

Russians in their country and abroad: between real responsibility and imagined guilt.

It is a great honour for me to speak in this audience, and I am deeply grateful to the European Parliament, ACAT Luxembourg and Lux Eureka for the possibility to speak here.

I am speaking as someone who was born in Russia and considers this country to be his homeland. I am also speaking as a citizen of the European Union, having studied in the UK for 8 years and serving to an Russian Orthodox community in Madrid for almost 20 years - a position which I had to leave in 2023 due to my continuous public opposition to the Russian civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Since then my life has been divided between Germany where I do academic research, dedicated to the religious dimensions of the Russian ideology, and Netherlands, where I serve a community of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Tilburg. I am not a political emigrant, but I strongly identify myself with their cases, not being able to visit my country - or, better to say, the journey is possible, but is likely to be one-way.

After the full-scale invasion I have witnessed the grief of the countless refugees from Ukraine, which our community in Madrid, mainly Ukrainian, had tried to welcome and assist. At the same time I witnessed the catastrophe of many Russians, who I want to speak about today. To say the word “catastrophe” to me means to say that the war has brought irreversible changes to the Russian society. Things will never be as they were before. The major consequence of the war upon the Russian society is the profound and dramatic division on all levels, including family members, something that has been witnessed by Andrey Loshak in his documentary “Broken Ties”, produced in 2022. My friend father Valerian Dunin-Barkovskiy, the co-founder of the the NGO “Friede Allen”, aimed to help the families of the Russian Orthodox priests, who were repressed for their anti-war position, rightly compared this drama with North and South Korea - same language, same nation, but no bridge connecting the two worlds. Those Russians who opposed the war have to face either emigration or remaining in their country, while being alien to it. My former classmate wrote me: “I walk along the streets of my home city, I look around my country, and I think: none of this is mine any longer”.

Those who left the country - up to a million people - have been cursed by the Russian authorities. The former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev wrote: "The cowardly traitors and greedy defectors have fled far away – may their bones rot in a foreign land. They are no longer among us, and we have become stronger and purer". The State Duma Commission for the Investigation of Foreign Interference has prepared a package of bills imposing restrictions on Russian citizens abroad who have been subject to criminal or administrative prosecution in Russia, including those persecuted on political grounds, having fled Russia. Among other measures, their funds will be frozen and they will not be able to manage or sell their property. They will also be denied consular services (e.g. to renew their passports), according to a statement by the head of the Commission Vasily Piskarev. Furthermore, the Prosecutor General's Office will maintain a public registry - "List of Persons Subject to Temporary Restrictive Measures - which will be publicly available online, the official statement stated.

What is even more bitter, the reaction from the institutional church has been similar. Patriarch Kyrill compared them with the prodigal son from the Gospel parable. Metropolitan Mark of Ryazan, who was recently appointed to be in charge of the Moscow Patriarchate dioceses and parishes in Western Europe, said that those who left the country or remained, being, as he said, "alien" to the interests of the Russian nation. Unlike "true heroes" they are a "generation of dependents", who were brought up at the "rubbish fields of the entertainment industry".

However, those who have fled the country have not necessarily encountered support and empathy. "Why aren't Russians doing more to stop the war?" is a question we are being asked more than often. How many times we have heard that imperialism is in our blood, that no sensible person can remain in Russia today without being complacent to the regime, but once we are out, we are being told that the best thing we can do is to go back to Russia and to overthrow Putin? A friend of mine, a journalist of the Nobel prize-winner Novaya Gazeta, five journalists of which have been assassinated in Russia, had her passport thrown into her face in the cash exchange office in the Oslo airport in 2022. A Russian scholar Dmitry Dubrovsky, who fled the country in 2022, was told by his German colleague at a conference that, like all Russian passport holders, he must be deported into Russia, proving his point with the knowledge of the Russian obscene language. These stories are numerous.

Roman Sheremeta, the founding rector of American University Kyiv, wrote: *“All russians hold collective responsibility for the genocide of the Ukrainian people. They are accountable for their silence, complacency, and inaction. The Russian dissident and one of the greatest chess players of all time, Garry Kasparov, said it plainly at a NATO Public Forum: “The big debate is whether it’s russia’s war or Putin’s war. Unfortunately, it’s russia’s war. Every russian, myself included, has a responsibility for the crimes committed in Ukraine.” Even more persuasive are the words spoken by russian prosecutors at the Nuremberg trials — words that now apply perfectly to russians themselves: “All Germans are to blame for the crimes of Germany on a par with the leadership of the country. Since it was they who elected and did not stop their authorities when they committed crimes against humanity.” Today, these words describe “all” russians”.*

After February 2022, the pro-war Russians were asking us: “where have you been for the last 8 years?”, meaning, “Why were you indifferent to the civilian victims in the East of Ukraine since 2014 and have only now become so discordant?” However, in the due course essentially the same question is directed from those who oppose the war - for example, when I was interviewed by Stephen Sackur on BBC “Hard Talk”, I was asked - why was it only in 2022 that I spoke out? Why was my voice not heard with the outbreak of the “Russian Spring” and the annexation of Crimea? Indeed, few of us could foresee that these eight years were a preparation to a full-scale war. Boris Nemtsov was one of the few Russians who predicted it, and he was assassinated near Kremlin in 2015. “Hypothetically, even an attack on a neighbouring country could be interpreted as a pre-emptive strike and a form of ‘defence’, I wrote in 2020 in article on the practice of blessing the weapons of mass destruction on Russia. However, even days before the invasion, when the breakaway Ukrainian republics were recognised, I did not foresee a possibility of a full-scale war, with Russian troops attempting aiming to take control over entire Ukraine with its capital.

