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THE ROLE OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN CREATING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

“A Nobel Peace Prize in times of war”

Panel discussion by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee,
in partnership with the Nobel Peace Centre

Intervention by Dunja Mijatović
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Strasbourg, 9 December 2022

Dear Secretary general, dear participants,

It would be difficult to find a more appropriate time or venue than this discussion to stress the critical need to protect and support human rights defenders. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has an illustrious history of standing with those fighting for human rights, documenting abuses, and providing aid to victims. The [Documentation Centre](#), named after Natalya Estemirova, is a great example of the organisation's principle of bringing together people from different backgrounds who share common values and goals.

It is, therefore, an extreme privilege and delight to be here with you today. With this tribute to Viasna, Memorial, and the Center for Civil Liberties, we hope to honour the many unsung heroes who have worked tirelessly to protect and strengthen human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Tomorrow, there will be a great absence in the ceremony hall: that of Ales Bialiatski. Ales is paying with his own freedom for his defence of the freedom of others. He was arrested for the first time in 1996, after establishing Viasna to assist protesters arrested that year. He was arrested again two years ago during the repression of protesters who were demanding the democracy denied by electoral fraud. Ales' only fault was standing in solidarity with his fellow citizens against a repressive regime.

This sounds familiar to many of us. Another prominent human rights defender was prevented from entering that hall 47 years ago. The dictatorship of his day made it impossible for Andrei Sakharov to accept the Nobel Peace Prize in person. But Sakharov did not cave in. Instead on that day, he used his freedom of movement within the Soviet area to go all the way to Vilnius to try to attend a trial and testify in favour of his friend Sergei Kovalev, who co-founded the Soviet branch of Amnesty International.

Each of us can take heart from their displays of solidarity. Even when human rights defenders face more and more opposition and difficulty, they must remain together and supportive of one another, including across borders. Together, they stand for the collective conscience.

What animates human rights defenders is solidarity with other fellow human beings. Many of you could live more comfortable lives, but you chose to speak out and stand in solidarity with the oppressed, regardless of their origin or whether you personally know them.

I am in awe of your courage, dedication, and altruism. Because you are stronger than those who want to silence you. Because your search for justice does not bow to those who want to destroy your resolve.

Because through your relentless search for justice and accountability, you are protecting the human rights of everyone.

This is what drives you. And this is what – too often - gets you into trouble.

Human rights defenders in contemporary Europe and across the globe are murdered, imprisoned, and harassed. You face violence and intimidation, among many other forms of reprisals, for demanding democracy, human rights, and dignity for all.

In times of war and crisis like the current one, your contributions to peace, freedom, human rights, justice, and democracy are especially needed. The Nobel Peace Prize, the Vaclav Havel Prize, and the Sakharov Prize are recent examples of this kind of recognition from the international community.

Unfortunately, this is not enough. Human rights defenders require increased backing from everyone: governments, international organisations, corporations, NGOs, and ordinary citizens. But the main responsibility rests with the states themselves. They have an obligation to ensure the safety of human rights defenders and an enabling environment for them -- and they have the means to do so.

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this was crucial. With the conflict having lasted for nearly 10 months and caused profound human suffering and destruction, this is even more imperative.

This is an exceptional circumstance, incomparable to the situation in any of our other Council of Europe member states. Still, it is a heartbreaking reminder of what can happen if states do not protect human rights and the people who fight for them.

As such, I have not and will not stop taking all possible measures within the framework of my mandate to strive for the safety and freedom of human rights defenders in Europe.

After Russia's war against Ukraine began, I maintained and even intensified regular dialogue with various members of civil society in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, including human rights defenders and journalists. On multiple occasions, I had online and in-person meetings with them, including in March in the Czech Republic and in May in Kyiv and the surrounding municipalities. I raised the concerns of human rights defenders for their physical safety and the obstacles they face in carrying out their work at home and abroad with member states of the Council of Europe.

I stressed the importance of national authorities speaking out to condemn attacks on human rights defenders. I also called for continuous political and practical support for those who remain in Russia and Belarus and are willing and able to carry out their civil society and human rights work there. I also pointed out some relocation and residence policies and the need for more Council of Europe member states to adopt them.

All these measures are possible if Council of Europe member states stand in solidarity with human rights defenders. The current situation in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus requires more resolve, and decisive and firm action to protect human rights defenders. At the same time, member states should improve the situation of human rights defenders everywhere including on their own territories. Instead of repressing them and restricting their ability to carry out legitimate work, national authorities should respect the obligation to protect and facilitate their work.

If we want a peaceful Europe in which human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are fully realised for all, we must work with human rights defenders and support them.

For this to happen, we need more solidarity. Solidarity of member states, their citizens, and civil society with human rights defenders and solidarity among human rights defenders. Because whenever and wherever a human rights defender is under attack, the whole system of human rights protection is in danger.

Thank you.