Today is a special day for all of us.

Most of you completed your last exams, and this means being free of CEU – when professors turn your last grades in, your will have your diplomas. Congratulations!

10 months ago, in the Auditorium, I promised you a year full of challenges, of friendships and even of fun. Looking into your eyes now, I can tell that at least some of that came true – despite classes, assignments, exams and deadlines. In terms of sheer numbers, you spent 150 teaching days in school – and each and every one of you spent at least 16,800 minutes or 336 hours in the classroom, and the cohort as a whole passed 71 exams in 30 exam days. Even saying these numbers out loud is hard work. Very-well done!

Some of you did more than attend classes and pass exams. The Vienna moot court team and the Hult prize teams took the name of the University to new places.

Others organized campaigns and events to share with the rest of us with what matters to them beyond readings, assignments and papers.

The student representatives made an excellent job in supporting the Department’s self-study efforts for this year’s regular review. I would like to thank them each for not only soliciting opinions and participation in these meetings, but also for encouraging students to provide insight which would have been impossible to gather otherwise.

This academic year has been made possible – no, not only by your professors – but by less visible forces who kept us, students and faculty, at bay. I would like to use this very special day to thank those invisible hands who made this year possible.

Very special thanks are due to Nora. Last summer she agreed somewhat reluctantly and on rather short notice to take over as department coordinator. Her extraordinary leadership skills, strategic mind, eternal patience and grace kept us all on the right track throughout the year. Her attention to detail far exceeds reasonable expectations. Her precision is legendary. If all of us could do half as good in our first year in a new position, we would feel very accomplished. And then there is Nora. Thank you ever so much!

Lea has been in charge of our lives in more than one way: she set schedules for classes and exams, made many other projects run smoothly – in addition to overseeing the doctoral program. As for many years before, she has been excellent in bringing order to chaos and continued to convince us all that doing the schedule was child’s play. All I can say is: anyone will find otherwise who gives it a try from scratch.

True to her character, Lea is looking for a new challenge in life: she will start a part time MA degree from September. Please join me in thanking Lea and wishing her the best of luck in her new undertaking!
Tunde, the master of readers and the e-learning site, the enforcer of thesis deadlines, the chaperone of GPAs has returned to the Department as her true self this year. She did an excellent job in all these tasks, providing our daily food for thought. Behind the scenes she has been instrumental to data collection and editing for the annual report. At times this task required the impossible and even a little more. Thanks a lot, Tunde, for all the excellent work this year!

Virag has helped many of us during the year, with projects large and small. We wish her good luck with her new career after CEU!

The Department, and especially the IBL program, will see important personnel changes with the next academic year. Professor Varady is retiring after 23 years at CEU, while Professor Messmann in leaving after 17 years. They have been honored by colleagues earlier this week in a small ceremony. They sure leave large shoes to fill. So please give some encouragement for Professor Tajti who will take over as chair of the IBL program from the next academic year!

Speaking of large shoes: after many-many years Professor Tajti is giving up the directorship of the doctoral program. As program director he oversaw many comprehensive exams and defenses, convened the weekly seminar – and to my absolute admiration – kept track of credits earned by doctoral students for a wide range of activities. I believe I am speaking in the name of all doctoral students when I say that he will be greatly missed – and we hope that he will be a frequent visitor in the weekly seminars. Professor Kollonay kindly agreed to take over this position to our great delight. We thank her for being so selfless and adventurous.

Finally: after three years in that large office, I will be stepping down as head of department. I would like to thank all colleagues who did their best (and went far beyond their job descriptions) to make my life easier for these three years. We have shared many great moments and successes, while responsibility for the mistakes remains solely mine.

Rest assured: with Professor Bard’s leadership the Department will be in safe hands. We are all grateful to him for agreeing to take over for another term, especially in light of the challenges which lay ahead.

Colleagues and friends know that I really am not a person for group photos and long speeches, especially at times when I stand between a hungry group and their food. You had a fair share of farewell speeches already, so you could probably do well without yet another piece of wisdom.

Today, however, is a very special day, and I would like to take a few more minutes to mark it.
Apologies in advance for being so very predictable for the one last time this year. Please bear with me when I cannot not mention that yesterday the US Supreme Court finally came to recognize marriage equality. So we did wake up to a better world today.

How does it sound like?

“A democratic, universalistic, caring and aspirationally egalitarian society embraces everyone and accepts people for who they are. To penalise people for being who and what they are is profoundly disrespectful of the human personality and violatory of equality. ... Respect for human rights requires the affirmation of self, not the denial of self. Equality therefore does not imply a levelling or homogenisation of behaviour or extolling one form as supreme, and another as inferior, but an acknowledgement and acceptance of difference.”

This sounds good and very right -- but this is not what Justice Kennedy said for the US Supreme Court yesterday.

This is what Justice Albie Sachs said for the South African Constitutional Court in their same sex marriage decision in 2005 –almost 10 years ago. [Minister of Home Affairs v Fourie, CCT 60/04, decision of December 1, 2005, para 60]

While the US Supreme Court’s coming around on same sex marriage is historic, it is not unprecedented – at best, it is timely.

It is of course momentous that Justice Kennedy got to write yesterday that “The limitation of marriage to opposite-sex couples may long have seemed natural and just, but its inconsistency with the central meaning of the fundamental right to marry is now manifest. With that knowledge must come the recognition that laws excluding same-sex couples from the marriage right impose stigma and injury of the kind prohibited by our basic charter.” [Obergefell v Hodges, 576 U.S. ___ (2015,) slip 17-18]

Getting the US Supreme Court to this acknowledgement is a major victory for the human rights community. Yet, first and foremost it is a victory for those who worked to make this very case happen. Those of us who were watching from the sidelines should remind ourselves that such victories are possible, and that such victories are brought along as a the result of the efforts (successes and failures) of people just like us.

All this week’s victory took was decades of hard work, community building, awareness raising, research and lobbying, and of course, in the end some lawyers to file these suits. It took commitment, perseverance, being able to stand up when knocked down, forging alliances across tribal divisions and across continents. Talking to friends was as important in getting here as was talking to foes – or at least trying to talk to them.

This momentous victory should remind us all that such changes do not just happen – they are made to happen, by people like us. Making such change
happen takes more than tweets and posts, but it does not take more than what you and us (we) are very-well trained to do.

I would urge you all to take a moment and look around. There are many victims of human rights violations right around us who are still waiting for their day in court. You do not need to look too far to see refugees stumbling, persons with disabilities locked up in large institutions, children not getting access to proper education due to their gender or skin color. When you look at them you see victims, suffering, desperation. I would challenge you to see a client and a cause without the advocate who can make a difference.

So, to echo the Rector’s words from last week, it is time people: Go out, and change the world!

And trust me on this one: you can do it!