

TEN YEARS OF CENS AND THE WAY AHEAD

Event report

Founded by Professor Péter Balázs right after the so-called Big Bang enlargement in 2005, **the Center for EU Enlargement Studies at the Central European University celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2015**. On October 26, 2015, colleagues and partners joined together to celebrate the first decade and to hear about CENS's plans for the upcoming years.

The celebration was opened by CEU **President and Rector John Shattuck** who discussed the Center's growing engagement within the CEU community over the years and emphasized its role as an arena for critical debate on EU-related issues. He highlighted the added-value of CENS that lies also in its hybrid quality of combining academic and policy research as it follows the developments of the democratization and Europeanization in Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighborhood and in EU external relations. He reminded of CENS's "Frontiers of Democracy – Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine" project as a key focus of the Center in the upcoming year, through which it directly contributes to CEU's own Frontiers of Democracy initiative while strengthening its network in the region.

Round anniversaries always serve as an occasion to assess the past and think about the future. **Professor Péter Balázs**, founder and director of the Center recalled the founding of the Center after his return from his position as Hungary's first EU Commissioner in 2005 when CENS started to operate with a staff of three altogether. At its foundation, Professor Balázs had defined the Center's areas of inquiry along four geographic areas which remained to be in its focus throughout its first ten years. These were 1) the lessons and consequences of the 'big enlargement' with special regard to the experience of the Visegrad 4 countries and Romania, 2) the Western Balkans as the next potential dimension of EU enlargement, 3) Turkey as a long standing candidate and a strategic partner and 4) the eastern neighbors including the EU's Eastern Partnership program and Russia, another strategic neighbor.

While the context has changed over time, the Center plans to maintain its focus on these geographic areas in the future too, with thematic adjustments in line with current developments. Professor Balázs argued that while no new accession is in sight in the near future, even if negotiations with Serbia, Montenegro and Turkey are in course, post-accession conditionality and the quality of new democracies are emerging issues in several EU member states that have entered the Union in the last wave, and these matters have entered the research topics of CENS as well. Furthermore the Ukrainian crisis exploded around conflicts of an EU association agreement. The Center has covered the developments since the start of the Maidan protests already through 12 events organized at CEU, and continues to engage in research on the EU's Eastern Partnership project and the consolidation problems of the post-Soviet partner countries. Finally, it is clear today that Turkey is not only a strategic neighbor of the EU but in the current context also rises on the agenda as a key transit point for refugees coming from areas of unrest and warfare and targeting core EU countries as asylum seekers.

All the above developments suggest that the original blend of EU Enlargement Studies has changed its color and brightness with time, nevertheless the political and geographical area where CENS's activities are enrooted is extremely important for world politics, and there will surely be sufficient food for thought for the next 10 years. All in all, "CENS still makes sense," concluded Balázs.

To give some further insight into the Center's activities and future plans, its coordinators and researchers highlighted some of their experiences at CENS and the future focus of their work. **Zselyke Tófalvi**, the Center's coordinator from its start, spoke about CENS's evolution from an idea to what is now a recognized research institution. CENS's creed has been to conduct policy-relevant research and contribute to both political and scholarly debates focusing on the EU in the context of the post-communist countries that have become EU member states, and on the Union's relationship with countries in its neighborhood. She highlighted that during the past 10 years, CENS has done its best to become an institution that successfully bridges the gap between policy making and academic research.

Hana Semanić further underlined the strong emphasis CENS puts on SEE-EU relations, and more narrowly on the Western Balkans and Turkey. Even without further EU enlargement over the next five years, she said, the aspiring member states should work toward this goal by learning from the experience of the Visegrad countries. With her participation, CENS is currently involved in developing an advocacy strategy for the Western Balkan countries which would facilitate the EU enlargement toward the region, would make it faster and more efficient.

