

16 October 2021 in Mont-Saint-Martin (F)
Conference **Ihor KOZLOVSKY**
700 days of captivity and torture

The president of the association "Ad pacem servandam" (in the service of peace), Mr Claude Pantaleoni, welcomes the guests and thanks Mr Kozlovsky for accepting the invitation.

At the beginning of the Russian military occupation in 2015 and 2016, Mr Kozlovsky demonstrated in the streets of Donetsk against the pro-Russian separatists who wanted to break away from Ukraine. Together with the leaders of the different religions present in Donetsk, he organises demonstrations to signal to the separatists as well as to the Russian military the importance of solving problems peacefully.

As a member of the National Academy of Ukraine, a researcher in religious sciences, a historian, a writer and a poet, Mr Kozlovsky has written several books and articles.

The president also recalled that the association "Ad Pacem servandam" was created in 2017 to help victims of the first Russian occupation of eastern Ukraine, which has caused thousands of deaths and injuries and brought much misery and suffering to Ukrainians.

The first question put to Mr Kozlovsky concerned **the differences between Ukrainians and Russians**. The speaker answered by saying that the two nations were formed differently. The fact that the Ukrainian people live on the border with Russia has influenced their character and mentality, as they are open to other influences and cultures and are tolerant. The Russian people, on the other hand, were formed under different circumstances. Thus, they are not only Slavs but also people with Finno-Ugric origins. Moreover, the Russian mentality is characterised by its desire to belong to an empire. While Ukrainians fight for their freedom and human rights, Russians put the good of their country and their state first, ready to sacrifice their rights and freedom to it.

While the Ukrainian language was formed on the territory where Ukrainians lived, the Russian language was formed from Slavonic, the language of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Bulgarian languages. Today, Ukrainians understand the Russian language well, while Russians do not understand the Ukrainian language. Until the Russian invasion in 2014, people were free in Donetsk to speak Russian or Ukrainian.

Asked **why Russia invaded eastern Ukraine in 2015**, Mr Kozlovsky said that it was important to say that in the Russian-invaded east of Ukraine there had never been any separatist tendencies before 2014. He himself, who has lived in Donetsk for seventy years, has never experienced any. On the other hand, Russia believes that Ukrainian territory belongs to its history, that Russian roots come from Kyiv and that, from a strategic point of view, Ukraine remains important to Russia because of the wealth of the soil and access to the Black Sea.

The Russian invasion began in 2014 when the Ukrainian state was very weak. With **the Maidan popular uprising**, President Yanukovich fled and the country was left without a legitimate president. This was the perfect time for Russia to start the invasion. In busloads and cars, Russians arrived in the big cities in eastern Ukraine. They dressed like Ukrainians and tried to behave like them, then they gathered around them all kinds of criminals with whom they took to the streets and demonstrated the separation of the region. These people organised the first demonstrations in Donetsk in which they proclaimed Donetsk's separation from Ukraine and its accession to Russia. At first, only Russian civilians were present, but **from the summer of 2014**, the regular Russian army entered eastern Ukraine and waged a **hybrid war**.

So, from the very beginning, Russian journalists arrived on the scene to take pictures of the conflict. They aimed to communicate to the whole world that a civil war was brewing in eastern Ukraine and that there are two camps of Ukrainians fighting each other. Then the Ukrainian police did not defend the Ukrainian patriots who

demonstrate by the thousands in the streets of Donetsk in early March 2014. Mr Kozlovsky explained this by the fact that Russian agents had infiltrated the Ukrainian police and that a significant part of the police force had been bought by Russia and was therefore no longer defending Ukrainian interests.

Asked how Mr Kozlovsky organised the **peaceful demonstrations in Donetsk**, he replied that at the beginning of March 2014 the various Christian denominations - Catholic, Uniate, Protestant and Orthodox - as well as Muslims gathered in the centre of Donetsk under a tent to show that they were against the Russian invasion, that they cared about Ukrainian unity and that they were ready to demonstrate for that. The demonstrations were like prayer marathons, i.e. believers of different faiths came together to pray, to share. When some came in, they were replaced by others, so there were always people there. This prayer marathon continued until **August 2014** when the Russian army occupied Donetsk. While at the beginning many demonstrators took part in the prayers, their number decreased as soon as the **persecutions** started and armed groups appeared in the city. Many no longer participated and a few continued to meet in secret. Most of the priests were forced to flee because their lives were in danger. In all, seventeen people from this peace marathon were beaten or imprisoned. Mr Kozlovsky himself was imprisoned for two years.

