

**Words of thanks to mark
the presentation of the Open Society Prize
in Budapest on 23 June 2017**

Only for press:

Text in advance.

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Mr President, Rector (Ignatieff),
Students,

How delighted I am to be with you here in Budapest on this special day and join with you in celebrating the completion of your academic training! I would like to offer my sincere congratulations to all those being awarded an academic degree today – with or without distinction – and I wish you every success in your plans for the future.

Mr Ignatieff,

Thank you very much for your extremely kind words about me and my work. And I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to you, together with your university bodies, for presenting me with the Open Society Prize. It is a great honour for me to receive this prize this year and in this place.

I am thankful and moved on two counts: because of the purpose of the prize, which stands for a tolerant, open and democratic society. But also because of the people whose names are associated with the prize and whose work we regard with particular respect: the first prizewinner, Karl Popper, and other outstanding defenders of democratic values such as Václav Havel and Martti Ahtisaari.

Yet this prize, which promotes an open society and is awarded in Hungary's capital, awakens in me very personal memories, which I would like to share with you.

It is the memory of Hungary's great liberal tradition, of its citizens' love of freedom. I can still very clearly recall 1956, when Hungarians courageously took a stand against Communist rule. As a 16-year-old citizen of another Soviet-controlled dictatorship, I was full of hope as I followed the first

peaceful protests initiated by students in this city. They invoked the Revolution of 1848 and, like the revolutionaries in those days, called for more civil liberties, a parliamentary democracy and national sovereignty. Ideas that were unheard of in the sphere of Soviet imperialist influence! Many citizens throughout Hungary quickly followed the students, and soon the ruling powers could no longer ignore the calls for freedom. It took the intervention of Soviet tanks, the use of brutal violence, to put a merciless stop to the democratic revolution. In the face of such violence, harassment and oppression, the people hid their longing for freedom and self-determination, but they did not allow it to be snuffed out, and they nurtured it over many decades. For us Germans from the GDR, they seemed to demonstrate their desire for freedom very confidently, certainly much more openly and bravely than we had seen in our own country. Whenever we visited Hungary, we were amazed by the self-assurance of the people here, and by life in general, which seemed to us more liberal than life in the GDR.

In summer 1989, we observed Hungary again from our perspective in East Germany, captivated by the reforms that were taking place there. Step by step, the Hungarian people reclaimed their independence and freedom. And when the gateway to freedom gradually also began to open up for many citizens from the GDR, we were inspired by the open and liberal attitude of the Hungarians. It was the images of the Pan-European Picnic in Sopronpuszta and then the legal opening of the Hungarian-Austrian border for GDR citizens on 10 September 1989 that also encouraged us in the GDR.

The *spiritus rector* of this university and of the Open Society Prize, George Soros, is an outstanding example of Hungarians' liberal and open stance. Soros, who grew up in this city, escaped persecution by Nazi thugs and survived the Siege of Budapest, went on to study with Karl Popper in London after the War and became one of the most persistent advocates of a liberal society in Central and Eastern Europe. From an early stage he worked with his Open Society Foundation in Warsaw Pact countries and supported their transformation from totalitarian states to democratic societies.

Why am I sharing my memories with you today? Not for the sake of the memories themselves, but because we constantly have to remind ourselves of who we are and what we have already achieved. It was the citizens of Hungary who longed and struggled for freedom, and now some of them feel that this freedom is under threat or has even been lost. At that time, we longed for a Europe without borders – and now some people see this openness as a threat. Both in the East and in the West we worked to create a united continent, and now some wish to retreat to their own nation states. In 1989, Hungarians led the way in fighting for freedom, democracy and an open society.

We won this freedom together – and I would also like to see us using and embracing this freedom together!

I am well aware, and probably you are too, that this liberal democracy is not perfect. Unlike other systems of government, it makes no claim to be so. On the contrary, it is able and willing to learn. It is the only system that doesn't seek to hide its failures and weaknesses but desires to resolve them – by scientific findings or clashes of opinions! And it values highly and promotes an active civil society.

And particularly at a time when, in many places, established orders are being called into question and many certainties are being shaken, we need to remember our own experiences. We need to embrace the challenges and defend liberal democracy. We can cite its achievements and don't have to sweep its weaknesses under the carpet. And we can do this with much more confidence than those who wish to return to standardised opinions in politics and science – they have achieved nothing in the past and have nothing to offer for the future. Liberal democracy does have something to offer.

Students, to conclude my words of thanks, I would like to round off my congratulations to you with a request:

Get involved in politics – either here or in your home town. And even if you only manage to take small steps and reap small successes, anything is better than just waiting and watching. Participate actively in the debates and join us in building a united Europe which values freedom and openness and shows responsibility in putting them into practice.