

International Come Together Session 26.2.2023

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It is February 2023. But sometimes I have the feeling that this cold month has been with us in Ukraine for the whole year. When I was woken up by an explosion on February 24 a year ago, I knew immediately: war had started. Then I found the confirmation on the Internet. A colleague had sent me an SMS: 'Russia has invaded. Is it a nightmare?'

Panic broke out across the country. In my hometown of Odessa, shops were sold out empty and empty were also the cash dispensers. Fuel had to be rationed across the country. Many made their way towards Moldova or Poland and then on to Germany or other countries in the European Union.

I felt paralyzed for the first few days after the start of the war. I couldn't do anything but follow the news. My life has been turned upside down. Until I understood: When the old life no longer exists, I need a new one. But how to see the light in the darkness? First of all, you should not fall into panic, but play all "scenarios" through and look for practicable solutions. We then talked about it with my family and made a decision that we will stay as long as possible.

The alternative would have been to pack ones' life in a suitcase and flee. But what could I have taken with me? My life, my friends, my homeland and my feelings do not fit into one suitcase. In addition, I did not want to abandon my country in this difficult situation. Sure, there were days when I cried in desperation. But I haven't regretted my decision to this day.

The new Ukrainian reality felt cruel. It was shaped by personal existential fears, by dead and injured people. By destruction, by deprivation. But at the same time there were always moments of hope. I never thought that the people in my city are so strong. Some of them joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces, others formed local defence groups. Many volunteers fought on the information or IT front, others offered shelter to unknown people, donated money and blood, organized help for the needy. We have become a tight-knit community.

Many have surpassed themselves and coped with the previously unimaginable challenges. Me too, but sometimes when I see all the pain and suffering or when I read terrible news, I think I can't take it anymore, I can't stand it. This happened, for example, when I spoke to the young girl from Mariupol who had

been raped by Russian soldiers. When I received a text message from my friend that her son had died at the front, or when on my birthday Russia bombarded Odessa and my acquaintance was killed with her husband and small child in a high-rise building. On days like this I wanted to give up and to drive away. But then I kept reminding myself that I was needed here because I am a journalist and a teacher and speak several languages.

Putin's delusion of taking Ukraine by surprise has not come true. But how much destruction and misery has this Russian war already brought to our country... Millions of people have fled, thousands are dead, millions more have to survive the winter in the most miserable conditions, miss their loved ones, are deprived of the most basic things and have to expect at any time to be killed by a missile.

Some place names have become engraved in the collective memory: Bucha, Kharkiv, Kherson, Mariupol, Bakhmut... These places were totally unknown to many people outside of Ukraine 12 months ago. Now they stand symbolically and as a reminder of the many Russian war crimes, the bitter battles, heavy defeats, but also of the joy of liberation like at Cherson.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that Putin is putting all his eggs in one basket: "Conquer Ukraine entirely". And in doing so, absolutely every means is right for him. If his military operations no longer bring the expected success, as it currently looks like, then he resorts to terrorizing the civilian population and making them suffer even more by bombing the infrastructure.

The war had a positive side effect. The countries of the West have suddenly remembered the values that they often invoke, but which they are often only half-heartedly committed to. A new cohesion of states, of many people, has developed. They stand together in the face of the Russian threat and support Ukraine in driving out the aggressor. They have recognized that this war is also about defending universal values, inalienable human rights, such as freedom of opinion, equality before the law and the rule of law.

I have little doubt that this war will end badly for Russia. The only question is when and at what price. For Ukraine, a lost war would mean not only the loss of state sovereignty, but also the annihilation of an entire people. That is why we cannot afford to lose this war.

We have seen since February 24, 2022, that this war changes everything. It changes politics. It changes our lives. It changes us humans. But our desire as Ukrainians to be free again and to remain free remains unchanged.