The Nobel Lecture

given by
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Center for Civil Liberties

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Time to take responsibility.

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, dear members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, citizens of Ukraine and citizens of the world.

This year, the entire Ukrainian nation was waiting for the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize laureates. We see this Prize as a recognition of the efforts of the Ukrainian people, who have bravely stood up to the attempts to destroy peaceful development of Europe, as well as a celebration of the work being done by human rights activists in order to prevent military threat for the entire world. We are proud of having Ukrainian language heard during the official ceremony for the first time in history.

We are receiving the Nobel Peace Prize during the war started by Russia. This war has been going on for eight years, 9 months and 21 days. For millions of people, such words as shelling, torture, deportation, filtration camps have become commonplace. But there are no words which can express the pain of a mother who lost her newborn son in a shelling of the maternity ward. A moment ago, she was caressing her baby, calling him by his name, breastfeeding him, inhaling his smell – and the next moment a Russian missile destroyed her entire universe. And now her beloved and longed-for baby lies in the smallest coffin in the world.

There are no available solutions for the challenges we and the whole world are facing now. People from different countries are also fighting for their rights and freedoms in extremely difficult circumstances. So, today I will at least try to ask the right questions so that we could start looking for these solutions.

First. How can we make human rights meaningful again?

Survivors of the World War II are no longer around. And the new generations began to take rights and freedoms for granted. Even in developed democracies, forces questioning the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are on the rise. But human rights cannot be upheld once and for all. The values of modern civilization must be protected.

Peace, progress and human rights are inextricably linked. A state that kills journalists, imprisons activists, or disperses peaceful demonstrations poses a threat not only to its citizens. Such a state poses a threat to the entire region and peace in the world as a whole. Therefore, the world must adequately respond to systemic violations. In political decision-making, human rights must be as important as economic benefits or security. This approach should be applied in foreign policy too.
Russia, that has been consistently destroying its own civil society, illustrates this very well. But the countries of the democratic world have long turned a blind eye to this. They continued to shake hands with the Russian leadership, build gas pipelines and conduct business as usual. For decades, Russian troops have been committing crimes in different countries. But they always got away with this. The world has not even adequately responded to the act of aggression and annexation of Crimea, which were the first such cases in post-war Europe. Russia believed that they could do whatever they want.

Now Russia is deliberately inflicting harm on civilians aiming to stop our resistance and occupy Ukraine. Russian troops intentionally destroy residential buildings, churches, schools, hospitals, shell evacuation corridors, put people in filtration camps, carry out forced deportations, kidnap, torture and kill people in the occupied territories.

The Russian people will be responsible for this disgraceful page of their history and their desire to forcefully restore the former empire.

Second. How to start calling a spade a spade?

People of Ukraine want peace more than anyone else in the world. But peace cannot be reached by country under attack laying down its arms. This would not be peace, but occupation. After the liberation of Bucha, we found a lot of civilians murdered in the streets and courtyards of their homes. These people were unarmed.

We must stop pretending deferred military threats are “political compromises”. The democratic world has grown accustomed to making concessions to dictatorships. And that is why the willingness of the Ukrainian people to resist Russian imperialism is so important. We will not leave people in the occupied territories to be killed and tortured. People’s lives cannot be a “political compromise”. Fighting for peace does not mean yielding to pressure of the aggressor, it means protecting people from its cruelty.

In this war, we are fighting for freedom in every meaning of the word. And for it, we are paying the highest possible price. We, Ukrainian citizens of all nationalities, should not discuss our right to a sovereign and independent Ukrainian state and development of the Ukrainian language and culture. As human beings, we do not need an approval of our right to determine our own identity and make our own democratic choices. Crimean Tatars and other indigenous peoples should not prove their right to live freely in their native land in Crimea.
Our today’s fight is paramount: it shapes the future of Ukraine. We want our post-war country to let us build not some shaky structures, but stable democratic institutions. Our values matter most not when it’s easy to embody them, but when it’s really hard. We must not become a mirror of the aggressor state.

This is not a war between two states, it is a war of two systems – authoritarianism and democracy. We are fighting for the opportunity to build a state in which everyone’s rights are protected, authorities are accountable, courts are independent, and the police do not beat peaceful student demonstrations in the central square of the capital.

