



Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Inaugural Helmut Schmidt Lecture

Berlin, November 10, 2021

“Mr. Steinbrück, honourable guests,

What a pleasure it is for me to be here today. It's an honour to open this inaugural lecture series, following the invitation of the Helmut Schmidt Foundation and the Global Public Policy Institute.

Being in Berlin is very special for me. This is a reminder and a promise at the same time. It has seen dictators come and go. It has witnessed suffering and destruction of unprecedented nature. But it has also seen humility and unbounded aspiration to freedom.

We are now just a few hundred meters away from the checkpoint Charlie that once separated East and West Berlin, cementing the division of Europe.

When I visited Berlin for the first time – it was over a year ago, the first thing I did was come to look at the Berlin Wall. For me, it is not only a place of remembrance, but also a powerful symbol of freedom and peaceful change that we seek to bring about in Belarus.

At the Potsdam Square, also not far from here, you can see a remainder of the Berlin Wall. Belarusian activists have painted it in white and red colours of our national flag in support of the protest movement. The largest in our country's independent history.

But today it is not the Berlin Wall that is being discussed in the media. It is the construction of a new fence to stop the influx of migrants across the borders with Lithuania, Poland and Latvia. This migrant smuggling is encouraged and orchestrated by the Belarusian authoritarian ruler. The latest news – Belarus is planning to increase its airport capacity and the number of flights from the Middle East. Five more airports are soon to open to flights from Damaskus, Dubai and Istanbul. At the moment, 800-1000 migrants per day land in Belarus. Thousands of migrants, including families with children, are trapped in the outskirts of the Białowieża forest. One of the deadliest migrant routes to Europe.

There is yet another news that has harnessed little to no attention in the European media – the Union State between Belarus and Russia. At last week's meeting of the



Supreme Council of the Russia-Belarus union state, Vladimir Putin and Aleksandr Lukashenko signed 28 programmes. Among them are military agreements, aimed at increasing cooperation and economic integration between the two countries.

All this is happening against the will of the Belarusian people.

Belarusians have clearly demonstrated in selfless campaigns and peaceful protests that earned respect and admiration in the world that the Lukashenka regime has no mandate and legitimacy to govern the country. Its only source of power is violence and torture.

The story of the Belarusian protest is a vivid example of “living democracy” that is the topic of my lecture here today. After almost three decades of authoritarian rule Belarusians have found courage to fight for freedom and a better democratic future. Against the odds of the pandemic and a suffocating political climate, we raised our voices against injustice and lawlessness.

The presidential campaign announced on 9 May 2020 has inspired unforeseen levels of mobilisation and participation. Through Telegram and social media channels, we mobilised our family, friends and colleagues to go to the ballots and give voice to their discontent. We collected hundreds of thousands of signatures for presidential candidates. We built an army of election observers. We created digital platforms to benefit from our society’s collective intelligence, unleashing creative campaigns, slogans, projects, ideas – a true force of living democracy. Never seen in Belarus before.

And we were surprised – suddenly we saw not only our family, friends and colleagues, but hundreds of thousands of Belarusians who were united by the same aspiration. Aspiration to live in a free country where citizens’ rights are respected. Where the voice of civil society is heard. The inspiring words of Maryia Kalesnikava, whom many of you know in Germany – in particular if you happen to come from Stuttgart, – “Belarusians, you are incredible” echoed across the country. It gave us strength and power.

The protests reached every Belarusian family. Every corner of our country – men and women, young and old, workers and teachers, journalists and doctors. Students and professors, sportsmen and artists, opera singers and entrepreneurs, IT specialists and shop assistants. Those coming from both urban, progressive centres and rural, conservative areas. Pictures and videos of peaceful Belarusian protests travelled the world.

Together, we have become the voice of the Belarusian society that, for so long, has been silenced, threatened, oppressed. This was not an expression of parliamentary



democracy that Helmut Schmidt, Germany's moral compass and a voice of reason, was advocating for. This was an expression of living democracy.

When I ran for president – out of love for my husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski who was not registered as a presidential candidate but thrown behind bars instead – I did not think that I could win. I did not believe in free elections in Belarus. I did not have any political experience or even ambition to enter politics. I was not even sure that I would have enough strength or courage to go through the campaign.

But then I felt an immense wave of support and solidarity. Our society has changed. We were tired of thinking that nothing depended on us and that only a strong leader would ensure stability and prosperity.

The day after the elections, I went to the central election committee to challenge the official claims that Lukashenka had received more than 80% of the votes. Following blatant manipulations and exchange of ballots, no one could take these claims seriously.

Instead of submitting my complaint and demanding Lukashenka to hand over power, I found myself talking to two security service officers. They were painting a grim picture of my children's future with both of their parents in jail, coercing me to leave the country. I was devastated and frightened. But like many Belarusians I continue our fight for democracy and the right to determine our country's future

Regime's response to the democratic uprising has been unprecedented violence. Since the presidential election on August 9, 2020, more than 37,000 people have been imprisoned. Thousands have been humiliated, tortured, and traumatised. Currently, there are 834 political prisoners, and the numbers continue to rise. Many face up to 20 years in prison. Thousands of Belarusians have been forced to flee the country. As of August 2021, Poland alone issued over 150,000 visas to Belarusians in exile. The actual number is likely to be much higher.

