

MEDIA

HIGHLIGHTS 2022 Q2



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Voice of America



Foro: Crisis de refugiados sacude a Europa
March 25, 2022

'You have to step over your fear': how to take on a dictator

June 6, 2022

By [Tracy McVeigh](#)



^ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, left, and Tawakkol Karman. Composite: Reuters/Getty

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Tawakkol Karman led uprisings in Belarus and Yemen respectively. They explain what it means to be at the forefront of a revolution

Revolutions are rarely successful. But although they are often thwarted by those they seek to overthrow, the energy created even by unsuccessful revolutionary protest can spark a process that builds

momentum over weeks, months – and even years, as two women who led very different uprisings explain.

Belarus: the unexpected president

At last month's Oslo Freedom Forum, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya took confidently to the stage.

Officially recognised by the US and many European nations as the winner of the Belarusian presidential election in 2020, she has lived in exile since Alexander Lukashenko, who has held the country in an iron grip for 28 years, claimed victory in the ballot.

Every inch the stateswoman in her suit and high heels, Tsikhanouskaya won a standing ovation from Oslo's audience of human rights activists and journalists. Days later, she passed a painful milestone: two years since she last saw her husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky, a dissident blogger who was arrested after announcing plans to run in the 2020 election and sentenced to 18 years in prison. He left behind a stay-at-home mother looking after two children with hearing difficulties; she has no idea if he knows how much has changed in his absence.

"My husband was jailed and I haven't had any communication with him since. We never discussed my participation in the election, in politics.

"It was unimaginable, because I was a housewife and we never discussed politics at home. I became interested only because my husband started his blog and began to oppose the dictator, so when he was jailed, my first thought was to support him, a step to show my love for him. It was not for freedom or democracy.

"But then, of course, so many people started to demonstrate and show their intention for change that I joined. In our country, everybody had thought you can't change anything, you are in the minority.

"Then, in 2020, we saw there were millions of us who felt the same. "

The sense of hope as huge numbers of people swelled pro-democracy rallies in Belarus was strengthened by Tsikhanouskaya and two other opposition leaders, Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo standing for change – all women, all united.



▲ *Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya at a rally before the 2020 election. Photograph: Sergei Grits/AP*

"I think it was a unique moment because we are a post-Soviet country. In the Soviet Union, a woman knew where her place was – and her place was behind a man, always. Of course, times were changing and in Belarus we had a lot of women in business and some politicians, but not a lot. There were still rules that women were in the secondary roles, but in 2020 the regime underestimated the role of women.

"I was accepted as candidate. Lukashenko wanted to make a laughing stock of me – 'Look who would vote for a woman? She's a housewife' – but he didn't catch the mood. Belarusian people are so tired of politicians who care only about themselves, who don't care about the people, and the fact that women were leading this uprising was attractive for people because they see women as normally kinder,

more caring about children; they want people to be happy, to be in comfort. Lukashenko said, 'Our constitution is not for a woman,' that there would never be a woman president in our country, and it showed he'd lost connection.

"Now, of course, our win has shown that women have the same power as men and in future in Belarus there will be no debate about where the place of women is. She will be equal to men. I think we now will avoid this part of our history where women will have to fight for their rights, because we already proved everything."

Lukashenko, keen to strengthen ties with Vladimir Putin, has supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"In Belarus, when the dictator became a collaborator and co-aggressor it was shocking for Belarusian people because we know that we are on the side of Ukrainians," she says.

"The regime of Lukashenko and the Belarusian people are two different things. Put Belarusian people and Ukrainians together when you are talking about the struggle for freedom.



▲ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya March 2022.
Photograph: David Parry/PA

"In the international arena we are managing to explain to people what is going on. Please punish the Belarusian regime, but please support the Belarusian people. When you mention punishment or sanctions, be precise.

"We are with Ukrainians. When Lukashenko dragged our country into the war, despite repressions, despite people realising they faced torture or being detained, hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest. It's extremely difficult to fight in a dictatorship when you are detained for a yellow ribbon in your hair or for an Instagram like, but this war wasn't approved by Belarusian people.

"Many Belarusians are fighting with Ukrainians. The partisans in Belarus are working to stop equipment, to stop arms and food supplies

getting through our territories to reach Russian troops. Belarusian people can claim two victories: that Russian troops didn't feel safe in Belarus because of the disruptions, and that people are taking pictures of troops and missiles launching and troop movements and sending this information immediately to the Ukrainians," she says.

"So, yes, for me, in two years I have changed. It's not modest to say so, but I became a symbol of change. I addressed the UN and met Joe



▲ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya holds a picture of her husband, Syarhei Tsikhanouski, during a protest in Vilnius, Lithuania, May 2021.
Photograph: Janis Laizans/Reuters

Biden and so on, but it will be a huge pleasure when my husband is released to give him back this role, to exchange roles, because I am so tired and exhausted. It is hard to hear all the time about people who are suffering, who are tortured.

When he is released, I will give him this flag.

"On 29 May, it was two years of detention. I have heard his voice only on video. I'm a woman, I'm strong enough – I'm an adult, but it's very hard to see children wait for their daddy. I have to make him stay in their memory, so I have pictures of my husband everywhere in our apartment. Every night, I hear, 'When is my daddy coming back?'"

"I live with this hope that my children will see him soon, and it pushes you, it pushes you every day. There are so many political prisoners."

"In 2020 we thought one more week, one more week, but two years have passed. It's a big period of life, but people are not ready to say, 'OK we didn't achieve, we will give up,' so that energy is underground. It's in the people.

"We don't know how long the regime's arms are, so I have to make sure my children have people who can take care of them.

"You think how you will be tortured, how you will be humiliated. You cannot be not scared, but you have

to step over your fear. My husband was afraid; others were afraid. It is the price you pay. More and more people are involved in the pro-democracy movement and people understand that our country can be completely different after 27 wasted years when a dictator thought of nothing but himself."

