

„Ideas do not apply for visas”

Michael Ignatieff’s and János Kornai’s speeches at the Open Society Prize award ceremony

Central European University (CEU) has awarded the *Open Society Prize* to János Kornai, professor emeritus at Harvard University and Corvinus University of Budapest. The Prize was awarded at the June 22, 2018, graduation ceremony of the university, after the new graduates received their degrees. Below, find Kornai’s laudation by Rector and President of CEU Michael Ignatieff and then the speech delivered at the occasion by János Kornai.

LAUDATION BY MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

By sheer force of thought, Janos Kornai pioneered an economic analysis that laid bare the destructive irrationality of ‘closed societies’ of the communist type. Key works such as *Overcentralization* and *Economics of Shortage* inspired a generation of reformers in China, Russia and Eastern Europe. After 1989, when the transitions began, Kornai’s works such as *The Road to Freedom* proposed a humane and just path toward a market economy. A quiet iconoclast, a free spirit, a much loved teacher, a devoted husband and father, a radical thinker and a critical patriot, Janos Kornai demonstrates what one man can achieve when his life and work are inspired by a commitment to freedom and a fearless intellectual honesty, the essential values of an open society.

SPEECH BY JÁNOS KORNAI

I am very proud to have been awarded the Open Society Prize.¹ And you, graduating students, you can be proud to have studied at this university. Recognition of any kind brings joy to the recipient, and a graduating student is always pleased to have successfully completed his or her studies. What makes our pride really special, however, is the fact that I received the prize and you received your degree from *this particular* university.

CEU does more than merely advocate the idea of university autonomy, the fundamental principle of the world of universities that goes back hundreds of years. CEU embodies that idea in the way it works, giving us an example of how to put it into practice. The life of CEU is characterized by free debate, discussion of conflicting ideas, competition between schools

¹ The Prize was first awarded to Karl Popper, in 1994, who developed the concept of the *open society*. Further awardees include Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic (1999), Árpád Göncz, President of the Republic of Hungary (2000), Bronislaw Geremek, former Polish minister of foreign affairs (2001), Tom Lantos, member of the US House of Representatives (2003), Ricardo Lagos, former president of Chile (2006), Carla Del Ponte, former Chief Prosecutor at International Criminal Tribunal (2007), Kofi Annan, former chief secretary of the United Nations (2007), Richard Holbrooke, US special envoy (2010, posthumously), Javier Solana, former secretary general of the European Commission (2011), *Médecins Sans Frontières* (2016) and Joachim Gauck, former president of Germany (2017).

of thought, openness to alternative principles, and diversity. Ideas do not recognize borders, do not apply for entry or exit visas: CEU sets us an example in this as well. I sincerely hope that when you take off your ceremonial gowns and go on to your further studies or take up your professions, you will pass on the way of thinking you have got used to and acquired here.

CEU has found itself in an uncertain situation. I would like to take this ceremonial opportunity to express my solidarity. It was not difficult to support this university when it worked in peace, undisturbed. The real test of friendship is what you do for your friends when they are in trouble, when they have to overcome difficulties. It is good to see how many real friends CEU has – it can count me among them.

Students, you who are now leaving behind these fine buildings, these familiar classrooms, however far you may go, pay attention to what is happening to your Alma Mater and remain its true friends.

In a brilliant essay Albert Hirschman contrasted two ways in which we can express our dissatisfaction and can act on our grievances: *exit* or *voice*, to leave or to protest. *Loyalty* strongly motivates whoever has to make a choice. If staying really becomes impossible, then exit can be the only practical way of survival. There are no universally valid rules about these hard choices. Here and now in Hungary, here and now in the post-socialist region, the sense of loyalty suggests the point of view that we should stay here and carry on with the work that has been started. We have to be faithful to those ideas which so badly need to take root in this soil, in this land which was closed off from the free flow of thought for so long periods of history. If we owe allegiance to anybody or anything, it is to that ideas of which CEU is such an important representative in this part of the world, east of the former Iron Curtain.

