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THE
NOBEL
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The Nobel Lecture

given by
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2022
Ales Bialiatski

Delivered by
Natallia Pinchuk

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Your Royal Majesties,

Your Royal Highnesses,

Honourable members of the Nobel Committee, honourable guests!

I am extremely excited, and humbled, to have the honour to speak here at the award ceremony of 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureates. Among them is my husband Ales Bialiatski.

Unfortunately, he cannot receive the award in person. He is illegally imprisoned in Belarus. That's why I'm standing behind this podium.

I want to express my profound gratitude to the Norwegian Nobel Committee, whose decision strengthened Ales in his commitment to stand firm in his convictions and gives hope to all Belarusians that they can count on the democratic world's solidarity in the fight for their rights, no matter the length of struggle.

Many thanks to everyone who has supported Ales, his friends and his cause all these years and supports him now.

I would most sincerely like to congratulate the **Center for Civil Liberties** and the **Memorial International Society** on the well-deserved award. Ales and we all realize how important and risky it is to fulfil the mission of human rights defenders, especially in the tragic time of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Not only is Ales in prison but there are also thousands of Belarusians, tens of thousands of repressed, unjustly imprisoned for their civic action and beliefs across the country. Hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee the country for the mere reason that they wanted to live in a democratic state. Unfortunately, the war of the authorities against their own people, language, history, and democratic values has been waged in Belarus for years. I say this here with supreme pain and vigilance, as today's political and military events threaten Belarus with the loss of statehood and independence.

Unfortunately, the authorities choose to engage with society through the use of force - grenades, batons, stun guns, endless arrests and torture. There is no effort or talk about national compromise or dialogue. They persecute girls and boys, women and men, minors and elderly people. The inhuman face of system reigns in Belarusian prisons, especially for those who dreamed of being free people!

In light of such a situation, it is no coincidence that the authorities arrested Ales and his associates from the human rights center "Viasna" for their democratic beliefs and human rights activities: Marfa Rabkova, Valiantsin Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich, Leanid Sudalenka, Andrei Chapiuk and other human rights defenders are behind bars.

Many human rights defenders remain under investigation and face the wrath of the prosecutor's charges, while others were forced to emigrate abroad.

But “none can conquer, stay or halt”¹ the human rights center "Viasna-96", created over twenty-five years ago by Ales and his associates.

Ales could not convey the text of his speech from prison, but he managed to tell me just a couple of words. Therefore, I will share with you his thoughts - both the latest and those recorded earlier. These are fragments of his previous statements, writings, and reflections. Here are his reflections about the past and future of Belarus, about human rights, about the fate of peace and freedom.

So, I pass the floor to Ales.

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It just so happens that people who value freedom the most are often deprived of it. I remember my friends — human rights activists from Cuba, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, I remember my spiritual sister Nasrin Sotoudeh from Iran. I admire Cardinal Joseph Zen from Hong Kong. Thousands of people are currently behind bars in Belarus for political reasons, and they are all my brothers and sisters. Nothing can stop people's thirst for freedom.

In my homeland, the entirety of Belarus is in a prison. Journalists, political scientists, trade union leaders are in jail, there are many of my acquaintances and friends among them... The courts work like a conveyor belt, convicts are transported to penal colonies, and new waves of political prisoners take their place...

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This award belongs to all my human rights defender friends, all civic activists, tens of thousands of Belarusians who have gone through beatings, torture, arrests, prison.

This award belongs to millions of Belarusian citizens who stood up and took action in the streets and online to defend their civil rights. It highlights the dramatic situation and struggle for human rights in the country.

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I recently had a short dialogue.

- When will you be released? - they asked me.

- I am already free, in my soul, was my reply.

My free soul hovers over the dungeon and over the maple leaf outlines of Belarus.

¹ From the song Pahonia – Translator's note

I look inside myself, and my ideals have not changed, have not lost their value, have not faded. They are always with me, and I guard them as best I can. They are like cast from gold, immune from rusting.

We want to build our society as more harmonious, fair and responsive to the needs of its sons and daughters. To achieve an independent, democratic Belarus, free of foreign coercion. We dream that it will be a country full of warmth and advantageous to live in.

