



Salzburg Global Seminar
Salzburg Lecture

Special Address by Oleksandra Matviichuk
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Citizens on the Front Lines

Oleksandra Matviichuk, a human rights lawyer and the first Nobel Peace laureate from Ukraine, delivered the annual Salzburg Lecture on July 1, 2023. The Salzburg Lecture was inaugurated in 2017 to mark the 70th Anniversary of Salzburg Global Seminar. The lecture is the keynote highlight of the annual Salzburg Global Weekend, addressing the key theme for that year. This year, with the theme “Democracy on the Front Lines”, we recognized the extraordinary contribution of citizens that take personal responsibility for shaping a more peaceful and thriving world, often at great risk.

The following text is a transcript of a speech as delivered, rather than a prepared text by the author.

Thank you very much for [giving] me the floor. It's a huge honor for me to address this distinguished audience. I am a human rights lawyer and I have been applying the law to defend people and human dignity for many years. At present, I and other Ukrainian human rights colleagues are doing our job in the circumstances when the law doesn't work.

Russian troops deliberately shell residential buildings, schools, churches, [and] hospitals, attack evacuation corridors, manage filtration camp systems, organize forcible deportations, commit murders, torture, rapes, abductions, and other kinds of offenses against civilians. And the entire UN system can't stop such Russian atrocities.

There is no justification for such actions. There is no legitimate purpose to force people to go down to the basement [and] to order them to elect several volunteers. No purpose in killing them. There is no purpose to have fun using the tanks to fire at people on bicycles whose bodies lay scattered around the streets until the liberation. There is no purpose in breaking [into] someone's house, killing the owner, and raping the mother next to her nine-year-old child. There is no purpose in shooting a 14-year-old boy in close range who was just playing with a ball in the yard. There is no military necessity in doing this. Russians have done these horrible things only because they could.

I have been documenting war crimes for nine years already, in order [that] sooner or later, all the Russians who committed these crimes with their own hands, as well as Putin, Lukashenko, and senior political leadership and high military command of [the] Russian state [can be] held accountable. I know that when you can't rely on legal instruments, you still can rely on people. That is why I would like to dedicate my Salzburg Lecture to the power of ordinary people and tell you about citizens on the front lines.

States that experience totalitarianism have a common characteristic. They may have a large population, but still a small number of citizens. Living in fear produces a certain way of thinking, like, "I am an ordinary person, nothing depends on me, and anyway, it is not us who make any decisions". This is a phenomenon of learned helplessness in action. A person voluntarily renounces his or her subjectivity. The person turns into a control object, a simple cog in a mechanism, as Soviet propaganda said. A person becomes a citizen not upon receiving a passport, but when the area of responsibility begins to encompass broader categories than him or herself or the family. A country in transit can be an example of the consequences of this.

A few years ago, I studied the results of sociological surveys in Ukraine. Only about 8% of people answered that they are engaged in public activity, that is, they invest their private resources like time, skills, money, etc. to achieve public goals. At the same time, 60% of people in big cities confidently answered that the responsibility for the situation in the country lies with them, and not only with the authorities. It turns out that, even realizing

this, 52% of these people didn't take a single step. An active minority, if it's organized, determines the direction of the country's development. However, the speed of this movement depends on the passive majority. Therefore, it's not enough to pass the right laws or create formal institutions. The values of society will be stronger anyway.

If people don't find the rule of law as a working tool for regulating relations, then we can fight corruption indefinitely. After all, the same people who denounced the corruption of high-ranking officials for some reason don't see a problem in giving a bribe and solving their own issues, for example, enrolling their child in kindergarten.

Democracy, the rule of law, and human rights are again about a way of thinking, about a certain paradigm of world perception which determines the way a person thinks and acts. Therefore, knowing or hearing that these values are important is not enough. Convictions are formed through actions. It's necessary to act. It's necessary to practice democracy daily, and not only by citizens of the countries in transit. Values lose their sense in case their protection is left only to human rights defenders, experts, lawyers, or diplomats.

Therefore, a few years ago, I set as one of my priority tasks the creation of simple entry points for ordinary people in order to massively involve them in human rights activity. During this period, Ukraine experienced several major upheavals and challenges, and I would like to share our experience and tell you three stories.

Story one: Euromaidan. Nine years ago, the Revolution of Dignity took place in Ukraine. Millions of people bravely stood up against authoritarian and corrupt regimes. They took to the streets across the country, demanding the regime to continue moving toward the European civilizational space. They fought just for a chance to build a country where the rights of everybody are protected, the government is accountable, the judiciary is independent, and the police do not beat students who are peacefully demonstrating. They paid the ultimate price for it. The police shot more than a hundred peaceful demonstrators in the capital's center square. People died under the flags of Ukraine and the European Union.

