

**Laudation speech by the Prime Minister of Lithuania Ingrida Šimonytė
at the Knight of Freedom award ceremony**

Warsaw Security Forum, 4 October 2022

Dear Madam Olena Zelenska,

Dear hosts and guests of this ceremony,

Druzi, braty i sestry Ukrajin'cy,

I was 14 in August 1989, when two million Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians joined hands in a human chain – the Baltic Way – to show the world that our nations would not rest until we regained freedom.

Only half a year passed, and Lithuania declared independence. 14 people sacrificed their lives for our freedom in January 1991. But the power of free people managed to stop Russian tanks. Lithuania restored and defended its independence at what now seems to be a relatively modest toll.

As a teenager, I couldn't possibly comprehend all political, economic, and social implications of those events. But I could grasp the magnitude of the moment. And I learned one thing very clearly: a country is only as strong as the resolve of its people to fight for their freedom and to defend their homeland.

Many years have passed but this conviction only grew stronger. And today, I can say with full certainty – Ukraine is invincible!

Everyone who has eyes could have seen it during the Orange Revolution when the people of Ukraine chose real democracy over silent obedience. They did not hesitate to demonstrate that no one ever would steal an election from them.

Everyone who has eyes should have seen it during the Revolution of Dignity when the people of Ukraine chose independence and European future over the return to the unloving arms of stepmother Russia. Neither the winter frost nor bullets fired by their own authorities scared them away from claiming their right to decide the faith of their own country.

Everyone who has eyes must have seen it when tens of thousands of men and women of Ukraine volunteered to defend their country against Russia's undeclared, coward war in Donbas. Since 2014, this war turned Ukrainian people into „a nation where

hundreds of thousands fight and millions help“, as President Zelensky aptly said. An army of 44 million who know what they fight for.

Yet a dictator in an isolated bunker and his paper generals refused to open their eyes and see. Their people could have looked and listened – but failed to really see and comprehend.

And therefore, on the 24th of February we woke up to a nightmare turned reality. All the civilized world gasped with outrage but also with fear. Of a war our generation had hoped we would never witness in real life – unfolding before our eyes against an independent, sovereign Ukraine. And soon, possibly knocking at our own doors. Of a dreadful thought that the dark times of brutal, vulturous dictators redrawing state borders by sheer military force are back to our continent.

Many have feared that Kyiv would indeed fall – if not in three days, then in a couple of weeks. Many have feared that people of Ukraine might not persevere, even with all our heartfelt support and all the help we could give.

But the army of 44 million did not fear. Ukraine has shown to the whole world how the “2nd mightiest army in the world” chokes on the bravery and courage of the freedom loving people. Whoever chose to be blind, can now see, with full clarity, that the people of Ukraine will be standing for every inch of their territory and for the right of each and every child of Ukraine to be raised in a free and independent homeland. That Ukraine will win this war in the end – or else, it will not be the end.

Gradually, our fear paled against the admiration of the bravery and courage of the people of Ukraine.

Because it takes courage to take up arms and fight for your country. To give up safety abroad and return, in millions, to join brothers and sisters in arms – in full and conscious readiness to sacrifice their life for their country.

It takes courage to remain in the cities and villages; to provide medical care for people in bomb shelters; to rescue victims from the wreckage; to extinguish fires; to demine and repair destroyed bridges, roads, and houses; to deliver food and teach children under falling Russian missiles. It takes courage to fulfil everyday tasks such as farming, planting, and harvesting – risking being blown on a landmine any minute.

It takes courage to keep the state functioning and reforms ongoing, even speeding them up to fast forward Ukraine on the path towards EU and NATO membership.

It takes courage to stay as a walking target and lead the fight, refusing the offer for a ride and asking for weapons and ammunition instead – as your husband, Madam Zelenska, did. As did all the leadership of Ukraine.

And it also takes courage to leave home to bring your children and elderly to safety. To travel thousands of kilometres, often under shelling, and to start a new if temporary life in a foreign country, submitting to the good will of complete strangers.

Ukrainian bravery has lightened up the cities around the world in blue and yellow, reminding that it is thanks to Ukrainians that our people can still enjoy justice, security, human rights, and freedoms. That they can safely plan for the future.

Ukrainian bravery is changing the world, making every country and every person decide on which side of the history they want to be.

Ukrainian bravery makes our continent safer by giving push for political decisions long delayed due to lack of political will or ambition – such as cutting off energy dependence on Russia, increasing defence spending, or moving forward with the EU enlargement.

I only pray that we, in the West, maintain a fraction of this courage to keep our unity and not tremble under Russia's constant bullying, energy blackmail and nuclear sabre rattling.

Because it is our duty to not lose perspective at the sight of an energy bill or a prospect of falling support ratings and keep helping Ukraine win this crucial war.

I saw the power of the Lithuanian people with my own eyes at the brink of our independence. And I am certain that the people of Lithuania and my government – as well as any government they might choose in the future – will stand by the people of Ukraine until your victory and ours, and beyond.

Every victim of the Russian aggression will be mourned. Everyone who have killed and tortured people of Ukraine in unspeakable ways will face not only God's judgement but also justice by an international tribunal. Every inch of Ukraine will be

rebuilt, better. By the people of Ukraine and with the help of all the governments of the civilized world and all the people of good will around the globe.

Until then, I am honoured and humbled to have this chance today to applaud the bravery and courage of the people of Ukraine. I think it is only fitting and symbolic that you, Madam Zelenska, are receiving it on behalf of your nation. Because even though you might have not chosen this role, today you embody every woman of Ukraine who puts fear aside and does her own part in helping Ukraine win. And you carry this task with patience and grace I truly admire.

This award might be one of the many the invincible people of Ukraine will rightfully receive. But the biggest award of all – I have no doubt – will be the one of their own making. The victory of good over evil. The victory of Ukraine.

Slava Ukraini!