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## International Association of Political Consultants Democracy Medal Presented to Women of Belarus at recent ceremony

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Former International Association of Political Consultants (IAPC) President Sepp Hartinger accompanied by IAPC member Christoph Hofinger and Secretary General of the Austrian Journalists Club, Barbara Meister presented the Democracy Award to Swiatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veronica Tsepkalo and imprisoned Maria Kalesnikaya, who was not able to attend, for their work in the promotion of democracy in Belarus. The IAPC awarded the Democracy Medal in 2020 but due to the pandemic was not able to present the award until now.

Mauroicio de Vengoechea, President of the IAPC said, "Individuals are at the heart of democracy and the political process. Through their actions, these three courageous women have demonstrated how to engage their fellow citizens in a positive, non-violent effort to bring about democratic change in their country."

In his remarks, Hartinger spoke of the fate of all fighters for democracy who are in political prison and thanked the women for their exemplary commitment to democracy. "This honor should not be a one-time effect, but the beginning of a closer cooperation to make democracy possible in Belarus and to strengthen it worldwide."

In their speeches, Tsikhanouskaya and Tsepkalo expressed their gratitude for the award and particularly emphasized the solidarity that can be felt worldwide.

### **About the recipients**

#### **Swiatlana Tsikhanouskaya**

Swiatlana Tsikhanouskaya is the leader of the democratic forces in Belarus who, according to independent observers, defeated autocratic President Aliaksandr Lukashenka in the August 9, 2020 presidential election. She had entered the race after her husband was arrested for running for president. Lukashenka publicly dismissed her as a "housewife" and claimed a woman could not become president. Tsikhanouskaya united Belarus's democratic forces along with two other leaders -- Maria Kalesnikaya and Veronica Tsepkalo.

After her forced exile, Tsikhanouskaya provoked unprecedented peaceful protests throughout Belarus, some of which were attended by hundreds of thousands of people. She visited more than 20 countries to rally support for a free Belarus. She is campaigning for the release of more than 500 political prisoners and peaceful change through free and fair elections. In her meetings with Chancellor Merkel, President Macron, President von der Leyen, President Charles Michel and other world leaders, she emphasized the need for a bolder response to the actions of the Belarusian dictatorship.

Tsikhanouskaya became a symbol of the peaceful struggle for democracy and female leadership. Among dozens of other awards, Swiatlana Tsikhanouskaya was honored with the Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament. In 2020, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Lithuanian President Nausėda and Norwegian MPs. She was included in the TOP-50 most influential people by Bloomberg, in the top 12 most influential women by Financial Times and in the top 28 most influential Europeans by POLITICO.

#### **Veronica Tsepkalo**

One of the three leaders of the national democracy movement in Belarus. Together with Swiatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Maria Kalesnikaya, she managed to bring together an unprecedented number of people to protest against a regime that violates human rights, falsifies presidential elections and uses brutal violence against its citizens. The trio was recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and has already received the International Democracy Prize and the Sakharov Prize. Currently, Veronica supports Belarusian women who have been victims of the regime's cruelty in recent months.

#### **Maria Kalesnikaya**

Kalesnikaya is a currently imprisoned civil rights activist in Belarus, political prisoner, and music educator and flutist. Through her relationships with Swiatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veronica Tsepkalo and friendship with Viktor Babaryka, as well as political developments in her home country, she became a human rights activist and non-partisan politician. In 2020, she became internationally known for her role in the Belarusian opposition.

In early September 2020, Kalesnikaya "disappeared" in Minsk in an as-yet unexplained manner; her family was able to report two days later that she was in state custody. In February, the prosecutor expanded the charges against her: she was alleged to have participated in a conspiracy to seize power in an anti-constitutional manner and to have founded and led an extremist association.

For this she was sentenced to eleven years in prison.

#### **About the IAPC Democracy Award**

Since 1982, the International Association of Political Consultants has been a pioneer in awarding an organization or an individual who in the judgement of its membership has worked courageously to foster, promote, and sustain the democratic process anywhere in the world through our Democracy Medal, the first international award of its kind.

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Established in 1968, The International Association of Political Consultants is committed to fostering democracy and the democratic process throughout the world. Members span a variety of political backgrounds and activities fostering the growing and diverse profession of political consulting as well as the practical aspects of democratic elections.

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