Opening Ceremony 2015

Welcome to our new students. Please stand so we can give you a special Opening Day Greeting!

Let me tell you a little about yourselves. You’re a tapestry of the world, and you come from 107 countries across the globe – from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

You’re obviously very special because you survived the admission process! This year we had a surge in applications to CEU – 34% more than last year. The word must be out about CEU – our mission, our diversity, our excellence, our excitement! I’m glad you got the word and decided to come!

Let me also tell you a little about Budapest – first on the light side, and then in a moment on the more serious side. Budapest is a great place to study and a great place to have fun, and everyone has their favorite thing to do. Mine is biking. You can go up and down the Danube on a bike as far as you want, and up and down the Buda hills until you wear yourself out. You can always find other CEU biking activists out there, so my advice is to study hard, but not too hard to enjoy yourselves!

The Opening Day of CEU’s 25th anniversary should be a time for celebration, but also a time for reflection. What kind of university is
CEU? And how should we relate to the battles over human rights and democracy that are raging all around us?

Today, we’re at the center of a massive humanitarian drama playing out in Central Europe and far beyond. The global refugee crisis has millions of victims, and has been triggered by multiple failures – failure to stop the deadly conflicts in the Middle East and Africa; failure to fund international relief efforts; failure of many Europeans to remember that their families were once refugees; and failure to provide asylum to people fleeing violence and persecution.

We all know that many of the refugees are from Syria – and this has deep personal meaning for me. When I was in high school I was welcomed by a Syrian family in Damascus as an exchange student, and the family that welcomed me gave me the kind of hospitality that Syrian families so rarely receive today.

Last year at this ceremony I announced that CEU was launching a far-reaching exploration of the Frontiers of Democracy. I’ll speak more about this in a moment. But now I want to announce a new far-reaching CEU initiative that I will call the Frontiers of Humanity.

As everyone knows, over the summer Budapest became the epicenter of the refugee crisis. In Hungary, the crisis came to be symbolized by xenophobic politics and razor-wire fences – but it was also symbolized by courageous private groups and individuals,
including many faculty, staff and students at CEU, who organized humanitarian relief efforts.

Many of you are here today, and I commend and thank you for what you are doing. This work on the Frontiers of Humanity is at the heart of CEU’s mission – promoting a social vision that values all lives, irrespective of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender or religion.

Last month, as the situation here became increasingly dire, I convened a CEU Refugee Task Force to support the university’s response. I can’t imagine a better way to have marked the start of CEU’s 25th anniversary than:

- By providing space to volunteer relief groups,
- By organizing donation campaigns,
- By coordinating translation assistance,
- By training volunteers,
- By holding teach-ins, and
- By opening classes this fall for audit by registered refugees.

There are also so many projects that I can’t possibly name them all. Let me cite just three as examples of the tremendous range of what’s been done by members of the CEU community on this new Frontiers of Humanity:

- A mobile WIFI hotspot station was developed by Kate Coyer of the Center for Media, Data and Society, and Stefan Roch, a public policy doctoral student.
- An ambitious project to engage refugees in planning the reconstruction of their city of Aleppo, initiated by Bob Templer, is being run by two Syrian Fellows, Al Hakam Shaar and Armenak Tokmajyan, at the Center for Conflict, Negotiation and Recovery.
- One of our student speakers today, Constanze Jeitler, has launched the CEU Helps Facebook page to provide practical information about how and where to volunteer.

I want to take a few moments to reflect on CEU at the beginning of our 25th year.

We offer degrees in many fields, but all are based on the same six principles.

The first principle is the pursuit of truth. In a world of propaganda, distortions and lies, truth is difficult, like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The second principle is having honest relationship with history. History is filled with difficult truths that politicians like to sweep under the rug. The pursuit of truth means that we shouldn’t let them.

Third is freedom of thought and speech. It’s easy to tune out those with whom you disagree -- much harder to listen and debate. But that’s what we do at CEU.
Fourth is respect for the dignity of individuals and groups. CEU is the most diverse community you’ll ever be in, and its strength comes from the mutual respect in which we hold each other.

Fifth is the rule of law. This is a big one. Law is the bulwark against abuse of power, and we must protect it from the abuses of politics.

