Monsieur le président,
Dear Professors,
Autorita,

Dear Families, my dear Friends.

I want to thank Veerle Deckmyn for giving me the opportunity to speak in front of you on such a joyful day. This salute gives me an occasion to congratulate you all, and at the same time acknowledge the institution that awards us today.

I started the PhD program with the idea that writing a thesis was a solitary endeavour. Spending a few years at the European University Institute has proven me wrong, and on many different levels. Research in the social sciences and humanities is a resolutely collective enterprise. The time when writing a thesis meant years of solitude - and perhaps loneliness - is definitely over. The EUI, with its unique academic environment, perfectly embodies this transformation.

The EUI is a university of excellence, but to fully grasp its influence we have to go back to the “idea of university”. I borrow this expression from Cardinal John Henry Newman, who established the standards by which we should abide over 150 years ago. To put it simply, the university aims at the disinterested search of the truth whatever its consequences, at the deepening and the communication of knowledge for itself, regardless of any utilitarian considerations. To follow the words of Newman, “When I speak of Knowledge, I mean something intellectual, something which grasps what it perceives through the senses; something which takes a view of things; which sees more
than the senses convey; which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees; which invests it with an idea."

How do these noble aspirations materialize? I believe there are two necessary elements common to all universities, and two additional elements, which in my mind the EUI sets as a standard.

It all starts with a good library. This is really self-evident, and doesn't require a lot of elaboration. It is however an opportunity to praise the abundant resources of our library, which would be inoperable without devoted librarians.

Second, a university requires a community of thinkers. We should always insist that the people gathered here today are not the employees of the university, but they are the university itself. In the particular case of the EUI, I would add that its employees – from the directors of services to those who it make possible and enjoyable to work in this environment are equally indispensable to our university community.

I now turn to two unique ways in which the EUI truly embodies the idea of university.

First, our institute fosters a true sense of academic citizenship. Because it is interdisciplinary, because it is far less hierarchical than most doctoral schools, because the EUI encourages us to truly engage with one another: we do more than write our own research. We exchange with professors and peers, we learn from them, we learn by commenting on their work. We have the opportunity to regularly engage with academics from the rest of the world. And we pursue this work through passionate discussions in the bars and on the terraces of the Badia, Schifanoia, Villa Paola – and now the new buildings – places that resonate with scientific controversy.

But we cannot exaggerate, and claim that all discussions around these buildings are exclusively scientific. And it brings me to the final factor that is, in my opinion, the greatest strength of the EUI: it generates a truly humanistic community, in the original sense of the term. Few abbeys would meet the humanist aspirations of the renaissance as our Badia Fiesolana does today. The EUI is a culturally vibrant institution, rich in diversity and passion for the world of arts. After a day of research, one can enjoy and contribute to music concerts, theatre plays, photographs exhibitions; a cine club, a Festival of Arts. But also practice almost every sport - and not the least, watch and play
football in our beloved Coppa Pavone. And let us not forget its linguistic diversity. The hazard of history has made English the most spoken language in the village of San Domenico di Fiesole. But all of us also speak, think in, and create in other languages. One recent initiative really captures the humanism of our community: the EUI refugee initiative, in which the EUI in general, and a group of individuals in particular, stemming from all over Europe, walking different professional paths, and emerging from very different backgrounds, have embraced a group of asylum seekers in our community. This commitment of our institution and the devotion of everyone involved testify to the humanist pulse that animates our idea of university. Because, in the famous words of François Rabelais: “Sagesse n’entre pas en âme malveillante et science sans conscience n’est que ruine de l’âme”.

I shall not argue the EUI is a perfect institution. We also have our flaws. But we can count on this humanistic community of academic citizens to watch carefully over this institution. And as much as we can celebrate the laureates of today, we are the past. We shall encourage our successors to remain loyal to the character of the EUI, and trust they can strengthen it. We are in a privileged institution, but not an Ivory tower. We are resolutely open to the world, and very aware of the many challenges it faces.

This humanistic community of academic citizens is not to be found only in the EUI. Surely, other places in Europe and in the world have achieved the idea of university. And some face the greatest threats precisely for that. I was not given any mandate when asked to give this speech other than to give a salute. Yet I want to make a clear political statement. I take the opportunity to address it to Professor András Sajó, but I hope it can have a wider echo. Because in Budapest they want to silence academics, precisely because they form a community of people who think freely, people who share international and humanistic values. On behalf of my peers, and our institution, I want to reaffirm that we stand with the Central European University. And I have faith that this commitment means more than just words, or wearing a badge, and that we will do all that is within our capacity to help our peers of CEU resist.

In many ways our idea of the university is under threat, be it by nationalist autocrats or lunatics who want to reduce established scientific truths to “alternative facts”. And we shall make no mistake, because silencing academics is usually only the beginning of a
story this continent has lived through too many times. It goes together with chasing the media, harassing political opponents and building walls. Forbidding or burning books. And as Heinrich Heine reminds us: «Dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende Auch Menschen».

Dear friends, I trust our common experience here at the EUI has given us the intellectual confidence to stand against these threats. And when I look around me, at this new generation of academics, I can only be optimist. We will now disperse over Europe and the world, find new jobs, make new friends, maybe found families, but I know all of you will carry with you a bit of the humanistic spirit of the EUI and spread our idea of university.

Éljen a szabadság.

Vive l’Institut Universitaire Européen.

Grazie a tutti.