From the summer of 2014, the inhabitants of Donetsk were fleeing en masse to the free territories of Ukraine. Before the Russian invasion, about seven million people lived in the two regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. Today (i.e. October 2021), about one-third of these two regions are occupied by the Russian army. And there are about one and a half million Ukrainians who have taken refuge in free Ukraine and about the same number of people who have left for Russia. It is believed that about one million people still live in the occupied territories.

His wife and one of Mr Kozlovsky's children left Donetsk in the summer of 2014. But he stayed because he has a second child who,

in 1998, suffered a spinal injury that forces him to stay in bed. To be able to transport him, he needed a specialised medical car, which Mr Kozlovsky only planned to take when the heavy fighting was over. It is then that Mr Kozlovsky learned that he was under surveillance by FSB agents.

On 27 January 2016, Ukrainian partisans tried to blow up the Lenin monument in the centre of Donetsk. From this date, the Donetsk Security Ministry started to arrest people who showed support for Ukraine. Mr Kozlovsky was on the lists that contained all the suspicious people. One day, while taking the rubbish out of the house, he was arrested by security officers who took him to a cell in the **basement of the Ministry of Security**. This is a place set up to hold arrested people. There he met people who were injured and who had been there for weeks. The hardest thing for him was to leave his son in bed alone at home. The Ministry's agents searched his whole house and took away what they wanted. But what worried him most is that they didn't give him any news about his son. After 24 hours, his wife received news from a friend that his son was alone in the house.

Only then could she arrange her transportation to free Ukraine. Neither Mr Kozlovsky nor his wife got any news from each other. Thus, psychological pressure was put on the family.

Mr Kozlovsky stayed several weeks in this cellar where it was very cold as it was winter. The conditions were inhuman: several people had to sleep on the concrete floor or furniture. In this cellar, the prisoners are mistreated: they can only go out twice a day, once at eight o'clock in the morning and again at eight o'clock in the evening. Some days, the prisoners were not even given food. After a week, Mr Kozlovsky was taken to his first interrogation. A bag was put over his head so that he could not see the interrogators. The first question he was asked is whether he had been tortured before. After this question, **the torture began**. First, they gave him electric shocks, and later they prepared a fake execution where, at the last moment, the torturers shoot aside. They also carried out fake drownings where Mr Kozlovsky was pulled out of the water at the last moment.

Between these different forms of extreme torture, he was beaten with different objects. During the torture, he had to listen to the accusations against him. It was **like Stalin's time** when people wrote letters of denunciation. So letters were written against him. The content said that Mr Kozlovsky is a Ukrainian patriot, that he organised prayer marathons and that, because many of his students had become pro-Ukrainian, he was a dangerous person for society. Once during interrogation, while he still had a bag on his head, the torturers gave him two cylindrical objects and asked him to specify what they were. While touching these objects, Mr Kozlovsky was unable to say what they are. In the end, they told him that these were two grenades, found hidden in his library behind some books. They then accused him of intending to blow up the Lenin monument in Donetsk with these grenades. Of course, Mr Kozlovsky never had these grenades but, having touched them without his knowledge, the torturers told him that these explosives now bear his fingerprints, which are evidence against him. Mr Kozlovsky says that he had so many books in his house, that they were so tightly packed in his library that it was impossible to hide anything behind them. Everything was a **lie** to build up so-called evidence against him and to frame him.

The Ministry of Security needed this evidence because the international scientific community was taking steps to search for him and to free him. The torture he had suffered was terrible. When he stood up, he collapsed, his body having suffered too much. The torturers broke many of his bones, so he had to learn to walk again after his release. Today, the speaker says that the hardest thing was to keep his human dignity because the torturers did not only aimed to break his body but also his human dignity.

Mr Kozlosky informs that at this very moment, as he speaks here in France, more than three hundred innocent people (men, women and young people) are being tortured in underground cellars in Donetsk. The best-known torture camp is called "Izolyatsia ".

Mr Kozlovsky witnessed cruel torture of others while in detention, including terrible torture where a man's genitals were destroyed by

electrocution. The perpetrators of this torture were either separatists or Russians. But the whole organisation of the torture is controlled by the Russian security service.

