



**The International  
Charlemagne Prize  
of Aachen**  
For the Unity of Europe

**Citation by the Board of Directors of the Society  
for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen  
to the Belarusian leading political activists  
Maria Kalesnikava, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and  
Veronica Tsepalo**

"Only a few years ago, the European Union was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize for having secured peace in Europe over the past six decades. In that time, there have been so many peaceful transitions from dictatorships and oppressive regimes to fully free and open democracies that the face of Europe has been altered almost beyond recognition. So much has been achieved because the right path has been shown. I have no doubt that, in Belarus, too, a peaceful transition to democracy can be achieved. I do not believe that Europe's intention now is to simply rest on its laurels. But it must establish mechanisms that promote its values. What happens in Belarus will co-determine Europe's prospects for future success." (ZEIT ONLINE, 9.8.2021)

This fiery appeal, recently directed at the EU by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, stresses an important aspect. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain a good three decades ago, Europe has undergone truly breathtaking development. What was then the Western European Community of Twelve has now become a comprehensive Union of 27, a single market with the greatest purchasing power in the world, a globally esteemed success model.

But with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EU has increasingly lost the radiant power of its foundational narrative. The historical dimension of our United Europe as – for decades unquestionably – the greatest peace and freedom project of the post-war era, has increasingly given way to economic cost-benefit calculation. And the passion of the European founding fathers has yielded to the number crunching of financial controllers.

But while, within the EU, increasing indifference towards the political dimension of our European Project is on the rise, developments at the Union's external borders are shedding light on just how fragile our precious order of peace and freedom actually is. Examples like the criminal attempt of the Belarusian dictator Lukashenko to instrumentalise refugees and their human hardship for egomaniacal political motives, his arrangement of a terrorist 'kidnapping' of an aeroplane in order to have an undesirable blogger arrested without legal grounds, the imprisonment since August 2020 of around 900 people for political reasons as well as threats against the EU, must sharpen our awareness that common values and fundamental convictions concerning freedom and the rule of law, and also democracy, are indispensable core elements of the EU and must apply to all citizens throughout Europe.

Since last year, voices calling for democracy, freedom and justice have also become more and more audible in Belarus: at first just a few, then thousands, then tens and hundreds of thousands. And, primarily, it is three brave women who, despite persecution and repression, have given and continue to give these voices a face.

In recognition of their courageous and encouraging efforts to fight against brutal state despotism, torture, oppression and the violation of basic human rights by an authoritarian regime – and to campaign for democracy, freedom and the rule of law, the Board of Directors of the Society for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen in 2022 have elected to honour the Belarusian political activists Maria Kalesnikava, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veronica Tsepkalo.

These three leading figures of the Belarusian democratic movement are energetic, living symbols of the spirit of freedom. The sacrifices they have made are unprecedented. Their messages are virulent and rousing. They are a steadfast signal to their own Belarusian society to take its destiny into its own hands. And they are a signal to a weary European society to once again take a stand – with conviction and militancy – for the European values that have been fought for over centuries, values that are increasingly endangered today due to the global struggle for profit and domination, but also to the indifference of many European citizens themselves.

We cannot allow the spirit of the Belarusian democratic movement to fail in Europe.

Maria Kalesnikava was born in Minsk on 24 April 1982. She studied flute and conducting at the Belarusian State Academy of Music in Minsk, then Early Music and New Music at the State University of Music and Performing Arts Stuttgart (until 2012), after which she played in various ensembles in Germany. She taught music from 1999 till 2019, firstly in Belarus then in Germany. From 2016, she worked on many music projects in Germany and managed projects in Belarus with participation of musicians from abroad. In 2019, she became the art director of the "OK-16" culture centre in Minsk. For the 2020 presidential election, she was initially the head of the opposition candidate Viktor Babariko's campaign.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was born on 11 September 1982 in the Belarusian provincial town of Mikashevichy. After finishing secondary school, from 2000, she studied Educational Sciences at the State Pedagogical University in Mazyr, specialising in English and German. She then worked as a translator. After the birth of her two children, she worked primarily as a housemaker. She is married to the businessman and blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky.

Veronica Tsepkalo was born in Mogilev on 7 September 1976. In 1998, she graduated from the Faculty of International Relations at the Belarus State University. This was followed by further studies at the Belarus State Economic University from 2004 to 2006. A mother of two, she is married to the Founder of Belarus High Technologies Park, former diplomat, IT consultant Valery Tsepkalo, whose bid for the presidency she actively supported. Until she found herself forced to flee the country, she worked in Belarus as Senior Manager for Business Development for Microsoft. Currently, she is the Chair of Belarus Women's Foundation, that provides help to female political prisoners and their children.

The shared story of these three strong and fearless women began in May 2020. When the widely known dissident Sergei Tikhanovsky, who was later imprisoned on trumped-up charges, was blocked from registering his presidential candidacy by the Central Electoral Commission of Belarus, his wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who until then had not been politically active, spontaneously decided to register as an independent candidate for the office – and was admitted to the primaries. Within the following two months, she succeeded in collecting 100,000 (original) supporter signatures. In an autocratic system – and especially under pandemic conditions – this was quite an ambitious undertaking, even for better-known democratic candidates than herself.

