

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first to express my thanks for the honour of receiving the award that the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding represents. My thanks go to the prize's sponsors:

firstly the Saxon State Minister for Science and Art, Dame Sabine von Schorlemer, and to the Lord Mayor of Leipzig, Burkhard Jung, the members of the jury who selected me and to all those who worked behind the scenes and in public to organise this prize. I would like to extend warm gratitude to Sibylle Lewitscharoff for her wonderful laudatory speech which sees me now stand before you, touched and abashed. And I thank all of you here in the auditorium for attending. I associate warm memories with the Leipzig Book Prize, ones that stretch back a long time. I attended the ceremony once before, back in 1994. In that year, my friend Ryszard Kapuściński received the inaugural award. I was asked to translate his acceptance speech. If my memory does not fail me, I even held his speech seventeen years ago in Leipzig, but in a smaller venue and not in the Gewandhaus.

Kapuscinski spoke of establishing a new Europe, one that would have to go hand in hand with expanding its borders, and he warned against isolating our continent from the rest of the world in an attempt to make it a fortress. He said that this is unrealistic and contradicts the spirit of Europe. We must not see Europe, said Kapuściński at the time, as being just Paris, Cologne and Rome – and not just Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, we would add from a current perspective. Kiev, Lemberg, Iwano-Frankiwnsk, previously called Stanislawiw, Stanislawów or Stanislau, and Charkiw, Chisinau, capital of the Republic of Moldavia, the Belarusian metropolis of Minsk and Kapuściński's home town of Pinsk are naturally also on board. These are all places that are inseparably linked with Europe, even if seemingly absurd, sudden changes in history have moved them outside of those borders that some appear to consider the new Limes, worthy of defence against foreign barbarians.

When we met in Leipzig in 1994, Kapuściński spoke with me of his plans to write a book about Pinsk. We sat over a glass of wine in a pub whose name I no longer remember, when he started to speak of Pinsk and Bialorus, Belarus, White Russia. His words were suffused with warmth, even nostalgia for the land of his childhood, its breathtaking beauty, the sheer endless marshlands and the countless meandering rivers that in the fantasy of a child, connected the impoverished provincial town with the whole world. It is a shame and shameful, he lamented, that we know so little of this world, so near and yet so far, of the people, the Belarusians, Jews and Poles, of their shared lives and their culture and history. Kapuściński intended using the Pinsk book to familiarise us with the region, to tickle our interest and our understanding. His early death prevented it.

The situation has changed, of course, since we spoke then. The free and prosperous Europe has shifted its borders eastwards, but these borders have not disappeared. The new borders that crisscross our continent are guarded with the same rigour as during the Cold War, but now we are the ones deploying the implacable watchmen. Now it is we, the

inhabitants of the western countries, who duck down behind ingeniously fortified borders and demand that they be made ever-more impenetrable to keep out the Others, the less welloff who enjoy fewer freedoms than we do. On the outside of the borders of New Europe. This verdict applies equally to our neighbours with whom we share so much, historically and culturally. For instance to the Belarusians, the Ukrainians, the people in the Republic of Moldavia or the Serbs. The fact that some of them are descendents of our fellow countrymen who not even a century ago lived with us in a joint city that we now, I speak as an Austrian, love to appreciate in glorious nostalgia, changes none of this. We are less inclined to wallow in sentimentality when faced with the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of our former fellow citizens. If they hit on the idea of visiting us, they are forced to endure excruciating interrogations, only in many cases to be turned away, mostly without any apparent justification. We are prone to keeping needy relations and neighbours at arm's length, and poverty appears troublesome. After all, they could endanger our security and order or at the very least our prosperity. At times we bestow extenuating circumstances upon authors and artists, but they should not take it for granted. This defensive stance manifests itself also in our relations with these countries and cultures, although we have made some progress in charting the unmarked terrain of our literary maps. Authors who just a few years ago were only known to the initiated now enjoy the respect they deserve in German-speaking countries, for instance Juri Andruchowytch, Oksana Zabuzhko or Serhij Zhadan, to pick out a few Ukrainian authors. The book by the Belarusian author Artur Klinau about his home city of Minsk was wellreceived, and I wish the same for his compatriot Alhierd Bacharevic, whose novel *Die Elster auf dem Galgen* was recently published in a German translation. It is an insightful and equally nightmarish read. Magazines such as *Osteuropa*, Internet forums, individual publishers and translators are paving the way magnificently, but we are still missing a lot. Because we know too little, read too little, because too little is translated, because most publishers risk too little, because we need even more funding. There are numerous reasons why the situation is as it is, namely dissatisfactory. Not just for our friends who are refused the respect they deserve, but also for us, as we miss so many interesting, exciting, beautiful, also daunting and breathtaking things, and fail to pick up on so many worthwhile authors and books. The same is true for the political developments in those regions we so nonchalantly classify as the other, inferior side of Europe. We have come to accept that values such as the freedom of the written and spoken word, free elections and the unimpeded freedom to express one's opinion are by no means self-evident in some European countries. For example in Belarus. Since December of last year, opposition politicians and participants in peaceful demonstrations have been imprisoned; some have even been sentenced under heavy state interference to several years in prison due to participation in mass unrest, desecrating national symbols and hooliganism. The presidential candidate and author, Vladimir Nekljajev,

was beaten up and severely injured by security forces during a demonstration; he was released after several weeks in prison – and placed under house arrest.

