

Rede zum Zusammenhalt

“Speech On Cohesion”

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Matwijtschuk:

I am a Ukrainian human rights lawyer. For many years I have been applying the law to defend people and human dignity. Now I am in a situation where the law does not work.

Russian troops are destroying residential buildings, churches, museums, schools, and hospitals. They are shooting at the evacuation corridors. They are torturing people in filtration camps. They are forcibly taking Ukrainian children to Russia. They ban the Ukrainian language and culture. They are abducting, robbing, raping and killing in the occupied territories. The entire UN architecture of international organizations and international treaties cannot stop it.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, we have faced an unprecedented number of war crimes. We have joined our efforts with dozens of organizations in the regions and built a national network of documentators throughout the country, including the occupied territories. We have an ambitious goal to document every criminal episode that has been committed in the smallest settlement of every oblast of the country. Working together, we have already recorded and contributed over 62,000 episodes to our database. We are documenting more than just violations of the Geneva or Hague Conventions. We are documenting human pain.

War turns people into numbers. The scale of war crimes grows so fast that it becomes impossible to tell all the stories. But I will tell you one.

This is the story of Illia Matviienko, a 10-year-old boy from Mariupol. Russian troops surrounded the city and did not allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to open the green corridor and evacuate civilians. Hence, Illia and his mother hid in the basement of their house from the Russian shelling. Like many people in the city, they melted snow to have water and made fires to cook at least some food. When the supplies ran out, they were forced to go out and consequently they became exposed to shelling. His mother was wounded in her head, and the boy's leg was torn. With the last of her strength, his mother dragged her son to a friend's apartment. There was no medical assistance. Prior to this, the Russians destroyed the maternity hospital and the entire medical infrastructure in Mariupol. That is why in the apartment they lay down on the couch and just hugged each other. They were lying like that for several hours. Ilya told that his mother died and froze right in his arms.

I have one question. How we people, in the 21st century, will defend human beings, their lives, their freedom and their dignity? Can we rely on the law - or does only brutal force matter?

It is important to understand this not only for people in Ukraine, Syria, China, Iran, Nicaragua or Sudan. The answer to this question determines our common future in Europe.

I don't know how historians in the future will call this historical period. But we happen to live in rather challenging times. The world order, based on the Charter of the UN and international law, is collapsing before our eyes. The international peace and security system established after the Second World War provided unjustified indulgences for certain countries. It did not cope well with global challenges before, but now it is stalling and reproducing ritualistic movements. The work of the Security Council is paralyzed. We have entered a period of turbulence, and now fires will occur more and more frequently in different parts of the world because the world's wiring is faulty and sparks everywhere.

Samuel Huntington predicted that new global conflicts would arise between different civilizations. I live in Kyiv, and my native city, like thousands of other Ukrainian cities, is being shelled not only by Russian missiles but also by Iranian drones. China is helping Russia circumvent sanctions and import technologies critical to warfare. North Korea sent Russia more than a million artillery shells. Syria votes at the UN General Assembly in support of Russia. We are dealing with the formation of an entire authoritarian bloc. However, Russia, Iran, China, Syria, and North Korea are different civilizations according to the Huntington classification. However, they pose a crucial common feature. All these regimes that have taken power in their countries have the same idea of what a human being is. Therefore, this is not a conflict of civilizations. This is a conflict of anthropologies.

Authoritarian leaders consider people as objects of control and deny them rights and freedoms. Democracies consider people, their rights and freedoms to be of the highest value. There is no way to negotiate this. The existence of the free world always threatens dictatorships with the loss of power. Because human beings inherently have a desire for freedom.

Therefore, when we talk about Russia's war against Ukraine, we are not talking about a war between two states. This is the war between two systems - authoritarianism and democracy. This becomes more obvious when we

consider its causes. Because this war was started not in February 2022, but in February 2014.

This was just after the Revolution of Dignity had ended in Ukraine. Millions of people had bravely stood up against a corrupt authoritarian regime. They took to the streets across the entire country, demanding that the regime continue moving towards Europe, towards genuine democratic values. They fought for the right to build a state in which the rights of each person are protected, the authorities are held accountable, the courts are independent, and the police do not beat peaceful student demonstrators.

When the authoritarian regime fell, Ukraine got its chance for democratic transformation. And to stop Ukraine's progress towards genuine democracy, Russia invaded. Russia occupied Crimea and part of eastern regions in 2014, and then in 2022 it expanded this war into a full-scale invasion. Because Putin is not afraid of NATO. Putin is afraid of the idea of freedom.

