

Vladimir Kara-Murza address to the OSCE PA Winter Meeting

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Madame President, Members of the Assembly, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.
Dear friends.

Before I say anything else, I want to thank you – of course, for the gracious invitation to speak before you today, but first and foremost for your support and your solidarity during the time of my imprisonment. Just a few months ago I was sitting in a 2-by-3 metre cell in solitary confinement at a maximum-security prison in Siberia, certain that this was what the rest of my life was going to look like. The prisoner exchange in August that saved 16 people, including 8 Russian political prisoners, from the hell of Vladimir Putin’s Gulag was made possible by you – by sustained efforts of good people in democratic nations who never stopped speaking, advocating, shouting on behalf of those locked up in Russia for the only “crime” of opposing Putin’s dictatorship and his murderous war in Ukraine. This exchange showed that public opinion matters; that public attention saves; and that democracies, when they stand on values and work together, are stronger than any dictatorship can ever hope to be.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the founding stone of this organization, the Helsinki Final Act, that established an inviolable link between international security, economic development, and respect for human rights. For decades, this body has been defined by its most important promise: to create a common space of peace, cooperation, and democracy from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

Today that promise seems farther than ever. In fact, Putin’s regime in Russia has clearly proven – albeit in the negative – the interdependence of the three “baskets” of the Helsinki Process: where there is no democracy, there will be neither security nor peace.

For nearly three years, Putin has been conducting an all-out war against Ukraine – a brutal and unprovoked attack on a peaceful sovereign nation; bombing hospitals and schools, killing civilians, families, children; wiping entire cities from the face of the Earth. And for more than two decades, he has been leading another war – on the freedoms, rights, and dignity of our own citizens in Russia. The freedom of expression, the freedom of assembly, the freedom of elections and other basic rights guaranteed by the OSCE have fallen victim to his rule. And there were literal victims, too. Last Sunday marked one year since the murder of Alexei Navalny. Next week will be 10 years since the murder of Boris Nemtsov. Two leaders who gave their lives in the fight for a better Russia.

I hope that all those Western politicians who want to return to “business as usual” with Putin; who want to lend Putin international legitimacy; who want to shake Putin’s hand remember that this is a hand covered in blood.

Repression in Russia has reached a level unparalleled since the Soviet era. According to publicly available – and self-admittedly incomplete – figures from human rights groups, today’s Russia holds 1,497 political prisoners – more than the whole of the Soviet Union did in the mid-1980s. That number is growing constantly. This coming week alone, 158 people will be tried in courtrooms across Russia on politically motivated charges. And the fastest-growing category on that list are people who have protested against the war in Ukraine.

These protests have taken different forms. In the case of Alexei Gorinov, a Moscow municipal councillor, it was calling for a minute of silence at his council meeting for Ukrainian children killed by Russian bombs. The price was 7 years in prison. In the case of Maria Ponomarenko, a journalist from Siberia and a mother of two, it was writing the truth about the Russian airstrike on the theatre in Mariupol that left hundreds of civilians dead. The price was 6 years in prison. In the case of Dmitry Ivanov, a talented mathematician arrested on the day of his final exam at Moscow State University before he could graduate, it was posting on social media about war crimes committed by Russian forces in Bucha and elsewhere in Ukraine. The price was 8½ years in prison. And the list goes on – more names than would be possible to mention.

As ceasefire talks begin in the coming weeks, it is imperative that any deal to end the bloodshed in Ukraine provides for the release of *all* captives of this war. Prisoners of war on both sides – as required by the Third Geneva Convention. Ukrainian civilian hostages, thousands of them, held in Russian detention facilities. Ukrainian children abducted to Russia – a war crime that led to Putin’s indictment by the International Criminal Court. And *Russian* political prisoners – my fellow citizens who refused to stay silent in the face of this atrocity, even at the cost of their own freedom.

Putin’s propaganda wants the world to believe that *all* Russians support his regime; that *all* Russians back his war. But actions speak louder than words – and the ever-growing spiral of repression tells a different story. The hundreds who are imprisoned; the thousands who faced administrative charges; the tens of thousands detained by police at antiwar protests; the hundreds of thousands who signed petitions to get an antiwar candidate on the presidential ballot last year – these are the faces of a different Russia. The Russia Putin does not want you to see. Not the Russia of murderers and war criminals in the Kremlin – but the Russia of decent and good-hearted people who oppose them. Not the archaic, repressive, belligerent Russia of today – but a hopeful, peaceful, democratic Russia of tomorrow. A Russia that would finally fulfill the promise of a common space of peace, cooperation, and democracy from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

I believe in this promise with all my heart. I know that many of you do too. Let us work together to make it a reality.