Finally, and above all, CEU teaches how to challenge conventional wisdom and how to think critically. This is the intellectual heart of our university, and it’s what we try to do every day.

A quarter of a century ago these six principles brought down the Berlin Wall and liberated Central and Eastern Europe. They are the principles of an open society, and they inspired the founding of CEU.

Today they are challenged across the globe, and their defense is our mission.

In the face of this challenge our university is flourishing.

We’ve recruited excellent students from all over the world. We’ve brought together an outstanding international faculty immersed in the study of human affairs. We’ve become a center of excellence in teaching and research. We’re among the top five universities in Europe today in winning EU support for research in the social sciences and humanities, and we’re ranked by the Times Higher
Education review among the top 100 universities in the world in these fields.

We’re sharpening our open society mission at a time when closed societies are reemerging.

Our graduates are reforming economies, leading democratic governments, promoting human rights, helping refugees, running universities, teaching students, creating start-ups, managing businesses, fighting corruption and working to build a better world.

I’m sure you’re wondering how to prepare for these kinds of careers: four words of advice: learn to think critically.

We live in a world drowning in information and starving for truth.

Facts today are often less accepted than opinions, analysis less favored than advocacy, justice less served than prejudice.

As CEU students you need to think for yourselves, to guard against attractive lies, resist easy conclusions.

We’re committed to critical thinking as a principle of open society, even as models of closed society have sprung up all over.

New authoritarian models that promise stability by silencing opponents.
Nationalist models that appeal to fear and racism to justify building fences and exclusion.

Populist models that sweep away the checks and balances protecting minorities.

Economic models of unregulated markets that produce wealth for the few but impose hardships on the many.

Beyond these closed society models, constitutional democracies in the West are plagued by dysfunction – in politics, in economics and in the way governments relate to their citizens.

In the midst of these challenges, CEU strives to be a beacon of open society and is looking to the future.

We’re renewing and expanding our campus. We’re building bridges between the humanities and the social sciences. We’re offering innovative programs in public policy and business. We’re educating students to navigate the contested world. And we’re defining ourselves as a frontier university.

CEU is taking a stand for the principles that define our university. On the Frontiers of Humanity, we’re responding as volunteers and academics to the horrific refugee crisis all round us, and on the Frontiers of Democracy, we’re exploring the many variations,
weaknesses, strengths, friends and enemies of democratic governance.

Last year we launched a far-reaching series of conferences and lectures on democracy.

We’re looking closely and critically at what makes democracy – traditionally this includes free elections, free speech, free media, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, a regulated market economy, the protection of minorities, civil liberties, civil society and the intellectual freedom of universities and cultural institutions. What do these traditional concepts mean today? What experiments are being done today? What’s the meaning of democracy in the digital age? Why is democracy supported or rejected, and what are its benefits and costs?

A university should be at the center of debate, and that’s what CEU is all about. We seek out many points of view. We invite experts, practitioners and officials with differing perspectives. This year, as part of our 25th anniversary, we will host four major international conferences in CEU’s Frontiers of Democracy series. We will look at the problems of constitutional democracies, and the populist appeal of government by majority. We will explore the ways in which democracy can be undermined from within by leaders who use elections to gain control over the institutions of pluralism. We will look at challenges to democracy in Hungary, in the EU, in Russia, in
the US and far beyond. And we will do this in a framework of critical thinking and openness to competing views.

What is the value of democracy today? Can liberal democracy be revitalized? What are the costs of illiberal democracy? Are new civic approaches and a new vocabulary needed to support democratic values?

These questions are at the core of the humanities, the social sciences, law, public policy and business. Interdisciplinary areas like cognitive science, network science, religious studies and the School of Public Policy offer new perspectives.

The last point I want to make is about the new cross-cutting intellectual themes that we are developing to create new interdisciplinary opportunities at CEU and bring the university together. After much discussion by the faculty and engagement last year across academic units, this year we are planning four broad themes within the framework of our existing departments and schools. The themes are social mind, inequalities and social justice, governance and energy and society. These themes are expected to generate cross-disciplinary teaching and research, and I’m sure you’ll hear much more about them during the fall.

So, let me welcome you again to our 25th academic year. It will be my capstone year as Rector, and we will all have key roles to play as
members of this remarkable CEU community of students, faculty, staff and alumni, here on the frontiers of humanity and democracy.