times, for instance, in case of gifted people, both goals are present, namely, improvement and being the best. In order to be able to achieve exceptional performance, a gifted person constantly has to develop, because without intensive learning, without making the effort to know the subject or to practice music or to practice sport, it is not possible to win. A double motivation may therefore be present, towards development and towards winning. On the other hand, what it means to be non-competitive has not been elaborated well ... Many people say "I am not competitive". That's OK ... but what kind of personality is that? What does it mean that I am not competitive or what is the source of not being competitive? Ryckman and his colleagues described competition avoidance. We further elaborated on that and identified different types of non-competitiveness. We also found that those who are very clearly competition-avoidant have more problems than those who are competitive. This is again important because the general notion that competition is something negative was extended to the level of personality as well; being competitive as a person had a negative connotation while being non-competitive, a trait that was often identified with being cooperative, was perceived as positive. It seems, therefore, that it was important to deconstruct non-competitiveness as well. We differentiated two types of competition avoidance: avoidance due to stress and anxiety which competition causes and avoidance due to fear of losing. We found – similar to Ryckman and his colleagues – that com-

petition avoidance is related to anxiety, higher level of perceived stress, and low self-esteem, meaning that the person anticipates not being able to win. That person is a “loser” and wants to avoid those negative experiences. We also identified another kind of non-competitiveness, a neutral one. A person, who does not care about competition, does not approach it, and does not actively avoid it, does not care about winning and does not care about losing. One of our current interests is to deconstruct this attitude as our hypothesis is that there are different psychological processes behind this neutrality. One reason can be autonomy, which means that the need for social comparison is low. Some people say “I don’t compare myself to others”, “I am I”. They emphasize their individuality and uniqueness and therefore believe that comparison is meaningless. But sometimes being indifferent towards competition can also result in lack of motivation, a kind of a-motivation. That person is simply not motivated.

Are there some cross-cultural results? For example, in the Eastern countries or in the Western world, are there some findings about intercultural differences?

In my research in Japan, I found that the main function Japanese attribute to competition is improvement and mutual improvement, meaning that the competitive parties improve each other through competition. This is distinctively different from the concept of competition among rivals who consider each other enemies and are motivated to defeat the rival by whatever means, which is a concept that I found, for instance, among Hungarian respondents much more frequently. Canadian have a more pragmatic concept of competition, that is to say, that the focus is on the goal and not the “enemy”. Going back to personal attitudes towards competition, self-developmental competitiveness is much more prevalent among East-Asians, because self-development, self-growth, and self-perfection are normative cultural values. Ryckman and his colleagues found that hypercompetitiveness is related to the narcissistic personality. Therefore, in societies where narcissism is more encouraged, for instance, in the USA, hypercompetitiveness can be more prevalent. There has been no substantial research on this so far as the newly identified competitive orientations and the personalized classifications are more recent developments. However, some comparisons have been made. In Hungary, for example, avoiding competition due to anxiety and avoiding competition due to fear of losing are closely related. According to our preliminary results in China, they are not. If Chinese respondents have a tendency to avoid competition, they avoid it due to anxiety but not due to fear of losing. This leads us to the psychology of coping with winning and losing. This is also a topic that has not been well elaborated in literature. What I found in my comparative research is that Japanese, and I found it among the Chinese as well, know how to cope with losing. They are able not to give up, stand up, continue, and try again and again. I therefore found that avoiding competition due to fear of losing is not characteristic to the Chinese and can be explained by them being not afraid of losing because they have capacities, strategies, they have inner resources to endure losing and make a step forward, to stand up and continue after losing. I find

these intercultural differences very interesting. If during the socialization process in the family, in the school, or in the media, people are socialized to cope with losing, they will be more equipped to cope with it and will not avoid competition because there is chance of losing. However, if one is not equipped with these capacities, then losing may be destructive; that person loses confidence, becomes demotivated, and gives up.

You are discussing competitive dimensions or profiles, but what would you say about their domain specificity?

