Guest of Honor Ayşe Buğra, Esteemed Jury, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Let me first commend the jury for the excellent choice of presenting the Gilel Storch Award to Osman Kavala.

And then a little background:

In the early 90s, I began traveling as a journalist to Turkey, or Türkiye as the country is now officially called. In those years a devastating civil war was going on in the southeast between the state and Kurdish insurgents. Its repercussions could be felt anywhere in the country.

While it was no longer automatically a crime to speak Kurdish in daily life, expressing political views, giving speeches, or even singing in Kurdish was often prosecuted as “separatist propaganda" under Turkey's strict anti-terror laws.

Turkey in those years had a despicable record of torture, arbitrary killings, enforced disappearances and a crackdown on the freedom of speech.

Calling the mass killings of Armenians and other Christians in the final days of the Ottoman Empire a genocide could be prosecuted as an insult to the Turkish nation.

Women wearing headscarves were banned from universities and public state buildings.

From these years, I will always remember a female lawyer and human rights defender who said to me that “in Turkey, every decent person has been in jail”.

Today’s Turkey is not identical to the Republic in the 1990s. But as we speak, too many decent people are in jail. And no one symbolizes those unfairly imprisoned more than Osman Kavala.

For more than a decade Turkey has been developing into a new type of authoritarian state, driven by a constitutional order that centralizes power in the Presidency, or, more precisely, in the presidential palace in Ankara.

This can be felt in every courtroom, in every police station, on every university campus, in every civil society organization, and in media newsrooms.

Against this authoritarianism, a vibrant, courageous and multifaceted Turkish civil society has been standing, and still stands — most of the time.

Osman Kavala epitomizes the spirit of civil society in Turkey. He is a businessman and philanthropist who was arrested in October 2017. For two years he was held in pre-trial detention until he was prosecuted in 2019.

Nearly five years after his detention, in April 2022, Osman Kavala was sentenced by an Istanbul court to aggravated life imprisonment without parole for attempting to overthrow the Government of Turkey or prevent it from performing its duties. The sentence was in reference to the nationwide anti-government Gezi protests in 2013. However, Kavala was acquitted of the charge of military and political espionage — the grounds for his detention. Eight co-defendants — an architect, a lawyer, a city planner, a filmmaker, a

rights defender, an educator, a founder of a university and another businessman — were sentenced to 18 years in prison.

It was a judicial scandal. And so it remains.

In his defense in court, Osman Kavala showed that the accusations against him were based on distorted facts and fantastic fiction. And so they remain.

His innocence has been corroborated by the European Court of Human Rights which called for Osman Kavala's immediate release in a first landmark decision in December 2019. For a second time, in July 2022, the court in Strasbourg reiterated its call for his release. The court ruled that Turkey had failed to fulfill its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights by refusing to execute the original release order.

For almost nine long years, Osman Kavala has been locked up in the huge Silivri Prison, later named the Marmara Prison, where he is only allowed to have visits from his lawyers and his immediate family members every second week.

The 2019 indictment against Osman Kavala shows a clear correlation between the prosecutor's wording for the charges and two speeches that President Erdoğan held shortly before.

Erdogan's speeches and the indictment consisted of conspiracy theories alleging that the Gezi Protests, which spread from a little park in the center of Istanbul to 80 cities all over the Republic, had been plotted by the billionaire philanthropist George Soros with the aim of overthrowing the Turkish government. President Erdoğan portrayed Osman Kavala as the "Turkish Soros", as the alleged national pillar of a globalized plot. Resonating with conspiracy thinking and antisemitic tropes, the president called Soros "the famous Hungarian Jew", who "encourages people to divide and to shatter nations".

The prosecutor argued that the Gezi protests were similar to previous uprisings in countries like Georgia in the Eastern bloc, and Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab spring, depicting these uprisings as orchestrated by foreign hands with hidden agendas, when in fact they were spontaneous outbursts of deeply felt frustration. I know it well from Tunisia and Egypt, because I covered these events from many Arab capitals at the time.

Also, as someone who covered the Gezi protests as a journalist, I can confirm, like so many others, that they were not a premeditated plot. Such claims are surreal. The judges in Strasbourg came to the same conclusion.

Osman Kavala is a man of peace and transparency. Throughout his life he has devoted himself to building bridges and investing in culture, art and dialogue to transform societies, to guide them away from violent clashes and towards peaceful conflict resolution and democracy.

I never had a chance to meet him in person; I admired him from a distance. But for many years I had memorable meetings with one of his colleagues in civil society, the late Turkish-Jewish businessman Ishak Alaton, co-founder of the Open Society Foundation in Turkey. He and Osman Kavala supported initiatives that promoted democracy and

citizens' and minorities' rights. Both were entrepreneurs who saw no contradiction between a commitment to democracy and human rights and their business enterprises. On the contrary, I would say.

Osman Kavala, today 69, came of age in the 1970s when Turkey's military held sway over the secular republic and the country was polarized between leftist and right-wing movements, and between Kurdish militants and Turkish ultranationalists.

People who have known Osman Kavala for decades remind me of how, as a young student, he became active in a leftist movement, supporting Kurds and others.