At that time, I was coordinating the Euromaidan Distress Initiative, which brought several thousands of people to provide legal aid and other assistance to persecuted protesters throughout the country. All these months, we worked around the clock, hundreds and hundreds of beaten, arrested, tortured, accused and fabricated criminal or administrative charges passed through our hands. Then we were alone against the entire state machine that wanted to destroy us physically. The criminal group collaborated with the police. Police coordinated their actions with the prosecutor's office, the special source with the courts, the government, [and] the vast majority of the parliament. All were against us.

Under such conditions, it [would have been] so easy to give up and say that nothing could be done. Nevertheless, our lawyers and our volunteers fought honestly and devotedly for every person, for each procedure's means as if the law existed. After all, it produced unexpected results.

We started at the legal level but reached a kind of symbolic level, the level where senses and ideas emerged. Everyone in Maidan knew that there was no guarantee. You can be beaten, you can be arrested, you can be even killed. But there are people who will fight for you, who will never leave you alone, who would not abandon your family under any circumstances, and it gave strength and helped people to overcome fear.

Later, journalists asked me how exactly I imagined the victory of Maidan. I thought about it and realized that I had nothing to answer them. We were sleeping for 3-4 hours per day. Every day we extinguished fires. I had neither time nor energy for any reflections. We were just doing our job, honestly. Afterward, I found similar thoughts in the memories of Soviet dissidents. They wrote that they had no hope. They understood that they were opposed by the whole Soviet gulag, and even their names might never be remembered. However, they could not do otherwise. Their dignity demanded they fought against non-freedom.

This experience has taught me one important thing. I know that in different countries of the world, every day, many people also fight for freedom and human dignity. Sometimes this fight may seem to be senseless because there are enormous opposing powers. However, the total history of humankind convincingly proved that people should not give up. Even when we have no tools, our own words and own personal stance always remain. Eventually, it's not so little.

Story two: occupation of Crimea and Donbas. When the authoritarian regime collapsed, Ukraine obtained a chance for a quick democratic transformation. In order to stop us in this way, Putin started this war of aggression. He occupied Crimea and part of Lugansk and Donetsk regions. Because Putin is not afraid of NATO. Putin is afraid of the idea of freedom which came closer to Russian borders. And that is why it is not just a war between two states. This is a war between two systems: authoritarianism and democracy.

We were the first human rights organization who sent mobile groups to document war crimes in Crimea and eastern parts of Ukraine. I personally spoke to hundreds of people who survived Russian captivity because Russia, in order to save control over the region, introduced terror against civilians. They deliberately exterminated active local people, mayors, journalists, volunteers, priests, artists, and others. These people told me horrible stories [about] how they were beaten, raped, how they were smashed into wooden boxes, how their fingers were cut, how their nails were torn away, their nails were drilled, how they were tortured with electricity. One woman told me how her eye was dug out with a spoon.

[These are] horrible stories, and we sent numerous reports to the UN, Council of Europe, to OSCE, [and] to European Union. But nobody cared. Nothing has stopped. It was a moment when I told myself that when you can't rely on legal instruments, you still can rely on people.

We call for global solidarity and we apply to people in different countries. The reason and moment for this was the action of Ukrainian Crimean film producer Oleg Sentsov, who was illegally imprisoned for long years in a colony, far away in the Russian Federation called Labytnangi. He started a hunger strike with a demand to release not just himself but all Ukrainians who were illegally detained by Russia. We tried to make his voice stronger, and we started the global action Save Oleg Sentsov in different countries of the world.

To make a long story short, I will tell you that this global action started with simultaneous demonstrations in more than 35 countries, and not just capitals, but different cities of countries participated in this global action. They pleaded not just to Putin, who doesn't care about any demonstrations, but to their own national governments, what they have to do in order to release Ukrainian political prisoners and stop Russia to torture and to kill them. This had a result, in the fact that Oleg Sentsov and dozens of other Ukrainian political prisoners returned in 2019 to their families.

It's a huge impact of the collective action of thousands of people in different countries of the world who joined our calls. What I want to tell with this story is that there are a lot of things which have no limitation in national borders. Freedom is such a thing, but human solidarity is also such a thing. The mass mobilization of a huge amount of people in different countries of the world can change this story quicker than UN intervention.

Last story: large-scale war. When the large-scale invasion started, international organizations and foreign governments evacuated their personnel. But ordinary people remained, and ordinary people started to do extraordinary things. It was ordinary people who took people out of the ruined cities. It was ordinary people who helped to survive under artillery fire. It was ordinary people who rescued people trapped in the rubble of residential buildings. It was ordinary people who broke encirclement to provide humanitarian aid.