First of all, there is no extensive research on how much domain-dependent or not domain dependent competitiveness is. If we take the profiles, then hypercompetitiveness and complex competitiveness, because it has a hypercompetitive component as well, extends to many different areas. Whatever they do, if it is in the kitchen, if it is their profession, if it is sports, if it is beauty, they always experience competition and want to be the best or want to be winners. Hypercompetitiveness is more domain-general. On the other end of the spectrum, competition avoidance, I suppose, is rather domain-general as well. However, self-developmental competitors are competitive in those fields that are important to them, to their self-definition; in other domains, they are neutral.

I can give you an example. I am a competitive person. When I travel ... it is very boring to stand in a security line. Imagine, early morning, you have a flight, and you stand in a security line half sleeping ... I normally find somebody who is at that position where I am, but in the parallel line and then I start to compete with that person who gets through the security screening faster. From that moment on, I am completely awake, seemingly doing nothing, but in fact I am in a huge competition, every minute I have to check. “Ooh no, now he is faster”. If somebody looks at me, it is not possible to know what is going on inside me. As you can imagine, this is not the most important competition in my life and is in a domain that is otherwise totally unimportant to me. Nevertheless, if I lose, for example, a competitive research grant application, it affects me a lot. Of course, different domains have different levels of importance and depending on this importance, competitiveness has different forms and different consequences.

Great example ... Do you agree that motivation is a crucial factor which makes a difference?

I think so, yes. When people compete, they do so because they are motivated to reach the goal. If we go back for a second to the motivation theories, they almost never discuss competition as a motivation.

Continuing with this line of conversation ... Are adults and children, in your opinion, more or less competitive today than in the past?

I think they are more competitive, because our lives provide more situations in which we can or should compare ourselves to others. There exists a very interesting theory and research by Frances Schachter. She studied families with same

sex siblings with a small age difference. She stated that in these families, social comparison is overwhelmed, because if, for example, your sister is almost the same age as you are and also a girl, there are a lot of situations in which you can compare yourself to each other and parents and other people compare you more as well. If there is a six years age difference, then comparison does not make that much sense. Frequent social comparison intensifies competition. Following this logic, in my opinion at least, social comparison is nowadays overwhelmed, and it results in intensive competition. The constant presence of young people in social media provides a lot of opportunities to compare received attention, popularity, possessions, clothes, outlook etc. There is a constant evaluation by counting likes and checking who liked the given post. I don't think that the motivation to compete is more intense, but we are more exposed to situations which trigger this motive. If we go to gifted education, what we experience is the globalized competition of talented people. Many decades ago, it was more common to celebrate national talents even if that person would have never been an exceptional artist or scientist internationally. Now the "talent market" is totally international and each highly gifted person has to compete with other highly gifted people from the whole world. This means that the standards of comparison are higher and that more ability to cope with this competition to be successful is required.

I was not only interested if the intensity of our competitiveness has changed, but also if we compete in a different way? I mean, not so much being better in the same dimension but trying to be different?

That is a very interesting issue, because I think there is also a cross-cultural difference: in individualistic societies, it is a value to be different, to be unique; it is a value to elaborate on your exceptional combination of abilities and personality. In fact, you can compete in how unique and exceptional you can be. But in the collectivistic societies you don't value unique dimensions. You have joint dimensions along which you compare yourself... that is why my Japanese respondents sometimes said that competition makes them similar to each other, because they compete with the other along the same set of characteristic and they both grow in that dimension. While competing, they in fact become more similar to each other, even if they want to be better than the other within that similarity. Americans would say that competition diversifies you because you elaborate on how you differ from the other. I described these two types of competitions as horizontal and vertical competition. Vertical competition means that the parties compete along one dimension and they want to be better than the other within this dimension. In horizontal competition, however, the parties want to be better by being different, therefore they want to find new dimensions in which they are different from the rival, and this process may promote creativity, innovation, and differentiation of the self. The horizontal process is more prevalent in Western individualistic societies, while the vertical process in collectivistic societies, where difference is not valued.

Have you done research on the relation between competition and mental and somatic health? What did you find?

