

*Presidential address by Nina George, President of the EWC, and the address by Mr. Barys Piatrovich, Chair of the Union of Belarusian Writers, during the EWC AGM 2020 on September 7.*

Dear colleagues,

Why do we do what we do?

Why do we, everyone present today, stand up for the moral, economic and human rights of authors? What is it that drives us? Why do we take the floor and use our words – when others lack it - or even free words are taken away?

I do it because I have longing. Longing for an integral version of society. It is the longing for a reliable counterpart, for a space of encounter that is not marked by fear. Comments, opinions, and posts should come from a person, not from a bot or fake account of an interest group that wants to impose extreme tendencies. It is the hunger for reliable information that is not suspected of being deep fake or suspected of having been copied together or translated in an erroneous and discriminatory way by an AI who is one day to replace authors.

The deep need for information flows that are not shut down by the state, controlled by monopolies or pre-sorted by their algorithms.

And: longing to get back into a human, social discourse. We are dealing with an increasing loss of our data sovereignty, the loss of trust, and the loss of fact-based discourse.

From my point of view, our actions, for fairness and freedom and for the appreciation of the word and its authors, are linked in regulatory terms to the need for integrity.

I do what I do in order to set a decisive course for a future with diversity and biblio-diversity. To make discourses that are relevant - about anti-racism, for example, about living and loving in other religious or emotional ways. To let independent science research and argue.

The defense and protection, freedom, and integrity of authors, of any genre, is the basis for tolerance, for the preservation of the ability to read for future generations, and a basis for understanding and independent opinion-forming.

We defend free, independent, and diverse voices; this is our contribution, to democracy, to integrity, to a world society that wants to live together, not against each other.

And that is why I would now like to handover the word to the Chair of the Union of Belarusian Writers, Barys Piatrovich. Thank you, Barys, for being here today, please take the floor.

*Speech presented by Mr. Barys Piatrovich, Chair of the Union of Belarusian Writers, during the EWC AGM 2020 online on 07/09/2020.*

Dear colleagues, greetings from Belarus!

We are grateful to the EWC, dear Ms. Nina George and Ms. Myriam Diocaretz, for the support we received after sending our statements explaining the situation in Belarus. We thank everyone for the solidarity and support we received after the publication of our statement. We are excited that Europe and the world, thanks to your help too, have finally paid attention to our country and our people struggling for freedom, democracy, and the right to choose.

The brutal suppression of protesters on August 9-12 did not frighten people, as the authorities were hoping, but provoked even greater protest. As the riot police grabbed and severely beat most of the men, the main role was taken by the nice and brave Belarusian women. They came out on August 13 dressed in white and with flowers in their hands and inspired the already fading protest to continue. They were supported by factory workers and on August 16 at least 300,000 people showed up at the protests in Minsk, and about a million - all over Belarus. Protests continue daily to this day.

The specifics of the Belarusian protests are:

- There are almost no leaders, as possible organizers were arrested preventively before the election. And then, if anyone tried to, they were arrested immediately. Members of the Coordinating Council that led the protests, one of them is the Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, are now facing criminal charges because ostensibly they attempted to seize power by force. By the way, no criminal cases have been initiated on the facts of beatings, tortures, and murders of protesters.

- the protests are absolutely peaceful: during the marches, not a single shop window was broken, not a single car was turned over, people marching wait for the green light to cross the street, and take off their shoes when they get on the benches to see better...

- The role of coordinators and organizers of the protests was taken over by social medias and Telegram channels.

- Meanwhile, beatings, arrests, and trials continue. If in the first days about 2,000 people were arrested, now it is one hundred or two hundred people a day. Intimidation and persecutions continue, especially against the journalists. More than 70 websites are shut down. The printing of major independent publications is banned, and even if they can be printed outside Belarus, it is impossible to distribute them. The Internet is slow and sporadic.

Members of our Union are absolutely on the side of the people and participated in the protests with them. Pavel Seviarynets, one of the members of our Union, is a prisoner of conscience for more than three months.

Now the situation is stalemate: people are protesting all over Belarus every day for a month already, and Lukashenko is sitting in his residence and promises to carry out some constitutional reform in a year or two. He behaves as if he really won the election. He says he will not give up power, even if he is killed. After the mass rallies, he goes out to the riot police with a machine gun in his hands, which causes not only laughter but also pity...

We need to understand that we have a dictator whom Europe did not know yet. Any honest person, having so convincingly lost the election, would agree with the will of the people. The problem is that Lukashenko knows that if he gives up his power, he will face trial in The Hague for previous crimes and the deaths of the opponents.

While the European Union promises sanctions against the Belarusian authorities, Putin is clearly on Lukashenko's side, preparing and keeping special units near the border with Belarus to help Lukashenko retain power if even loyal riot police turn away from him.

What can be done to help us in this situation? It is important for us to make Europe understand what monster we have to fight with and to see what an aggressor it is to its neighboring countries. The Belarusian people have consolidated and clearly expressed their desire to be with a free Europe and must understand that Europe is also with them. As for the members of our Union, we will continue the struggle that has lasted for 26 years. We believe in the justice of our will and the victory.