Yemen: after the revolution

[Tawakkol Karman](#) became known as "the lady of the [Arab spring](#)" in recognition of her role in the 2011 pro-democracy youth uprising in Yemen for which she won a Nobel peace prize. Now living in exile with her husband and baby son, she is an activist against corruption and authoritarianism and still works for the revolution that rolled across the Arab region but left Yemen behind – [a country now gripped by war and hunger](#).

"The revolution is a continuous act. It doesn't stop, especially when it faces challenges and obstacles. The age of the revolution is still here; it's just 11 years, and in that time we have overthrown about seven dictators in the Arab spring, so that's a big, big achievement. We will not lose our hope. We are so proud of what we did and the prob-

lem is now with the counter-revolution leaders and those who support authoritarian regimes.

"We will not give up and we will continue and we will achieve our goals of freedom and democracy."

"The [current ceasefire](#) is very important and the food security situation is very important, but Yemen is bigger than that," she says. "[Stopping the war means stopping the Saudis and the influence of Iran](#) ... If the Saudis stop their missiles, that will stop the current situation. They have total hegemony; they forced the legitimate president to resign and gave the authority to a presidential council. Stopping the war means Yemen has to decide its own path, to sever from the Emirates; from Iran as well.

"The reason that Saudi waged the war was that they want to stop the wheel of change in [Yemen](#). They want to stop a peaceful-transition revolution.

"Dictators think they will be allowed to control whatever they want to. The more a dictator is appeased and the more western governments make alliances with dictators, the



^ Tawakkol Karman speaks to the press in front of the Saudi consulate in Istanbul during a demonstration over the disappearance of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Photograph: Ozan Kose/AFP/Getty Images

stronger they are and the more their people suffer.

"Yemen and all the countries who chose to face the dictators, they will not stop their dream. Every great revolution is followed by the counter-revolution, but the future belongs to us and we are optimistic because we started this battle and knew we would face such obstacles.

"The thing that we didn't expect during our struggle? It is that we didn't expect western governments to let us down as they did. They make alliances with dictators and they encourage dictators to wage all kinds of wars against us – Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in Egypt. They support these people by not put-

ting pressure on them to stop. They are selling weapons to them.

“So that has really frustrated us,” she says. “And one of the results of that is we see now how Putin was encouraged in going into Ukraine. In Syria, his actions going without censure encouraged him.”

Russia has supported the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, in the ongoing conflict in Syria since the start of the uprising in 2011 and directly intervened militarily in 2015. Its bombing of civilian targets, hospitals and schools is widely recognised as causing hundreds of deaths and it holds a naval base in Syrian territory. The lack of censure of Russia’s actions, Karman believes, gave a green light to Putin’s warmongering ambitions.



▲ Tawakkol Karman. Photograph: Philippe Desmazes/AFP/Getty Images

“The situation in Syria encouraged Putin to invade Crimea and then Ukraine, so now all of our freedom is under threat.

“Our enemies should be one. It is one battle all around the world. It is so clear. Don’t trust these dictators; don’t think your alliance will help you – they are ruthless and united together. Authoritarian regimes are not friends to democratic regimes. Putin and those like him are the enemies of humanity.

“I feel deep sympathy for Ukraine, but I really expected this war.”

However, Karman insists she is an optimist. She believes the place of women at the forefront of politics in her region is too strong to ever be reversed.

“We change a lot. **Women** led the Arab spring; we led the revolution. The deep root of leading the political process and decision-making has changed things for women in society.

“Chaos and wars cause woman and children double the issues, but women are sacrificing, leading the struggle against coups in Libya, in Syria, in Sudan, in Yemen, and

inside Saudi Arabia too. Women are paying the price for just daring to be an activist.

"Some people will say that women's rights have gone backwards; some people lose hope, but this is the battle for freedom and democracy and we should remember that the people are there, underground, still sacrificing. The majority continue the struggle, dreaming to make change. They don't give up but are willing and happy to sacrifice anything for their kids to have a future.

"When we raised the revolution, we knew the dictators and the kingdoms around us would do all they could do to stop this wheel of change. OK, we did not expect the western governments who claim to support democracy to let us down, but we believe in ourselves and we know that sooner or later we will win this battle. We are both so sad and so mad.

"I am optimistic. I know the west will wake up and correct their policies, because now they are under fire. Make alliances with freedom fighters and activists around the world.

"For Yemen, there needs to be a real will to stop the war. The Yemeni

authorities need to have their political independence and make real alliances – not through the gate of Saudi Arabia.



▲ *Women carry a poster of Tawakkol Karman during a demonstration to demand the resignation of Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, October 2011. Photograph: Mohammed Huwais/AFP/Getty Images*

"People are so scared of Saudi Arabia. The world takes no kind of action because of this dark, dark oil money.

"For politicians who still follow this strategy of believing dictators somehow guarantee stability, this will not work. Dictators pose the greatest risk to global peace. They are the ones who directly and indirectly support terrorism, poverty, corruption. We need peace, democracy and rule of law."

EFE

HRF “strongly” condemns the trial of Cubans Otero Alcántara and “Osorbo”

May 31, 2022



^ Several police and state security agents control access to the court where the second day of the trial against Cuban artists and opponents, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maiykel Castillo, “El Osorbo”, is being held today, in Havana (Cuba) . EFE/ Yander Zamora

The Human Rights Foundation (HRF) on Tuesday “strongly” condemned the trial against artists and opponents Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel ‘Osorbo’ Castillo, a

process that, according to the organization, is part of a “wider campaign by the Cuban regime

to persecute artists, intellectuals and human rights defenders.”

The Human Rights Foundation (HRF) on Tuesday “strongly” condemned the trial against artists and opponents Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel ‘Osorbo’ Castillo.

“Luis Manuel and Maykel have managed to inspire millions of Cubans to stand up to a regime that has tried - without success - to crush their spirits for more than six decades,” Javier El-Hage, legal director of HRF, said in a statement.

