

## Never Again Lecture

### Never Again and the war

I am a human rights lawyer. For many years, I have used the law to protect people and human dignity. Now, I find myself in a situation where the law doesn't work.

We are documenting how Russian troops shell homes, schools, playgrounds, museums, and hospitals. They are imprisoning and torturing people in filtration camps. They are taking children from their parents and forcibly deporting them to Russia. They ban Ukrainian language and culture. They are kidnapping, robbing, raping, and killing people in the occupied territories. And the UN, like the entire international peace and security system, cannot stop it.

While the war turns people into numbers, we give people back their names. Because people are not numbers, and life of each person matters.

But human life has no value for Russia. Russia uses war crimes as a method of warfare. The Russians use violence of such intensity that the only way to escape is to submit and identify with the aggressor. Russia deliberately inflicts pain on the civilian population to break the resistance of the people, paralyze the will for freedom, and take over the country. In the last three years alone, we have documented more than 84,000 episodes of war crimes.

The most torturous to document are the kids' stories. Let me tell you one of them. It is the story of 10-year-old Andrii from the city of Brovary near Kyiv. When the Russians began bombing the city in the first days of the full-scale invasion, his parents grabbed their child, documents, and some hastily gathered belongings to get away from the areas that the Russian army was storming. On the way, they encountered a line of Russian tanks. An armored personnel carrier hit and ran over the civilian car. Andrii remembers that his father was already dead. But his mother, sitting beside him in the back seat, remained alive. A minute later, someone forcefully pulled him out of the car and threw him on the road. The Russians fired at the gas tank again. This 10-year-old boy told my colleague how his parents burned to death in the car in front of him.

There is no justification for such actions. Just as there was no legal reason for it. Just as there was no military necessity. Russians did these awful things simply because they could.

The slogan 'never again' is outdated and no longer reflects reality. Evil is back, and it is trying to reestablish itself in our part of the world. And as a human rights lawyer, I would like to ask a simple question:

How are we, those living in the 21st century, going to protect people, their lives, their freedom, and their human dignity? Can we rely on the law? Or is brute force the only way?

The answer to this question will not only determine the fate of people in Ukraine, Iran, Sudan, Myanmar, Venezuela, or Nicaragua. The answer to this question will shape our common future.

### **Never again vs we can do it again**

It is hard to idealize history when you know it well. The twentieth century brought two devastating world wars, horrific colonial wars, millions of deaths, and the total dehumanization of human beings symbolized by the Holocaust and the Nazi concentration camps. The terrible lessons of the past forced us to take decisive action. Responsibility for the past was redefined in the slogan 'never again.' Leaders created the UN system and signed international conventions. The Schuman Declaration marked the beginning of a unified European project. The idea that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights became a new postwar humanism.

However, while the end of the Second World War marked the victory of good over evil for Western societies, for Central and Eastern Europe, it was the victory of one evil over another. While Nazi war criminals were tried at the Nuremberg Tribunal, the Soviet totalitarian Gulag was never convicted or punished. When the whole world remembers those who died in Second World War, saying 'Never again,' Russia celebrates the day of victory, exclaiming 'We can do it again.'

Human rights, progress, and peace are inextricably linked. States that grossly violate human rights pose a threat not only to their own citizens but also to the peace and security of the world as a whole. These would seem to be well-known and hard-won lessons of history. However, for decades, the world has turned a blind eye to what Russia is doing.

Putin has been gradually destroying Russian civil society, killing journalists, imprisoning activists, and breaking up peaceful demonstrations. Russian troops have committed heinous crimes in Chechnya, Moldova, Georgia, Mali, Libya, and Syria. Russia has never been punished. Putin is convinced he can do whatever he wants.

A new 'axis of evil' is forming before our eyes. China is helping Russia evade sanctions and import technology. Iran supplies missiles and drones. North Korea is sending its soldiers to war. All of these regimes have something in common. All of these regimes that have seized power in their countries have the same vision of what a human being is. They see people as objects to be controlled and deny them freedom.