By the time the final decision on who was to be admitted to the presidential election was announced on 14 July, the most promising Lukaschenko-opponent, Viktor Babariko, had already been in prison for weeks and was excluded from the election. Valery Tsepkalo, who was also considered a promising

candidate and was still at large, was denied registration for the presidential election on the grounds that multiple tens of thousands of his supporter signatures had been allegedly rejected as forgeries.

In contrast, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the "candidate out of nowhere", (taz, 23.7.2020), who had obviously been completely underestimated by the incumbent president in terms of her impact on the electorate, was, for the time being, allowed to run for the presidency.

Just a few days later, together with Maria Kalesnikava and Veronica Tsepkalo, she succeeded in achieving something that the Belarusian opposition had lacked for decades: a joining of forces. By putting aside previous rivalries and political differences, and also by bringing in smaller parties and trade unions to contribute their expertise and resources, these three women – so different in many respects – formed an alliance that, above all else, shared one prime objective: to overthrow dictatorship and totalitarianism, and to usher in a democratic 'new dawn' in Belarus.

During the following weeks, the three women managed to reach the broadest sectors of the population in person. A central rally at the end of July in Minsk alone was estimated by the human rights organisation Viasna to have attracted over 60,000 participants. The trio did not present any meticulously worked-out political agendas to those gathered at the rally, and – unlike earlier agitators – they refused to position themselves in an anti-Russian niche. Instead, they demonstrated their commitment to democracy and freedom, and their desire to win the election legally in order to free the country from the dictatorship, release political prisoners and, as quickly as possible, set up new free and fair elections.

As endearing, new and direct the three campaigners appeared to be during their campaigning – with their emotive messages in the form of raised fists, the hearts they shaped with their hands, and their two-fingered V-for-"Victory" signs soon becoming distinctive symbols of an upheaval – the mission they had embarked upon was fraught with danger. With her husband already imprisoned and threats of what might happen to her family becoming increasingly blunt, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya decided to send her two children to stay with their grandmother in Lithuania. In the meantime, Valery Tsepkalo had already moved to Moscow with his children. Undaunted, the three women continued their election campaign.

When the alleged result of the "elections" of 9 August 2020 – which violated all international standards – was announced, Alexander Lukaschenko was claimed to have received a good 80%, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya just 10% of the votes. However, according to independent observers, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in reality won the plurality of the vote. Threatened by the Belarusian security forces when she went to the Central Electoral Commission to protest against rigged commission she was forced to flee to Lithuania. A few hours earlier – to escape repercussions and imprisonment – Veronica Tsepkalo had already fled the country to join her husband and children to Moscow.

Maria Kalesnikava, who refused to leave the country, was imprisoned in September 2020 and, in September 2021, was sentenced to eleven years in prison – allegedly for plotting to illegally seize power and for being a threat to national security. And when, in the courtroom on the day of her sentencing – standing in a kind of cage – she smiled and once again formed her shackled hands into the shape of a heart, symbolising love, it was a message that deeply touched and emboldened people throughout Belarus and far beyond.

The protests against the "election results", joined by tens of thousands – in some cases over a hundred thousand citizens – and the coordinating council initiated by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya with the goal to coordinate a peaceful, democratic transition, were met by the Belarus regime with repression, arrests and, often, random violence. In May 2021, in order to be able to arrest a blogger who had criticised the incumbent regime, those in power did not even shy away from 'intercepting' a plane and forcing it

to land. And, in autumn 2021, they unashamedly exploited and endangered vulnerable refugees in order to destabilise the EU and discredit its values.

Recently Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who continues her undaunted fight for freedom and democracy in Belarus together with Veronica Tsepalo and numerous other comrades-in-arms, wrote the following: "Every day, I see more people being imprisoned for their convictions and political attitudes. These are not just people in the public eye, like my husband Sergei Tikhanovsky or my friend Maria Kalesnikava. In Belarus today, anyone can become a political prisoner. And that is really scary. [...] But then I think about the courage of those Belarusians who stand up for freedom and democracy. That courage is so powerful, and I am so proud to see this awakening. It gives me hope, every day, for my children, for my husband and for our future together." (ZEIT ONLINE, 9.8.2021)

An awakening that deserves the support and solidarity of the European Union, its institutions and its civil society.

With Maria Kalesnikava, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veronica Tsepalo the Board of Directors of the Society for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen in 2022 honours three courageous women who, under the most adverse of political circumstances, at the risk of their personal freedom and integrity, stood up to the Belarusian dictator; three outstanding personalities who stood up for what is at the core of the European Project: human rights, peace and freedom, the rule of law, democracy and solidarity. With their resolute and fearless commitment, these three Belarusian leaders have become leading paragons of the struggle for freedom and democracy, not only for hundreds of thousands of their compatriots, but also far beyond the Belarus border.