“Now Cuba’s totalitarian dictatorship wants to make an example of these two pro-democracy heroes by offering them the same cruel treatment it has offered so many before them: leave Cuba or face years in prison,” he added.

Strong security controls and complaints of repression surrounded

this Monday in Havana the first day of the trial of Cuban artists and dissidents Otero Alcántara, leader of the San Isidro Movement (MSI), and “Osorbo.”

The two, for whom the prosecution is asking for 7 and 10 years in prison, respectively, have been in provisional prison since last year.

The human rights NGOs HRW and Amnesty International (AI) have demanded that they be released “immediately and unconditionally.”

According to HRW, the accusations and trials against them are “unfounded” and are part of a campaign “to persecute artists, intellectuals and human rights defenders related to the historic protests against the July 11 dictatorship that devastated the island on last year.”

Otero Alcántara, in prison since July 11, is accused of the alleged crimes of outrage against the symbols of the country, contempt and public disorder.

AI considers this plastic and visual artist who was recently selected among the 100 most influential

people in the world by Time magazine a prisoner of conscience.

"His art and activism have been denigrated by the Cuban dictatorship. In the last four years, Otero Alcántara has been the object of constant harassment and dozens of arbitrary arrests. He was jailed for the last time on July 11, 2021, after announcing on the social networks that would join the nationwide protests," details HRW.

For his part, "Osorbo", rapper and co-author of the song "Patria y Vida", winner of two Latin Grammys and which became an anthem for the "pro-democracy movement in Cuba", according to HRW, was arrested in May 2021 after joining a street protest.

Since then he has also been detained without trial, he adds.

This Monday, members of the Cuban exile community and members of the MSI marched in Miami to express their support for Otero Alcántara and "Osorbo."

The walk, which was attended by "El Funky", one of the interpreters of the song "Patria y Vida", began with a "human chain" in the

Ermita de la Caridad del Cobre, patron saint of Cuba, and continued to the Museum American of the Cuban Diaspora.

Yoslán Martínez, cousin of Mayel "Osorbo", asked during the march "that they release him, please, and that he be calm...", according to statements collected by Univision.

"This #UnfairTrial once again demonstrates the violation of human rights in #Cuba. We demand the release of #LuisMa and #MaykelOsorbo," wrote the MSI on Twitter, made up of artists, audiovisual producers, musicians, poets, producers, activists, and journalists.

For Freedom, Against Dictatorship

June 1, 2022

By [Jay Nordlinger](#)



▲ *Omar Alshogre, a Syrian former political prisoner, speaking at the Oslo Freedom Forum on May 23, 2022 (Oslo Freedom Forum / Jan Khür)*

Notes on the Oslo Freedom Forum: Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Uyghurs, Cubans, Syrians, et al.

Editor's Note: The Oslo Freedom Forum took place in the Norwegian capital from May 23 to May 25.

The Oslo Freedom Forum is an unusual thing: It gathers human-rights activists from all over the world. Dissidents, oppositionists, former political prisoners – future political prisoners. OFF does not care whether the dictatorship is left or right. Whether the boot is red or

black. It is anti-dictatorship. OFF does not favor human rights for some; it favors them for all.

This is a quite unusual thing.

Many people have good dictatorships and bad dictatorships. For example: Saudi Arabia, good; Iran, bad. Russia, good; China, bad. Cuba, good; Burma, bad. In my experience, those who oppose dictatorship across the board – and support liberty for all – are pretty rare.

- One of the greatest benefits of the Oslo Freedom Forum, say its participants, is that it makes people feel less alone. If you are a dissident up against a dictatorship, you can feel very, very alone. But the people at OFF are in the same boat, so to speak. They can trade stories, compare notes – be understood. And they feel less alone.

Which is a valuable gift.

- In the first session of the forum, Thor Halvorssen, the founder of OFF and its parent organization, the Human Rights Foundation, based in New York, speaks from the stage of the Oslo Concert Hall. (This is the home of another organization:

the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra.) Halvorssen says that some people have asked him, “How come OFF doesn’t address abuses in democratic countries?” His answer is as follows:

People in democracies have remedies: legitimate courts; multiple political parties; a free press. People under dictatorship lack such remedies. There is a time and a place for everything. At this forum, we address abuses in authoritarian or totalitarian countries.

Which sounds (and is) reasonable.

- The opening session of the forum, you can see on YouTube: [here](#).

- In his remarks – his welcome, if you will – Halvorssen says that more than half of humanity lives under authoritarian regimes: about 4 billion people. And you can see the contrast between unfree, closed societies and free, open ones. China is “buckling” under the coronavirus, says Halvorssen.

Which reminds me of Garry Kasparov, the chairman of the Human Rights Foundation. He has a pithy formulation: “China gave the world the virus; America gave the

world the vaccine” (or most of the vaccines, I gather).

One of the greatest benefits of the Oslo Freedom Forum, say its participants, is that it makes people feel less alone. If you are a dissident up against a dictatorship, you can feel very, very alone. But the people at OFF are in the same boat, so to speak. They can trade stories, compare notes – be understood. And they feel less alone.

Kasparov, I admire no end, for this reason, among others: He doesn't have to be doing any of this. He doesn't have to campaign for freedom, democracy, and human rights around the world, exposing himself to risk, from the Kremlin, in particular. He could have spent his years as the great retired chess cham-

panion, the chess legend, receiving accolades from one and all.

When I mentioned this once, he responded, “I never wanted to be a statue. For one thing, just think what pigeons do to it.”

- Various people mention the stakes in Ukraine – which are huge, for Ukrainians, of course, and for the world at large. You know who recognizes this? The Russian state, for sure. I will quote the foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov: “This is not about Ukraine at all, but the world order. The current crisis is a fateful, epoch-making moment in modern history. It reflects the battle over what the world order will look like.”

A rare moment of agreement, between me and Lavrov, today's Gromyko (and Molotov).

