



Stichting Nederlandse Onafhankelijkheid

Speech at the Dutch Independence Award ceremony

By the Ambassador of Ukraine, Maksym Kononenko

Pronounced during the Dutch Independence celebration on July 26th 2022

Ladies and Gentlemen!

First of all, I want to congratulate all of you and thank you all.

I want to congratulate you on the anniversary of the independence of the Netherlands!

I want to thank you because this year you have generously shared your national day with Ukraine, which is heroically fighting for its independence against the most powerful empire of evil.

Every year on this day you invite some prominent person to deliver a speech about Independence. Thank you that this year you have chosen Andrii Kurkov, a world-famous Ukrainian writer.

For me, as an ambassador, it is a special honor to accept in the name of our President Volodymyr Zelenskyy the Dutch Independence Award, which is established this year. If he only had the opportunity to leave Ukraine for one day and come here personally, he would probably say that this is a reward for the entire Ukrainian people. After all, this is largely the case. However, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's personal merits are also undeniable. For hundreds of millions of people, Ukraine's struggle for freedom and independence merges with his image.

Independence of state is one of the greatest social values for all peoples of the world, but in Europe the idea of independence has a special meaning, special added value. Ever since the Springtime of Nations in 1848-1849, the idea of an independent nation-state has been closely linked to the idea of personal freedom, social equality, justice and democracy. As you know, the Springtime of Nations was suppressed, but the idea of national independence as a state form of democracy proved invincible. It was it that formed the basis of the modern Europe of free nations, which arose on the ruins of old empires.

Here it is time and place to remind that the idea of a nation state combined with people's power was first formulated in the Netherlands, namely in the Act of Abjuration of 1581, the anniversary of which we are celebrating today. Of course, the example of the Netherlands could not but influence the freedom-loving minds of Europe, and then the whole European nations. So, the Netherlands was not just ahead of time, it changed the mental code of Europe, determining the direction of its development for centuries to come.

In this connection, I would like to draw attention to one interesting circumstance. The 80-year war for the independence of the Netherlands officially ended in 1648. And it was in this very year that Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, the hetman, or the highest commander of the Ukrainian Cossack army, began his rebellion against Rzeczpospolita. The uprising quickly turned into the first war for independence in the history of Ukraine. Looking ahead, I will inform you that Khmelnytsky managed to create an independent Cossack state, but he almost immediately asked for protection from neighbouring Russia, which was as treacherous than as it is nowadays. In less than a hundred



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years, Ukrainian statehood turned into a pure formality, and during the reign of Catherine II, not even a trace of it remained.

The question arises, is the year 1648 just a coincidence? Could the example of the Netherlands influence Bohdan Khmelnytsky? I think the answer will become clear if we take into account that Bohdan Khmelnytsky together with 2,500 Ukrainian Cossacks in 1645-1646 served in the French army and participated in the war for Flanders. In particular, the Cossacks distinguished themselves during the storming of Dunkirk in 1646.

I cannot ignore another interesting Dutch-Ukrainian parallel. This is a parallel between the Act of Abjuration of 1581 and the Constitution of 1710, which was drawn up by the Cossack hetman Pylyp Orlyk. This document also combines the principles of state independence and democracy and is considered the first attempt to create a Constitution of the modern type. So, we Ukrainians, like the Dutch, also made a significant contribution to the formation of the fundamental principles and values of modern Europe, that we are sharing today.

I will also mention that on July 28, that is, 2 days after the Independence Day of the Netherlands, Ukraine celebrates its Statehood Day. On this day in 988, Ukraine was baptized and thus became a full-fledged European state. Statehood Day symbolizes the connection of generations that for more than a thousand years have been building our state, defending it from the enemy, developing its economy, its culture, education and science. Today, this connection of generations helps us in the fight against the Russian occupation.

Ukrainian-Dutch historical parallels in the struggle for independence, in my opinion, are interesting also because they clearly demonstrate how basic European ideas are transferred from one people to another, how they interact with each other, overcoming state borders and entire centuries.

However, there is, unfortunately, a significant difference between the fates of the Netherlands and Ukraine. If the Netherlands won its independence back in the 17th century, Ukraine gained it only in 1991 after 700 years of statelessness. We were very happy that this independence came to us without any war, and only in 2014 we learned that the war was just postponed for 23 years.

In February 2014 Russia took advantage of the vulnerable transition period in Ukraine after the victory of the Maidan revolution in Kyiv and occupied the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. Three months later, the Russians invaded the eastern region of Ukraine, Donbas, and proclaimed two puppet pseudo-states there – the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Finally, on 24 of February 2022, the Russian Federation started an unjustified, unprovoked and illegal full-fledged war against Ukraine.

As for today, nearly 20 percent of Ukraine's territory is occupied. More than 24 000 civilian infrastructure facilities destroyed and damaged. The overall infrastructure damage, and lost profits and investments constitute almost 600 bln USD. Massive Russian missile attacks, more than 3,000 since the start of the war, killed dozens of civilians far away from the front line.

But why all these deaths and destructions?

Just because Putin and Russian leadership are obsessed with the idea of restoring the Russian Empire - the Soviet Union, as well as its sphere of influence in the Central Europe. This is the only real reason for the current acute phase of the war, everything else – prevention of the NATO expansion, fight against the fictional “Ukrainian fascists”, protection of the Russian-speaking population – is a smoke screen, demagoguery and disinformation. Three hundred years of



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experience shows that Russia will not retreat and will threaten peace in Europe and the world until its imperial idea itself suffers a crushing defeat. And for this, its defeat on the battlefield in Ukraine is necessary, as well as a political and economic defeat inside the country and on the international arena.

Ukraine will provide the defeat on the battlefield, but to do this we need the most modern heavy weapons, urgently and in the necessary quantities. We need solidarity and comprehensive support from all of Europe and the entire democratic world.

It seems to me that Europe is very slowly coming to understand the essence of the imperial, fascist regime of Vladimir Putin. It also begins to comprehend that it is about more than a territorial conflict between two countries. It is about a conflict of civilizations, a conflict of freedom and enslavement, democracy and tyranny, the power of law and the right of power, a conflict of the future and the past. The future of Europe and the world depends on who wins.

I am glad that the leadership of the Netherlands understands everything distinctly and clearly. It was not for nothing that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, during the recent visit of Prime Minister Mark Rutte to Kyiv, gratefully noted that the Netherlands was among the top ten countries for military aid to Ukraine. This gratitude is shared by the entire Ukrainian people.

In conclusion, I would like to address the events of last night. Yesterday, during an informal conversation, Andrii Kurkov admitted that in his youth he wanted to become a diplomat, but he became a world-famous Ukrainian writer. My childhood dream was to become a journalist and writer, but life prepared for me a diplomatic destiny and the position of Ambassador of Ukraine to the Netherlands. And it's not that sometimes children's dreams are fulfilled in a very strange and unexpected way, it's that fate brought us both to this stage today. Today, the writer Kurkov and the diplomat Kononenko represent Ukraine in this hall. This is the best sign of unity and solidarity of Ukrainians in this struggle. Today there is no government and opposition, no state and civil society, no east and west, south and north. Today there is a Ukrainian people who are fighting for their national identity and independence. And I am convinced that we will win this war. We have no other way out: we are doomed to victory. Together with our partners and allies we will gain it for the peaceful and prosperous future of Ukraine, of the Netherlands, of the European Union, of the whole civilized world! Слава Україні!

Thank you for attention.

Maksym Kononenko

Wassenaar, July 26th 2022