On the way to the European family, we have to overcome the trauma of war and its associated risks, and affirm the choice of the Ukrainian people determined by the Revolution of Dignity.

Third. How to ensure peace for people around the world?

The international system of peace and security does not work anymore. Crimean Tatar Server Mustafayev as well as many others are put in Russian prisons because of their human rights work. For a long time, we used law to protect human rights, but now we do not have any legal mechanisms to stop Russian atrocities. So many of the human rights activists were compelled to defend what they believe in with arms in their hands. For example, my friend Maksym Butkevych, who is now in Russian captivity. He and other Ukrainian prisoners of war, as well as all detained civilians, must be released.

The UN system, created after the World War II by its winners, provides for some unjustified indulgences for individual countries. If we don’t want to live in the world where rules are set by states with stronger military capabilities, this has to be changed.

We have to start reforming the international system to protect people from wars and authoritarian regimes. We need effective guarantees of security and respect for human rights for citizens of all states regardless of their participation in military alliances, military capability or economic power. This new system should have human rights at its core.

And the responsibility for this lies not only with politicians. Politicians are tempted to avoid looking for complex strategies, which require a lot of time. They often act as if global challenges would disappear by themselves. But the truth is that they only get worse. We, people who want to live in peace, should tell politicians that we need a new architecture of the world order.
We may not have political tools, but we still have our words and our position. Ordinary people have much more influence than they think they do. Voices of millions of people from different countries can change world history faster than interventions of the UN.

Fourth. How to ensure justice for those affected by the war?

Dictators are afraid that the idea of freedom will prevail. This is why Russia is trying to convince the whole world that the rule of law, human rights and democracy are fake values. Because they do not protect anyone in this war.

Yes, the law doesn't work right now. But we do not think it is forever. We have to break this impunity cycle and change the approach to justice for war crimes. A lasting peace that gives freedom from fear and hope for a better future is impossible without justice.

We still see the world through the lens of the Nuremberg Tribunal, where war criminals were convicted only after the fall of the Nazi regime. But justice should not depend on resilience of authoritarian regimes. We live in a new century after all. Justice cannot wait.

We need to bridge the responsibility gap and make justice possible for all the affected people. When the national system is overloaded with the war crimes. When the International Criminal Court can try just a few selected cases or has no jurisdiction at all.

War turns people into numbers. We have to reclaim the names of all victims of war crimes. Regardless of who they are, their social status, type of crime they have suffered, and whether the media and society are interested in their cases. Because anyone’s life is priceless.

Law is a living continuously evolving matter. We have to establish an international tribunal and bring Putin, Lukashenko and other war criminals to justice. Yes, this is a bold step. But we have to prove that the rule of law does work, and justice does exist, even if they are delayed.

Fifth. How can global solidarity become our passion?

Our world has become very complex and interconnected. Right now, people in Iran are fighting for their freedom. People in China are resisting the digital dictatorship. People in Somalia are bringing child soldiers back to peaceful life. They know better
than anyone what it means to be human and stand up for human dignity. Our future depends on their success. We are responsible for everything that happens in the world.

Human rights require a certain mindset, a specific perception of the world that determines our thinking and behavior. Human rights become less relevant if their protection is left only to lawyers and diplomats. So, it is not enough to pass the right laws or create formal institutions. Societal values will always prevail.

This means that we need a new humanist movement that would work with meanings, educate people, build grass-root support and engage people in the protection of rights and freedoms. This movement should unite intellectuals and activists from different countries, because the ideas of freedom and human rights are universal and have no state borders.

This will enable us to create a demand for solutions and jointly overcome global challenges – wars, inequality, attacks on privacy, rising authoritarianism, climate change, etc. This way we can make this world a safer place.

We do not want our children to go through wars and suffering. So, as parents we have to assume the responsibility and act, not to shift it on our children. Humanity has a chance to overcome global crises and build a new philosophy of life.

It’s time to assume the responsibility. We don’t know how much of the time we still have.

And since this Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony takes place during the war, I will allow myself to reach out to people around the world and call for solidarity. You don’t have to be Ukrainians to support Ukraine. It is enough just to be humans.