Official report of debates

Václav Havel Human Rights Prize

Ivan DJURIC (Youth Initiative for Human Rights): Representatives, we are very proud and honoured.

Firstly, allow me to express my utmost admiration and support for the two activists that we know so little about in our part of the world, despite their importance and contribution - Mr. Tohti and Mr. Yorov. The reach of our solidarity must travel beyond European borders, and we vow to that when we call Human Rights universal. I believe that, in this part of the world, we have more commitment to this attribute of being universal.

However, our Europe also didn't achieve all the ideals we set decades ago. When the Council of Europe was founded 70 years ago, Western Europe united in a vision of peace, freedom and democracy. After the fall of the Berlin wall and concurring events, that vision and dream were joined by the block we called Eastern Europe, led by Václav Havel. There was only a "small Gaelic village that resisted still", resisted a trend some called “the end of history”.

While democratic transitions came rushing in, Yugoslavia was preparing for a violent breakup in the late 1980s. What most deemed impossible, happened. Wars broke out in the European continent once more. More than 120 000 people died in the wars, hundreds of thousands were displaced or victimised in some other way. More than 10.000 are still missing.

Apart from personal, individual and family tragedies, which so many suffered, the damage for our countries and societies is still more than tangible. Our democracies are weak, our economies are still not even close to what they were before the war. Regional cooperation in the Balkans is still heavily burdened by hatred, mistrust, prejudices and wartime legacy. The political elites and societies in our countries have still not renounced their war agendas and nationalist ideologies.

I will not say before you that new wars in the Balkans are inevitable, but I will tell you that our countries’ leaders mention war with ever-increasing frequency, while in parallel there is an ongoing arms race in the region. I will say that borders in the region are not defined. Kosovo’s territorial integrity, but also that of Bosnia and Herzegovina are questioned daily. I will say that world powers have firmly chosen sides in our disputes and conflicts. I will tell you that convicted war criminals are treated as esteemed members of our societies, while peace and Human Rights activists are being labelled as traitors and state enemies.

Youth Initiative for Human Rights is devoted to the process of dealing with the past, which we believe is the only guarantee towards a viable peace. We live by these words - too young to remember, determined to never forget. We are trying to rectify the errors of the past, so that justice may be brought to victims. And we also want to shape the future, a peaceful future for the Balkans. The future we hope for and work towards is one
where the opinions of others will not be formed through prejudice and lies, but through personal, authentic experiences and facts. We want to make it possible, normal, natural, for young people to meet, to work together, create, travel, to fall in love across the countries in the Balkans just as they do across Europe.

We want people to have universal respect for victims and deep disdain for war criminals, no matter what their nationality is. We want deeper, more substantial and more honest regional cooperation. And these are not just commonplaces and empty talk, these are very ambitious goals in our region. It is crucial for me to say that none of these values that I've mentioned are appreciated in our region. This concerns us, and we want to use this opportunity to share this concern with you.

We are deeply proud, grateful and honoured by this prize, and once again would like to thank the Parliamentary Assembly, the Václav Havel Library, the Charter 77 and the selection panel for recognising the values we stand for. And to thank our long-time friends and partners who nominated us. Thank you all for understanding that Europe needs a Balkans whose fundamental values are those of the Council of Europe. We need Europe in order to achieve peace in the Balkans, instead of the ceasefire that we currently live in.

Each of our countries needs more of Europe and European values, more freedom and democracy. Most of us benefit from the protection of the Council of Europe, the Convention and the Court, but not all of us. Kosovo’s citizens do not have access to the Council of Europe or the European Court for Human Rights. They need a visa to get here. That is not European. We must change that.

Our message to Europe is - do not play deaf at the sound of war drums fading in from the Balkans. We are not strangers, we are Europeans. Our message to the citizens of our countries is - peace is our most prized possession. Peace is not merely the absence of war, peace is a state where war is impossible. We must actively and persistently work on building peace, creating new bonds between people and improving regional cooperation in every field of life.

We dedicate this award to the pioneers of these processes, hundreds of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights' present and former activists, volunteers, exchange participants and leaders. This belongs to all of them.

Thank you, hvala vam, merci.