

Honorable Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Today's ceremony has a very unique meaning. For the first time in history it is not the president, not a minister, not a legendary historical hero or a well-known writer who has been distinguished with the Knight of Freedom award, but a prisoner of conscience.

Five years ago Mr. Mikhail Khodorkovsky has been called as such by Amnesty International. Nevertheless he is a prisoner – today at large – of a peculiar kind. He is a man who dared to oppose the ruler of an authoritarian empire. The man who said no to the system that strangles democracy and almost every day violates dignity and rights of its citizens. And he was persistent and uncompromising in his activity, without paying heed to harassment and severe repressions.

Let me congratulate the Awarding Committee on the right decision. The Knight of Freedom award has been conferred to outstanding figures that have contributed to the promotion of the values of General Kazimierz Pulaski - freedom, justice and democracy. And just today, Mikhail Khodorkovsky is the man whose name has become one of the most important and clear symbols of the struggle for freedom. Moreover, he is also regarded as a person who, once he regained his freedom, did not forget about other prisoners. With a great commitment and passion he has devoted a lot of time and resources to the promotion of the values so close to Pulaski. The whole activity of the Open Russia Foundation, established by Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2001, is aimed at this goal, as well as Mr. Khodorkovsky's numerous recent international initiatives, publications and interviews.

I wanted to draw your attention to the particular philosophy and mode of action presented by the Hero of today's ceremony. I am convinced that it is no coincidence that in 2013 Mr. Khodorkovsky was awarded the Lech Walesa Prize. His nomination at that time read: *"For His courage in promoting the values of civil society."* At that time, Mikhail Khodorkovsky was in prison, so the award was collected by his son, but the rewarding committee appreciated the fact that he wants to change Russia through the development of education, culture, raising awareness and building a civil society. Given Russia's bloody revolutionary tradition, it is undoubtedly something new, a sign

of the times. Khodorkovsky, however, does not want to introduce changes at all costs, especially at the price of protesters' lives. On the contrary, recognizing the inevitability of the collapse of modern-day authoritarianism, Khodorkovsky remains devoted, first and foremost, to the safety of the people. For him, the change has to take place in a peaceful way, giving real democracy a chance. Right now, living in a country that is dangerously questioning democratic principles, I can understand better why civic education and strong civil society is crucial to stability of democracy.

In his opinion: *"A strong state means efficiently functioning democratic institutions: independent courts, a professional Parliament, a serious opposition, that does not go radical under the influence of external pressures, fair elections, a conscious civil society and independent media"*. He does not believe in so-called *"good dictatorship"* which is often *"the dream of bureaucrats"* and which has to secure economic growth and stability. His belief is that imperialistic plans laid out by present authorities are doomed to fail. He claims that *"trying to maintain the Empire, instead of building the State based on the rule of law, has cost us dearly"*.

There is one more reason for which Mikhail Khodorkovsky should be recognized. Before I took the office of Commissioner for Human Rights, I had a privilege to work with human rights lawyers from Russia. I know lawyers who spend months defending Greenpeace activists in the north of Russia. I admire lawyers who travel long days and hours to Siberian prisons to meet their clients. I appreciate fight taken by anti-torture activists being subject of repression by totalitarian rulers in various regions of Russia, including Chechnya. Some of them have to use official *"foreign agents"* name, as it is required by repressive Russian legislation. Activists must know that they are not alone, that the world sees and supports them, and that oppressive regimes can and must be fought, even if they have law enforcement agencies in their pockets – this knowledge alone is priceless. They must have also one symbol, person of courage and dignity, who is supporting their cause internationally, who gives them a hope for change in a future, that their work has a meaning, despite reprisals and other difficulties. I believe Mikhail Khodorkovsky is such a person.

In a way, it was only thanks to Mr. Khodorkovsky that a milestone moment in my career came about. I remember my first street protest. It was at the gates of the Russian Embassy, when Mr. Khodorkovsky was going to be convicted for the second time. On 15 December 2010, when the judgment in so-called second trial was scheduled, I stood there with my friends and other activists. Then we learned that issuance of verdict was postponed to 27 December 2010, for the time when everybody in the world would be celebrating Christmas. Due to such tricks you better understand - in your future life - how violations of judicial independence work in practice. You are getting the real picture of authoritarian power.

Courage is infectious. Therefore, I believe that the idea of awarding The Knight of Freedom award at the inauguration of the Academy of Young Diplomats is an excellent choice. You are facing a world, Ladies and Gentlemen, in which you will have to stand up for human rights and values and fight oppression and misuse of law. Your humanity will be put to countless tests. Numerous persons and modern day intellectuals will try to tell you - human rights are not so important. World may develop without them. We must have a progress. But please tell what is the other value - stronger than human dignity and freedom - that may build the contemporary world. Please explain that human rights are not significant, to numerous prisoners of conscience, victims of torture, families of persons who "forcefully disappeared", mothers of dead soldiers, and other victims of repressive regimes.

When you are meeting any person who is a victim of human rights violations and is begging for your help, please think - it might be just the colleague from the prison cell of the man you see here - Mr. Mikhail Khodorkovsky. This colleague has a dignity as any other human being.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish Mr. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, from the bottom of my heart, that he might see his dream of free, democratic Russia, where the rule of law is universally accepted, come true. I hope, too, that one day we will be able to build lasting and friendly relations between the Polish and Russian civil societies. In many ways, this, I don't think I have to add, will be up to you, young diplomats. There is, if you ask me, a "knight of freedom" in each and every one of you.