The Lukashenka regime is acting out of revenge and fear. The political elite continues to cling to power using violence and repression. However, we resolutely reject any form of violence. The political situation has not yet changed, but our society has already changed.

We don't want to be paralysed by fear. We don't want our athletes to be forced into exile. We don't want our journalists to be hijacked together with innocent European citizens for the sake of one man's personal revenge. We don't want Belarus to be an international threat. We don't want our country's leadership to encourage migrant smuggling.



But we should not be blinded by migration. We should not fight the battle against windmills and invest our resources in building fences. It doesn't lead us anywhere. The Belarusian regime is neither predictable nor plausible. There will be new threats and new pressure mechanisms unless we tackle the problem at its root. And the problem is the illegitimate power in Belarus. The regime that holds millions of people hostage and has become a threat to regional and global peace and security.

What we want is to determine our own future – a right we have been deprived of for far too long. We want to build a democratic Belarus, based on our shared values of freedom and solidarity. Our first and most urgent priority is to stop violence and repressions. The second priority is to release all political prisoners. And I won't be tired of repeating that political prisoners shall not become subjects of bargaining games. These are Belarusian citizens who committed no crimes. In free, democratic countries, they would have been celebrated for their deeds. For their selflessness, solidarity and heroism. Our final priority is to initiate a nation-wide dialogue and pave the way to new presidential elections and a democratic future for Belarus.

We need to resolve this crisis, and I truly believe that it is only with the concerted efforts of the international community that we can achieve this. If Belarus is forgotten, if Belarus is disregarded, this humanitarian catastrophe will become a threat to all democracies in the world. It is therefore the need of the hour to lead Belarus peacefully out of the political crisis. And to bring the Belarusian political elites to the negotiating table with regional and international partners. And I'm convinced that Germany could play an important mediating role in this process.

Germany is at a crossroads today – but no matter what direction it will take, there are high expectations towards Germany's future role. Both domestically and internationally. Germany is not just an economic power and a global export leader. Germany is a constitutional state who has a record of successfully overcoming tyranny and finding reconciliation based on democratic values. Just as Europe is not just a single market, but a continent united by fundamental rights and values.

What is often taken for granted here in Germany and Europe, thousands of Belarusians have to fight for every day: freedom. Freedom to vote. Freedom to protest. Freedom to exercise the profession that you like. Freedom not to end up in a detention centre after a peaceful demonstration. Freedom to be safe in the streets of your city. Freedom to go on strike. Freedom to elect our own leader. Freedom to be alive.

But this fight is not just about Belarus. It is about the future of democracy in Europe. And we need more bold action for democracy. We need a vision for the future in Europe and a more ambitious agenda of political reform.



We have no time to lose. Faced with the great challenges of our time such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, rapidly growing inequalities, demographic change, or the erosion of trust in politics and democratic institutions, we must act quickly and boldly.

Europe must once again become a magnet for other countries and free itself from fatalism and despair. We must encourage people who want to support democracy. Achieving democracy for a society is similar to learning to take responsibility for your own future. It is a coming-of-age process. Democracy will be sustainable only when we realise our personal responsibility for it.

I truly believe that Belarus will become a success story, a precedent, an example for others to be emulated. It is not enough to defend democracy. We need to advance democracy. We need to live democracy. We need to fill it with new forms and meaning, reflect on our changing societies and the times we live in. We owe the next generation an inspiring narrative of future democratic Europe.

We can now close our eyes and act as if nothing is happening. Or we can use our voices and power to seek justice, to show solidarity, to be advocates of freedom and change. And I want us to stay vigilant. I want us to always stay alert. I want us to continue our fight for justice and freedom. It is human lives that are at stake. It is human dignity that is at stake. It is our children's future that is at stake.

These days, the words of hope come not from Europe's parliaments, media outlets or university pulpits but from Belarusian prisons. "Spiritually I have become even richer and stronger. They believe they put me in prison, but in fact they only strengthened my faith in the righteous fight for freedom", writes Belarusian sportsman Aleksei Kudin who was imprisoned in January this year.

Marfa Rabkova, a human rights defender and volunteer service coordinator of the Human Rights Center Viasna, who is now facing a 12-year prison sentence, shares a timeless reminder: "Though turmoil has descended upon our land, I am sure that we soon will see the dawn. That is not for us to choose the times, but the times choose us. It will remain up to us to go through all the hardships and obstacles with dignity. And the main goal is to remain Human".

If they are full of hope, behind bars, how can we not be? So let's not build fences. Times will come to tear them down. Let's build a strong democracy instead. Let's **LIVE** democracy. That's what Germany and Europe are best at.

Thank you!"