Freedom is not about articles in international conventions. Without freedom, there is not even love. Unfreedom prevents people from voting for whom they want, saying what they think, loving whom their hearts tell them, and choosing which God to pray to. But if the leader orders one's mother to be tortured, the people of North Korea will obey. They have been born and raised in captivity for generations. No wonder no foreigner has ever seen a cemetery in North Korea. Only love does not fade away. It needs space to be with your loved ones, at least in your mind. In North Korea, human life isn't worth much. Their world is not only authoritarian, it is anti-human.

What matters is not the name but the place that the ideology you support gives to two things: human freedom and violence against human beings. It doesn't matter whether that system of ideas is on the right or the left of the spectrum, or how it positions itself, or who its leaders are, or even whether you like its rhetoric about protecting workers' rights or family values or preserving national culture, or anti-colonial appeals, or anything else that resonates with you.

Authoritarian regimes always have the same answer to the question of the place of human freedom and violence against people. For them, freedom is a threat, and violence is a method. And this should be a stopping factor, no matter how righteous their goals are. Despite the difference in the ideological spectrum, this leads to the same results. After all, the Second World War was started in 1939 by the left-wing Soviet Union and the right-wing Third Reich.

### **Never again and the international system**

I don't know what historians will call this historic period in the future, but the international peace and security system based on the UN Charter and international law is collapsing before our eyes. The UN is faltering and reproducing ritual movements. The Security Council is paralyzed. International principles such as the non-use of force, the inviolability of state borders, and respect for territorial integrity are being openly questioned. Yet, it was the denial of these principles in the last century that led to the Second World War.

We live in turbulent times. Fires break out more frequently in different parts of the world because the wiring is faulty, and sparks fly everywhere. The international order has been destroyed, and it will take a lot of effort to restore it.

It seems that democracies are not ready for this responsibility. The generations that remembered the lessons of the Second World War are gone. The current generations have inherited democracy from their parents. They have begun to take freedom and security for granted. They question the meaning of the Declaration of Human Rights. They have become consumers of values. People understand freedom as choosing between different cheeses in a supermarket. And so, they are willing to trade freedom for populist promises, economic benefits, the illusion of security, and, above all, their comfort.

I am truly sorry, but the decades of relative peace and sustainable development are over, even for Western societies, let alone for those parts of the world that have never had that luxury. It is impossible to build a paradise, even if you are an island separated by oceans when part of the world is being bloodied by mass violence. The decades of freedom that marked the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union are over. Global challenges are on our doorstep.

On top of that, we live in a world of rapidly developing new technologies. People spend more and more time in virtual space, polluted with fakes and disinformation. As a result, people lose the ability to distinguish between truth and lies. They become vulnerable to outside manipulation. Now, the residents of a small community no longer have a shared sense of reality. Without a shared sense of reality, people are unable to act together. Without common action, how can we address these global challenges?

Human nature is unchanging; if reality frightens us, we will deny it. We will extract from reality those fragments that confirm our view of the world, categorically rejecting everything that does not fit into it. We will also demand easy and quick solutions to return to the status quo, and we will vote for the politicians who promise us these.

You can treat a runny nose with sit-ups: this treatment at least will not harm your health. But when it comes to cancer, the cost of simple solutions and delaying treatment will be high.

I will say this: the collapse of the international order was preceded by an ethical crisis. We began to interpret the slogan ‘never again’ in different ways.

### **Never again and the ethical crisis**

For Ukrainians, ‘never again’ literally means this. We will not tolerate evil, even if it is many times greater than our capacity. We will resist evil, saying ‘never again’ to occupation, to concentration camps, to the destruction of entire nations, to murder and torture. We will fight for the slightest chance for our children to have the freedom to live without fear of violence and to shape their future. For Ukrainians, ‘never again’ is not just a word. We have proved it on the battlefield.

However, for many people in Western societies, ‘never again’ has come to mean that we will never again pay a high price for our freedom. Even when our lives are at stake, we are no longer willing to risk them. We will compromise with evil – shaking hands with Putin, coming to military parades on Red Square, building gas pipelines, doing business as usual.

