

**Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Guests,**

1. Speaking about contemporary Central Europe and the development of democracy, one cannot fail to take into account the painful historical experiences that have shaped the Europe of today. Those experiences gave us all a real lesson. They have shown the significance of human rights. If we look at all human rights documents and declarations, we can see that provisions of each of them, were born at the altar of blood of victims and tears of their families who wanted justice. We should also not forget that their incorporation in various international laws is a result of many human tragedies.
2. The horrors of the Second World War and the experience of totalitarian regimes have shown the necessity of implementing the concept of the so-called militant democracy. It is a system in which democracy has built-in mechanisms to protect it against abuse of power by the majority. Among them are such mechanisms as: 1) prohibition of operation of parties or organizations whose methods relate to totalitarian practices, 2) counteracting hate speech and hate crimes. In contemporary Europe, such problems are faced more and more frequently and the concept of militant democracy needs to be implemented.
3. Nearly 70 years ago, our great predecessors achieved the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet, for this great idea to develop and continue to serve people, every generation must take the effort to read it in a new way to understand the obligations, duties and opportunities arising from it.
4. We live in an era which presents new challenges to Europe at large, as well as to the European Union. The relatively peaceful years of development of the European integration have created the impression that across our continent, free citizens' rights are sufficiently and irrevocably guaranteed. We did not expect history, in any way, to take a step backwards. We did not anticipate any regions or communities in Europe to practically question the basic values of democracy, the role of constitutions or rule of law. We did not expect emergence and stabilization of strong authoritarian states.

We also did not expect the increase in the threat of terrorism or the intensification of extremist anti-migration attitudes. And, last but not least, our imagination did not fully foresee the emergence of new problems related to the development of technologies (the internet and social media), or the threats to environmental protection.

5. The new challenges should not obscure, however, the general trends more and more visible in Europe. Societies in individual countries show increasingly radical approaches. They close themselves off from diversity. They try to find enemies responsible for possible failures and mistakes. We know all of this from history. As the experience of the 20th century has shown, the transition to authoritarian systems and then to totalitarian ones is not an immediate process. It does not happen suddenly, overnight. We do not wake up one day in a country, in a community which is totalitarian. This process is slow, extended in time and may be preceded by periods of political instability, tensions and determination to find political enemies. Sometimes it is difficult to see this alteration, this special moment of fundamental change and to make sure it is not too late to stop the process.
6. Therefore, we need to react as soon as possible. We should remember that human rights are not guaranteed once and forever in constitutions and international treaties. What is also necessary is to have mechanisms and strong institutions ensuring that those rights are respected. It is of great importance for this whole system to operate and to actually react when human rights are violated.
7. Although observance of law is a value in itself, law must embody moral values. Hans Kelsen, one of the founders of constitutional judicature said that if the law accepted by majority is not controlled, it may lead to the so-called dictatorship of majority. Then, it no longer protects minorities, those groups which are discriminated and excluded, but it merely dictates what the majority wants to achieve. And this, obviously, is a very dangerous process. It may be accompanied by growing indifference and gradually increasing inability to react: at the beginning, we may be concerned but over time we come to the conclusion that if something does not relate to us, why should we bother? Maybe next time it will not relate to us either.

8. If we remain indifferent, if we do not notice things that happen around us, such as hate speech, attacks on the grounds of race, cases of anti-Semitism or xenophobia, if we agree to the division of the society, it is as if we were allowing the traumatic legacy of the 20th century to win once again. In a sense, we agree to things we were warned against by those who made their own individual sacrifices.
9. The scale of certain problems and dilemmas relating to the role of human rights on our continent is becoming too large for a single country or a single institution to tackle. There is an increasing need for common reflection and joint action, and for new projects to strengthen the weakening role of the rights of individuals in their relations with public institutions.
10. The idea of a great debate on the future of human rights in Europe was mentioned by me for the first time in the Parliament in Vienna, during the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the Ombudsman institution in Austria. I emphasized that if, in our globalizing world, an individual person, with his or her rights and inherent dignity is not to be marginalized, we need to take action. We should undertake initiatives to restore and maintain relative stability. There is a need to engage many countries, societies, academic communities and non-governmental organizations.
11. I am very much counting on the Czechs, their unique experience and globally known rationalism. I believe they will get involved in this initiative, too. After all, it is said that democracy has many homelands. In this context we, Poles, usually pride ourselves on having the first constitution on the European continent, the Constitution of 3 May 1791. And on the experience of the “Solidarity” trade union. But speaking of democracy, one cannot underestimate the Czech Velvet Revolution which played a significant role in transforming the political system without bloodshed. We also do appreciate the great role and contribution of Václav Havel. Today, we need to rediscover this European spirit of change.
12. We are required to do so in the light of our mission and the citizens’ expectations. We need to organize and support all those brave people who, without seeking political benefit, are ready to fight for the rights and

freedoms of individuals, for the truth and for dignity of every human being. Therefore, I am even more honoured to have been invited to today's ceremony which will award persons to whom those ideals are particularly close.

13. The Homo Homini award was once given to Ales Bialatski, head of the “Viasna” Human Rights Centre. When I recently met him, he spoke about the Belarusian experience on the way to democracy. *“We started from scratch, but the democratization process was going on very quickly. President Lukashenko won the elections in 1994, after a populist campaign. And it turned out that the foundations of democracy were not that strong. People wanted a strong ruler. And then, the authorities started to take further steps to check how the society would react. There was no reaction at that time.* This confirms what I have already mentioned: we have to be aware that when the authorities put out some feelers, when they start mentioning ideas, plans, when they test our resistance, we have to react firmly and to speak out, we should not remain indifferent. Even if we think that at a given moment it does not make sense or that we cannot succeed. Times may change and the truth will win. But someone must all the time keep the flame.
14. Another good example is Intigam Aliyev. Your award has helped many to fight for his freedom. He is no longer political prisoner. And he may stand firm by his beliefs.
15. I am therefore particularly satisfied that the Committee against Torture, which receives the award today, is expressing Havelian truth in all its words and actions. By protesting against Foreign Agents law, by helping victims of repressive regime, by investigating perpetrators of torture and helping victims of torture, by reaching out the most distant and dangerous areas of Russia. By risking their health and life. This expression of truth – made by daily actions and real help - makes them powerful, even if majority thinks that they are powerless. It allows them to sustain dignity. But it is our responsibility as human rights defenders that Igor Kalyapin and his friends should never be alone. Like in the famous anthem of FC Liverpool fans “You will never walk alone”. The very awareness that human rights defenders are not alone, that their efforts are seen and supported in the world, and that it is possible to win over an oppressive

regime is something that gives strength and is priceless when you are facing daily challenges, dilemmas and risks. I beg for your solidarity with them.