



Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

Office

Emerging Europe: Public Figure of the Year Award

Award Acceptance Remarks

Dear Mr Wrobel,

I am extremely honoured and humbled to receive the Public Figure of the Year Award. The work that Emerging Europe is doing – putting spotlight on a region that is often misunderstood and underrepresented – is extremely important. We need more subtle and in-depth reporting on Central and Eastern Europe, and we know what serious risks and dangers journalists encounter doing their job.

Belarusian state authorities have declared war on independent journalism, crushing the remaining islands of media freedom. Leading news sites are blocked, TV channels are under total control of the state, hundreds of journalists are being threatened, intimidated and arrested. At least 18 criminal cases have been initiated against Belarusian journalists. Three journalists have received prison terms - among them Daria Chul'tsova and Katsiaryna Andreeva. They were sentenced to two years in prison for live streaming protests against the murder of Raman Bandarenka, a peaceful protester brutally beaten by the police for defending our national symbols. They knew they would be a target of the state repression machine, and nevertheless they decided to do their job. 75,000 people watched their stream.

My heart is bleeding reading their stories – young, courageous, truth-seeking. We need Daria and Katsiaryna to hold those in power accountable, to tell true stories of people's lives, their struggles and aspirations. It is for them that we need to continue our fight for justice, peace and democracy.

When I joined the presidential campaign in the summer of 2020, I was frightened but I wanted to help. I wanted injustice to come to an end. How surprised I was to see a wave of solidarity and support throughout the country. We have mobilised hundreds of thousands of people – looking in the same direction and sharing the same aspirations. Together we have shown the world what power participatory democracy can unleash. My only role as a leader is to listen to people, to make their voices heard and to harness the power of collective intelligence.

Belarus has dared to rip off the chains of authoritarianism and is longing for freedom. We are now experiencing a spiral of extreme violence and repression. Belarusian society is suffocating. I am everything but naïve: these are the darkest days in our country's independent history. But I know, we know that the darkest hour is just before dawn. I truly believe that with the concerted efforts of the international community we will be able to change the course of history in Belarus.

Europe should be the leading voice advocating for the fundamental values and freedoms. As former Vice President of the European Commission Günther Verheugen said when receiving this award in 2018, "We need more Europe and not less". And today more so than ever.

Let us shake off the fear. Let us be ambitious, courageous and daring. Let us be advocates of democracy and freedom.

Thank you!

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya