

**Sperrfrist Redebeginn
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort**



**Verleihung des
Internationalen Karlspreises zu Aachen 2022**

an die

**belarussischen führenden politischen Aktivistinnen
Maria Kalesnikava, Swetlana Tichanowskaja und
Veronica Tsepkalo**

**Ansprache
der Preisträgerinnen Swetlana Tichanowskaja
und Tatsiana Khomich**

englisch

Dear President Bas,
President Metsola,
dear Minister Baerbock,
Dear Lord-Mayer Keupen,
Dear Mr Linden,
excellencies, friends,

Yesterday, a journalist asked me what my children will say, when I return with this medal. They will probably say: Mom, did you win a competition?

Let me clarify, this Charlemagne prize belongs not to me, and not to our trio – it belongs to all Belarusians. To **Belarusians who** have been showing enormous effort and dedication in their peaceful, non-violent struggle against tyranny.

It belongs to Belarusian women, journalists, and fearless volunteers. It also belongs to every kid waiting for her mom or dad from prison. To those, who will never see their beloved ones anymore.

In 2020, **Belarusians** surprised everyone and themselves first of all. It felt like it was a national awakening after 26 years of coma. Hundreds of thousands marched in 40 cities demanding free elections. We have chosen freedom over tyranny.

Belarusians lit up our fire of freedom. Since then, our resistance did not stop for a single day, but went underground. You don't see mass demonstrations: what demonstration can you expect in a GULAG? But every day we heard about a small protest, a graffiti, a sabotage action. The flame kept burning.

Belarusians realized that their fate is in their hands, and no one would make changes happen for them. We also have developed immunity against dictatorship. We realized it's our duty to make sure it doesn't repeat.

Belarusians also pay a big price for their bravery. Lukashenka's regime used every tool from "dictator's playbook". If Orwell were writing about Belarus today, we would consider his books non-fiction. Arbitrary arrests. Torture. Kidnapping. Interrogations. False confessions. Death Threats.... 4700 years – this is the combined sentence of 1300 political prisoners. Just imagine: 4700 years of stolen life...

For this regime, human life has no value. Last November, I spoke at the European Parliament and said that we don't have another year. And it came true: we really didn't have another year.

Lukashenka unleashed terror against its own citizen, then he threatened European security with a flight hijack, orchestrated the migrant crisis. Just last week, the

dictator signed a law permitting capital punishment for “**attempted** acts” of terrorism. De facto, this is a murder warrant. Shootings of political opponents are becoming a reality. Mikalai Autukhovich, a Belarusian entrepreneur charged with terrorism, could be the next victim.

You are probably tired of listening about the horrors our people are experiencing. Tired of hearing how two countries next to Russia suffer and constantly tell you that you are not doing enough. But I am not asking you to come and win for us. But I do ask you to keep the focus on Belarus.

I am grateful for the unprecedented international solidarity. Our voice has been heard at the UN Security Council, the European Parliament, Bundestag and all across the world. As Charlemagne united Europe 12 centuries ago, we united Europe again. I couldn't imagine seeing such strong solidarity with Belarus across borders and political divisions.

Today this unity is as important as ever. **Your Unity** is important for peace in Ukraine. **Your unity** is important for democracy in Belarus. Dictators are trying to divide the united West, to split the United States and Europe. They are trying to drive a wedge between the countries of the EU. They are blackmailing the world with hunger, migrants, and nuclear weapons. Sanctions on dictators should not be lifted because of blackmail. Putin and Lukashenka raise the stakes and pretend to be the lesser of two evils. The biggest sanction against Putin would be Free Belarus.

I often hear that what happens in Belarus and Ukraine is the fight between the West and the East. it's not true. It is the fight between democracy and tyranny. But it is also a struggle between past and future. Our people chose freedom and democracy, but the past keeps dragging us back.

This **evil** past only wants us to be frightened and oppressed. And we, dear ladies and gentlemen, need to follow the examples of the **good** past. Examples of great Europeans like Robert Schuman, Vaclav Havel and John Paul II who truly dedicated their lives for the sake of our continent.

Let us be inspired by their bravery, by the bravery of Belarusians and Ukrainians. And let us ensure that dictators won't make history again. The history and the future should belong to us, the free people of Europe.

Thank you!

QUOTE

"Let us be inspired by the bravery of Belarusians and Ukrainians. They fight for freedom and peace. Let us ensure that dictators won't make history again. The history and the future should belong to us, the free people of Europe."

Speech Khomich

For decades, Europe has been struggling for democracy, not only helping countries in other parts of the world, but also on its own continent. The poison of fascism, totalitarianism, and dictatorship has not yet outlived itself here – in the most developed part of the planet. Spain, Poland, Germany, Italy survived this struggle, won, and now it is a brilliant example of free and democratic countries.

Two years ago, Belarusians actively joined the struggle for freedom. By protesting against one of the two most brutal dictatorships in Europe, Belarusians have shown an example of exceptional courage and strength. Dictatorships such as the Lukashenka regime demonstrate themselves as the most ruthless, bloodthirsty and protracted. From the very beginning, it was clear to Belarusians that colossal repressions were waiting for us if we encroached on the existence of this regime. At stake were our freedom, life, safety and health, which we risked in order to live not just in a free country – in a free part of the world.

Because of the proximity to Russia, because of the close interweaving of the two regimes that help each other to do their dark deeds, in the first days of the war Belarusians had to defend themselves from attacks, comparisons with Russians, from reproaches against themselves. But we quickly got back to what we are used – to action. And our actions reminded everyone that Belarusians are a European nation that suffers from tyranny and repression but helps and resists. Thousands of Belarusian volunteers joined helping Ukraine with their hands, feet and heads. Belarusians have collected and donated impressive amounts of money. We found protection for Ukrainian soldiers, apartments for refugees, cars for transporting victims. Belarusians stopped Russian trains that transported ammunition to Ukraine – for which they can face the death penalty. And if Belarusians took up arms in this war, it was only to protect Ukraine from the Russian aggression. Belarusian volunteers are fighting for Ukraine on the front right now, and we have already lost some of them.

We don't need to be pitied. We are not “poor Belarusians”. We are strong, smart, progressive and selfless. Belarusians are a nation that has created successful private business and world-famous IT companies on the ruins of the Soviet past. We should not be fenced off, we should not be labeled and stigmatized as Russia, because we are not it. The imperial motives of the neighboring country are alien to us, we shouldn't be closed and isolated.

What is needed? It is needed to continue supporting us and helping to eliminate the dictatorship in our common region. The methods applied to Russia now should not be applied to Belarus. There cannot be a common policy and a common approach. Russia wants to grab us and jump together out of the plane with a failed parachute, but we won't let it do it. We are a European nation that was unlucky – we had to prove our right to freedom and democracy, to a full-fledged existence in the European family. But we proved it. We remember all the help we are given in the fight against the dictatorship, and we will make it worth your while in a New Belarus.

Now Belarus is one of the first countries in the world in terms of the number of political prisoners and is the first in Europe. Fifteen hundred political prisoners and several thousand Belarusians without an official status of a political prisoner are in prison for political reasons. By seeking their release, Belarusians are seeking not only the release of thousands of their relatives, friends, fellow countrymen, they are seeking the release of the largest number of political prisoners in Europe. One of the political prisoners is my sister Maria Kalesnikava – 11 years in prison. Or Viktor Babaryka, a man who decided to become president in order to bring democracy to Belarus himself – 14 years in prison. They are examples of Belarusians who had their own ordinary life and non-political work. But the history of the Belarusian resistance is not the stories of politicians, it is a whole nation of fighters for their right to decide, choose, live.