What I basically found in all age groups and with different samples is that self-developmental competitiveness always goes together with higher psychological and somatic health. Complex competitiveness, which is a combination of self-developmental and hypercompetitiveness, is the second healthiest and competition avoidant people, due to their anxiety or fear of losing, are the least healthy both in somatic and psychological terms. What is really interesting is that hypercompetitiveness was mostly unrelated to mental and somatic health in our research. Self-developmental competitiveness and complex competitiveness are hence a kind of protective factors while competition-avoidance is a kind of risk factor. Neutral attitude is particularly interesting. It seems that those people who claim that they are not interested in competition can be very different from each other in their psychological characteristics. Earlier I mentioned autonomy and low need of these individuals to compare themselves to others as one group, and I also mentioned a-motivation, people who are not interested and not motivated to work on being better, and the third group that I have not mentioned before are the suppressors. Autonomy or amotivation may go together with higher psychological and somatic health, while suppressors, who have competitive motivation but its acknowledgement would evoke anxiety and negative feelings, deny and suppress these emotions and may be less healthy. We are now starting new research to go behind neutrality, because the sign of denial goes together with bad mental and somatic health.

Which variables did you use to describe health?

In our representative study for the Hungarian population, and for our high school students, university students, and old people samples, we looked at depression, anxiety, perceived stress, and hopelessness as indicators of mental health. We used the Patient Health Questionnaire to measure both psychological and somatic health as well as the European Core Health indicators. In addition, we studied some psychological protective factors like resilience, positivity, and mental toughness. Self-developmental competitors and complex competitors had the highest scores in protective factors while avoidants had the lowest. And this was consistent in all our samples and in all age groups from adolescence to old age.

Was there correlation between competitiveness and addiction as well?

In a study with my colleagues Noemi Tari-Keresztes and Bettina Piko we found that physical activity was positively related to enjoyment of competition among adolescents, and in our representative study we found that doing sports correlated with self-developmental competitiveness. We did not find, however, any other meaningful relationship, partly because we had the impression that the respondents did not answer all the questions reliably, for example, those about alcohol and drug consumption.

This topic, that is, the relationship between attitudes towards competition and health behaviour, is not well elaborated. You could say, “yes, if you are very competitive, this is very stressful, so you smoke more, or you drink more, or you take more drugs”, but there is no evidence for such a relation. In fact, some research implies that those who are competitive are also healthier, in general, than those who are not.

Taking your idea of the “Beauty and the Beast Paradigm” with which you explained that competition and cooperation are no longer understood as mutually exclusive (Fulop, 2008, 2009), how would you answer the crucial question: Is it good or bad to be competitive?

It can be both. If somebody is self-developmental competitive or complex competitive it is good to be competitive. If somebody is hypercompetitive it is more controversial, however, if somebody is competition avoidant that indicates worse mental and somatic health and less psychological protection. We live in competitive societies and it is of utmost importance to be able to function in them in a successful and effective way, pursuing our goals and maintaining our health. Obviously, those whose personality matches the expectations of the society, school, workplace, and job market will experience being competitive in a more positive way than those who have a tendency to avoid these situations, partly because they have difficulties coping with them.

If we speak about the competitive processes that may unfold in interpersonal relationships or in intergroup relationships, they can also be good and constructive, or bad and destructive. As I explained before, according to the “Beauty and the Beast” paradigm competition, as opposed to cooperation, was considered to be almost exclusively negative. Both competition and cooperation, however, are part of our interpersonal dynamics. They can be parallel in the same relationship and can be present in our motivational structure at the same time, so that we want to cooperate and compete at the same time. The interesting question is how this is possible or in what way the two can be combined? Based on a series of experiments with children, William R. Charlesworth, who is an evolutionary developmental psychologist, claims that the combination of competition with cooperation is the most successful competitive strategy. If you show yourself as a good co-operator in business life, then you have a better chance that the next business will be yours, and this won't be the case if you are the person who doesn't want to cooperate. Cooperation is a competitive advantage, therefore, we have to change our way of thinking about these phenomena and stop treating them as phenomena that are impossible to handle together. I researched the kinds of conditions that contribute to a cooperative relationship between competitors. One very important condition is keeping the implicit and explicit rules of competition. For instance, it is a basic cooperation among the competing parties that they can trust each other, that both of them stay within the rules, stay within the accepted, and mutually agree upon ways of competing. If there is this kind of basic cooperation, then competition can really bring out more benefits than potential negative effects. Of course, in order to keep the rules, the rules have to be relatively clear. So, for instance, within a friendship, if friends start to com-

