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## **Council of Europe: Havel Prize to Belarusian opposition leader Maria Kalesnikava**

The Václav Havel Human Rights Prize has been awarded to Belarusian opposition leader Maria Kalesnikava. The Council of Europe thus intended to honour the “outstanding civil society action in defence of human rights” carried out by civil society leaders, including Maria Kalesnikava, one of the women who supported presidential nominee Viktor Babaryka in the 2019 election. Because of this, she is now in prison to serve a 11-year sentence. The 60,000-euro prize was awarded to Maria’s sister, Tatsiana Khomich, at the opening of the autumn plenary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Strasbourg today. “This award is a sign of solidarity of the entire democratic world with the people of Belarus”, Ms Khomich told the PACE. “It is also a sign to us, Belarusians, that the international community supports us, and that we are on the right track”. PACE President Rik Daems, for his part, said: “In standing up against a regime which has chosen force and brutality against peaceful and legitimate protest, Ms Kalesnikava showed that she is ready to risk her own safety for a cause greater than herself – she has shown true courage”. Indeed, this prize “comes at a heavy price”. The two other shortlisted nominees were Reporters Without Borders, an NGO committed to defending media freedom, and Burundian human rights defender Germain Rukuki.

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