

Speech - Veronika Tsepikalo on 26.05.22 - Transcript

Good Morning - Guten Tag!

This medal looks like an Olympic medal – I was looking at it and felt like a sportswoman.

First of all, I want to thank you, dear ladies and gentleman, for this Charlemagne Prize. It really means a lot to us. But as Svetlana said: Any prize and any award the three of us have been ever awarded with, does not belong to us personally, but to the people of Belarus who united in 2020.

You know, we have a saying in Belarus: Before 2020, we didn't know each other, but after 2020 we've found each other. You can ask any Belarusian who left the country long ago and who has been living in a different country for many years now that before 2020, we would not even consider ourselves as Belarusians. So, therefore, we believe that 2020 was the year that our nation was born.

You all know what is happening in Belarus right now. 40.000 people went through illegitimate imprisonment. This is the largest number in Europe after WWII. 12 civilians have lost their lives, with not a single criminal case opened. Many people are tortured, many are humiliated or beaten. But we're not giving up. And Lukashenko knows that. And every day he's adopting new laws and regulations that just aim to break us. But this is not going to happen.

In the last month, he [Lukashenko] closed two of the largest medical centres in Belarus, just because they were doing their job as they were providing help to those ones, who were beaten or even murdered after the elections while participating in peaceful protests.

In modern Belarus you cannot - almost - find a family, which was not impacted by Lukashenko's regime. Just look at the three of us: Svetlana's husband is in prison, Tatjana's sister is in prison; and I have my own story, which I would like to share with you, because as you know, behind every statistic and behind every number there's a human being, there's a human life and a destiny.

My mother used to know Lukashenko in person. They used to work together for many years before he became president. And when he became president, it appeared by chance that our family lived in the same building as Lukashenko's advisors. And one day, there was a terrorist act in our residential building. Somebody blew a bomb in our residential building. And guess what happened next! My mother was blamed for this terrorist act. Our apartment was searched, my mother was detained. At that time, my mother was very ill as a cancer patient with stage 4 cancer. So, Lukashenko gave the order to arrest her right at the hospital, where she got her cancer treatment. For many days, my sister and I were fighting with the guards to get the chance to see our mother. After three or four days - I can't even remember because I was living like in a dream - my sister and I got the chance to see our mother. What I saw in this moment broke my life – the before and the after. When we entered the hospital room, my mother was lying on the cold floor, in her underwear, handcuffed with her hands to the hospital bed. And because she was going through this ongoing chemotherapy, you could even see the bone on her hand, while these guards still handcuffed these hands to the bed. It was a heart-breaking moment for me. At this moment I realized, that this is the real face of dictatorship, the real face of autocracy. At this very moment I lost a part of my life, a part of my heart in this hospital room.

Yes, several months later, my mother died of cancer. I am sure – and it's a fact - that what happened to her deteriorated her health significantly and fast.

This story was shared with the Belarussian public during one of our largest meetings in Minsk, thus I didn't share the second part of this story, which we kept as a family secret for many, many years as

we were too afraid to disclose this part of our family, of our history. My mother was born in Germany. She was born in a labour camp in 1944 and her father was German. During the time of the Soviet Union, you could never disclose that you were born in Germany and your father was German because, you know, nobody knew what was going to happen to you. Even in the passport, my grandmother was very afraid to mention Germany as her [my mother's] place of birth. My mother's biggest dream was to meet her father one day, to get to know him, because she was absolutely sure that he was a nice person.

And you know, today, by standing in front of you, I have a firm and strong belief, especially by standing on German soil: If I got to see my grandfather, he would tell me that he's so proud of the Germany today. The country you've created – it is unbelievable. You have democracy, you have freedom of speech, you have basic democratic rights, which were denied in Belarus for many, many years. And I'm sure my grandfather would be doubly happy, because his granddaughter is getting one of the highest awards in Germany.

Thank you so much.