To the question of how the inhabitants of the occupied territories reacted to this occupation, Mr Kozlovsky replied that the population had no one opinion, but that one part was pro-Ukrainian without daring to state it publicly. Another part is pro-Russian without being in the majority. Most people are **not indifferent to the Russian occupation** but want to live in peace. For Kozlovsky, the fundamental problem is that the pro-Russian side is imposing itself by arms by relying on the Russian occupation army.

At present, the occupiers are spreading a lot of lies; they say, for example, that those who want to leave for Ukraine will have a lot of problems. The passports of the two self-proclaimed republics are not recognised anywhere. But if someone wants to leave without a Ukrainian passport, they can do so by declaring at the border that they were under pressure; they can then apply for a new Ukrainian passport.

Mr Kozlovsky remained in this multiple torture cellar for a month. Then he was transferred to another prison where he was put in a cell with criminal prisoners. The difference here is that these prisoners, unlike the political prisoners, have the right to more freedoms such as being able to phone friends. So Mr Kozlovsky could use one of their phones to contact his wife and receive the news.

After the cell with common criminals, Mr Kozlovsky was transferred to an old prison from the Soviet era. There were people sentenced to life imprisonment or sentenced to death. In this new cell, Mr Kozlovsky could barely lie down on the floor where, instead of a toilet, there was a hole for natural needs. In the ceiling, there was a kind of hole that was always open and through which the sky could be seen. The rain and snow percolated through a window opening where the glass was missing. Mr Kozlovsky **stayed for half a year in that cell** where all communication with the outside world was impossible. Life in it was terrible. From time to time, water from the

drains would rise through the hole in the floor and flood the cell. Rats came up too, and Kozlovsky talked to them, only to hear his own voice. When it rained or snowed, he had the feeling that he was in contact with the outside and that he was not alone. He knew that somewhere out there was his family and his real life.

After half a year in the cell, Mr Kozlovsky was brought before a **war tribunal**. He was transferred to a prison camp where conditions were somewhat better. He remained there until his release in a political prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine. On the day of his release, he landed on a Ukrainian plane in Kyiv where his family was waiting for him.

As a religious researcher himself, Kozlovsky can say that the situation of Christian churches in the Russian-occupied territories is terrible. But it is from the Russian invasion of Ukraine that **religious communities suffer persecution**. In 2014 and 2015, priests and believers were chased out of churches and homes by the military. Their properties and cars were confiscated. In Sloviansk, four priests were killed in their cars. As of 2016, all religious matters are controlled by the Ministry of State Security. The self-proclaimed Donetsk Republic has made a law that says that the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is the only legitimate one and that all others have no right to exist and are therefore persecuted.

Currently, the problems in the territories occupied by the Russian army are manifold. The inhabitants have lost their freedom and with much of the industry destroyed, many are **out of work**. There are whole factories that have been cut up and dismantled for transport to Russia. Many coal mines are closed; those who are still working receive a small payment. And there are not enough doctors because many, particularly specialists, have left for Ukraine. During this period of the pandemic, the situation has worsened considerably because **many crossing points with Ukraine have been closed** and only a few crossing points with Russia remain open. As there are not enough medicine and hygiene articles, the pandemic is taking its toll.

People are unable to bury their dead, so many corpses are stored in tents waiting to be buried.

Mr Kozlovsky currently lives in Kyiv where he rents a small flat with his family. Everything he owned in Donetsk, his flat and his books, are lost. Neither he nor any of his family or friends can return to Donetsk because their lives would be in danger. He also suffers from the fact that he cannot visit the graves of his ancestors who are all in Donetsk.

Mr Kozlovsky believes that European states should put pressure on Russia. But for him, it is clear that Russia is not going to stop with the attack on Ukraine. At the same time, it is putting pressure on the **Europeans** by making them **dependent on the supply of gas and oil**. Russia will only benefit from a weak and dependent Europe.

Finally, for Mr Kozlovsky, we must stop putting economic interests at the centre of politics. Instead, we must promote the value of living together and the love of neighbour that comes from Christianity.

The fact that the Nobel Peace Prize was given to a Russian journalist is a sign that Europe supports the representatives of the Russian press, which remains relatively independent and dares to oppose Putin.

Mr Kozlovsky ended his lecture by thanking all those who had come to listen to him. For him, love means concrete testimony of the truth he has experienced.