

Oleksandr Souchko

Defending Civil Society in Ukraine

On the day Russia invaded my country, I knew I would need to leave my home base in Kyiv. It was important to keep the Ukrainian foundation I lead operational, and continue to support our grantees, partners, and civil society allies even as the bombs began to fall. As Russian President Putin's armed forces began attacking Ukraine's capital city, I got in the car and headed west. A drive that normally takes five hours took 15. But the same trip today would take far longer, as thousands of my countrymen have clogged the highways on the journey, fleeing danger in the desperate search for safety.

It was important for me to remain in Ukraine. Russia's illegal war is now almost two weeks old, and we have much work to do. Our daily routines have given way to emergency hospital runs, ferrying much-needed medicine and supplies to support the wounded. Some assist in the delivery of materials to Ukraine's armed forces, and help our neighbors build fortifications to protect our cities. Others work with local business associations to help build supply chains. An army of volunteers help the elderly, the disabled, women, and children with the many challenges of relocation, from funding the gas to move them to providing the food they need to survive.

Our human rights activists are deeply engaged in documenting war crimes. Russia has abandoned any pretence of focusing on military targets, and is indiscriminately shelling businesses, stores, and apartment buildings. Amid the worst ground offensive since World War II, whole cities may be destroyed. It will be important to collect and preserve the evidence of what Putin has done, to provide to international courts and tribunals so that justice may one day be done. And the voices of Ukraine's vibrant civil society sector must be protected, as we know these defenders of democracy and freedom are high on Putin's kill list.

These are just some of the jobs civil society is doing to resist Russia's brutal and illegal aggression and preserve the progress our people have made over the past 30 years, when we emerged from the ashes of the former Soviet Union and began our journey on democracy's path. I am proud that the Open Society Foundations, our philanthropic parent, has announced an initial \$25 million investment in launching the Ukraine Democracy Fund to help preserve and advance what's been built here—and has called on other donors to join in this crucial mission.

The needs are enormous, and the stakes could not be higher. Because whatever Putin might be telling the Russian people to justify this heinous and unjust war, we know that this is un-

like most aggressions in human history—caused not by any actual conflict between nations, but a dangerous dictator’s fever dream.

Most battles in our lifetime have had a tangible root cause: religious differences; clashes between ethnic identities; a fight over access to land, the sea, or natural resources. Putin’s bloody assault on Ukraine is about none of those things. It is about his deranged desire to regain the great power status of the Russian empire. Borrowing from mythologies of the 17th and 18th centuries, he’s invented a fairy tale about the lands around Kyiv. In his mind, my country naturally belongs to his. It doesn’t, and it never has. But in his warped worldview, he cannot accept Ukraine’s very existence.

His hatred of my homeland is fuelled by Ukraine’s decision to pull away from the Soviet model and go in a completely different direction. Russia is built on hierarchy and subordination to a strong central power. Ukraine has a legacy of self-determination, and has chosen the path to a democratic, pluralistic open society. We are not there yet, but we are on the road. We won’t be subjugated. And Putin can’t stand that.

He sees himself as a man of destiny. He’s established a strong authoritarian rule in Russia. Arrested anyone who dared speak out against him. Destroyed civil society in his country and restored a measure of economic and military power following the collapse of the Soviet Union. He got everything he wanted—except for Ukraine. He’s tried, and failed, to bring this nation to heel many times. And he’s gotten angrier and angrier about it with each passing year.

He believes Russia and Ukraine are one nation. But it is this fundamental misreading of the situation that helps explain why Ukraine’s resistance has been so strong. Putin’s view of Ukraine is an existential threat to our people. This is not about a piece of land. This is about our right to exist. And this is why the people are so determined to defend what’s ours. In the name of vanquishing Ukraine, he has tied together its various strands in an unbreakable bond, united as never before.

On my drive west the day the bombing began, I was accompanied by my son—who, at 21, is roughly the same age I was when Ukraine won its independence. We worked together for a few days, but soon he began to feel the need to return to Kyiv. We have elderly family members there who were unable to travel with us, and he felt it was his duty to stay by their side through the dark days ahead. I am proud of my son. I am proud of my country.

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