- The Oslo Freedom Forum is sometimes known as “Davos for Dissidents.” Bill Browder is a regular attendee. He spearheads the global campaign for Magnitsky acts. He has been in the crosshairs of Putin and his goons for years. (I wrote about Browder, and his extraordinary family, in 2018: [here.](#)) This year, Browder is not in Oslo but in Davos. Why? He explains in a video,

presented to the forum. He wants to convince the big corporate executives to disassociate themselves, at long last, from Russia – from Putin's authoritarian kleptocracy. There may be a window.

- Another regular attendee at the Freedom Forum is Vladimir Kara-Murza, the Russian democracy leader. Like Browder, he is not attending this year. But he is not in Davos. He is in a Russian prison cell. Long an advocate of political prisoners, he is now one himself – and he needs other people to serve as advocates for him.

Chief among them is his gallant wife, Evgenia – who is loath to be in the public eye, but who enters the fray whenever her husband cannot: when he has been subject to a poison attack, for example, as he has been twice, or, like now, when he is thrown into prison.

In the Oslo Concert Hall, Evgenia reads a message from Vladimir. He says he has no regrets whatsoever about speaking out against Putin's assault on Ukraine, and the Kremlin's other abuses and crimes. He quotes his mentor, Boris Nemtsov: "The cost of freedom is high." (Nemtsov was murdered within sight

of the Kremlin in February 2015.) Vladimir goes on to say, "The cost of silence and complicity is unacceptable."

A great man.

- Oleksandra Matviichuk is a Ukrainian human-rights lawyer. She gives a talk in which she details atrocities committed by Russian troops in her country. There are some pictures, too – hard to look at, of course, but necessary to face. How do you gun down people riding their bicycles on their streets? Streets on which they have ridden their bicycles routinely, in the normal course of life? How do you break into a house, kill the father, and rape the mother in front of her young child? These are the kinds of things that Russians are doing over and over in Ukraine.

I realize that it's a war: one army, or military, competing against another. But, mainly, it seems to me a simple assault by one country on the people of another. Not a hair on a Russian civilian's head is threatened. But every person – every man, woman, and child – in Ukraine is a target. That's a "war," I suppose. But it seems to me something else, and has since the beginning.

Like others, I am usually very careful to distinguish between a government and a people – especially a dictatorship and the people under its rule. I take care to say “Putin” or “the Kremlin,” not “Russia” or “Russians.” But, you know? Putin is not killing women as they wait in a bread line. He is not firing at mothers and children as they try to evacuate. He is not raping anyone. Other people are doing this. There is a broader responsibility, is there not?

This is a big, contentious, and painful subject . . .

- Alexander Lukashenko, the dictator of Belarus, is a junior Putin. Those opposing his government are incredibly brave. I have been writing about them, in detail, since 2010. Here in Oslo, three women give a talk, jointly. They are heroines of democracy in Belarus: Veronika Tsepalo, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and Tatsiana Khomich. Tatsiana is the sister of Maria Kalesnikava, a political prisoner. Maria ripped up her passport rather than accept exile. Tatsiana is representing Maria while Maria is behind bars.

They have faced – they have braved – great dangers, these

people. One of them says this: When you go out in the day, you don't know whether you will return in the evening. Whether you will hug your children goodnight.

Once, at an opposition rally, the women were told that there were snipers on a nearby rooftop. All the women could think to do was wave to them.

It's amazing what people will risk for the basic freedoms and rights that so many of the rest of us are lucky enough to take for granted.

- Last year, the Oslo Freedom Forum was held in Miami, not Oslo. This had to do with the complications of travel in a time of Covid. In a [report](#) from Miami, I wrote,

There is a panel on myths of the Cuban dictatorship. I am to moderate it. One of our guests was to be Carolina Barrero, a Cuban art historian and activist. But she has not come to Miami. Why? Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, the artist and political prisoner, has gone on hunger strike. Carolina and others have joined him in solidarity.

The things people do. The sacrifices they make. Extraordinary.

Since then, Ms. Barrero has been kept under house arrest in Cuba, then expelled from the country. She is here in Norway, speaking. And it is a pleasure to see her, and hear her. Many young people in Cuba are sick and tired of the dictatorship – even more sick and tired, possibly, than the old people are. They see that millions upon millions of people, including in Latin America, are leading normal lives, in free societies, or relatively free ones. Why should they be deprived of the same? Why should they have to live under one of the few remaining Communist dictatorships in all the world? Fidel and Che and the rest set up shop such a long time ago. The shop must be closed, or destroyed, at long last.

• I meet a friend of mine, a Uyghur American. She is so fed up. For six years, she says, Uyghurs abroad have been explaining the Uyghur situation to the world at large. What's a Uyghur? How do you pronounce "Uyghur"? How do they differ from the ethnic majority in China? Etc. The U.S. State Department, among other institutions and bodies, has described Beijing's persecution of the Uyghurs as a "genocide." Yet no real action is taken. My friend is so sick of

talking. Enough talking, she says. She is ready for her people to be a cause – a worldwide cause – as the Ukrainians are. The Uyghurs are facing an emergency, just as the Ukrainians are.

The frustration of my friend, I understand. Easily. I also think of the Syrians . . .

• Omar Alshogre is an amazing young man. He is a student at Georgetown University – vibrant; winsome. He was a political prisoner in his native Syria, subjected to any number of horrors. To have kept his sanity is an achievement. Before he was released, he underwent a mock execution. Understand: He thought it was a real execution. He thought he was going to die. Instead . . .

Anyway, an amazing, heart-in-throat story. I could not help thinking of Tosca, the Puccini opera. The prisoner, Cavaradossi, is told that there will be a mock execution. He has to play along. Then he will escape, with his beloved, Floria Tosca. And yet – the execution squad kills him for real.

It is wonderful to see Omar, alive and ready to tackle the world, for years to come.

• A concert hall ought to have a musical performance, and there is one – more than one, actually – on the stage here at the Freedom Forum. The one I have in mind is by Lynn Adib, a singer-songwriter born and raised in Damascus. A beautiful performer.

