

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Today is a very important day in my life. Every day, every lawyer defends the interests of those who entrusted him or her with their destiny, their interests, and sometimes their lives. We have chosen this profession, and it gave us not only hardships but also the triumph of victory.

I felt that way when, after many years of stagnation, for the very first time the Minsk City Bar Association openly and democratically elected its leadership. I was moved when my colleagues entrusted me to be a part of this leadership. There were hard times, when we had to face the Ministry's of Justice attempts to interfere with our professional activity. However, our relationship with the Ministry of Justice had a contentious nature because at that time according to the law, the Ministry could neither revoke a decision of the Presidency of the Bar, nor take direct measures against lawyers.

The events of 19 December 2011 put an end to my hopes that democratic changes could be possible in a single institution within a non-democratic state.

A few days after the presidential elections in Belarus, the majority of the presidential candidates, the heads of their electoral headquarters, the leaders of the opposition were arrested. Hundreds of participants in peaceful assemblies were sentenced to serve various terms.

The lawyers of the Minsk City Bar defended those people. The authorities were either unwilling to provide unbiased information on the detainees, or publicly lied about the situation. Mass media got unbiased information only from the lawyers of these detainees, and these detainees could receive information about the situation outside just from their lawyers.

They were held in the KGB prison, where their lawyers were denied access by the KGB. From that moment onwards and until the end of the investigation, all meetings with their clients were held only in the presence of an investigator who prevented any communication between lawyers and clients.

The Ministry of Justice launched a campaign against those lawyers who defended the presidential candidates. In particular, it accused the lawyers of infringing the law. The reasons of this campaign lied in the public statements of the lawyers who complained about physical sufferings of their clients and about the violation of their rights to due process.

In February 2011 the Ministry of Justice disbarred the following lawyers: Oleg and Tatiana Ageev, Vladimir Tolstik, Tamara Goraeva. Both Oleg Ageev and Tatiana Ageeva were members of the Presidency of the Minsk City Bar. Oleg Ageev defended Ales Michalevich, one of the presidential candidates, who after being released from the KGB prison made a shocking statement about the tortures he had suffered. Vladimir Tolstik and Tamara Goraeva defended a journalist Irina Halip. Valentina Busko, a lawyer, was disbarred for participating in a peaceful assembly against the falsification of the election results. Later on, Tamara Sidorenko and Vladimir Bukshytynov, the lawyers of Vladimir Nekliaev, another presidential candidate, were disbarred. Finally, I was disbarred too.

A year later, a new Law on the Bar was adopted. This law allowed the government to transform an independent body, the Bar, into an association fully controlled by the state.

Therefore, the award that you are giving me rightfully belongs to all those people who fought next to me, who upheld the true meaning of independence of the legal profession, who did not betray their principles and the interests of clients.

Today, as nearly two years ago, when the CCBE gave us its support, we see your continuous commitment to solidarity among lawyers. *Facta sunt potentiora verbis* – actions speak louder than words.

I truly believe that the Bar in Belarus will face difficult times. However, the time will come when we, Belarusian lawyers, will take our rightful place next to European lawyers, and Belarus – next to European states.

In conclusion, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all colleagues who are supporting me and my fellows. Thanks to you and your support we have no doubts that we did the right thing when we decided not to give up our principles and to fight against the dictatorship.