This outer pressure that we feel both within Russia and outside of it is nothing compared to the pressure to which we subject ourselves. What is our responsibility for the war? The fact that none us ever voted for Putin or supported the “Russian Spring” does not make this question disappear. Distinguishing guilt from responsibility is not an easy task, as the feeling of guilt is real, as any other human sentiment. I personally observed the inverse proportion - those who were truly responsible have not felt any

guilt, wholly those, who in no way contributed to Putin's regime feel guilty. In an interview to Katerina Gordeeva I compared this psychological phenomenon to a situation, when someone commits suicide. If this happens, there as a circle of guilt among those who remain. The state of the person committing suicide is beyond their possibility to help. They are not guilty, yet their feeling of guilt is real. Is our country not committing suicide today?

Russians distance themselves from the Russian war in different ways - some renounce their citizenship (but they can only do it if they have a citizenship of a different country), some donate to the Ukrainian army, while some join it. Sergey Loyko, who is a Russian journalist covering the war in eastern Ukraine since 2014, and who joined the Ukrainian Ukrainian Territorial Defence Forces, on November 24 this year wrote: *"All Russians are guilty of this endless war. And honestly speaking, we, the so-called 'good Russians,' are even more guilty than the bad ones. We had a chance to change the country. But we screwed it up. Because of laziness, apathy, bragging, daydreaming, and cowardice .. I am personally guilty of this war. I was preoccupied with myself and my life, and did nothing to prevent Putinism. There is no forgiveness for us".*

Not everyone happily accepts the pronoun "we", when bold statements on behalf of the others are being made. Well, the time of forgiveness and reconciliation will come, but it will not be a time of easy questions. Who will be in position to forgive on behalf of the innocent people, who are being killed today? And who will be in a position to be forgiven?

So what has happened to us? Who are we today? A character of Erich Maria Remarque' "Shadows is Paradise" speaks to a Russian/French girl in America:

"You're not an American, are you?" the girl asked.

"No. German."

"I hate the Germans."

"So do I," I said.

She looked at me with surprise. "I didn't mean it personally."

"Neither did I."

"I'm French. You understand. The war."

"I understand," I said calmly. This wasn't the first time I had been held responsible for the sins of the German regime. You get used to it after a while. I had been sent to an internment camp in France, but I didn't hate the French. There was no use trying to explain that. I could only envy the primitive simplicity of her black-and-white approach".

The Psalm 44 says: *"you scatter us among the nations ... You make us the butt of our neighbours, the mockery and scorn of those around us, you make us a by-word among nations, other peoples shake their heads over us. All day long I brood on my disgrace, the shame written clear on my face".* Today many of us may can identify ourselves with these words.

We have to look back into the past in order to understand the present. There is a book "The German War", written by an Oxford historian Nicholas Stargardt. In Russia it has been published under the title "The Mobilised Nation", and since February 2022 the sales have exploded, and for a good reason. The author asks: how did the German society remain mobilised right until the end of the war, unwilling to recognise the failure of the Third Reich? His answer was simple: the propaganda succeeded in transmitting the message, that the invasion into both Western and Eastern Europe was a form of defence. People were told that Great Britain and the USSR are a threat. So when the German cities were bombed by the Allies and the Soviets, the Germans sincerely believed that their country was a victim of external hostile forces. This is how today's propaganda functions in Russia as well. The West is seen a a threat, and the Russian invasion into Ukraine - as a form of defence. The Russian s are being hated and discriminated in the West, woe are being told. Therefore, whatever initiative we undertake, we should ask ourselves a question: does it fuel the Russian propaganda?

It is important to understand that the war is no longer about the Ukrainian territory. When the Russian politicians say that its main outcome is the consolidation of the Russian society around the President, they mean it. The formatting of the Russian society through isolation and political terror is not a consequence of the war. Is has become its purpose. The

measures mobilising the society around Putin are counter productive. I understand that targeting the dictator directly is not an easy task. However, to believe that he will be responsive to measures, such as making the process of receiving the EU visas for Russian citizens more difficult, would be far-sighted.

