

Commencement 2015:
On the Frontiers of Democracy

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You are a tapestry of the world – 652 students from 80 countries on every continent, from Albania to Zimbabwe.

Your degrees are in many fields, but all are based on the same principles.

The pursuit of truth.

An honest relationship with history.

Freedom of thought and speech.

Respect for the dignity of individuals and groups.

The rule of law.

And above all, a commitment to think critically and challenge conventional wisdom.

A quarter of a century ago these principles brought down the Berlin Wall.

And they inspired the founding of this university.

Today these same principles are under attack, as they were earlier from fascism and communism.

But the attacks today are more complex and more difficult to recognize than the attacks of totalitarianism. They come from other dangerous “isms” – nationalism, racism, authoritarianism and many variations on these themes – that undermine democratic societies.

But as these challenges have grown, so has our university.

We’ve recruited outstanding students like you from all over the world. We’ve brought together an international faculty immersed in the study of human affairs. We’ve become a center of excellence in teaching and research.

And the generosity of our founder and other supporters has allowed us to make daring plans for the future.

We have sharpened our open society mission at a time when closed societies are coming back into vogue.

As CEU graduates you will pursue this mission in many different ways -- by reforming economies, leading governments, promoting human rights, helping refugees, teaching students,

running think tanks, creating start-ups, managing businesses, fighting corruption and working to build a better world.

I know you're asking yourselves how you can do this? The answer is to think critically, the way you have learned to do at CEU.

You know that the world we live in is drowning in information and starving for truth.

You know that the facts are often less accepted than opinions, analysis less favored than advocacy, justice less served than prejudice.

You know how to think for yourselves, to guard against attractive lies, to resist easy conclusions.

As you make your way in the world you will encounter many seductive models of closed society.

Authoritarian models that bring stability and silence critics.

Nationalist models that appeal to fear and racism by excluding minorities and migrants.

Majoritarian models that look democratic, but sweep away the checks and balances that are necessary for real democracy.

Unregulated market models that produce wealth for the few while imposing hardships on the many who are left behind.

Critical thinking means looking critically at democracy itself, which Winston Churchill famously described as the worst form of government, apart from all the others.

Democracies today that are obsessed with security and surveillance are in danger of becoming the enemies of freedom and civil liberties.

Democracies today that allow unregulated money to influence elections, and create huge inequalities of wealth, are in danger of seeding their own destruction.

These are some of the models of closed society that are all around us.

Our job is to defend CEU's autonomy against those who would take it away, and to serve its mission in a hostile environment.

We are defending academic freedom by resisting the pressure to censor controversial speech.

We are promoting an open society by teaching its values and celebrating its heroes, like the International Renaissance Foundation of Ukraine, on whom this morning our founder will bestow the Open Society Prize of 2015.

We are a university on the frontiers of democracy, committed to preparing CEU graduates like you to find your way in a hotly contested and rapidly changing world.

It won't be easy, but you won't be alone. Today you are joining a global network of CEU alumni, now more than 12,000 strong in 126 countries. Make sure to use this network – it's your lifetime connection to CEU.

Sixteen years ago, the Open Society Prize was awarded to Vaclav Havel, a courageous leader who was inspired by the same values as the Renaissance Foundation.

In his acceptance speech Vaclav Havel defined the meaning of open society in words that describe the world to which we aspire:

“An Open Society – that is a society of people exercising free association, a society that does not dictate any ideology – requires an open human being with an open mind.”

You are graduating as open human beings with open minds. And there is a long line of CEU graduates before you who have these same attributes.

Let me tell a story about some of them.

Six years ago, at the beginning of my term as President, a graduate in Nationalism Studies consulted me about a project she was starting in Srebrenica, the town in Bosnia where genocide was committed in 1995.

The aim of the project was to bring together young Serbs and Bosniaks who had grown up in the shadow of mass atrocities. The goal was to create a forum where the hopes and dreams of a new multi-ethnic generation could begin to be realized.

I have a strong personal connection to the Srebrenica Project. In August 1995 I was the first international official to reach the killing fields and interview the survivors, working with Richard Holbrooke, who four years ago was posthumously awarded the Open Society Prize.

Twenty years later there is a new crisis in the Western Balkans. Frozen ethnic politics and deep-rooted corruption threaten the peace and stability of the region.

CEU graduates like the ones who founded the Srebrenica project are working to overcome that terrible legacy, and what they are doing is at the heart of what this university stands for.

It can be dangerous to stand up for open society. In Azerbaijan today, two CEU alumni are political prisoners because of their work on its behalf.

Nearly fifty years ago, Robert F. Kennedy, the brother of the assassinated American President, gave a famous speech to white South African students at the University of Cape Town. South Africa was then in the grip of the racist apartheid system.

In his speech, Kennedy urged the students to challenge the system by invoking the example of those who had resisted fascism in Europe during World War II.

Here's what he told them:

“It is from the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression.”

So I urge you to go forth armed with the ideal of an open society. And what you do to change the world will make us proud that you graduated from CEU!