



President's New Year's Reception 2024

Acceptance Speech | Dr. Olga Shparaga, Philosopher and winner of the Voltaire Prize 2024

Dear President Günther, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to be here and to receive the Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding, and Respect for Differences.

I am a Belarusian philosopher, and philosophy has always been and remains a way for me to think about what is happening, especially in my country. But it is also an opportunity to exert a critical and practical influence on events.

Therefore, after my parallel studies in Belarus and Germany, I decided to stay in Belarus to promote the integration of European values in my country, to invite researchers, intellectuals, and experts from different countries to Belarus, to develop projects together with them and to change Belarus towards a democratic future.

Anti-authoritarian, pro-democratic protests began in Belarus in the summer of 2020, which V-Dem researchers now classify as one of the 15 largest protests in the world in the last 50 years. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets across the country for more than 100 days.

However, society did not manage to dispense with the dictatorship in Belarus in 2020. As a result, repression in Belarus has reached unprecedented levels since the beginning of 2021. More than 1,400 non-governmental organizations and more than 600 independent media outlets have been forcibly shut down or are facing closure in Belarus. Over the past three years, hundreds of people have been imprisoned in Belarus every month and sentenced to up to 20 years in prison. More than 5,000 political criminal proceedings have been initiated in the country and more than 50,000 people have been subjected to various forms of persecution since 2020. At the end of December 2022, 1,455 people were officially recognized as political prisoners in Belarus (unofficially there are many more); on December 27, 2023, there were 1,474, which means that some people leave the prisons and their places are immediately taken by new political prisoners.

But that's not all. We have had no contact with a number of political prisoners for almost a year. They are held in solitary confinement (*incommunicado*), which is a type of crime against humanity.

These political prisoners include the musician and political activist Maria Kalesnikava, one of the leaders of the 2020 protests, who tore up her passport at the border on September 7, 2020, to avoid being

forcibly expelled from Belarus. On September 7, 2021, she was sentenced to eleven years in a penal colony.

Maria Kalesnikava and other women offered Belarusian society various opportunities to show solidarity and protest in 2020 by combining vulnerability and activism in their actions. They have shown that it is possible to show solidarity across the different identities and boundaries of social groups. It was women who encouraged the most vulnerable groups – LGBTQ people, people with disabilities and older people – to protest.

I was also actively involved in the Belarusian protests in 2020: together with my colleagues, I founded a female group in the Coordination Council around the Belarusian opposition politician Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. When I was imprisoned for 15 days because of my activism, I gave lectures in prison and supported my colleagues in every possible way.

After the escalation of the Russian war in Ukraine and Lukashenko's complicity in the aggression, Belarusian women and Belarusian society continued their resistance, now against Lukashenko and Putin together. One of the most important forms of this resistance today is the fragile and caring resistance of Belarusian women in prisons and penal colonies, which I describe in a recent book containing [testimonies of imprisoned women in Belarus](#), edited by my colleague Cordelia Dvorac.

It is a great responsibility for me not only to continue to speak about Belarus and make the parts of Belarusian society that do not agree with Lukashenko's regime, visible, but also to try to contribute, especially as a public figure and scholar, to bringing us closer to a democratic future in Belarus. That is why I continue my work in the FemGroup, which is a visible part of the Belarusian pro-democratic political forces in the diaspora today. An important part of our work is to criticize not only Lukashenko's regime, but also the right-wing conservative tendencies in the pro-democratic Belarusian community.

I see this prize not only as a sign of recognition of my efforts as a philosopher and activist, but also as a sign of recognition of the efforts of Belarusian society towards democratic change. I believe that the fight for democracy today can only continue in this way – in solidarity across national borders.