pete with each other and somehow it is not clear what you can do to a friend or what you cannot do to a friend in a competitive situation, then this can lead to a relationship break because one says “Well, I thought this is not a problem in a friendship” and the other says “Yes, it is a problem in a friendship”. This can happen because the rules of competition were never discussed beforehand. In addition to keeping the rules, honesty and open communication, not manipulating, and not being aggressive, all contribute to a cooperative and constructive competitive relationship. If you feel that competing with the other person helped you to improve yourself or made you learn something that you value, then you tend to cooperate more with that rival.

In your research you also focused on understanding coping strategies in competitive situations. What have you found?

I found that there are also different patterns of coping with winning and losing, and the way you cope with winning is not independent of the way you cope with losing. Actually, they create a joint pattern. We identified four different patterns of coping emotionally and behaviourally with winning and losing. The balanced pattern, which means that the winner is proud, happy, and satisfied, this emotional reaction is connected to looking for new challenges and facing new competitions as a behaviour. In case of losing, the loser feels sad, disappointed, and frustrated and these emotions lead to not giving up, but trying to do ones best next time, not being afraid of new challenges, and trying to make better results. The balanced pattern of coping with winning and losing means that even if one wins, even if one loses, that person continues. This means that winning doesn't make the winner so confident about oneself that she would stop trying, and losing doesn't make the loser less self-confident so that she would stop trying and move to new challenges. Another pattern of coping with winning and losing, basically the opposite of the balanced pattern, is the avoidant pattern. In this case, the winner does not experience happiness but rather embarrassment. Winning is more like a burden which means that “next time I have to win again”, or “that is what is expected from me”, or that “I cause negative feelings in others, in the losers, and then they will react to me in a negative way”. So, winning doesn't bring happiness, winning brings more embarrassment. The behavioural reaction to winning is not looking for new opportunities to win but rather trying to avoid situations in which one can be a winner. In case of losing, the loser reacts with self-devaluation, losing self-confidence, being depressed, being ashamed, and gives up. The avoidant person wants to avoid both winning and losing. There is also the narcissistic coping. The winner is self-aggrandizing, like “I am the best”, “I am the king”, and looks down to the loser. In case of losing, however, most of the emotions are directed towards the winner in the form of anger, hate, and revenge. This means that losing makes the loser working harder or improving oneself, it does not make the loser give up, but rather initiates actions against the winner because the person is narcissistically hurt by losing. We also identified a fourth pattern of coping with winning and losing, the neutral pattern. When winning, the competitor says, “I don't care about win-

ning”; when losing she says, “I don’t care about losing”. They feel “nothing” when winning and “nothing” when losing. We are now working on elaborating the relationship between competitive attitudinal patterns and patterns of coping with winning and losing, and based on our preliminary results, it seems that they are strongly connected.

In the Moscow talk you presented the bio-psycho-social-cultural model you are recently working on. It seems very complicated. How would you introduce it?

During the years of researching different aspects of competition, my goal was to understand different levels of determinants that define competitive behaviour and competitive interaction in a given point of time and in a given situation. There are biological and social determinants and my goal was to produce a model, which can take into consideration its complexity, for example, the given situation and more distal determinants such as our phylogenetic inheritance.

