

## President's New Year's Reception 2024

### Laudatory speech for Voltaire Prize winner Dr. Olga Shparaga by Prof. Dr. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger

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The political philosopher Olga Shparaga is one of the most important public voices of the Belarusian opposition movement. As a political scientist, she expands our knowledge of civil society and the development of a European identity in the post-Soviet space. As an activist, she worked with great courage for the peaceful transition of power in her country. In exile, she now campaigns for a free and democratic Europe beyond the borders of the European Union (EU).

Olga Shparaga studied philosophy and social sciences at Belarusian State University in Minsk and at Ruhr University Bochum (1993/94). In 2001, she obtained a PhD degree from Belarusian State University (Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences). After working as a lecturer at the European Humanities University in Minsk (Belarus) and as an associate professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the EHU in Vilnius (Lithuania), she became a research associate at the Center for European Studies (CfES) in Minsk in 2010. In 2014, Shparaga and her colleagues founded the College of Liberal Arts in Belarus (ECLAB) in Minsk, where she taught "Ethics and Politics of Contemporary Society".

Shparaga has held teaching and research positions in the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Germany, and the USA. In addition to her academic research and teaching, she has been active as a journalist and has become an important public voice mediating between Eastern and Western Europe. She is a member of the advisory boards of *The Ideology and Politics Journal*, *The Interlocutor* and *pARTisan*. From 2006 to 2014, she was editor of the magazine *Novaja Eŭropa* ("New Europe"). She was temporarily imprisoned in October 2020 for her membership in the Coordination Council of the Belarusian Protest Movement, which was founded by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to organize the peaceful and orderly transition of power. She then fled into exile in Vilnius to avoid a criminal trial. She was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study Berlin until spring 2022; she is currently a fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

Olga Shparaga is a sharp-witted analyst of the political and social structures in the post-Soviet space. She deals with questions of national and social identity formation and collective memory politics, with the current structural change of the public sphere, with the resistance movements in Eastern Europe, and with European political identity beyond the EU, but also with the role of art in contemporary

Belarusian society. In addition to her native language, she also publishes in German, English, Russian, and Lithuanian. Her essays were published in the German journal *Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, the *Art Activist Journal*, and in *Gefter*, one of the formerly most important independent Russian magazines. Her first monograph was "The Community after the Holocaust: Towards the Society of Inclusion" (in Russian, Minsk 2018) and was awarded the prize for the best philosophical book of 2018 by the International Congress of Researchers of Belarus. The book "Jan Patocka. Europe and Post-Europe" (Minsk 2011) is currently being prepared for translation into German. It uses the example of Patocka to shed light on the development of the European idea after the Holocaust against the backdrop of Eastern European experiences and discourses.

In 2021, Suhrkamp published her monograph "The Revolution Has a Female Face: The Case of Belarus" in German, the original version of which was awarded the Belarusian PEN Prize (a Lithuanian translation is in preparation). In it, she analyses the structure of the Belarusian democracy movement and clarifies why it is precisely gender policy issues that form the center of civil society mobilization and, at the same time, incur the wrath of autocratic regimes.

In short: Olga Shparaga analyzes political theory from the perspective of a philosopher with a broad historical education and combines her research with incredibly courageous political activism. Her central concern was and is to promote cross-border solidarity against right-wing authoritarianism and Russian neo-imperialism and to advocate for a free Europe that extends beyond the borders of the EU. Thanks to her excellent language skills, she has become an important ambassador for the Belarusian democracy and women's movements in the West.

However, since this freedom movement has been violently suppressed by the Lukashenko regime and its protagonists are either in prison camps or in exile, this movement has fallen to the margins of international interest. The intensified phase of the Russian war against Ukraine since February 2022 has made Belarus almost completely disappear from Western media reports. The history of the opposition there is closely intertwined with that of the democratic Maidan revolution in Ukraine, though. Both movements have undoubtedly fueled the Putin regime's fear that the demands for political freedom, gender equality, and the rule of law could resonate with the Russian population. The Belarusian protest movement is a sister of the Ukrainian revolution. The people of Belarus are also victims of Russian neo-imperialism.

The award for Olga Shparaga will not only honor a highly deserving scientist and human rights activist. It will also help give the Belarusian freedom movement the attention it deserves and demonstrate that it is not deemed a lost cause in the West.