We will say that we are for peace. And even though we do not know how to stop Russia, we will demand that aid to Ukraine be stopped. We will call the right to self-defense and resistance to Russian aggression ‘prolonging the war.’ We will normalize evil. We will try to negotiate with it. We will leave millions of people in the gray zone so that all these years, human rights lawyers will document abductions, torture, rape, forced adoption of Ukrainian children, erasure of Ukrainian identity, filtration camps, and mass graves. Anything the evil did not affect us and did not spread.

But unpunished evil grows. Russia is an empire. And an empire has a center but no borders. An empire always seeks to expand. The very existence of the free world is always a threat to authoritarian regimes. There is no compromise here. The idea of freedom can spread beyond their borders. And then they will lose all power.

People who think only of their comfort have a typical horizon problem. They call themselves pragmatists. They want to benefit here and now. They do not care about human values. But if you expect the future on a credit card, do not forget: sooner or later, you will have to pay back the loan with interest.

Learn from our mistakes. Russian tanks are coming for cheap Russian gas bills. After the occupation of Crimea and Donbas, some Ukrainians recovered from the shock and turned the war off from the news like a switch on a TV remote. The war was still scary, but it was far away. People wanted to live a quiet life. They avoided taking responsibility. But then came the day when no one could turn off the war on the TV, and all that was left was to grab their children, documents, and some hastily gathered belongings and pray that the Russian tanks would not come across the street.

### **Never again and the rule of force**

Putin's reason for starting this war was not just to occupy more Ukrainian territory. Putin waged this war to occupy and destroy all of Ukraine and move on. His logic is historical. He wants to write himself in the history of the world. He dreams of restoring the Soviet empire, the collapse of which, in his own words, was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the last century. He openly declares that Russia's borders do not end anywhere.

Therefore, let's speak plainly: people in Europe are safe as long as Ukrainians continue to hold back the Russian offensive.

However, the lives of people outside Europe will also change. Our world is very interconnected, and only the spread of freedom makes it safer. Putin is trying to convince people that freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are fake values because they don't protect anyone during war. Putin is trying to demonstrate that a state with powerful military capacity and nuclear weapons can break the international order, dictate its rules to the entire world community, and even forcibly change internationally recognized borders.

If Putin succeeds, it will inspire other authoritarian leaders in different parts of the world to do the same. The UN's international system of peace and security no longer works. It means that all countries will be forced to invest their resources not in education, healthcare, cultural development, or business support, not in addressing global problems such as the fight against poverty, climate change, or the safe development of new technologies, but in weapons. We will witness an increase in the number of nuclear countries, the use of AI as a method of warfare, the emergence of robotic armies, and new types of weapons of mass destruction. If evil is not stopped, we will find ourselves in a world that will be dangerous for everyone without exception.

It will be a world of the past. And that past was not great. It is a world where the force sets the rules, the majority must blindly obey them, and where human life has no value. Staying at the top of the hierarchy also requires effort. Therefore, a world where the rule of force prevails is always a world of wars and mass violence.

### **Never again and lasting peace**

People in Ukraine crave peace more than anyone. But peace does not come when the country that has been attacked lays down its arms. Then, it is not peace but occupation. Occupation is the same war, just in a different form.

Occupation might seem a better option due to reducing human suffering. But this statement is not correct. Occupation does not reduce human suffering. Occupation makes human suffering invisible.

After six months of silence, Russia returned the body of my colleague, Ukrainian journalist Viktoria Roshchyna. The body showed signs of torture, but several internal organs were missing – eyeballs, brain, and part of the trachea.

I knew Viktoria personally. She was talented, dedicated to the journalistic profession, and extraordinarily brave. In the summer of 2023, she went to the occupied territories to write a story about the illegal arrests and torture of civilians. And she disappeared. We already know that she was abducted, tortured, secretly transported to Russia, and held there in inhumane conditions without any official charges. We also know that she did not receive medical care and, according to cellmates, weighed about 30 kg. But we still don't know how she died.