Following this trail of thought, **András Szalai** highlighted, that even though enlargement is not on the political agenda at the moment, a wide variety of issues that are strongly tied to it have been on the rise on scholars' research agenda. These issues range from Europe's magnetism in the wider neighborhood to internal institutional reform and post-accession conditionality. CENS has been at the forefront of tackling these problems of enlargement and will continue so, he said. "In accordance with our mission, continued Szalai, we have recently launched a research project that investigates the securitization of mass migration in Europe, and its implications both for the CEE region and for the EU as a whole." **Gabriella Góbl**, coordinator of the Center and a sociologist by training works closely with Szalai on the project, bringing the perspective of civil society organizations to the mix.

Bogdan Radu reminded of the CENS's commitment of studying the Europeanization and the state of democracy within post-communist countries. On the one hand, EU integration was a process that strengthened democratic consolidation, he said, while at the same time weak post-accession conditionality allowed for democratic setbacks in some more recent EU member states. He concluded that understanding democratic transition and consolidation is a process of interactive learning and sustained dialogue, through which quality of democracy can be improved in both EU member states and countries in the neighborhood.

After leading and cooperating on several research projects looking into the legal and institutional aspects of democratic transition in the Visegrad countries, CENS is now looking into how democratic transition takes hold in society in the framework of our project entitled "Frontiers of Democracy: Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine," said **Zsuzsanna Végh**. She also emphasized that with the Visegrad Group celebrating its 25th anniversary since its foundation in 2016, CENS will look into not only what the group has achieved in the past, but also how it can shape the future of the region and the European Union as a whole.

Annamária Kiss introduced the Center's focus on Russia, the post-Soviet space and the process of post-Soviet consolidation by highlighting a series of discussions CENS organized around the developments in Ukraine involving academics, politicians, civil activists

as well as CEU students. Supporting the aim of strengthening the Center's "Russian profile", CENS recently won a Jean Monnet project in cooperation with the Solokhov University in Moscow. The project will concentrate on the effects of EU values and membership on the research and innovation field, capturing the experience of the CEE countries while also aiming to promote European Union studies at higher educational institutions in Russia.

Some of CENS's key partners joined the speeches by giving their account of the cooperation and discussing how they see the Center's role in Hungary and in the wider research community in the region. **Tamás Szűcs**, head of the European Union's Representation in Hungary, recalled his time working together with Professor Balázs in Brussels at Hungary's Permanent Representation to the European Union, and highlighted CENS's key role in providing an international forum for discussing key elements of the European agenda in Hungary. This special role motivated **András Deák**, former research director of CENS and research fellow at the Institute of World Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, to join the Center in 2009 for a brief period while Professor Balázs served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary. He mentioned the unique position of CENS in Hungary: even though it is situated in Budapest its "square zero" is not Hungary, but the European Union. **Krisztina Arató**, professor of the Eötvös Loránd University and a long-term partner of the Center also emphasized this unique role through which CENS fills a gap in Hungary by being one of the very few research centers in Hungary that deal with European affairs. She mentioned that through this role CENS also has a local responsibility which she hopes can be built on in future cooperation.

The research and advocacy activities of CENS in the Visegrad Group as well as in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe are strongly supported by the International Visegrad Fund, whose director, **Beata Jaczewska** highlighted CENS's role as a stable partner in the region's think tank community and emphasized that the Fund counts on CENS's activities and expertise in its mission to provide democracy assistance in wider Europe. Hitting a more personal tone, **János Molnár** from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Budapest Office congratulated CENS and its staff on the developments of the past ten years and expressed his appreciation for the Center's cooperation on bringing new and innovative ideas to the table which go beyond the mainstream.

Finally, one of CENS's most active partners in CEU's student community, **Margaryta Rymarenko** noted that what distinguishes CENS from other CEU research centers is its openness to and strong cooperation with students. The educational and practical opportunities CENS provide for the student community, she said, contribute to developing their research, public speaking and organizational skills, which is a great added value as a whole.