• There is also a comedian – Sakdiyah Ma’ruf, a woman from Indonesia. She is a “hijabi” (one who wears a hijab). She grew up in a conservative religious community, she tells us. So, the pandemic was not such a big deal. Stay at home? And if you have to go outside, cover up? Why, millions of women are experts at that . . .

A little laughter is a life necessity.

Campaigning for Good

June 2, 2022

By [Jay Nordlinger](#)



▲ *Carine Kanimba, daughter of Paul Rusesabagina, the Rwandan hero and political prisoner, at the Oslo Freedom Forum, May 2022 (Oslo Freedom Forum / Jan Khür)*

Further notes on the Oslo Freedom Forum: Rwandans, Tibetans, Eritreans, Ukrainians, Russians, Afghans, Saudis, Venezuelans, et al.

Editor's Note: The Oslo Freedom Forum took place in the Norwegian capital from May 23 to May 25. Yesterday, we published Jay

Nordlinger's first installment of notes. Today is the second and final.

I meet an American of my acquaintance, who works in foreign policy. I ask him about his family. He has a daughter, 20 years old, who was studying in Milan earlier this year. But, when Russia's assault

on Ukraine began, she left school, suspending her education. She felt compelled to go to Warsaw, to help with refugees, in any way she could. Then she went to Ukraine itself, and helped with the clean-up of Bucha, where some of the worst massacres occurred.

What a woman. Kind of gives one hope for the future.

- Carine and Anaïse Kanimba are delightful young women. They are about an important mission: getting their father released from prison. He is Paul Rusesabagina, known as “the hotel manager.” It was he who saved more than a thousand people in the Rwandan genocide. His story was depicted in the 2004 movie Hotel Rwanda. President George W. Bush saw it twice. He met with Rusesabagina in the Oval Office. They discussed Darfur (the genocide there). Later, Bush awarded Rusesabagina the Presidential Medal of Freedom. And now the hotel manager is a political prisoner of the Rwandan dictator, Paul Kagame.

Rusesabagina adopted Carine and Anaïse after their parents were murdered in the genocide. To

meet these young women – it is really something.

- Chemi Lhamo is another brave and compelling young woman. She is a Tibetan in Canada. She was elected president of the student body of her university. (No surprise there. She is a natural.) This caused a wave of nastiness, directed at her by PRC types. “China is your daddy” and all that. Yet Chemi Lhamo soldiers on.

You might think of Tibet as a lost cause: swallowed up by China, its nationhood crushed out. But it is not a lost cause to the Tibetans, and many of us hope to see that land Tibetan again.

- From the stage of the Oslo Freedom Forum, you hear many mind-boggling stories. Few are as mind-boggling as that told by Filmon Debru, who is an Eritrean survivor of human trafficking. He was bought and sold. Bought and sold. Tortured daily, almost to death. He lost half of each hand. Later, his hands were repaired, at least to a degree, by an Israeli surgeon. Today, he is in Germany, working as a software developer for Siemens.

What people endure. The courage and persistence they demonstrate.

• You can watch the goings-on at the Freedom Forum on YouTube:

[here](#), for example, and [here](#).

• If there is an MVP, writing branch, of the Ukraine war, it may be Anne Applebaum, the historian and journalist. No slouch himself is her husband, Radek Sikorski, a former foreign minister and defense minister of Poland. He, too, is a journalist, and was foreign correspondent for National Review, in the late Cold War. Applebaum is present at the Freedom Forum. So is Alexander Sikorski, son of Radek and Anne, who is a recent Yale graduate who now works for the Human Rights Foundation. A chip off the old block – blocks – which is a wonderful thing to be.

• Oleksandra Matviichuk, the Ukrainian human-rights lawyer, makes an important point: People say, “Just give away territories.” They tell Ukraine to cede territories, in order to satisfy Putin and end the war. First, the idea that Putin would be satisfied by bits, rather than the whole, is ill-informed. But second: Ukraine is not fighting merely for territories. It is fighting for

the people in those territories. Have you seen what Russian forces have done to people under their control in Ukraine? They have killed them, raped them, kidnapped them, burned their villages to the ground.

Foreigners speak blithely about “territories.” Ukrainians are fighting for their people, for themselves.

• Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign minister, gives an address to the Freedom Forum by video. “We have no option but to defend our right to exist,” he says. He also says that Ukraine’s model is very different from Putin’s. We’re talking about models of government and society. Ukraine’s model is a dire threat to Putin’s. Putin knows it all too well. What’s more, says the foreign minister, people have rights simply by virtue of being human – rights from birth.

These are elementary things. And extremely important to restate, and to bear in mind.

• Paul Massaro is an American, a policy adviser to the U.S. Helsinki Commission. Here at the Freedom Forum, he is speaking in his own capacity. And he says that, to the extent the West is united on

Ukraine, it's thanks to Zelensky and the Ukrainians. The West did not necessarily want to be united – at least behind the Ukrainians. Many, many people thought the war would be over in about three days. Then we would go on with business as usual, in our trademark accommodationist way. But Zelensky and the Ukrainians made this impossible.

Which is amazing.

- After many years of smug success, the authoritarians have overstepped, says Garry Kasparov. Putin's assault on Ukraine has aroused the sleeping West. In every age, there is a battle between freedom and tyranny, Kasparov says. And, today, the Ukrainians are on the front line. They have reminded the world of the costs of freedom. Western countries are paying – money, equipment. This is extremely important. But the Ukrainians are paying in blood.

There is an old concept: sacrifice. Ukrainians have reminded the world of it. The Ukrainians are making tremendous, barely speakable sacrifices. What about the rest of us? Can we do without our Russian gas? Our T-shirts made in the

Xinjiang region, by slave labor? Do the Ukrainians not shame us a little?

About Russia, Kasparov is very sharp. The best thing that could happen to Russia is to quit imperialism. To expunge the virus of imperialism from the national body. Russia has so much to offer: scientifically, artistically, and so on. But the government is bent on the conquest of other nations and peoples. This keeps Russia down, whether Russians know it or not.

