

Sunday, February 7, at the Theaterhaus Stuttgart, as part of the Eclat music festival.
Presentation of the Human Rights Award 2021 of the Gerhart and Renate Baum-Foundation to the Belarusian freedom fighter Maria Kalesnikava.

Laudatory speech: Gerhart Baum

We live in a free country, in a functioning democracy, in a free Europe. We live also now in Corona times according to the liberties of our Basic Law. Fundamental rights are restricted, but in order to save lives, as the Basic Law demands according to the dictates of human dignity.

Now, at this very moment, thousands of people in Russia and Belarus are living in prisons - crammed together, mistreated and under psychological pressure. They are deprived of their freedom because they demonstrate for freedom. They go out of the house and don't know if they will come home again. Peaceful citizens are confronted with highly armed so-called "anti-terrorist units." So perception of human rights is terror?

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience, and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." So reads Article 1 of the 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." The peoples of the world agreed on this - for the first time in human history. They justified it in the preamble with the fact that "misrecognition and disregard of the human rights led to acts of barbarism which deeply have wounded the conscience of mankind...". It was the reaction to terrible crimes against humanity in the last Century.

The behavior of the autocrats in Russia and Belarus - yes, that too violates the conscience of humanity.

"No one shall be arbitrarily arrested, detained or expelled from the country" - this is stated in Article 9 of this declaration.

But how exactly does this demand apply to the fate of our laureate! She is a political prisoner - deprived of all her rights. And the special thing is: she has resisted to be expelled from the country. She tore up her passport and knew that she would pay for it, pay like Nawalny. He too knew what would happen to him.

Maria Kalesnikava has stayed in the country, with all the risks for her own good, to be close to all those who feel as she does. She is a patriot. She loves her country and will not be driven out. She knows that the struggle from within challenges those in power in a special way. She suffers from imprisonment. She is deliberately subjected to humiliations, degradations and psychological pressure. And this has been going on for 5 months!

The resistance against the regime is justified. Its thoughts and actions are a relic of the old from the old Soviet times. But the regime is exhausted, has run out of steam. It offers people no prospects for the future and denies them freedom.

From May of last year, prospects for a change of regime became visible - with Viktor Babariko at the helm. There was a spirit of optimism, and a new dynamic developed. Lukashenko, however, had the challengers imprisoned. When Svetlana Tikhanovskaya stood in for her husband, a prominent blogger critical of the system, who was also imprisoned, Lukashenko allowed her to run, assuming that she would not be successful. "Our society is not mature enough to vote for a woman," he let announced. But it was women who drove the movement after.

The support base ultimately included all opposition groups. Lukashenko could only by falsifying the election - for the second time in the last 26 years. Only this time it was not without consequences. More than 100,000 people took to the streets. Again and again. In addition, there was a false anti-Corona policy. The man actually said, "The best vaccine against the virus, is to go through the disease."

It's hard to make a safe prognosis. One thing is certain: Lukashenko has lost all legitimacy. He has broken so many promises that he is not trusted to lead to lead the country into a free future. The people see themselves as being in peaceful neighborhood with Russia. One of the keys to a solution lies there. How Putin continue to support the Minsk potentate? Will he fear the argument that demonstrations can achieve something, or will Lukashenko become a burden for him? The decisive point, however, is that the situation in both countries cannot be compared with previous ones. The forces working for change have become stronger. Everything speaks in favor of to fight on.

With this year's Human Rights Award 2021 of the Gerhart and Renate Baum Foundation, my wife and I honor the Belarusian civil rights campaigner Maria Kalesnikava for her courage and determination to fight for freedom in her country. The award ceremony will take place here in Stuttgart, here in the Theaterhaus, where we are today in the context of the music festival ECLAT, for which Maria was active for a long time. We are pleased that the Intendant Christine Fischer is combining the program of Eclat with the award ceremony this year.

Together with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and Veronika Zepkalo, Maria Kaleskinava has become a female icon of resistance. Especially with her cheerful and combative appearance, her energetic body language, with her ability to inspire, she expressed what people to angry, but always consciously peaceful protest. Maria has become become a shining symbol of the Belarusian opposition movement. Therefore she is persecuted by the regime. She always emphasizes that she loves her country. She is a patriot in the best sense of the word. We honor with her all those who, like her, fight for freedom in Belarus.

My wife and I have experienced Maria Kalesnikava as an artist and cultural manager here in Stuttgart. For several years, as chairman of the board of trustees of "Music of the Centuries" I was closely connected to the activities here in the house. Maria graduated from the Stuttgart Conservatory, worked here as a music teacher and cultural manager. At the end of today's event, we will hear the world premiere of a piece of music composed for her ensemble "vis-à-vis". Unfortunately she is not be able to play her flute part herself today....

In 2019, Viktor Babariko, a supporter of the arts and a member of the opposition, brought Maria to Minsk with the mission to build a cultural center there. Since then, her life has been played out between Germany and Belarus. At the same time, she continued her education as a speaker and became a virtuoso media professional. After the arrest of her mentor Babariko in July 2020 Maria took over his political role in the opposition.

So, Maria Kalesnikava is a political activist AND an artist. And she knows about the lasting power of art. Art creates spaces for change, or - as Schiller said - "art is a daughter of freedom". Democracy and art are inseparable. What can we, who are fortunate enough to live in freedom, do from the outside? In any case, more than before. The possibilities for political influence are limited, but of those that are possible should be made more use of - and with pressure on the regime in Minsk, but also on Putin's Russia, without whose support Lukashenko would be long gone. Putin fears the people, fears the demonstrations in his own country. We, the Europeans and the entire free world must bring our values to bear. It values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which I quoted at the beginning of this speech.

Let us encourage Maria Kalesnikava and her comrades-in-arms: Don't give up! Let us strengthen them through our solidarity. Let us fight for their release from prison. At this moment, let us also think of all those around the world who, in situations of oppression - always against corrupt power cliques that plunder their plunder their countries. Let us also think today of the elimination of democracy in Myanmar by the military junta. Let us think of Hong Kong, of the oppressed Uyghurs in China, to name but two examples.

I have spent many years campaigning for human rights on behalf of the German government and the United Nations. I know how important it is for these people to be recognized, to take an interest in their fate and not to remain silent - but to act, if at all possible. The striving for freedom is innate in all people, wherever they live. It is strong and will prevail in the end!