But he was not really an ordinary student. He came from a business family, which had made its fortune in the tobacco trading industry in northern Greece during Turkey's Ottoman past. Kavala also happens to be the name of a port city in today's Greece, previously a city in the Ottoman Empire. His ancestors were among the hundreds of thousands of Muslims who were forced to move from Greece to the new Republic of Turkey, while over a million Greek Orthodox Christians had to leave their homes in today's Turkey during the huge population exchange in the early 1920s. His name thus carries a legacy of an Ottoman multicultural past, when Turkish could be heard in the coffeehouses in Kavala, Saloniki and Crete, and when Anatolia had millions of Christians of Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Syriac descent. Ottoman Istanbul, Anatolia, and the Balkans also had large and vibrant Jewish minorities.

In the early 1980s, Osman Kavala was a PhD student in New York. He was called back home in 1982, after the death of his father, to take over the family company, the Kavala Group. This occurred shortly after a military coup d'etat when Turkey's prisons and detention centers were filled with dissidents, activists and militants. The testimonies of torture were harrowing.

So how did a PhD student with leftist leanings who suddenly inherited a family business handle this delicate situation?

Early on, Kavala co-founded a publishing house. Some of the texts he published were written by Kurdish inmates in the prisons of Diyarbakir in the southeast. He also co-founded an environmental organization, TEMA, as well as the Helsinki Citizens Assembly. Later he became the co-founder of a progressive and liberal think tank, TESEV.

When the armed conflict between the military and the outlawed Kurdish PKK seemed to be waning, Osman Kavala got involved in new projects: trying to heal a wounded society with the help of art and culture.

In 2002, the same year that President Erdoğan's AKP was elected to power, Kavala founded Anadolu Kültür, which supported arts and cultural initiatives across the republic. He built an extensive network that others would benefit from, among them NGOs, EU institutions and embassies. When Sweden, in the early years of the millennium, wanted to support Turkey's democratization process and a more EU-compatible Turkey, the Consul General in Istanbul at the time, Mr. Ingmar Karlsson, turned to Osman Kavala for advice.

"Osman was always helpful and he had contacts all over Turkey", Ingmar Karlsson recalls.

The first project Osman Kavala helped the Swedish Consulate with was finding venues around Turkey for a photography exhibit by the photographer Ulla Lemberg, featuring Swedish dads with their children. Osman Kavala also helped distribute children's literature which had been translated from Swedish to Kurdish languages. Moreover, when an Istanbul university broke a taboo by hosting an international conference on Seyfo, that is the mass killings and expulsions of Assyrian/Syriac Christians from eastern Anatolia in the early 1900s, Kavala stepped in to help.

We must not forget Kavala's commitment to promoting an Armenian-Turkish dialogue. Inspired by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in Berlin, founded by Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim for Jewish and Arab musicians, Kavala laid the ground for a Turkey-Armenia Youth Symphony Orchestra, bringing together young musicians from both countries.

The terrible irony is that this refined and cultured person who has done so much for Turkish society is incarcerated for life, as if he had been a hardcore terrorist and putschist. This is both absurd and a tragedy for Turkey.

In the legal case Kavala vs Turkey, the European Court of Human Rights has shown that Kavala was imprisoned for political ends. The judges concluded that his imprisonment was meant to have a chilling effect on civil society at large and to discourage other human rights defenders. In other words, it was designed to foster an obedient, subservient society, contrary to any spirit of vibrant democracy.

Judgments from Strasbourg are binding for every member state of the Council of Europe, and Turkey has been a member since 1950. Some months after the first judgment in Strasbourg, a Turkish court acquitted Osman Kavala and his co-defendants from all accusations. Kavala described this day as the best of his life. But before he could walk out as a free man, he was arrested again.

We must ask ourselves why?

Reading between the lines in the judgment from Strasbourg you may find a vengeful President of the Republic, fearing freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, although he himself was once a victim of such violations in the 1990s, when he was put in prison and banned from politics, charged with reading a poem in public.

Even though the apparent purpose of keeping Kavala behind bars is to silence him and others, Turkey's civil society cannot easily be muted. Turkey is not Turkmenistan or Tajikistan. There will always be new generations coming of age with their demands for personal dignity and political freedoms.

In prison, Kavala is still active. From his cell he recently served as the editor of the Turkish translation of Rashid Khalidi's much acclaimed book The Hundred Years' War on Palestine.

Osman Kavala will not be forgotten no matter how thick the gates and how high the walls of his prison are. The stamina and courage that he and his co-defendants represent are what scare the ruling circles in an authoritarian state — be it Turkey or any other country. With a growing authoritarian trend worldwide, Osman Kavala's case concerns us all.

However, civil society in Turkey appears to have lost its hope in the European Union accession process. They see European governments refrain from pushing Turkey on human rights issues because they fear it will backfire and make Ankara tilt closer towards Russia or open its gates for refugees and migrants.

As far as the Council of Europe is concerned, in 2022 it launched infringement proceedings against Turkey due to its refusal to obey the binding judgment from Strasbourg to release Osman Kavala. But the infringement proceedings are yet to be implemented.

People in civil society that I have been speaking with see another frail possibility to obtain the release of Kavala and other innocent prisoners: the current disarmament process with the PKK. Turkey's new disarmament legislation makes no reference to the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. But it is believed and hoped that this process could lead to amendments of Turkey's arbitrary anti-terror laws and open windows of opportunity. A disarmament process would also pave the way for better relations with the EU.

But an initial step must be respect for the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, starting with the release of Osman Kavala.