What is glorious about the mass murder and mass rape committed by Russian forces against the Ukrainian people? What is glorious about Russia's status as a pariah – or near pariah, or should-be pariah – in the world?

In a sense, Russian defeat in Ukraine would be as good for Russia as it would be for Ukraine. The Kremlin has bewitched and distracted the Russian people with imperialism for long enough. Let Russia at last be a nation at peace, prospering.

- You will want to meet Zarifa Ghafari. I will write about her soon. She was one of the handful of female mayors in Afghanistan.

And one of the youngest. She has survived more than her share of murder attempts. She is positively amazing, this young woman.

- Abdulrahman al-Sadhan is a political prisoner in Saudi Arabia. He was kidnapped, held incommunicado, tortured. . . . That's how they operate, the Saudi authorities. Sadhan worked for the Red Crescent (as the Red Cross is known in many a country). Anonymously, he tweeted some remarks critical of the government. And the authorities found out.

Campaigning to win his release is his sister, Areej. She is a speaker here in Oslo. And I have podcasted with her. The love she has shown. And the determination and the bravery. Such people set an example.

- I see many old friends, and many of my favorite people. Pedro Burelli, speaking for his country, Venezuela. Leopoldo López, doing the same. Enes Kanter Freedom, the NBA player. He stands tall, in more than one way. Emil Constantinescu, the former president of Romania, and a champion of democracy in the former Soviet bloc and elsewhere.

He is one of the most dignified people I know.

It's a joy, and it's fortifying, to be among such people. If you ever needed a tribe – you could do a lot worse. . . .

- Marina Ovsyannikova is a television journalist in Russia – was. It was she who, on March 14, stepped into the studio during a live broadcast, stood behind the anchorwoman, and delivered an anti-war message. She told the audience that the state media were lying to them. Marina is now in exile. She has been disowned by her family – a very, very painful thing. Sometimes, though, you have to take a stand. You have to act, even if "irrationally." That is Marina's belief.

I get to know her a little, here in Oslo, and it is rather moving.

From the stage of the Freedom Forum, she says that, when she was a student, she read 1984. This was in 1998. Totalitarian times were past, at least for her country, Russia. She could not imagine that anything like 1984 would ever return.

For 20 years, she says, Putin has built a cynical, lying propaganda machine. She could no longer bear to be part of it. Independent media have been wiped out. The people are drugged, in a way: drugged by propaganda. And inflamed by it. They are taught to hate Ukraine, hate the United States, hate Western Europe. And this can have disastrous consequences, as we have seen.

She makes a simple statement, but one hard to improve on. One unquestionably honest. "I want my children to live in a free country." I hope they do.

- Walid Ben Selim and Marie-Marguerite Cano give a wonderful performance. He is a Moroccan singer-songwriter; she is a French harpist. He sings beautifully, and in tune (which is part of beauty, for sure); she plays with alertness and skill. How refreshing, to hear something new (to me) and commendable.

- It is so easy to be cynical in this lousy world. To think that no one's good. That no one's worth anything. That there is no real good and evil, just gray and game-playing. That between freedom – so-called

freedom! – and tyranny there is no real difference. "What, you think we're so innocent?" Such bunk. Not true.

I'm grateful for the good there is, and grateful for my readers, whether longstanding – it's been damn near 30 years – or shortstanding. See you later.

PaykanArtCar Receives the Havel Prize for Creative Dissent at the 2022 Oslo Freedom Forum

May 26, 2022



PaykanArtCar, a non-profit organization collaborating with artists to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community and human rights in Iran, was awarded yesterday the Havel Prize for Creative Dissent at the 2022 Oslo Freedom Forum. The

award, established in 2012 by the Human Rights Foundation, honors exceptional artists advocating for human rights and using creativity to “challenge injustice and live in truth”. The prize was named after the late Czech dissident

playwright and politician, Václav Havel in recognition of his combat against arbitrary power, tyranny and injustice.

Previous laureates include Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, South Sudanese activist and musician Emmanuel Jal, Saudi women's rights activist Manal al-Sharif, Chinese Dissident artist Badiucao and the late Rwandan gospel musician and activist Kizito Mihigo. PaykanArtCar was launched in 2021 after the purchase at an auction of an iconic Paykan automobile, which one belonged to the Shah of Iran and was later gifted to Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu.

The organization commissions marginalized but talented Iranian artists to use the car as a canvas to highlight human rights struggles in Iran. The inaugural PaykanArtCar was commissioned to Alireza Shojaian, an Iranian LGBTQ+ artist and activist, who transformed an iconic Paykan automobile, symbol of Iran's industrial and dynastic past, into a vehicle for human rights challenging the contemporary mistreatment of the LGBTQ+ community in Iran.

Commenting on PaykanArtCar's , Dr. Hiva Feizi, Executive Director of PaykanArtCar said: "It is a great honor to have been awarded the Havel Prize for creative dissent and to be recognized as a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. We are delighted that the PaykanArtCar, once an automobile given by the Shah of Iran to the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, is now a vehicle for freedom of expression and human rights of all in Iran, regardless of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation".

Iranian Artists-in-Exile Find a Vehicle for Protest

June 4, 2022

By Bobby Ghosh



▲ MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA - OCTOBER 04: The PaykanArtCar, a new vehicle dedicated to highlighting human rights abuses in Iran, is unveiled at the Human Rights Foundation's Oslo Freedom Forum on September 5, 2021 in Miami, Florida. (Photo by John Parra/Getty Images for PaykanArtCar) (Photographer: John Parra/Getty Images North America)

At the Oslo Freedom Forum, an annual gathering of political activists and dissidents, attendees are confronted with the challenge of making the world care about

long-running tyrannies. The passage of decades makes it that much harder to draw international attention to the plight of Cubans, say, or Zimbabweans – and harder

still because newer causes, such as the tragedy of the Uyghurs, clamor for our collective concern.

