**(Yvon Englert)**

This year we are awarding two Honorary Titles for Freedom of Expression.

To Elif Shafak

and to Ahmet Altan,

for their vital and courageous contribution to the freedom of thinking, writing and expression.

Ahmet Altan is a renowded Turkish author, journalist and former editor-in-chief of Taraf, a daily newspaper which is now banned.

In September 2016 he was arrested for the first time.

He was accused of being a member of the Gülen movement, and thus of the coup attempt against the Turkish leader Erdogan.

In 2018, Altan was sentenced to life in prison on a very vague charge.

In November last year, he was released on probation, but a few days later the police the police detained him again after a ruling reversing his release.

Today, he is still in prison.

Amnesty International considers him as a prisoner of conscience and asks for his immediate release.

In his prison cell, he wrote and published his memoirs under the title I Will Never See the World Again.

Speaking truth to power, that’s what Ahmet Altan has been doing all his life.

In his memoir he writes and I quote:

"You can imprison me but you cannot keep me here. Because, like all writers, I have magic, I can pass through your walls with ease.”

**(Caroline Pauwels)**

Elif Shafak, our second laureate, is a Turkish-British writer, academic and women’s rights activist.

She lives in the UK.

Elif Shafak writes in Turkish and English, and has published successful novels and essays, translated in more than 50 languages.

She is a courageous activist for women's rights, for minority rights, and for freedom of speech and expression.

In The Guardian she published a critical analysis of the situation in Turkey.

Her conclusion applies to all authoritarian regimes:

“Wherever there is a decline in democracy we will see an increase in censorship and intolerance. Today, more than ever before, literature has to be not only about stories but also about silences and the silenced. It has to become a sanctuary for the disempowered and the marginalised across the world.

On behalf of our two universities VUB and ULB, it is a great honor to award this year’s Difference Day Honorary Title for Freedom of Expression to award Elif Shakaf and Ahmet Altan.