Freedom is indivisible

Today war, and an exceptionally cruel one at that, is close at hand, and so many people in the West are surprised that Ukrainians do not want to surrender, that they do not want to be Russian. Why is the determination of the Ukrainians not understood in the West?

The Russian aggression against Ukraine began a year ago. It has once again exposed the different hierarchies of values and importance in Europe. Many people in the West wonder why the Ukrainians and their Eastern European neighbours have such a mad love of freedom. This question alone raises a fundamental issue of how much Europeans really understand each other. Why does the average Pole, Lithuanian or Romanian know more about the situation in Germany, France or the UK than the average German, Frenchman or Briton knows about Poland, Lithuania or Romania? It is not simply a matter of distance. It is only natural that Western European citizens are concerned about their own everyday issues, but there was a time when news about the war in Vietnam, the struggle for black rights in the US, the coup in Chile or the resistance against apartheid dominated the headlines of their news services. Today the war, and an extremely cruel one at that, rages closer to these countries, yet so many people in the West are surprised that the Ukrainians do not want to surrender, that they do not want to become Russians. Is it just the distance, however small, that makes the West not understand the determination of the Ukrainians or the sacrificial help of the Poles despite the difficult and sometimes bloody history of Polish-Ukrainian relations?

They say that the first level of musicality is to notice if the music is playing or not. The first level in the relations between people, but also between nations, is to notice each other. Perhaps the second level is to show interest. The object of this interest – the relations between Russia and its immediate neighbours – is not easy. And yet, if one wants to understand what Ukrainians, Poles or their neighbours involved in helping Ukraine are all about, one simply has to take an interest in these countries' politics, history and culture instead of looking at the situation in Central Europe from the perspective of their own interest or even their own convenience – as the Germans do today, possibly still day-dreaming about the prospect of the supposed benefits of a special relationship with Russia. Is freedom a divisible value? Do some people deserve it more than others? Do some have the right to benefit from depriving others of their freedom? And that is leaving aside the motives of Russia, which is pursuing its imperial dreams using extremely barbaric methods (but is still often perceived illusively in Western Europe).

From time to time, Central and Eastern European affairs come to the attention of the European public. In the last Eurovision Song Contest, the song *Snap* performed by Armenian Rosa Linn (real surname Kostandyan), came twentieth in the final. The catchy melody may have attracted attention, but the difficult lyrics certainly did not help the song's success. It came later: the song entered the charts in many countries. Still, few people make an effort to decipher its message. Censorship restrictions – politically motivated lyrics are not allowed in the Eurovision Song Contest – encourage poetic invention. Rosa Linn has smuggled in a great deal of emotion that is well worth absorbing. The artist cannot forget her tragic and distorted experiences. Arguably, the number refers to the war with the Azerbaijanis, but it could be any other aggression and any other atrocity. Rosa is told to snap her fingers at them. The word 'snap', however, has many meanings. You can make this gesture to try to forget the oppressors, but it is not a spell that brings consolation. 'Where are you?' asks Rosa Linn. As no one answers, the artist abandons hope. 'This the last one', she sings, but 'how many last songs are left?'

Why is there no one listening?

Perhaps this is because the word ‘freedom’ has a very different flavour in Western Europe and Central Europe, let alone Russia. Western thinkers have perpetuated the view that there is only the ‘freedom from’, that all restrictions must be removed. The ‘freedom to’, i.e. concern for the common good and other positive values, threatens to spawn coercion, and coercion is the last thing anyone wants. Western freedom is thus mainly associated with affluence, health, pleasure and enjoyment without obligation. This is what is fought for at the demonstrations. The reflex of hospitality towards the ‘refugees’ of 2015 turned out to be a false gesture, as were the protests under the slogan ‘Je suis Charlie’. Altruism has been confused with a lack of reason. Now altruism is getting sidelined. The key these days is to tackle global warming and reduce the number of cow farms, or outlaw slick guys who present themselves as women to win in female sports. Where ‘Parent 1’ and ‘Parent 2’ are required to conceive a child, it is hard to bother with the Russians tearing down Ukrainian houses. Where are all those wonderful instincts of ‘Solidarity with *Solidarity*’? The ‘freedom from’ has already taken hold in some circles in Central European countries, too, but has not yet dominated public opinion. Here, moved by the tragedy of our neighbours, we still open our doors to them, feed them and help them find shelter. From here, one goes out into the world to sound the alarm about injustice and barbarism and to mobilise aid.

Perhaps it is also a matter of imagination and empathy. Is that third level of human relations too much to expect from Westerners? Freedom has a special value in Poland and the countries between Germany and Russia because we remember the price so often paid for it. Despite the change of generations, the memory of the mass deportations to Siberia or the German concentration camps for children still lives in the minds and hearts of Poles. It is difficult to forget the havoc wreaked by German aggression in 1939, especially as its material impact is still being felt today. We will remember this regardless of whether and when Germany pays reparations to Poland and regardless of when the European Union stops vilifying our country in exchange for Russian money. So yes, in Poland, we can imagine how a Ukrainian woman feels with her house razed to the ground and her child killed by the Russians. In most Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian families there was someone who died in the depths of the Gulag. They also understand the pain of thousands of Ukrainian children being deported to the east and the dread of not having a roof over the heads of those who remain.

A lack of imagination and empathy makes it difficult for the people in the West to realise that the same fate could befall children in France, Germany or Italy. Reportedly, Putin has told the Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson that he didn’t want to hurt the latter, even though with missiles, this would be a matter of moments. Perhaps that is why the British are supporting Ukraine. President Macron or Chancellor Scholz might not have had anything of the sort said to them, but does that mean they never will? If such as scenario is difficult for them to imagine, perhaps it is time the broader Western public thought about it themselves.

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