

CEU 25

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Your big day has finally arrived! Let's start by giving a big round of applause for our graduating students.

In a few minutes you will get your diplomas, I will hand them out on this stage for the last time, and CEU will turn 25 – the ripe old age that most of you have reached, so in a sense we're all graduating here together. You and I will head out into the world together, and CEU will head into its next quarter century as the world's open society university.

As I look out at you, I can see a great tapestry of nations and cultures.

There are 690 of you, and you come from 81 countries. We congratulate you, and your families and friends who have come from near and far to cheer you on.

I want to thank the CEU Board of Trustees for their support; our founder, George Soros, for his vision and generosity; our faculty and staff for their comradeship; my successor, Michael Ignatieff for his commitment to the University; and last and above all, I want to thank Ellen for being my constant partner in this great adventure!

And now, let me say this to our graduates: You have many excellent qualities.

You've shown great persistence – not only in the classroom, but also on the soccer field, where your team vanquished the CEU faculty and staff team last month in a dazzling tie-breaking shoot-out!

You've shown that you're committed to open society values – you responded last fall to the refugee crisis, by volunteering at the Keleti train station in Budapest and in many other places, and by helping humanitarian organizations like Medecins sans Frontieres – whom we honor with this year's Open Society Prize.

You've shown what makes CEU the most diverse international university in the world, a place that celebrates your many nations and cultures, in contrast to the corrosive nationalism of our time.

The degrees you have earned are in many fields, but all are based on the same five principles.

Freedom of thought.

The pursuit of truth.

An honest relationship with history.

Respect for the dignity of individuals and groups.

And the rule of law.

A quarter century ago CEU was founded on these principles.

Today they're challenged from all directions.

These challenges are complex, more difficult to recognize than the earlier challenges of totalitarianism. They come from other “isms” – nationalism, racism, authoritarianism.

We’re working at CEU to meet these challenges.

We’ve recruited outstanding students from all over the world.

We’ve brought together a distinguished international faculty.

We’ve become a center of excellence in teaching and research.

And we’ve sharpened our mission to reimagine what makes an open society in the 21st century.

You’ve learned many things at CEU.

You’ve learned what it means to be on the frontiers of democracy.

You’ve learned that a world drowning in information is starving for truth.

You’ve learned to guard against attractive lies, and resist easy conclusions.

You’ve learned that there are many seductive models of closed society, and what to do to guard against them.

Authoritarian models that promise stability and silence critics.

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

Majoritarian models that sweep away the checks and balances of democratic governance.

Free market models that produce wealth for the few and inequality for the many.

You've learned about the dangers of closed minds and closed societies by thinking for yourself, and thinking critically.

You know that it won't be easy to navigate in today's hotly contested world, but as CEU graduates you won't be alone.

You are joining a global network of 13343 alumni in 129 countries. Stay connected – CEU is your lifelong asset!

Seventeen years ago, CEU awarded the Open Society Prize to Vaclav Havel for his lifelong commitment to the struggle for democracy and human rights.

In his acceptance speech Havel defined an open society in words that might well describe your link to CEU:

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

CEU alumni are open human beings with open minds.

Let me tell you a story about some of them.

In my first year as Rector, a graduate from Nationalism Studies came to me about a project she wanted to start in Srebrenica, the town in Bosnia where genocide had been committed.

Her project was to bring together young Serbs and Bosnians who had grown up in the shadow of that genocide. Her goal was to create a place where the hopes and dreams of a new generation could 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 the late Richard Holbrooke, who four years ago was posthumously awarded CEU's Open Society Prize.

Today there is still instability in the Western Balkans. Frozen ethnic politics and deep-rooted corruption continue to plague the region.

But CEU graduates from all parts of the former Yugoslavia are working to overcome that 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, a CEU alumnus Ilgar Mammadov (POLS '98) has been a political prisoner for two years. I call again for his release, as I did from this podium last year.

Half a century ago, Robert Kennedy gave a famous speech to South African students at the University of Cape Town. South Africa was then in the grip of the racist apartheid system, and the students were beginning to resist.

In words that resonate today, Kennedy cited the example of the German students who had resisted fascism during World War II.

Here's what he told his audience:

“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.”

The ideal of an open society is like a ripple of hope. Armed with that ideal, each of you who are graduating here today can create your own centers of energy and daring in the world that you are entering.

The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote about the values that might inspire you. His poem “Incantation” describes the journey you are on, and the spirit of CEU on its 25th anniversary.

*Human reason is beautiful and invincible.
No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,
No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
It establishes the universal ideas in language,
And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.
It puts what should be above things as they are,
Is an enemy of despair and a friend of hope.
It does not know Jew from Greek or slave from master,
It gives us the estate of the world to manage and change.*

As you go forth into that world, you will encounter many

who scoff at these words and the values they express. But if you hold onto them, and use your powers of critical thinking to push back, I believe that each of you in your own way can overcome the skeptics and succeed in changing the world.

It will be proud moment for you and for me when I present you with your degrees. I am proud of you, and honored to have led this great university from which you are graduating today.

Thank you, and good luck!