Ending the current war cannot be an ultimate purpose, as it had been the case with Germany. Some time ago I came across a brochure “The German Problem and the Responsibility of Britain”, which was published in 1947. Its author was Robert Birley, who was then an Educational Advisor to the Control Commission in the British Zone in Germany. In this lecture he says that the lesson of both world wars is that *“military victory is not enough and that Germany would only cease to threaten the peace of the world if there were a change in the mind of the outlook of the German people”*, which *“openly accepted Evil as its Good”*. I think that these words are equally relevant today. In today’s Russia there are no institutions which have a capacity to discern what is good from what is evil. They have either been dissipated, like the Nobel prize-winner Memorial, or have completely discredited themselves, like the Moscow Patriarchate. However, there are people who have preserved their moral authority, having paid a high price for it. According to OVD info, over 20.000 people have been detained for their anti-war position. By February 17, 2025, there were 1,185 individuals who faced criminal prosecution for anti-war statements or speeches. This number includes those whose cases are under investigation or in court, as well as those who continue to serve their sentences. Of these individuals, 372 were then in prison. According to the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Russia there are over 2.000 political prisoners in Russia. No doubt there are more of them - for example, we only found out about Pavel Kushnir, the Russian pianist, when he was already dead. The head of the Presidential Council on human rights in Russia Valery Fadeev said that these are not political repressions, but are barely minimal “sanitary measures”.

One has a right to ask “Why aren’t Russians doing more to stop the war?” only if one is ready to join these people where they are.

I would also remember about other forms of resistance in Russia, which still remain legal, such as helping the political prisoners and to the Ukrainian POW. Some are illegal and dangerous. Just to give one example, Idite Lesom (Get Lost) is an organisation that helps both Russian citizens to escape conscription and Russian soldiers to desert and flee the country or surrender to Ukraine, while also providing legal, financial and psychological aid to those who need it. Over 60.000 people have already received help, avoiding conscription, deserting and leaving Russia with their help. Its head Grigory Sverdlin reported few days ago that a hacker group has broken into the servers of Mikord, the company that is the key developer of the Unified Military Conscription Registry. According to him, the hackers had been in the system for several months and had transferred a huge amount of registry-related data to the project, including technical and financial documentation and source code. He noted that these materials would soon be made publicly available. "Thanks to the hack, the destruction of data and the entire infrastructure, the work of the registry has been disrupted for at least several months. This machine (30 million accounts!) won't be able to send people to kill and die for another few months," Sverdlin said. These examples shows that military resistance is not the only way to oppose Putin’s regime, and there are non-violent methods which are efficient. Today various Russian independent media - mostly from abroad - are confronting the Russian propaganda, bringing to the Russians alternative sources of information and analytics. These journalists cannot return, they are declared by the Russian state as “undesirable”, “extremists” and “terrorists”. Are we going to put those who resist the dictatorship on the “collective responsibility” guilt list, or do we want to encourage and help them?

The questions of guilt and responsibility are not new. Karl Jaspers distinguishes between the criminal, political, moral and metaphysical cult,

the last concept meaning that anyone who ended being alive rather than attempting to stop the evil by sacrificing his life is “metaphysically guilty”. However, I believe that today drowning ourselves in metaphysical guilt is not going to help anyone. Paradoxically, the narrative of the “collective responsibility” preachers mirrors Putin’s propaganda, which is founded on the allegation that his support among the Russians is total. Is Arseniy Turbin, who was arrested on political charges when he was just 15, meant to share the “collective responsibility” of his nation? The meaning of our responsibility is not about feeling guilty for the acts which we have not committed, but is about a solitary moral duty which consists in resisting the evil in the most efficient way possible. I believe that those people who made a difficult moral choice deserve support, and if they paid a price - admiration, but certainly not a place on the guilt list.

Of course, one can ask: why is it that we are speaking about Russians at all today? Is it not the Ukrainians, whose life and safety should be a priority?

Because a political regime, which is unsafe for its own citizens, will never be safe for its neighbours. One has to be blind not to see the connection between the increasing levels of repressions in Russia and its growing military threat. This is why no peace deal on Ukraine will be secure, unless the political prisoners are freed and the political terror is over. Ultimately do not think that a dilemma “Who should be saved first?” really exists. I subscribe to the definition of politics proposed by Mikhail Nemtsev, a Russian philosopher who is currently working Germany: **politics is the art of saving lives**. The concept of the human rights implies that being black, white, Ukrainian, Russian, etc does not make one’s freedom and dignity inferior or superior. And politics is not about saving lives, what is it about?

I often remember the definition of fascism, proposed by Anthony Gregor, an American political scientist, who defined it as “an expression of **collective outrage**, which arises from a sense of profound and protracted, real or fancied, group humiliation”. If resentment after the loss in the WWI

has been behind German fascism, if the resentment over the collapse of the USSR is fuelling today's Russian fascism, how can we make sure, that the loss, or at least, an outcome not glorious for today's Russia will not lead the country to resentment with consequences, more dramatic than those we are facing today?

No country is immune from falling into the pit of dictatorship, militarism, primacy of force and political narcissism. This is not history, this is today's agenda where we thought the pillars of democracy were. There have been ways in, and there have been ways out. This gives hope, but also imposes responsibility.

Thus, I believe that in regards to Russia these are at least three specific directions to follow:

1. Continuous effort towards the liberation of the political prisoners in Russia. The recent case of Belarus shows that this effort may be efficient.
2. Assisting the NGO, which contribute to effective non-violent resistance (such as Idite Lesom/Get Lost).
3. Assisting the Russian independent media, which confront the official Russian propaganda.

Thank you for your attention.