

Key note speech - Charles Goerens

NEVER AGAIN!

Europe has just commemorated the liberation of Auschwitz. Many of the speeches delivered on this occasion ended with the solemn vow: "**Never again.**" But what does "never again" truly signify? Is it a commitment? An expectation? Or a hope? If it is a commitment, why is anti-Semitism once again on the rise across Europe and beyond? If it is a hope, we must admit it remains far from being realised.

Endlessly repeating the same mantras, the same promises, without taking meaningful action to prevent what we have witnessed in history — it is not only futile, but dangerous.

Each time the Middle East is engulfed in violence, we find ourselves rocked by anti-semitic protests, some of them so virulent they threaten the very lives of Jews living among us.

The cult of memory, as we see, is not enough to ward off the dangers posed by antisemitism. The few remaining Holocaust survivors and their descendants are once again haunted by the very real fear that the state may one day be unable or unwilling to protect them.

One may ask: why does the Holocaust feature so prominently in this speech? The answer is simple: the Holocaust was the culmination of the greatest state-sponsored atrocity in the history of humanity. Georges Ben-Soussan, a distinguished French historian and one of the foremost authorities on the Holocaust, whom I deeply respect, reminds us of this dark chapter in history. We know that this state-sanctioned crime ended in 1945. But when did it truly begin?

“Wehret den Anfängen,” a German sentence that means — “Resist the beginnings” — a warning to intervene at the first signs of something dangerous taking root. When did the true beginning of what we call the “Final Solution” occur?

Was it at the Wannsee Conference in 1942?

Or was it much earlier?

Was it with the establishment of the first death camps in the early 1940s?

Or with Operation Reinhardt, which led to the mass murder of over one and a half million Jews and 50,000 Roma people?

Or perhaps it was the T4 programme, initiated by the Führer in 1939, which led to the elimination of around 80,000 disabled people?

Could it have started with the Nuremberg Laws of 1935?

Or was it even earlier, when Hitler came to power in 1933?

Or, should we look to “Mein Kampf” for the origin of these dark ideas?

While historians must answer these questions, it is up to all of us, as citizens and policymakers, to draw the necessary lessons so that history does not repeat itself.

Could the Holocaust have happened in a democracy?

I believe we can answer this with a resounding **NO!**

In a democracy, built on the separation of powers and institutional safeguards, such a perversion of justice is simply unthinkable. In a democracy, where the government is held accountable by a freely elected parliament and an independent judiciary system, the very idea of passing laws enabling the deportation and systematic destruction of a people would be unthinkable. It is equally unimaginable in a society with a free press, which would immediately alert citizens to any attempt by the government to harm them.

What truly distinguishes democracy from dictatorship is the acceptance — even the enshrinement — of counter-powers, which must form an integral part of the political system.

These counter-powers are clearly defined by constitutional and legal frameworks in all democracies worthy of the name.

The slide into autocracy — and ultimately dictatorship — begins with the dismantling of these counter-powers and the shrinking of civil society. Once this goal is achieved, the leader will take the next step: controlling the flow of communication.

First, they attempt to limit the media to only those messages that serve their interests. **Then**, the relentless attempts to suppress press freedom multiply, and as the media aligns itself with the regime, critical voices become fewer, eventually silent.

This creeping silence is the result of multiple developments. Aspiring dictators have a toolbox full of methods to achieve their ends. With increasing control over state-run radio and TV channels, the right to information is replaced with state-sponsored brainwashing. This is the sad reality in Russia today. The regime ruthlessly targets its own citizens, silencing any opposition. We in the West failed to see it coming.

More than twenty years ago, at the Sustainable Development Summit in South Africa, Jacques Chirac said: “The world is burning around us, and we look the other way.” These words, though spoken in a different context, still resonate today, especially when we reflect on our gullibility with which we have dealt with Putin’s regime over the years.

