

Good afternoon, colleagues.

First of all, I would like to thank you for the attention you have given to me and to Ukraine as a whole. I hope I will be able to shed some light on a number of issues.

I understand that sometimes, when you look at the situation in Ukraine from abroad, from countries that have not experienced war for almost a hundred years, where your societies have devoted all their resources to improving the well-being of their citizens, educating them and developing their potential, what is happening here may seem so distant and difficult to comprehend that you might feel it is not even worth trying to understand.

But believe me, until quite recently, I myself lived in a peaceful town by the sea, where the greatest problem people faced was boredom. And all of that ended overnight, when Russia invaded my country. Ending a war is so difficult. Yet peace can end suddenly and irreversibly.

You probably know that I was imprisoned by the Russian occupying forces in the very first days of the war and that I returned home through a prisoner exchange more than a year ago. I returned from captivity, but in a certain sense, I am still a prisoner. I am a prisoner because I know how many people remain in captivity. I am a prisoner because I know what is happening in Oleshky right now, and I can do nothing to help. I am a prisoner because the Russians are still here.

I live in Kherson, which means that I can become a target for a Russian drone operator simply because I have stepped outside to buy groceries. Yes, this happens regularly where we live. Russian soldiers stationed on the left bank of the Dnipro River, in Oleshky itself, hunt civilians. They kill people for no reason. And they are proud of it. Afterwards, they post the videos online, accompanied by mocking comments. They say they cannot forgive the people of Kherson for the way we welcomed the Ukrainian army when our city was liberated.

But captivity taught me something: Russians kill simply because they can. They do not need any additional reasons. Some people say that the war is becoming more radical and increasingly brutal. But I do not think that is true. The Russians are simply acquiring more and more means of killing us. Some are supplied by Iran, some by North Korea, and some by China.

And many European countries are failing to enforce sanctions properly, which is why components manufactured in the United States and the European Union continue to be found in the latest Russian missiles. Their desire to kill has not increased. It simply could not increase any further. Torture chambers are part of the basic infrastructure that follows the Russians wherever they go. They are among the first things they establish when they capture a town or village. In Kherson, there was even a torture chamber for children. That was in 2022.

How much further could things possibly escalate? No, the Russians have not changed. When the entire world today pretends that nothing is happening in Oleshky, it is horrifying not only because innocent people are dying of hunger there.

Of deliberately inflicted starvation. It is also horrifying because this has happened before in our history.

Almost a hundred years ago, Russian communists deliberately created a famine in Ukraine that killed millions of people. And the world, just as it does today, pretended that nothing was happening. Nobody wanted to fall out with the Soviet Union. And that is why it is happening again.

Evil that goes unpunished always returns. The Russians have learned this lesson: kill more, plunder more brazenly, and no one will dare to stop you. Today, we are the ones stopping them. But at what cost!

And how painful it is to think that if we had not been left to fight this war alone, it could have ended back in 2022, and none of this would have happened. There would have been no destroyed cities, no millions of burned books, no hundreds of thousands of people killed. We would already be rebuilding our country and making documentaries about the deranged dictator Vladimir Putin, who dared to start a war in Europe in the twenty-first century and paid a terrible price for it. Can you imagine how wonderful that would have been?

But we are still here. In captivity. And it is not only Oleshky that is in captivity. It is not only me. You are in captivity too. You are in captivity because the Russians have destroyed not only my beautiful city by the sea. They have also damaged your world. A world where rules existed. A world where there was respect. A world where people were not afraid of one another, and where they did not have to fear that tomorrow some degenerate in Russia might press the red button. We have all lost the world we once lived in. But we are trying, at any cost, to preserve who we are.

And you know, we had so many illusions before 2014. Even before 2022. We desperately did not want to believe that war was possible. That it could be like this: a war without any limits, a long war, an unimaginably brutal war, a war in which we would be so brave, yet so terribly alone. But you still have a little time to free yourselves from your illusions and to understand that everything happening here, every single death, concerns you directly.

Volodymyr Mykolajenko