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****THE VÁCLAV HAVEL PRIZE AWARDED TO MURAT ARSLAN: THE STORY****

We had already encountered situations where selected candidates could not be present because they were in detention. In such cases, a family member represents the candidate. In the specific case of Mr. Arslan, exceptionally, the candidate would be represented by his lawyer. If his lawyer was unable to attend, there would be no representation.

That was the position of the Council of Europe on October 4. It was in response to my email, which read: “Our colleague MURAT ARSLAN is in prison, a victim of the arbitrary repression of the Turkish government, which targeted him because of his courageous commitment to fundamental democratic rights. Thus, unfortunately, he will not be able to attend the ceremony where, as a finalist, he should be present. This is why his lawyer has informed us that Murat ARSLAN wishes to be represented by MEDEL. MEDEL has chosen me as its delegate. Therefore, it is not just about attending the ceremony; we want to physically represent Murat ARSLAN during the ceremony and receive the prize, if he is chosen, or, if not, the document given to the finalists.”

There were four days left to convince the Council of Europe of the legitimacy of an effective representation of MEDEL within the Council of Europe's parliament. Initially, they proposed to give me only a “visitor badge” with access to the gallery, meaning a glassed-in area separating the public from the parliamentary chamber.

On October 5, Gualtieri wrote to the Council of Europe to confirm that I would represent MEDEL on October 9, still hoping that Murat’s lawyer might make it to Strasbourg, and that I could be

present at her side. Regardless of what happened, it was decided that I would be in Strasbourg, ready for any eventuality.

On October 6, in the early morning, the Council of Europe requested my identification to issue a visitor badge, which I immediately provided. Later that afternoon, I received an email about a phone call scheduled for later. Was the situation evolving? That's how I came into contact with a friend at the council, with whom I would stay in close communication. She explained that Murat's case was unusual because no family member could come to receive the prize. While the presence of the lawyer was already exceptional, the lawyer had informed us the day before that she could not attend. Therefore, allowing me to represent Murat would be even more exceptional, especially since the names of sponsors like MEDEL are not usually revealed.

I might have to say a few words and respond to the press, but nothing was certain. Everything would be decided on the evening of Sunday, October 8, during the final meeting of the prize jury.

Late on October 8, my friend at the Council called me: deliberations were continuing. I sensed that the Turkish government was applying pressure. I wasn't yet sure if I could deliver the speech written by Murat, but I was assured that I would be seated in the parliamentary chamber with the "authorities," as well as the prize recipients, and that I would receive either the finalist's diploma or the winner's trophy. I was expected by late morning, with the prize ceremony taking place at the opening of the parliamentary session at 3 p.m.

From a visitor behind a glass, I became an active participant in the assembly. For Murat, I was pleased; he would know, whatever happened, that he had been represented by his European civil family.

****Murat's speech****: we had received a text written in Turkish by Murat, in case he won the prize. We had arranged for it to be translated into English. As soon as I learned the lawyer of Murat's unavailability, I made sure to have the text translated. Wanting to have a first-hand French translation, I contacted a Turkish speaker who, over the weekend, provided me with a French version that closely matched the Turkish text. I then worked to give the text a formulation that matched its beauty and strength.

Meanwhile, MEDEL's office was preparing: press releases and speeches, in French and English, along with a photo of Murat. Everything was ready, whatever the jury's decision.

****The prize ceremony****: Upon arriving at the Council of Europe, after the usual formalities, I was greeted and led to a small room where the two other nominees, the "Hungarian Helsinki Committee" and Jesuit Father Georg Sporschill, were already present. Only the latter spoke French and was very curious about the situation in our country.

The suspense continued.

Together, we attended the opening of a Václav Havel exhibition, a pure distillation of all ceremonies of this kind. Then, instead of a guided tour of the exhibition, we were led to the dining room to have lunch with high authorities, including the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the Czech Foreign Minister, and others.

In my mind, the suspense continued, and the food was of little importance compared to this historical and tragic moment. As the parliamentary session and the much-anticipated verdict drew near, my friend in the council discreetly led me to the still-empty parliamentary chamber, saying: “You have Murat Arslan’s speech, prepare to deliver it,” and she explained the ceremony’s proceedings in advance. Sworn to secrecy, I returned to the company of the other nominees, pretending I knew nothing, chatting casually with the Austrian Jesuit, even though I wanted nothing more than to re-read Murat’s speech.

The emotion was strong; I thought of Murat in his prison, where 26 detainees were crammed together. I recalled images of Murat at the Toulouse congress of the SM. He was present in my mind.

We were led into the parliamentary chamber, each to our seats. I sat behind Murat’s empty chair, symbolizing, beyond the state persecution that had befallen him, the Turkish nation, void of democracy. All the photographers rushed toward the two other nominees, barely glancing at the empty seat.

The routine of opening the parliamentary session began, and soon the jury’s decision was announced. Everything happened quickly: the diploma was awarded, the trophy was presented, congratulations from the jury and various authorities, photos were taken, and Murat’s words were powerfully proclaimed in the chamber.

And to think I was there without any personal claim to honor: I was not the one who had courageously fought against the arbitrariness of the Turkish government; I was not the one enduring grueling hardships in a Turkish jail; I was not the one who had written such a beautiful and courageous speech. But Murat had given MEDEL this extraordinary right to represent him in the name of the democratic values we share.



In the days that followed, I received a very touching message of gratitude from Murat's lawyer, in her name and on behalf of Murat and his wife. Murat's words had resonated throughout Europe, and the courageous resistance of all Turkish colleagues who had been arbitrarily repressed received more than a tribute—international recognition.

A few days later, I delivered the diploma and trophy to the Élysée Palace to be sent to the French Embassy in Turkey.