Faced with this violent repression, numerous artists and authors see no alternative but to leave the country. Many have already emigrated and are forced to come to terms with longer sojourns on foreign soil. Everything suggests that the Lukaschenko regime now plans to use brutal force to stifle and destroy the all-too-constricted freedoms that the autonomous Belarus art and culture scene had eked out over the last few years.

Once more, artists and authors are among the first victims of state despotism. My friend Alhierd Bacharevic wrote to me that *any attempt at alternative thought is now brutally suppressed in Belarus. Throughout society, paranoia reigns supreme in a manner that we have never experienced in our recent history.* Alhierd Bacharevic is currently living in Germany; a return to Belarus would be inconceivable under the prevailing circumstances. Svetlana Aleksijevic, a Belarus author who writes in Russian, recently addressed the dictator in an open letter. It states: *We find ourselves transported back to the nineteen-thirties. It won't take much for us to have show trials again.* Svetlana Aleksijevic was awarded the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding in 1998; she has lived abroad for years.

Can the recent trials already be described as show-trials?

After all, some defendants were tortured and forced to make public confessions. Or are Soviet-style show-trials on the horizon?

And how will free Europe respond?

But even given the outrage at violence and despotism in Belarus, we must not be so presumptuous to read the works of Belarus authors as if they were political manifestos. Literature is created in an atmosphere that is heavily influenced by politics, especially in countries like Belarus; but this does not give us license to reduce it to political contents and significance.

The literary word must retain its autonomy.

Belarus puts Europe to shame, but the process of democratisation is experiencing dramatic setbacks in other countries also. In Ukraine, for example. We followed the country's uprising after the Orange Revolution with admiration, and the literary scene benefited also. New names emerged next to well-known authors such as Juri Andruchowytsh, Oksana Zabuzhko or Andrej Kurkow: Jurko and Taras Prochasko, Natalka Snyadanko and Lubko Deresch, to name but a few.

But interest has since waned, although the political situation has come to a head. Or is this in itself the reason? Whatever it may be, democracy has been systematically and progressively undermined in Ukraine since the change of government. Just like in Belarus, the political opposition, critical sections of the media, independent artists and cultural figures are being increasingly intimidated and put under pressure. For instance, a well-known female author and holder of the highest state accolade for literature, the Taras Schewtschenko Prize, has been bullied and threatened by the militia and institutions of the judiciary; she has gone on record as saying the Office of the Attorney General literally *surrounded* her, just because in a book, she made a comment about a monument to the

Great Patriotic War in Kiev that sounded disparaging to some ears. A communist member of parliament and representative of the Veterans' Association was offended by this and let fly a veritable hailstorm of intimidation against the author, her family, her friends and the publisher. The name of the author is Maria Matios; she is very well-known in Ukraine, but even that was insufficient to protect her against this state-controlled hate campaign. The bizarre events were even noted in German-speaking countries, although the wonderful author's books are still not translated. What a loss!

What happened to Maria Matios is no isolated event. All of my friends in Ukraine speak of a return of fear, a return of state despotism, of informants and mistrust. When I met Juri Andruchowytch in Berlin at the end of last September, he seemed despondent to me, although I had always found him optimistic and sanguine. It is horrifying, he said, how quickly the dictatorship returns – and how little attention the West pays to the process. He sounded even gloomier when he wrote to me a few weeks ago: *You can feel the violence looming every day: threats, intimidation, arrests, blood, weapons, murders, assassinations.* And Juri added as a warning: *Nobody should be surprised if one day, Europe experiences something akin to a second Balkans in Ukraine.*

My friend Natalka Snyadanko, a young author from Lviv, has a similarly pessimistic take on the situation. She told me recently that she can increasingly feel how interest in what is happening in Ukraine is seeping away in the West. She feels disappointed: *In difficult times, being ignored instead of supported is nothing new, but it is still unjust.*

Europe has not achieved much in political terms to counteract this development. It is therefore all the more a task for we intellectuals, authors, publishers and journalists to allay the fears and concerns of our friends on the other side of Europe; we must try all the more to open every door to them and their works. In our own interests.