Russia wants to convince the entire world that freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are fake values. Because they do not protect anyone in the war. Russia wants to convince that a state with a powerful military potential and nuclear weapons can break the world order, dictate its rules to international community and even forcibly change internationally recognized borders.

If Russia succeeds, it will encourage authoritarian leaders in various parts of the world to do the same. The international system of peace and security does not work anymore. Democratic governments will be forced to invest money not in education, health care, culture or business development, not in solving global problems such as climate change or social inequality, but in weapons. We will witness an increase in the number of nuclear states, the emergence of robotic armies and new weapons of mass destruction. If Russia succeeds and this scenario comes true, we will find ourselves in a world that will be dangerous for everyone without exception. We live in a very interconnected world. Only the spread of freedom makes this world safer.

Realpolitik as an approach to conflict moderation and prevention has failed. In fact, history shows that these approaches did not work in the past. They will not work now either. Because the nature of things has not changed. Unpunished evil grows because people begin to think they can do whatever they want. An empire has a center but no borders, and it always seeks to expand. Regimes that massively violate human rights pose a threat not only to their own citizens,

but to world peace as a whole. Delay in addressing serious challenges to avoid discomfort today will turn into a global catastrophe tomorrow.

Public intellectuals say that we live in an era of post-truth. As for me, we live in an era of post-knowledge. People with access to Google, who can get the formula for aspirin in a second, forget that this does not make them chemists. People around the world are demanding quick and simple solutions. Perhaps in more peaceful times, we could afford it. You can treat a runny nose with squats, and at least it will not harm the body. However, if we are already dealing with cancer, the price of such simple solutions and actual therapy delays will be high.

The times are not peaceful. Therefore, it is important to call a spade a spade. People only begin to understand that the war is going on when the bombs are falling on their heads, but the war has dimensions other than the military one: it is an economic war, an information war, a war of values. Whether we are brave enough to admit it or not, this war has long since crossed the borders of the European Union.

The problem is not only that the freedom space in authoritarian countries has narrowed to the size of a prison cell. The problem is that even in developed democracies, forces calling into question the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are gaining weight.

There are reasons for this. The coming generations replaced those ones that survived the Second World War. They have inherited democracy from their parents. They began to take rights and freedoms for granted. They have become consumers of values. They perceive freedom as choosing between cheeses in the supermarket. Therefore, they are ready to exchange freedom for economic benefits, promises of security or personal comfort.

Yet, the truth is that freedom is very fragile. Human rights are not attained once and forever. We make our own choices every day.

I am here to say, that in such times of turbulence, cohesion is required. Global challenges cannot be resolved individually alone. The efforts of those who worked to build a shared European project was aimed to overcome the history of wars. But stable growth and peace in the region are impossible while a part of Europe is bleeding.

Ukrainians are fighting not only for their freedom. People in Ukraine are defending the world order that was established after the Second World War.

I am here to say that we need German leadership in confronting Russian aggression. If authoritarian regimes support each other, democracies definitely

should demonstrate unity defending their values. Because it was the values of freedom and democracy that enabled Western societies to live without fear of violence and to have decades of stable development.

Probably the leadership in security policy is not something Germany is used to, but the challenges we face today are also not the ones we had before. The strengthening of the authoritarian bloc is not only about violating the international law and the international borders - it's about destabilizing and conquering the bigger part of the world, be it by forced migration, disinformation, aided by AI, and climate change, which the autocracies don't care about. It is an illusion to think that any country can stay away from tackling them.

There are many things in the world that do not have state borders. Solidarity is one of them. Solidarity should become a verb.

Europe should respond to the challenges of the present. It is the determination to act that defines a civilization that has a future.

I am optimistic about the future. Although I do not see it as easy. I am here to say that despite everything, this is a life-affirming story because these are dramatic times that raise hope. When freedom is denied, it starts to powerfully break out. Even when you cannot rely on law, and the international peace and security system does not work, you can always rely on people. We are accustomed to thinking through the lens of states and interstate organizations, however, ordinary people have much more impact than they can even imagine. Ordinary people have a power to change the history.

Yes, the future is unclear and not guaranteed. Nevertheless, it is such a privilege to have a chance to fight for the future we wish for ourselves and our own children.