Victoria was only a few weeks shy of her 28th birthday. The Russians long refused to return her body to her grieving parents. They are still trying to hide what they did to her.

My colleague Victoria Roshchyna deliberately risked her life to tell the world what Russia was doing to the people in the occupied territories. She believed that the truth matters. She believed that it was a journalist's duty to show the face of evil and bring the human dimension back into political discussions, and in doing so, she could save many lives.

If we stop fighting, we will cease to exist. Putin openly states that the Ukrainian people do not exist, just as there is no Ukrainian language or culture. For eleven years now, we have been documenting how these words are turning into the deliberate extermination of an entire nation. Russian troops have killed the highest number of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, whom they supposedly came to liberate. In the territories seized by Russia, they are building new military bases, implementing terror against the civilian population, holding thousands of men and women in prisons, forcibly mobilizing people into the Russian army, compelling children in schools to sing the Russian anthem, and giving the houses and apartments of Ukrainians to Russians from distant regions of Russia. Active colonization and preparations for a new armed offensive are proceeding rapidly, where the captured territories will serve as a military bridgehead.

As of now, about 1 million 600 thousand Ukrainian children are under occupation. Russia is raising a new generation of Putin's soldiers out of them. Russian military personnel are regularly invited to schools to give patriotic lectures. Children from the occupied territories are brought to sports and recreation camps, where they wear military uniforms, live in barracks

conditions, and learn to use weapons. Russian media disseminated footage of children lining up in military uniforms in a summer camp in Chechnya. Ramzan Kadyrov personally supervised the re-education program. The children in the video shouted ‘Akhmat Sila!’

After the age of 14, Ukrainian children are forcibly given a passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation. After the age of 18, they are subject to compulsory conscription into the Russian army. In other words, they will go to fight and die anywhere in the world Putin decides.

### **Never again and the power of people**

In my experience, when you cannot rely on law or on the international system of peace and security, you can still always rely on people. We are used to thinking in terms of states and intergovernmental organizations, but ordinary people have much more power than they think.

Look at Ukrainians. Three years ago, no one believed we could withstand such a massive armed threat. Russia has veto power in the UN, nuclear weapons, mighty military capacity, a population of 140 million, and oil and gas, meaning a lot of money. Three years ago, not only Putin but other countries gave us, at most, 3-4 days. I was in Kyiv when Russian troops tried to encircle it. I remember how international organizations evacuated their personnel. But ordinary people stayed. Ordinary people started to do extraordinary things.

Ordinary farmers pushed Russian tanks into ditches by their tractors. Ordinary doctors performed surgeries in the basements. Ordinary teachers conducted lessons during winter blackouts. Ordinary civil servants kept the banking system afloat. Ordinary citizens united and rescued people trapped in the rubble of buildings, broke through encirclements with humanitarian aid, and organized evacuations under Russian artillery fire.

I wouldn't wish our experience on anyone, but this dramatic time allowed us to manifest the best in ourselves: to be brave, to fight for freedom, to make difficult but correct decisions, to take responsibility, to help each other. Now, more than ever, we acutely feel what it means to be human.

People in this world are not just observers. It is not enough to understand that in many parts of the world, the space for freedom is shrinking to the size of a prison cell. It is naive to believe that you just need to wait long enough until things settle down. It is unworthy to evade responsibility; after all, we always have our voices and our stances. We are not hostages of circumstances but participants in this process; we cannot leave problems as an inheritance for our children.

And I want you to know that our children still draw the flags of Ukraine in occupied Donetsk, Mariupol, Kakhovka, Bakhchysarai, and Yalta. Andrii, who lost his father and mother in a car fired by Russians, dreams of becoming a football player and playing for the national team, and for his parents up there in heaven to be proud of him and say, 'That's our son.'

And you know what, if our children continue to dream and fight even under occupation, then we, adults, have absolutely no right to give up. Resisting evil is not only morally right but also the most effective life strategy.

It is our time, yours and mine. We have no other. People create this world through their specific actions. They change the course of history.