



THE
RIGHT
LIVELIHOOD
AWARD

Speech by Jakob von Uexküll, Founder-President of the Right Livelihood Award, at the 37th Right Livelihood Award Ceremony Stockholm, 25 November 2016

Honourable Members of Parliament,
Members of the Swedish Government,
Right Livelihood Award Laureates,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

It is my great honour to welcome you tonight on behalf of the Right Livelihood Award Foundation in the magnificent Vasa Museum, a venue so evocative both for our award's Swedish origins and our country's history.

2016 will no doubt go down in history as a year of great shocks: from the unspeakable suffering endured by civilians to the crackdown on democratic freedoms around the world.

It has also been a tumultuous year for the Right Livelihood Award, its Laureates and the global civil society they represent.

Indeed, if I were to use a venue-appropriate metaphor: today, we are all in the same boat.

But if the lessons of Vasa are anything to learn from, it is that grand ambitions of leaders – be they from the 17th century or the 21st – will not succeed unless they are grounded in reality, and based on good advice and sound science.

In other words, armed-to-the-teeth, ill-constructed, ego-driven vessels inevitably – and quickly! – sink.

What was sorely lacking in Vasa – and what civil society provides – is the often life-saving counterweight to top-heavy governments.

Yes, civil society activists rock the proverbial boat from time to time – but they also make the ship more stable and resilient in the long run.



Without independent press, flourishing NGOs, strong communities and empowered women, there can be no open society. And unless the doors of democratic institutions – around the world and here in Sweden – are open to civil society, democracies cannot work.

In a year when open societies face unprecedented threats, it is shocking that the highest representative of Swedish democracy has decided to close the Parliament's doors to the Right Livelihood Award and several other events of great public interest, and thus encourage the enemies of open societies.

A few years ago I was honoured by the Swedish Government for "important work to support global sustainable development and human rights" by founding this award for personal courage, environmental protection and social transformation. I have been very encouraged by its widespread recognition in Sweden, culminating in a special law, passed in 2004, conferring a unique legal status on the Right Livelihood Award Foundation because "in the government's opinion its goals and activities are so highly beneficial for the common good that it has become key national concern" ("en central nationell angelägenhet").

We know from the messages received by many award recipients how much they value the widespread support among MPs across political boundaries, and how protective the presentation of the award in Parliament has been for them.

This award has saved lives, opened prison doors, and ended a dictator's plan to return. We will continue to support our recipients in every way, and trust that, with your support, we soon again celebrate in the Swedish Parliament.

Now more than ever the supporters of open democratic societies everywhere need to join together. I would like to express my deep gratitude to the German Parliament and President for hosting our recipients in the coming days in Berlin, as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights who will meet our Laureates in Geneva.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our 2016 Laureates work in some of the most difficult circumstances. Hailing from Syria, Egypt, Russia and Turkey, they have witnessed some of the most turbulent events in modern times.

Amid the failed coups and stalled peace negotiations, despite propaganda wars and persecution, they stand up for the fundamental rights to life, equality, education and freedom of expression, and are not afraid to speak truth to power.



We have all seen this year how quickly freedoms we take for granted can be reversed; decades of cooperation and peace-building can be undone; history can be rewritten; exclusion and intolerance return.

Today we stand in solidarity with our Laureate Mozn Hassan who was unable to attend the ceremony due to a travel ban imposed on her by the Egyptian authorities.

Mozn is watching us online, and I would like to assure you, Mozn, that we, our Laureates and our supporters will not rest until this arbitrary decision has been reversed!

We also demand the immediate release of journalists and staff of our Laureate Cumhuriyet who are under arrest awaiting trial. It is truly shocking that Turkey has become 'the largest prison for journalists in the world'!

We also honour the memory of more than 140 Syria Civil Defence volunteers who have lost their life while rescuing civilians in war-torn Aleppo and elsewhere across the country, and nearly half a million Syrians who have died as a result of hostilities or on their perilous journey out of the country.

This year, we have also lost a member of the Right Livelihood Award family: one of our earliest awardees, Bill Mollison (RLA 1981). The permaculture system he designed has spread worldwide, showing how agriculture can be integrated with its surroundings in a highly productive loop of production, consumption and re-use. Bill was a man truly larger-than-life who rose to every challenge and challenged every assumption.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

Before we present the awards to our 2016 Laureates, I would like to thank Eva-Lena Jansson, Chair of the Society for the Right Livelihood Award in the Swedish Parliament (SÄRLA), and all other Members of Parliament, for their unwavering support.

I would also like to warmly thank our long-standing partner, the Vasa Museum, for hosting this year's award ceremony, and our media partner Deutsche Welle for producing the videos of our Laureates.

And our profound gratitude goes to our Circle of Friends and other donors who provide ongoing support to the Right Livelihood Award, which lives and thrives thanks to their generous donations.



Thank you very much.

Presentation part:

It is with great pleasure that I present the 2016 Right Livelihood Award to Syria Civil Defence, represented by its director Raed al-Saleh, "for their outstanding bravery, compassion and humanitarian engagement in rescuing civilians from the destruction of the Syrian civil war"

It is with great pleasure that I present the 2016 Right Livelihood Award to Mozn Hassan and Nazra for Feminist Studies, "for asserting the equality and rights of women in circumstances where they are subject to ongoing violence, abuse and discrimination".

Dear Mozn, we will continue to work for your right to travel and will do our utmost to ensure that you receive your diploma in the near future.

It is with great pleasure that I present the 2016 Right Livelihood Award to Svetlana Gannushkina "for her decades-long commitment to promoting human rights and justice for refugees and forced migrants, and tolerance among different ethnic groups".

It is with great pleasure that I present the 2016 Right Livelihood Award to Cumhuriyet "for their fearless investigative journalism and commitment to freedom of expression in the face of oppression, censorship, imprisonment and death threats". Cumhuriyet is represented here tonight by Zeynep Oral and Isıl Özgentürk.

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I would now like to ask all Laureates to join us on the stage for a group picture.