

Conference Speech: Supporting Human Rights and Democratic Opposition in Times of Crisis

Opening: Gratitude and Luxembourg's Democratic Spirit

Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to Isabel Wiseler-Lima, who has been an exceptional partner for ACAT Luxembourg in our human rights work since the Forum Journal 2021. Her dedication exemplifies what makes Luxembourg special - the accessibility of our politicians and the short pathways between civil society, government, and political actors at various levels.

Isabel Wiseler-Lima represents the best of democratic values. Our politicians maintain open doors and, more importantly, open ears to human rights organizations like ACAT. Isabel, particularly in her role leading human rights initiatives within the CSV party, has demonstrated how politicians and civil society organizations can work together effectively. She has listened to us even when our messages were challenging - and for this courage, we are deeply grateful.

As human rights defenders, our role is to bring critical issues to public and political attention. Politicians may not always follow our recommendations for various political reasons, but the dialogue must never stop. This exchange between civil society and government is the lifeblood of democracy.

ACAT's Mission: Universal Human Rights in Practice

ACAT (*Action des Chrétiens pour l'Abolition de la Torture*) operates as a Christian-inspired human rights organization with a clear mission: to work for universal human rights, in particular by fighting against torture, the death penalty, and inhumane conditions in prisons. Just days ago, on December 10th, we marked the 77th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - a milestone document establishing the fundamental rights and freedoms of every individual.

This declaration is fundamentally about protecting individuals against state power, particularly repressive states where the rights to life, freedom, and security are under constant threat. Yet even in our democracies, we must maintain vigilance. As a theologian and Christian, I believe we must read the "signs of the times" - not merely following current events, but remembering and highlighting ongoing human rights violations that may have faded from media attention.

Belarus: A Test Case for International Solidarity

This principle of vigilance led us to launch a campaign in January 2022 for those persecuted in Belarus following the August 9, 2020 elections. When Lukashenko falsified election results and particularly targeted Viktor Babariko, the repression intensified dramatically. Today, in December 2024, we know of approximately 1,278 political prisoners, with over 1,200 still imprisoned.

In 2022, when international attention had shifted elsewhere, we decided to act. We partnered with Viasna, the Minsk-based human rights organization - which Lukashenko later declared an "extremist organization" on August 23, 2023. Together with reporters, we exposed how Luxembourg investment funds were inadvertently supporting Lukashenko's regime. We organized conferences with the Pierre Werner Institute and Amnesty International, featuring prominent philosophers and sociologists.

A Moment of Moral Clarity: The Concert for Belarus

We planned a benefit concert for Belarus in March 2022. Artists from post-Soviet countries and Luxembourg agreed to participate. Then came a phone call that changed my perspective forever.

One musician withdrew, saying: "My friends are asking how I can play for Belarus when Belarus is allied with Putin." This was days after Russia had launched its attack on Ukraine, partially from Belarusian territory.

This moment stripped away my innocence about how people process political complexities. Intelligent, well-meaning people couldn't differentiate between supporting Belarusian human rights defenders and supporting the Lukashenko regime. They couldn't see that Viasna fights for human rights in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine equally.

Human Rights in Times of War: Building Bridges

The war in Ukraine transformed our work profoundly. We launched "Human Rights in Times of War: Current and Historical Dimensions" - a project supported by the Oeuvre Nationale de Secours Grande-Duchesse Charlotte.

The concept was radical yet necessary: bringing together people from Ukraine and Russia - all opposed to war - in the same room. We facilitated discussions between Palestinians and Israelis, examined the historical relationships between Germans and Luxembourgers during wartime.

Luxembourg's multicultural character means many residents carry the burden of human rights violations, the trauma of being refugees, the pain of having loved ones imprisoned or killed. We must listen to these stories. More crucially, we must create spaces where those who might never speak can encounter each other's humanity.

Beyond Black and White: The Human Rights Imperative

Over four sessions, we brought Ukrainian and Russian people together. For some Ukrainians, simply being in the same room with Russians was emotionally overwhelming. Many couldn't attend - the wounds were too fresh. But those who came discovered something profound.

They experienced that the narrative is not simply “Russians bad, Ukrainians good” or “Russians as perpetrators and Ukrainians as victims.” Without comparing suffering or minimizing injustices, participants recognized the human dimension that transcends nationality. They understood that human rights are individual rights, not collective judgments.

As human rights defenders, we cannot be guided by political expediency or popular opinion. We must support victims of human rights violations regardless of their origin. We must amplify the voices of brave people defending human rights who are now imprisoned - whether in Russia, Belarus, or elsewhere in the world.

Looking Forward: Supporting Democratic Opposition

This brings me to our central message today. Supporting Russian and Belarusian opposition movements isn't about political convenience - it's about nurturing the seeds of democracy. When we support those who risk everything to speak truth to power, we invest in a democratic future for the entire region.

The international community's focus on Ukraine is politically and morally correct. But human rights work demands we also remember those fighting for democracy within authoritarian states. Their struggle is our struggle. Their courage deserves our support.

The Universal Promise

Human rights are universal and individual. They transcend borders, ethnicities, and political systems. In supporting opposition movements for democracy and human rights defenders everywhere, we affirm the fundamental dignity of every human being.

As we continue this vital work, let us remember that democracy requires constant vigilance, courageous dialogue, and the willingness to see beyond simple narratives. The path forward demands we support all those who fight for human rights, wherever they may be, whatever the political cost.

Thank you.