This is a noble idea, concordant with the global ideas of civility. We are not dreaming of something special or extraordinary, we just want “to be called human”, as our classic Yanka Kupala said. It implies respect for ourselves and for others, it implies human rights, a democratic way of life, the recognition of the Belarusian language and of our history.

I began to be critical of Soviet reality early on. Among other things, I faced a sharp restriction on the use of the Belarusian language, with the policy of de-belarusianization, which was carried out then - and is still being executed today. The former colonial dependence of Belarus is an ever-present reality. And as a result, there is still a threat to the existence of Belarusians as a nation and people

It is a dramatic mistake to separate human rights from the values of identity and independence. I have been involved in the independent underground movement since 1982, in fact since I was young man at 20 years of age. Its aim was to achieve a democratic independent Belarus in which human rights would be respected. There can be no Belarus without democracy and there can be no human rights without an independent Belarus. And civil society should have such a degree of independence that it guarantees the safety of a person from abuses of state power.

I believe because I know that the night ends and then the morning comes with light. I know that what pushes us forward tirelessly is hope and a dream.

Martin Luther King paid for his dream with his life, he was shot. My payment for my dream is less, but with harsh consequences I don't regret a bit. After all, my dream is worthy of all the personal sacrifices. My ideals are in tune with the ideals of my older friends and spiritual mentors - Czech Václav Havel and Belarusian Vasil Bykau. Both of them went through great life's trials, both advanced their nations and culture, both fought for democracy and human rights until the last minutes of their lives.

It is impossible to expect that a good harvest would grow immediately in an empty field. The field is to be well fertilised; stones should be removed... And what the communist government did in Belarus for 70 years can be called scorched earth...

There were times in the late 1980s when we literally knew each other by sight... But in the early 1990s there were thousands and tens of thousands of us ...

Presidential elections were held in Belarus on August 9, 2020. Mass falsifications made people take to the streets. Good and Evil came together in a duel. Evil is well-armed. And from the side of Good there only peaceful mass protests unheard of for the country, which gathered hundreds of thousands of people.

In response, the authorities have fully launched the repressive mechanism of torture and murder — Raman Bandarenka, Vitold Ashurak and many others became its victims.

This is the highest and unspeakable of level of repression in its cruelty. People are subject to ghastly tortures and unimaginable suffering.

Cells and prisons are akin to Soviet public toilets, where people are kept for months and years. I am absolutely against women being in prison but imagine their imprisonment in Belarus — this branch of hell on Earth!

Lukashenka's statements confirm that his enforcers have been given carte blanche to stop people by instigating fear and mass intimidation

But the citizens of Belarus demand justice. They demand that those who committed mass crimes be punished. They demand free elections. Belarus and the Belarusian society will never be the same again when they were completely tied hand and foot. People have woken up...

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Now the permanent struggle of good and evil has unfolded almost in its purest form throughout the region. The cold wind from the East collided with the warmth of the European renaissance.

It is not enough to be educated and democratic, it is not enough to be humane and merciful. We should be able to protect our achievements and our Fatherland. It is not for nothing that in the Middle Ages the concept of the Fatherland was linked to the concept of freedom.

I know exactly what kind of Ukraine would suit Russia and Putin — a dependent dictatorship. The same as today's Belarus, where the voice of the oppressed people is ignored and disregarded.

Russian military bases, huge economic dependence, cultural and linguistic russification — that's the answer, on whose side is Lukashenka. The Belarusian

authorities are independent only to the extent that Putin allows them to be. Consequently, it is necessary to fight against "the international of dictatorships".

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I am a human rights activist and therefore a supporter of nonviolent resistance. I am not an aggressive person by nature, I always try to behave accordingly. However, I recognise that goodness and truth must be able to protect themselves.

As I can, I keep peace in my soul, I grow it like a delicate flower, I drive away anger. And I pray that reality does not force me to dig up a long-buried axe and defend the truth with an axe in my hands. Peace. May peace remain in my soul.

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And on December 10, I want to repeat for everyone: "Do not be afraid!" These were the words that Pope John Paul II said in the 1980s when he came to communist Poland. He didn't say anything else then, but it was enough. I believe because I know that spring always comes after winter.

These were quotes from Ales Bialiatski. And I will conclude my speech with the exclamations of his soul:

Freedom to the Belarusian people! Freedom to Viasna! Long live Belarus!