This is something which was failed to be understood by Russia, and by the democratic West as well. Authoritarian regimes perceived the world through a specific prism. Putin doesn't believe in the power of people. That is why Putin thought that exclusively Ukraine's armed forces would resist him.

But well-developed democracies also miscalculated. And the reason is that well-developed democracies, and people there, for a long time live and experience the action of well-developed and effective state institutions, with some problems as usual.

But still, we live in Ukraine. We never have [had] the luxury to experience well-developed and well-functioning state institutions. That is why when challenges emerge, people get used to taking responsibility on their own shoulders. That is why, when the large-scale invasion started, points of crystallization appeared not just in the office of the president, but in different sectors of civil society.

Civil society expanded and has grown rapidly. I mentioned about 8% of people according to a sociological survey, but now hardly anyone can stay indifferent. Suddenly it appeared that ordinary people who are fighting for their freedom and for their human dignity are more significant than [Russia's] army number two in the world. Ordinary people's efforts have practical impacts and determine the outcome of this war. We are used to thinking within such categories as state and inter-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, ordinary people have a much greater impact than they can even imagine.

While on my way here, I received the news that my friend, the Ukrainian writer Victoria Amelina, had been seriously injured after a Russian missile had hit a cafe in Kramatorsk. Now she's in the intensive care unit and doctors are fighting for her life. Victoria Amelina is a very brave woman. When the large-scale invasion started, she regularly traveled to the East to document Russian war crimes. She knows that she can't change the war by herself, but without her efforts, nothing will change.

What [do] I want to say with this example? I would never wish any nation to go through our experience because war is awful, but these dramatic times provide us an opportunity to reveal the best in us, to be courageous, to fight for freedom, to make difficult but right choices, and to help each other. Now, maybe like never before, we are acutely aware of what it means to be a human.

In conclusion, I want to tell the following. As a human rights lawyer, I witnessed how quickly war turns people into numbers. Because the scale of war crimes grows so large that it has become impossible to recognize all the stories. That is why I want to tell you one.

This is a story of a woman whose name is Svetlana, who lost her entire family after a Russian rocket hit her building, and this is her words, "I heard them dying. My husband was breathing heavily, strained as if he was trying to throw the rubble off of himself, but he couldn't. At some point, he just went still. My grandmother died instantly. I heard my daughter crying. Then she also went quiet. As for my son, he called for me several times, and then nothing."

I want to raise a very actual question. How will we protect people, their dignity, their rights, and their freedom in the 21st century? Can we rely on the law? Or do just weapons matter? This question and the answer to this question will define our common future.

Because the problem is not that the space of freedom in authoritarian countries has narrowed to the size of the prison cell. The problem is that even in developed democracies, the political forces who openly put into doubt the universal principle of the Declaration of Human Rights gain strength. There are reasons for this.

The common generation replaces the one that survived the Second World War. They inherit the values of democracy from their parents, so they begin to take rights and freedoms for granted. People are increasingly manifesting themselves not as carriers of values, but as consumers. They understand freedom as choosing cheeses in supermarkets. Therefore, they are ready to exchange freedom for economic benefits, promises of security, or personal comfort.

Developed democracies are accustomed to concessions to dictatorships. They forgot that states that kill journalists, imprison activists, and disperse peaceful demonstrations pose a threat not only to their own citizens. Such a state poses a threat to the entire region and to peace in the world as a whole.

Human rights, progress, and peace are inextricably linked. Freedom and human rights can't be achieved once and for all. We make our own choice every day. Human rights should be no less important a factor in political decision-making than economic benefits or geopolitical interests or security.

The values of modern civilization must be protected. If international law and international order are not restored in the near future, it will have negative consequences for world development. We may have found ourselves in a future where a state with a strong military potential or nuclear weapon will dictate the rules of the game to the entire international community, and even forcibly change internationally recognized borders.

Politicians attempted to avoid looking for a complex strategy which requires a lot of time. They often act as if global challenges will disappear by themselves. But the truth is that global challenges only get worse. This means that we need a new humanist movement that would work with meetings, educate people, build grassroots support, and engage people in the protection of rights and freedom, and can pose the question which I just asked you, and demand the cardinal reform of the entire international system of peace and security. This movement should unite intellectuals and activists from different countries because their ideas of freedom and human rights are universal and have no state borders.

Our world has become very fast, extremely complex, and interconnected. The future is uncertain and not guaranteed. It is necessary to fight for it. People have to respond to the challenges of the present. Ordinary people have to act. Ordinary people have to take responsibility. It is the determination to act that defines a civilization that has a future. Thank you.