

Thank you very much, Eva

Dear Mr Adam Bodnar,

Dear Ms Van Herreweghe, vice-rector of the University of Ghent,

Ladies & Gentlemen

Dear Friends,

Dear Mr Bodnar, as Eva Brems was already mentioning, you are the twelfth person to be honoured in this way by the University of Ghent and by Amnesty International.

One of the very first holders of the Amnesty Chair of the University of Ghent, was the Egyptian writer, activist and physician Nawal el-Saadawi. She sadly passed away in March of this year. The traditional way of honouring such a loss is a moment of silence. But maybe a better way to honour this feminist icon is by starting this brief introduction with a quote from her. When she was asked in 2018 whether it wouldn't be wiser to tone down her criticism, she said, I quote:

*"No. I should be more outspoken, ..., because the world is becoming more aggressive, and we need people to speak loudly against injustices."*

Dear friends

I agree with Nawal el-Saadawi.

I also think it's very likely that Mr Bodnar, the guest we honour here tonight, agrees as well that we cannot be silent in the face of oppression and injustice.

Professor doctor Adam Bodnar, it is my honour to introduce you here today on behalf of the Board, members and activists of Amnesty International Vlaanderen. For those that don't know, Mr Bodnar is a law professor by training and he put that training to good use: his resumé as a human rights activist goes back to the 1990s. I won't list everything but his work with the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, as director of the Helsinki Foundation and in many other capacities, has made him respected, admired and influential as a Polish and European human rights expert. Unsurprisingly, he has received several human rights awards.

But it is because of Mr Bodnar's current role that we decided to honour him with the Amnesty International Chair 2021. Since 2015 Adam Bodnar serves as Polish ombudsman and human rights commissioner. In that post, he has had the challenging task of leading Poland's national human rights institution during a time that the country's government seemed to turn its back to the rule of law and on human rights.

There have been many worrying evolutions in Poland : we witness erosion of the independence of the judiciary, criminal charges used to curtail freedom of expression, further restrictions on access to abortion, widespread anti-lgbti rhetoric from politicians, arrests of activists and plans to withdraw from international human rights treaties... and those are just some of the things Amnesty International documented in 2020 alone. I assume that Mr Bodnar will further illustrate this during his lecture.

In this context, the office of the Human Rights Commissioner has been an important and steady line of defense for fundamental rights and freedoms. In Poland, it is the human rights commissioner that is often a last resort for people in need of protection and those most at

risk of discrimination: women, people from smaller towns, the elderly, people with disabilities, people living in homelessness, people from minorities, LGBTI-people, people in detention centres... All these and many more found a champion in Adam Bodnar and his team.

Dear Mr Bodnar,

It was precisely for taking up this important role during a difficult time and for doing so with such clarity, commitment and conviction that the University of Ghent and Amnesty International, wanted to honour you.

But Mr Bodnar, as you know, we decided to invite you over a year and a half ago. We had to postpone holding the actual ceremony due to COVID. Little did we know that the Polish authorities would make this new timing of the award significantly more meaningful.

Earlier this month, on 15 April, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled that Adam Bodnar cannot continue in his role of Ombudsman for much longer. In other words, the authorities pushed out Adam Bodnar. Civil society has dubbed this a hostile takeover by the parliamentary majority and is very worried – not in the least that the government will try to install someone who would not defend the independence and integrity of this important mandate.

Either way, later this year, Adam Bodnar will have to hand over the proverbial keys to his successor. Who that successor will be is not yet clear and not all is lost: many Polish people will fight to make sure that replacing Mr Bodnar happens in accordance with the provisions of Poland's Constitution and for the independence and impartiality of the Ombudsman. We will stand with them.

Dear Mr Bodnar, dear Adam if I may,

We are truly honoured to welcome you today. On a more personal note, I want to say that, from time to time, I speak with my colleague Draginja and her Amnesty-team in Poland, as well as with Amnesty members in your country. In these conversations your legacy and your current leading role for human rights in Poland becomes very clear. But equally important, many of them have testified on how essential your work was – and is – for all Polish citizens who are standing up for what is right, who are not afraid to be silenced and who find the courage to defend humanity. I feel humbled to also extend their profound gratitude to you, tonight.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let today be a celebration of Adam Bodnar's remarkable performance as commissioner in recent years. In the face of very difficult circumstances he stood up for the values that underpin human rights and equality.

But let the Amnesty Chair also be a signal of our solidarity with the members of the ombudsman-team, with Polish civil society and with all Polish citizens who deserve and need strong institutions to defend and fulfil their human rights.

With that, I gladly pass the floor to the vice-rector, Ms Van Herreweghe, for the official award ceremony.

Thank you