

Defending democracy: Europe must not stay on the sidelines

I come from Ukraine. The Ukraine that chose its future during the Maidan revolution. A European future, one literally worth fighting for. Through the tragic sacrifices of Ukrainians and the solidarity of our foreign friends, our revolution won. But that was just the beginning – our nation and our society came to face new and dramatic challenges, and further sacrifices. Russia invaded my homeland, starting a bloody conflict and occupying my hometown of Sevastopol on the Crimean peninsula.

These developments have shown us the importance of Europe, the European Union and European values, as well as showing the danger they bring in the form of toxic and illiberal concepts of unrestrained power which, on our continent, are embodied by the ruler of the Kremlin but, recently, also by his minor imitators, such as Orban and Kaczyński.

I have lived in Poland since 2008, where my organisation, the Open Dialogue Foundation was established to promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights in the post-Soviet countries. For me, as with many other Ukrainians, Poland became a gateway to the EU and a brighter future for ourselves. I wanted to take advantage of this to campaign for persecuted social activists, reformers and human rights defenders, as well as oppressed opposition politicians, sponsors of opposition movements, and independent journalists, and people associated with them.

Until 2017, we had never formally spoken out on the internal situation in Poland – the same Poland that had often been a role model and inspiration to its eastern neighbours and other post-Soviet states wishing for a democratic transformation. The Polish people showed them great solidarity, with my second homeland being a safe haven for many political refugees. Sadly, since the populist Law and Justice government took power and began demolishing the system of checks and balances, this has no longer been the case. Although I have always been a law-abiding resident, I was placed on the European entry ban list, as a threat to national security, by the Polish government.

Today, I live in Brussels, running my foundation in the immediate vicinity of the key EU institutions. I have personally experienced what methods can be employed by populists and nationalist governments that are evolving towards authoritarianism. It is a threat with a very dark face and it should remind us how much has been achieved so far thanks to the EU and the liberal democratic model of governance and public life. But the question remains of how to awaken those many Europeans who are willingly or passively giving their future and ours into the hands of the illiberals.

So, I do believe that today, our role is to make the citizens of the EU realise what the real meaning of liberal democracy and a united Europe is. As well as what the alternative means in practice. **The truth is, that the alternative is clear – it has been implemented by various post-Soviet autocracies and hybrid, oligarchic regimes that are violating fundamental human rights on a daily basis, from Moldova to Belarus, Russia and, last but not least, Kazakhstan. A careful look at what is happening there should serve as a warning. Furthermore, the European community must not stay on the sidelines, but must become vigorously active in spreading its principles. Because if it does not, if we do not, they will. And they have already started.**