The competitive drive has a very clear connection to evolutionary biology; however, my research in different cultures demonstrates that this biologically coded behaviour is also culturally shaped. On the biological and genetic side, there is a very strong and elaborated research focus as, for example, that led by prof. Alicia Salvador from the University of Valencia in Spain on the neuro-endocrinological processes that accompany winning and losing. It is also an interesting focus of research in order to reveal how the hormonal responses relate to the different patterns of coping with winning and losing. Family socialization of competitive attitudes belongs to the psychological components of the determinants. It is important what kind of models children observe, for example, competitiveness of their parents, what are parents’ values in relation to competition, and if they socialize their children to be competitive or not to be competitive, or to be competitive in a certain way. Educational institutions, with which I mean schools, also play an important role in socializing attitudes towards competition as well as winning and losing. These aspects are highly intertwined because the cultural background shapes how the family relates to competition, and how the institutions relate to competition. So, there is a biological part – a phylogenetic and a genetic – which you bring with yourself, and there is the social-cultural part and all these of course affect children’s development, socialization, how they are brought up to be a certain kind of competitive person, and how they relate to competition.

As an expert, how do you see the competition in educational institutions today, starting with pre-school? Has anything changed in recent decades?

I can observe that in all school systems, all over the world, competition is present. I researched how students perceive competition at different levels of schooling in Japan, Hungary, USA, China, and England. In all countries, students experience competition, however, there is a difference in terms of its frequency, its intensity, and at which point of education competition is present the most. For example in East-Asia, students have to compete very intensely when they go from junior high school to senior high school. They have to pass

a very competitive entrance exam. In most countries, the school system creates differences among different schools. There are more academically oriented and highly valued schools and schools also compete with each other to get access to the highest achieving students. In many countries, there are league tables that rank schools, placing them in a hierarchical order. There are also different contests organized by schools at the district or national level and, of course, there are international competitions as well like the Mathematics Olympiad. I carried out research with students of the best academic high schools in Hungary and also with students of alternative schools which have a very clear non-competitive ethos and school philosophy. I found that, in terms of students’ competitive attitudes, there was no difference between these schools. Students were equally competitive or competition avoidant. Even in the non-competitive schools, students experience a certain degree of competition, however, less than in the contest-oriented traditional, academic high schools. Students that attend the non-competitive schools naturally compare their ability to read or ability to solve mathematical problems to others and those who are competitive still compete, so competition is present without educational intervention.

Of course, different countries have different educational traditions in terms of competition. There is again a macro level, a cultural level that shapes teacher training and everyday school practices in relation to competition. In our research conducted with Cveta Razdevšek-Pučko and Marjanca Pergar Kuščer in Slovenia and Alistair Ross and Merryyn Hutchings in the UK, we wanted to reveal how competition and cooperation is present in school in these countries. We applied triangulation. We observed teachers and students in class in order to see if teachers encourage or discourage competition and cooperation among students and we observed students’ behaviour in class in order to determine if they compete and if they cooperate with each other. In addition to the classroom observation, we carried out interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with the students. We also used the so-called Associative Group Analytic technique (AGA) in order to reveal teachers’ subjective perception of competition and cooperation. We had many interesting results, which we summarized in a book published by the University of Ljubljana. In short, we could identify three different approaches to cooperation and competition. Slovenian teachers were more prone to apply cooperation, Hungarian teachers did just the opposite, they were more prone to apply competition, and English teachers provided equal opportunity for both.

In your opinion children are competitive, with or without the encouragement of teachers, but the nature of competitiveness can vary from more to less adaptable types. How can the school system help children develop healthier patterns of competitiveness? Is this even sensible?