The forum awards the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent to those who bring invention and imagination to their activism to alert the world to their causes. Previous winners have included Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, Indonesian comedian Sakdiyah Ma'ruf and Emmanuel Jal, a hip-hop artist from South Sudan.

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If art, comedy and music have long been deployed in political causes, one of this year's award-winning projects breaks new ground: It is a car.

The PaykanArtCar project has turned an Iranian-made sedan that was once gifted by Shah Mehammed Reza Pahlavi to the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu into a vehicle for activism against Iran's rulers. The idea is to use the car as a canvas on which Iranian artists can protest the depredations of the regime in Tehran.

The first artist to have at it is Alireza Shojaian, an Iran-born, Paris-based artist who has chosen to draw attention to the plight of Iran's LGBTQ+ community. Against a yellow background, Shojaian has painted images depicting Ali Fazeli Monfared, a 20-year-old man from Ahvaz, in southwestern Iran, who was allegedly beheaded last year by his own relatives for being gay. The style is redolent of the 10th century Persian epic known as Shahnameh, and the artist says he was especially inspired by one of its stories, the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab, in which a father kills his son.

International and Iranian rights groups say the LGBTQ+ community in Iran faces discrimination in society and criminalization in law. Same-gender sexual activity

carries the maximum sentence of death. The mores and laws are defended by the liberal and conservative factions of the theocracy. Former President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad famously declared there were no homosexuals in Iran, and former foreign minister Javad Zarif justified the execution of gays by invoking Iranian society's "moral principles."

Hiva Feizi, executive director of PaykanArtCar, told me the project is now seeking a second artist to use the car as a mural for another cause. "They can decide the specific issue – it could be about women's rights, environmental concerns or anything else – as long as it is related to Iran," she said.

A Florida-based nonprofit, PaykanArtCar is run by Mark Wallace, a United Nations diplomat under President George W. Bush. Wallace also heads United Against Nuclear Iran, which pursues more conventional means of advocacy – pressing policy makers in Washington not to make concessions to Tehran and pressuring companies to stop doing business with the country.

The PaykanArtCar project is in effect an acknowledgment that conventional efforts aren't sufficient to keep the cause of freedom in Iran fresh in the public mind. It certainly speaks to the Iranian diaspora, for whom the Paykan, which means "arrow" in Persian, is a national icon. Based on the Hillman Hunter, a British car, it was the first car manufactured in Iran, starting in 1967.

Although production of the sedan ceased in 2005 (a pickup version was made until 2015), the Paykan can still be seen on Iranian roads. Hardly the most comfortable or reliable of rides, the car nonetheless invokes pride, symbolizing the can-do spirit of Iranian drivers and mechanics. It also inspires thousands of jokes, and I heard most of them from Paykan taxi drivers during a trip to Tehran in 2015, just months before authorities tried to ban them to address the city's notorious air pollution. My favorite: "How do you make a Paykan accelerate 0–60 mph in less than 15 seconds? Push it off a cliff."

The Shah's gift to his fellow tyrant was made in 1974, when developing countries took special pride in making cars. (My native

India was then producing the Ambassador, based on another British car, the Morris Oxford.) It was still roadworthy when Ceausescu was toppled in 1989, and was twice put up for auction before it was acquired by the PaykanArtCar project.

Since being repurposed as a moving mural, it has been displayed in the US, Canada and in Europe. Feizi says that although Iranian diaspora groups were initially skeptical of its use to promote LGBTQ+ rights, "they've been coming to see it, and most of them agree that using it as a vehicle of protest is a novel idea, a good way to get attention for people in Iran."

At the OFF, it did a much better job of that than the motley gathering of Oslo-based Iranian dissidents who assemble regularly in front of the Norwegian parliament to chant slogans calling for the downfall of the regime in Tehran. They hadn't got the memo about creative dissent.

Biden's Saudi Arabia trip denounced as 'frightening and enraging' by dissidents

June 21, 2022

By [Alexander Nazaryan](#)



▲ Participants stand for a group photo after unveiling a new street sign for Jamal Khashoggi Way outside of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Wednesday, June 15, 2022 in Washington. (Gemunu Amarasinghe/AP)

WASHINGTON – Last week, the District of Columbia replaced a street sign, an action not ordinarily afforded press attention and attended by dignitaries. This one had both, because the street

was in front of the Saudi Arabian embassy, and its new name was Jamal Khashoggi Way.

Khashoggi was the dissident U.S.-based Saudi journalist who was

murdered inside a Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, in what U.S. government assessments and independent experts view as at the near-certain direction of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the most powerful member of the Saudi ruling family.

After he was killed, [Khashoggi was dismembered](#).

As a candidate, Presidential Biden said he planned to make Saudi Arabia's government "pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are."

Now some are wondering if the United States is forsaking the commitments it made after its killings, as the need to bring down oil prices eclipses human rights concerns. Next month, [Biden will travel to the petroleum-rich kingdom](#), where he will meet with the crown prince who likely ordered the death of Khashoggi, a Washington Post columnist.

"We should not compromise our American values," says Areej Al-Sadhan, whose brother Abdulrahman left the United States in 2014 to work on humanitarian relief in Saudi Arabia. He was

[arrested in 2018 for tweets criticizing the ruling regime](#) and remains imprisoned there. "We should not compromise human rights."



^ Areej al-Sadhan discusses the detention of her brother, humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, in 2019. (POMED via Flickr)

Biden has said he will not shy away from a confrontation with the Saudis over the killing of Khashoggi, as well as domestic repressive measures over women and others, but it is highly unlikely that he will be as strident as his own rhetoric once was. With gas prices [at almost \\$5 nationally](#), U.S. political and economic interests make it especially challenging to alienate the world's second-largest producer of crude oil.