Since February 2022, we can no longer afford the luxury of looking away. What we see now is Butcha. What we see now are schools, theatres, and supermarkets being destroyed. What we see is the forced deportation of children; - the destruction of Ukraine’s energy infrastructure. What we see is a man, Putin, who, after depriving his own people of freedom, seeks to break the will of the Ukrainians. What

we see is the return of barbarism to Europe; the collapse of the security order on the European continent; Russia rejecting the international order established since 1945, and the Russian propaganda machine meddling in our societies. What we see is the law of force replacing the rule of law.

What we see is Russia's relentless assault on the European Union. What we see is the growth of fifth columns in EU member states. What we see is Moscow's desire to undermine European integration and Russia's determination to sabotage the aspirations of Moldovan, Georgian, Serbian, and other citizens to join the EU.

What we see, tragically, is the hostility of Trump towards the European project and the destructive rage of Elon Musk, who helped him become president, now mobilising all his financial forces to fuel the enemies of the European Union.

And where are we Europeans in all of this? Our Europe, our European project, conceived over 70 years ago as a project of peace — what has become of it?

Over time, it has failed to inspire the citizens of the EU as it once did. **Why** has Europe ceased to be a source of hope? **Why** this disenchantment? Let us be honest: while it's true that the EU is not perfect, can those who condemn it honestly believe that our continent would be better off without the European project? Can they imagine a Europe without the European Union? **Can you?**

What inspired the French, Germans, Italians, and others to embrace European integration more than 70 years ago was their collective **aspiration for peace**. A peace that is far more than the absence of war. True peace in Europe is rooted in the irreducible dignity of the individual, anchored in values of freedom and tolerance — values that are enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. Article 2 of the Treaty outlines these values, and Article 7 provides a mechanism for sanctions against member states that violate them.

Since the introduction of these provisions, two member states — Poland and Hungary — have been subject to procedures for non-compliance with the rule of law. As soon as these procedures were initiated, the Polish and Hungarian governments vociferously objected. For them, the EU's demand to restore the rule of law in their countries was an affront to their national sovereignty. This resistance is echoed by nationalist and sovereigntist movements across the EU.

Hungary and Poland, under their ruling governments, reject the primacy of EU law over national law. They challenge the EU's competence in matters of rule of law, particularly when it comes to restoring the independence of the judiciary and freedom of the press.

Why is the EU's competence in matters of rule of law so essential, especially when similar provisions are already enshrined in national constitutions? From my perspective, the EU's role is absolutely crucial. Imagine if a member state were to dismantle judicial independence and freedom of the press through constitutional changes. The obvious victim in such a situation would be the citizen. The European Union offers an essential safeguard: if national authorities abandon the rule of law, the EU gives citizens hope that the rule of law can be restored.

This may be unacceptable to autocrats and dictators, but it is a lifeline for EU citizens.

If some among you struggle to see the connection between what I have just outlined and the peace I wish to address, let me remind you: peace without freedom is hollow. The peace I envision is more than the absence of war. It means that citizens have the right to live in a state where their sovereignty is respected, where borders remain inviolable.

Let me ask you this: Is it still peace when a person's individual freedom is stripped away by a totalitarian state? A system that protects values of freedom and tolerance, supported by institutional safeguards, is, therefore, essential.

Partisan justice and a muzzled press pull us further from the ideal of peace. Military invasion of a sovereign state shatters it completely.

What we are witnessing today is not just an attack on Ukraine, but an assault on the very principles that bind us as Europeans. It is a challenge to the rule of law, to freedom, and to the integrity of the European Union itself. We must recognise that the threat we face is not only external **but internal** — when nationalism and the erosion of democratic institutions take root, we are **all** at risk. If we do not stand **united**, if we do not uphold our values, we are paving the way for history to repeat itself.

It is up to **each and every one** of us to defend the European project and ensure that the horrors of the past remain exactly that — **the past**. We cannot afford to be passive in the face of **tyranny, division, and violence**. Our unity, our democracy, and our unwavering commitment to the rule of law **must** stand strong as a beacon of hope for future generations.

Never again !

- Thank you. -

Written by MEP Charles Goerens