The fight for an open society, for democracy or human rights, can be fought with many means. The communiqué about the prize and the oration delivered just now by the Rector name several people who have received the prize in the past. I would like to mention Vaclav Havel, Árpád Göncz, Bronislaw Geremek and Joachim Glauk in particular. They all lived different lives. What they share (and I could include myself as well) is that they were all born in Eastern Europe; it was there that they learnt, by bitter experience, what dictatorship and the seclusion of a society from the West means.

I am especially proud that I am now the second Hungarian to be awarded this prize. I am pleased that the first one was Árpád Göncz, who is still loved by so many and fondly referred to as “Uncle Árpí”.

I hope you, new graduates, who have come from other countries, will not only take home memories of accumulating problems, of malicious rhetoric and harmful events. I hope that the image of this beautiful city, of the surroundings of the university which radiate calm, of the enchanting view unfolding from the banks of the Danube only a few steps away, will remain with you. You must have looked around in the country, and enjoyed Lake Balaton, gone on trips in the Hungarian hills and mountains, listened to Hungarian music. Maybe you have even encountered poems by Hungarian poets. It would be good if the world get a fair and balanced picture, and was not only informed of the depressing events in Hungary, but if they heard about what is decent and beautiful here, in this country, from such a reliable source as the lips of CEU graduates. I hope they spread the word about the many Hungarians who fight for human rights, for liberty and for a society founded on democratic principles.

I consider the first laureate, Karl Popper, to be a particularly fine example. I strive to follow his example above all, as he lived his life in the academic world. He was a philosopher, and was influential especially as a researcher, the author of studies and books, and as a teacher, who affected not only his own students and colleagues, but other philosophers and the world at large. And not only people working in his own field, but also those who are actively involved in cultivating and studying all the other fields of scholarship. But beyond that, and I wish to emphasize this, many of his thoughts carried a powerful message for the whole of society. It seems to me that the right thing to do at this occasion is to emphasize what the name of the prize that is being awarded now embodies: Popper's aspiration for an *open society*. History has brought forth, and continues to bring forth, many social systems which violate this ideal, which try to obstruct the free diffusion of ideas and strive to force a single set of ideas, its own ideology on everyone. Such systems are intolerant, unable to accept anything different. And of course they do not only want to reject foreign ideas, but also all foreign people, viewing them with suspicion, heavily influenced by prejudice. We badly need Popper's encouragement, the spread of the principle of the open society. Solid research has proved this, and books of world-wide renown illustrate the fact with many examples: accepting, inclusive societies have a much better chance of economic development and higher and longer-lasting rates of progress and innovation than deliberately enclosed, exclusive societies.

Here I turn yet again to the young, to the fresh graduates in particular. When you get back home, of course you will have the right to close yourselves off within the four walls of your professional workplace, or to continue your studies, to huddle in university rooms and build a cocoon in the small microcosm of your profession. It is even possible that you will achieve great things in this way. But the university which is now sending you on your way does not advocate such behavior. Do not become a blinkered expert of only one narrow discipline; observe the world with eyes wide open. And let us not only observe, but let each of us take part in public affairs – each in his or her own way. If you see that things are going wrong around you, you should raise your voice. There are many ways to do this. I do not urge everybody to rush to the barricades and tear up the cobble-stones like the students in Paris fifty years ago. Nor do I claim that you can only act with words of fire. Sir Karl Popper, for example, spoke politely in academic debates and public affairs. But he did speak!

Popper's idea of an open society motivates us time and again to speak out. In my country, Hungary not only CEU is under threat, but there are also plans endangering the autonomy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and its relationship to its chain of research institutes. I use this podium to express my solidarity with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and would like to give all my moral support for the defense of its autonomy. The greater the hardship, the more important it is to stand up for openness, autonomy of communities, freedom of research and teaching, human rights and democracy.

I would like to say thank you, once more, for the honor bestowed on me by CEU.