I think it is highly important. Namely, we all live in competitive societies and even if you do not want to, you must participate in many competitive situations. I think we should be able to prepare our children to cope in the best way possible with competitive situations they encounter and to social-

ize them to be cooperative and constructive competitors. It is also important to teach them how to cope with winning and losing in a way that helps them to go further and not become conceited by winning or to give up and become demotivated when losing. Teachers should convey the message that the final goal is to develop according to each student's potentials and that competition, winning, and losing are not judgements but information about students' position in that journey. Of course, a result of competition is a "judgement" in several situations. I mean, a student is able or not able to enter the desired high school based on the competitive entrance exam result. What students have to understand is that in order to reach their goals in life, there will be many such situations and they will encounter such judgements. What we found in our study with high school students was that those students who are well equipped with protective psychological factors like resilience, positivity, mental toughness and self-efficacy are coping better with intense competition as well as with negative feed-back as, for example, being worse than others or losing. Teachers can explicitly speak about this, explain the different attitudes towards competition and copings with winning and losing, and they can point to their different consequences and discuss how to deal with them when students encounter competition, winning, and losing. They can also explain what are the potential consequences of constructive competitive relationship and destructive competitive relationship and they also have the possibility to create a group climate in which constructive competition becomes normative and destructive competition is "sanctioned" by the group. But to be able to do this teachers first have to have professional knowledge about these issues.

There is another question that is currently inconclusive for the Slovenian educational context: When is the right time to involve children in academic or school competition?

I think that anytime is the right time because it does not depend on the age. If you observe pre-school children in the playground, they may just spontaneously turn to each other and say "let's compete who runs faster". Children do that for themselves, competition is there without any kind of outside intervention, and the question is what a teacher does with the process, with the result, how children are, for example, taught to be fair, how they are taught to treat each other during a competition as rivals. You can be 20 years old and destroyed by competition, if you are not taught how to deal with it, and what kind of significance to attribute to it, and if you are not taught how to use it to learn about yourself. One way to learn about our strengths and weaknesses, our better or worse abilities is via competition. But this has to be carried out in a controlled way, by teachers who are familiar with the psychology of competition. It is important to teach students to acknowledge and accept those that are better, but it is also important to teach how those who are better can encourage and help those who are not. It is important to promote engagement between winners and losers and avoid disengagement, which means that the loser despises and does not acknowledge the winner and the winner looks down upon the loser. It is the responsibility of teachers to make students understand that we are not only responsible for our own development,

but for the development of others as well, because in case our competitors are also quality competitors we all are able to develop further. I carried out a research with Chinese university students and I asked them: "If you were a parent and had the freedom to choose a school for your child, what kind of school would you choose? A school where your child is together with other students among which she is a poor achiever, or a school where your child is among the best?" Almost all of the students chose "the small fish in a big pond" and they explained that in such context, the child can learn more from others. This also indicated that Chinese students are not discouraged by others who are better – remember, we found that they are not avoiding competition due to fear of losing – and that they are better equipped with coping with winning and losing. They rather conceptualize such a situation as a potential to learn and improve. Losing is not the end of the world ... Losing is just an information about where you are in that moment. It is also important to explain that rivals do not have to be enemies; they can be partners or friends. All that can be explained to a small kid as well and teachers can help that kid to go through such a process. However, that is work, work also for the parents and in this respect, I agree that introducing competition for any age group without socializing the constructive ways of coping with it can be damaging. There has to be an institutionalized professional knowledge about this and teachers should be taught about this and about how to discuss winning and how to discuss losing and how to help losers to go further, how to explain to the winners that in spite of that you won, you have to engage yourself with the losers, and that losers have to be able to acknowledge the winners ... I mean ... this process that the winners and the losers should be engaged with each other, and that winning and losing should not disengage them ... and this also has its pedagogical goal, to keep together the winner and the loser, the winner to help the loser, and for the loser to learn from the winner.

Do you think that the same goes for gifted education as well? Should we educate gifted children in competition? Because we are discussing their psychosocial development and then we say that if they are often in competition, they may develop ... or they can be hurt psychologically.