"There's a part of me that understands why, diplomatically, we've gotten to this point, but it's also frightening and enraging," says

Bethany al-Haidari of the Human Rights Foundation, who fought a lengthy and harrowing battle in Saudi courts to wrest custody of her daughter from her abusive Saudi husband (unable to win in court, [she eventually fled back to the United States with her 7-year-old child](#)).

“There’s a part of me that understands why, diplomatically, we’ve gotten to this point, but it’s also frightening and enraging,” says Bethany al-Haidari of the Human Rights Foundation, who fought a lengthy and harrowing battle in Saudi courts to wrest custody of her daughter from her abusive Saudi husband...

Now, she is worried that Biden will be sending to authoritarians around the world the message that political expediency trumps core conviction. And while that may always be the

case in the world of realpolitik, the images sure to emanate from Riyadh will starkly contrast the divide between American values and practices.



^ Members of grassroots organization Code Pink at the unveiling of Jamal Khashoggi Way. (Allison Bailey/NurPhoto via ZUMA Press)

“He is going to meet with somebody that his own administration released the information he was culpable for the murder of a dissident,” al-Haidari told Yahoo News. “I don’t know care if it’s about oil, as long as human rights is there as well.”

Just weeks into his presidency, Biden [released an intelligence report](#) that definitively blamed the killing on Crown Prince Mohammed,

who “viewed Khashoggi as a threat to the Kingdom and broadly supported using violent measures if necessary to silence him.”

His administration promptly sanctioned 76 Saudis. It appeared that the White House would treat Riyadh the way it did Moscow, Tehran and Pyongyang – nodes of authoritarianism that, the president said, presented a challenge to democracy around the world. The way to challenge them, according to Biden, was to lead with the exemplary values of human rights and freedoms.



▲ *President Biden at the dedication of the Dodd Center for Human Rights at the University of Connecticut in 2021. (Leah Millis/Reuters)*

“Defending human rights and demonstrating that democracies deliver for their people is a fundamental challenge of our time,” [the White House said last October](#),

as it announced intentions to rejoin the U.N. Human Rights Council. “It’s at the center of my administration’s foreign policy and it goes to the heart of who we are as a nation – and as a people.”

But that was before oil-rich Russia invaded Ukraine, severely constraining the world’s energy supply, before inflation became the Democrats’ top political concern. Even congressional Democrats who had once been harsh critics of Mohammed – also known by his initials, MBS – have softened their tone, aware of the danger gas prices will pose in November’s midterm elections.

Last year, Rep. Tom Malinowski, D-N.J., introduced a severe travel sanctions bill that would target top Saudis, including MBS. “I applaud the Biden Administration for naming MBS as Khashoggi’s killer, but it undercuts our message to Saudi Arabia if we accuse him of the crime and then do nothing to hold him accountable,” [he said in a statement at the time](#).

Now locked in a tough reelection fight, Malinowski and other Democrats [released a statement praising Biden for working with](#)

Riyadh to lower gas prices; the call to “elevate human rights concerns in bilateral discussions” comes at bottom, as something of an afterthought.

Even if they understand why Biden is going to Saudi Arabia, critics and dissidents fear that the United States will lastingly concede moral authority for temporary relief. “This is going to only embolden this regime to commit more abuses, to undermine our human rights,” says al-Sadhan.



▲ *Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2019. (Jacquelyn Martin/Pool via AP)*

Although King Salman remains the regime’s titular head, it is his 36-year-old son and crown prince MBS who effectively runs the country and has maneuvered to the front of the succession line. A savvy political operator, he has tried to burnish the kingdom’s international

reputation with superficial reforms that, critics say, do little to improve the lives of women, political dissidents and others.

“From what I’ve witnessed so far under MBS,” al-Sadhan told Yahoo News, “I don’t see much hope.”

A U.S. citizen based in California, al-Sadhan says she is certain that her brother has been tortured. She refrained from publicizing his case at first but later decided that public attention would help. The attention to Abdulrahman’s plight has not gone unnoticed by the Saudis.

“The moment I went public, I started to receive threats from the Saudi government,” al-Sadhan says, in the form of menacing messages on her phone and social media accounts.

“Even though you’re in the U.S., we can find you,” went the threats, according to al-Sadhan. She remains determined to bring her brother back home, but doing so without help from the State Department will be all but impossible.

The White House has struggled to reconcile its shifting positions.

On the same day that Jamal Khashoggi Way was unveiled in Foggy Bottom, the Washington neighborhood where the Saudi Embassy is nestled, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre struggled to reconcile Biden's earlier support for human rights with the president's current courtship of the regime.



▲ A man holding placards at the unveiling of Jamal Khashoggi Way last week. (Gemunu Amarasinghe/AP)

"When it comes to human rights ... the president is a straight shooter," [she said](#). But in other exchanges with reporters, Jean-Pierre refused to say that the president blamed MBS for the Khashoggi killing. It was a striking departure from the way the president has spoken about Russian leader Vladimir Putin, [whom he has branded a "war criminal."](#)

Saudi [money and influence permeate establishment](#)

[Washington](#), but no publicity offensive could erase the worldwide outrage following Khashoggi's killing. And the announcement that Biden would meet with MBS gave opposition forces an opportunity to highlight what they see as Washington's hypocrisy.

On June 15 at the Eaton Hotel in downtown D.C., the Human Rights Foundation held a showing of "The Dissident," a 2020 documentary about Khashoggi's killing. The venue was mere feet from the newsroom of the Washington Post, where Khashoggi had been a global affairs columnist.

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newsroom of the Washington Post, where Khashoggi had been a global affairs columnist. In his last column – published posthumously – he lamented the rise of press freedom in the Arab world, as well as the squandered promises of the Arab Spring.

“The Arab world is facing its own version of an Iron Curtain, imposed not by external actors but through domestic forces vying for power,” he had written. In early October 2018, [he traveled to Istanbul in order to obtain a divorce](#). He would never be seen again.

The woman he had planned to marry is Hatice Cengiz. “I was so excited,” she says in the documentary. “What kind of wedding could we have? I didn’t want a huge celebration.”



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