The Press Office of the Global Campus of Human Rights had the honour to interview Oleksandra Matviichuk who was awarded the Sakharov Prize, the Nobel Peace Prize and the Right Livelihood Award, about her important work as Human Rights Defender and her participation in our Venice School for Human Rights Defenders 2023.
The Venice School, organised by the Global Campus of Human Rights Training and Project Department in cooperation with the European Parliament, hosts every year the recipients of the Sakharov Fellowship Programme as well as Sakharov Laureates and human rights defenders from all over the world.

In 2022 the Center for Civil Liberties (CCL) was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, the Nobel Peace Prize and the Right Livelihood Award. How are these international recognitions helping the work of the Center? What is the current situation in Ukraine and how are you capitalising all this visibility?

We receive the Nobel Peace Prize in a time of war, and it is very responsible. For decades, the voices of human rights defenders from our region were not heard. Now we have an opportunity to make the voice of Ukrainian human rights defenders visible.

The Nobel Peace Prize and other awards give us attention to the problem we are working on and the ways we propose to solve it. This is attention not only from the mass media, which open up to us those audiences or those countries whose audiences were previously inaccessible to us. It's attention from the people who make the decisions.

Can you tell us more about your work as chairwoman of the CCL? You are a woman working in a male-dominated environment: how difficult is it to be able to affirm yourself as a woman and what kind of relationships have you been able to build?

I have been the head of the Center for Civil Liberties since 2007. At first, I combined a legal career with human rights activities, but with the coming to power of Viktor Yanukovych (2010-2011), the number of challenges faced by human rights activists forced me to give up commercial activities and completely switch to the public sector.

"Euromaidan SOS" became one of the first large-scale projects of the CCL. The initiative was launched as a response to the brutal beating by the "Berkut" of peaceful student demonstrators on November 30, 2013 on Maidan Nezaležnosti.

With the beginning of the Russian occupation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, CCL was the first human rights organization to go to these temporarily occupied territories to document Russian war crimes.

It was with the beginning of the occupation of Ukrainian territories that the first illegal detentions of civilians began, and we were the first to start compiling lists of illegally imprisoned persons and launched the "Let my people go" campaign, the main goal of which is to release Ukrainian political prisoners.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, we continue to document Russia's war crimes by creating a Tribunal for Putin initiative with partners to investigate crimes of aggression and then hand them over for further prosecution.
What are the most important challenges ahead in the field of Human Rights and Democracy in the world? Could educational programmes such as the Venice School for Human Rights Defenders contribute to create a safe space for discussion on these challenges?

In developed democratic countries, modern generations are able to easily exchange human rights and freedoms for some economic achievements, for the illusion of security, for some promises of some greatness. They don't understand what freedom and human rights are, so they carry out such an exchange.

And this is a hazardous phenomenon because human rights and peace are very interconnected.

Populist radical movements are growing, they are again openly questioning the universal principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That is, we see that people in the elections vote for promises of some economic benefits, some illusions of security, as if exchanging human rights and freedoms for these promised things.

Could you give a message to the Global Campus of Human Rights community and to the Venice School participants?

I want to mention a quote from my speech "Speech to Europe" on Europe Day on May 9 in Vienna:

When the law temporarily fails, and we cannot rely on it, we can still always rely on people. Even if we do not have the political tools, our word and commitments always remain. Ordinary people have much more power than they themselves realize. The voice of millions of people in many countries can change the world faster than any intervention by the United Nations.

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Stay tuned for the tenth issue of the Magazine coming soon in July in English and Italian!

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