Of course, there is a need to do that. First of all, contests are one of the most important means for identification of those that are gifted. If children would not participate in these competitions, it would be very difficult to find those who are really exceptional. If there is an exceptional student in a school, it may be that at a district level, she is a good average, and at an international level she is an average performer. Just based on local evaluations and comparisons and without providing extra challenges it would be difficult to find those who may get extra support from the normally limited resources to be able to bring out their best potentials for the sake of science, art, medicine, sports, and the society or humankind at large. Therefore, competitions are very important in gifted students' life and in such cases it is even more important to be able to cope with these situations in the most adaptive way. Gifted children should also be "talented" competitors, coping with competitive situations in the best possible way, and being an

effective competitor can be conceptualized as a skill. In our study with young people who were exceptional achievers in nationwide or international contests, we found a correlation between being a more self-developmental competitor and having more balanced coping with winning and losing among those who were peak achievers, meaning that they won the first three prizes, as compared to those high achievers who were ranked lower. But in case of both groups, we found that they really appreciate this experience. Actually, there was a lot of positive and very few negative remarks related about their participation in contests. I didn't find any kind of deteriorating effect of this participation in my research. Obviously, I don't want to say that we couldn't find one or two particular students or a gifted person who says that this was really damaging, but if it was a case, that means that there was no support offered to this young person to work with this result, to work with this experience. In another recent study, I interviewed highly accomplished social and natural scientists, artists, and athletes about the role of contests and competitions in their exceptional achievement. I found that the majority of them were very positive about the role of competition when it was about their abilities and achievements in a fair and just way. What clearly had a damaging effect, however, was when competition was unfair, when losing was not related to their lack of effort or abilities, and when they were losing because the colleagues were envious and prevented them to go ahead, or when others got unfair advantages. For them, it was really difficult to deal with such situations, and they were present in all of these exceptionally successful people's lives. An important observation was that they managed to cope with these unjust and unfair competitive experiences and did not give up or lose their motivation and did not suffer any long-lasting setbacks.

What role could school psychologists play in conveying a culture of competitiveness in schools?

I think that school psychologists have a role, of course, because, many times, teachers are dealing with the whole class. There is less space for individual discussions about how the student perceives her place in the class, how she experiences her achievement compared to others, being a winner, being a loser, and how this affects her motivation and psychological well-being. School is a place where an individual compares herself and is compared with peers and older and younger children. There are grades to compare, speed of problem solving to compare, ability to communicate in a foreign language, to sing, to run, to draw a picture, or to do gymnastics to compare. This kind of evaluation is always there: better, worse, same, almost the same. Students have to cope with this information. Some children are able to do this very well, some children get support from their parents at home, and teachers also try to handle this, many times generally, I mean, at the level of the whole class, but school psychologists can provide guidance and support at the individual level. In academic literature, competition in school has been perceived negatively and studies show that intense competitive school climate may result in more psychopathological symptoms among students. In our study in which we compared students in schools with a strong competitive climate and in schools

with a non-competitive climate, we found that there was no difference between the two groups of students in terms of their mental and somatic health. It was not the school climate which was responsible for the individual differences, but much more the individual's attitude towards competition, and the protective psychological factors that have been available to them. Competition avoidant students had worse psychological health in both school climates and students who had more protective psychological factors and were more self-developmental competitors had better psychological health in both school types. This highlights the significance of school psychologists and their supportive and consulting role.

Parents, teachers, and school psychologists can frame or interpret competition as an opportunity to learn and to improve. In fact, this conceptualization was the most characteristic in my studies of Japanese and Chinese students. Being a loser in a particular situation is not a judgement about you for your whole life, neither is a judgement about you generally as a person. However, it is an impetuous to understand if this is something that you consider personally important and want to address and improve, or if it is something that is unimportant and can be put aside. School psychologists can also function as coaches or trainers for gifted students who intend to participate in contests. They can prepare them mentally, psychologically in many different ways. For example, how to focus or how to focus on doing their best instead of focusing on not to lose. This psychological preparation is very important. Sometimes there are highly gifted children who cannot really achieve in a competition because they are not mentally well prepared.

Finally, we would very much appreciate your assessment of the current global social changes. Should the psychology of competition continue to be used, discontinued or modified? What needs to be done?

... I am not a politician, but thinking about the role of competition and cooperation in our current societies I have some ideas. After the 2nd World War there was a cold war period which was an intense competition between at least two blocks, the Western bloc and the Eastern bloc. When the cold war ended and the Berlin wall fell, international relationships became much more cooperative. The European Union expanded to its former "enemies", the former socialist-communist countries. Equality and cooperation among the countries has been very much emphasized. Instead of an enemy type of competition, the three main actors of the international politics and economic life, USA, East-Asia, and European Union started to compete in a kind of mutually respectful cooperative way. This did not work well in my opinion, because on the surface cooperation was emphasized too much and the underlying competitive conflicts were not handled properly. In my opinion, several relatively recent political changes, for example, Donald Trump's presidency in the USA and Brexit are partly due to this not well managed cooperative competition. For example, Philip Hammond, the British Conservative Party member, said about Brexit: "We will change our model, and we will come back, and we will be competitively engaged" referring to Britain's future role as a competitor and not a cooperating party. Trump's slogan "Let's make America

great again” is also an open call for competition, because, apparently, he means “the greatest”. Actually, I think that instead of being more and more elaborated in terms of cooperative competitiveness, we are unfortunately getting towards a competitive world which has less and less cooperation in it. I think that in this respect, psychology of competition, research of competition, and especially research of cooperative and constructive competition is even more important. Namely, the only way, in my opinion, for the world to survive, and to provide a decent life to most of the people, is via cooperative competitive relationships. We can observe in this pandemic that there is strong cooperation and competition at the same time in scientific research. There is knowledge sharing to a certain extent, but research groups also compete who will be the first to find the vaccine or a medicine that can treat serious complications. However, if a serious economic crisis follows the present pandemic, it can very well happen that the destructive competitive processes will emerge over the distribution of scarce resources. A global cooperative political intervention towards avoiding that is necessary. I think that this kind of knowledge about the relation between cooperation and competition and the knowledge about constructive and destructive competition, cooperative and non-cooperative competition would benefit the political life as well.

Because Hungary and Slovenia share a broader cultural framework as post-socialistic countries, I was thinking that it was you who involved Slovenia in research on competition. Is that true?

Yes, in a rather indirect way. My research on cultural construction of competition carried out in Japan spiked the interest of prof. David Watkins at the University of Hong Kong. We started a collaboration and he referred to my work in his studies of competition in Hong Kong. David Watkins visited Europe and from Hungary he went to Slovenia and met Darja Kobal Grum from the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Darja was interested in research on competition straight away and got acquainted with my work via David Watkins. Darja was also a visiting professor at my University in Budapest and gave talks about her research results on competition.

Last but not least, you mentioned that at the end of the 2000s, with the support of the British, the Hungarian, and the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, you carried out an extensive comparative study on competition and cooperation in schools. How do you remember the collaboration with Dr. Marjanca Pergar Kuščar and Dr. Cveta Razdevšek-Pučko? If you look back ten or more years, what do you think were the main research benefits of this collaboration?

This research project could have happened only because I participated in an EU funded Socrates Academic Network called Children’s Identity and *Citizenship* in Europe. Through this network, I got to know Marjanca Pergar Kuščar and she right away became very interested in my work on competition in Japan and asked me to write an article for the Journal

of Asian and African Studies published in Slovenia. Marjanca included Cveta as a co-researcher on the Slovenian side. Alistair Ross, the English colleague in this research project, was in fact the chair of the whole network.

This was a 3-years-long project and the three research groups met at least two times per year. We visited schools in each country, discussed the process of the research, the data analysis and the results, and finally we wrote a book which summarized our work. This was a really exciting work and we were not only colleagues but with Marjanca and with Cveta as well we became friends. Cveta was the Dean of the Faculty of Education at that time and she had many more commitments so she could not spend much time together. Marjanca called our attention to one of the research methods we applied, the previously mentioned AGA technique, which she learned from prof. Vid Pečjak. I have used this technique many times in my later research and learned it in Slovenia from Marjanca. I remember our deep discussions about what we saw and learned via our research and about different educational approaches in relation to competition and cooperation in Hungary, Slovenia, and the UK. I was very sad when I learned about the death of Cveta, whom I considered a dear colleague of mine.

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