
Writers for Peace Committee

WRITING FOR PEACE



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THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND THE ROLE OF EUROPE

BY GERMÁN ROJAS
(WfPC CHAIR, PEN CHILE)

At the opening session of the meeting of the Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International held in Bled, Slovenia, on 8 April this year, I gave a welcome speech to all the delegates in which I referred both to the issue of the environment, climate emergencies and the threats they pose to peace, as well as to the international disorder that prevails in the world. The situation we face today is something we never saw even in the harshest times of the bipolar world that existed between 1945 and 1989, when the capitalist West was confronted with the communist East.

I said in Bled that the complex global scenario, plagued by geopolitical conflicts at the global level, the rise of nationalism, protectionism, environmental denialism, and serious attacks on multilateralism, was a cause of deep concern among peace-lovers.

I pointed out on that occasion that the re-emergence of US President Donald Trump on the world stage has drastically changed the nature of international relations.

Since his election, he continues to make threats everywhere: a savage tariff war on his “enemies” such as China and on his “friends” such as Canada, Mexico and European countries, mass expulsion of Latin American immigrants, an impossible increase (I said in April) to 5% of GDP in European contributions to NATO, the “purchase” of Greenland from Denmark, the “recovery” of the Panama Canal, and the

incorporation of Canada as the 51st state of the Union, among other provocations.

Once he took office, he rapidly began to carry out targeted and unannounced measures, such as the withdrawal of the United States from the UN World Health Organisation (WHO), the reduction of funding to international bodies, the drastic reduction of USAID, and the withdrawal of his country from multilateral organisations that are making efforts to tackle the problems of global climate change.

But the most disturbing problem was the introduction of total mistrust among his western allies by giving Putin the status of the only valid counterpart for peace negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, while at the same behaving in a thuggish manner along with his Vice President, J.D. Vance, in the shameful verbal abuse of Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelenski in the Oval Office.

From a long-term strategic point of view, it is extremely serious and threatening to witness the emergence of the dismantling of American democracy and a new way of doing politics that subjects the whole world to maximum tension, tries to establish a new international “order” where multilateralism disappears, and where the main power behaves like an immense private company that ignores the rules of the diplomatic order and one of its main pillars: “pacta sunt servanda” (pacts must be kept).

Everything is ephemeral, whoever shouts loudest imposes the rules, the enemies of my enemies are not necessarily my friends.

Alarming signs, such as the fundamental role that ambitious and unelected characters like Elon Musk began to play since the beginning of this year, have partially lost intensity following the rift between the billionaire and Donald Trump. However, this in no way means that millionaires from the private sector no longer have an excessive influence on current policymaking, transforming them into a dangerous new player in international politics, as they threaten the arts of political negotiation, consensus-building, and understanding among all actors involved in various causes.

But undoubtedly the most serious factor in this situation is the fragmentation suffered by Europe, which remained unmoved by J.D. Vance's harsh criticism in Munich of European politics and its institutions, where he argued that the greatest threat to the continent did not come from China and Russia, but from within. Vance pointed out that Europe prioritises decadent values, such as the defence of human rights and the environment but does not stand up strongly to the 'threat' of illegal immigration. He capped off his visit by meeting with Alice Weidel, leader of AfD, Germany's far-right party, refusing to meet with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

With the honourable exceptions of a few countries, notably Slovenia and Spain, Europe has also failed to take any significant action on the crisis in the Middle East, the genocide suffered by the Palestinian people, or the escalation of the conflict with Israel's direct attack on Iran, which culminated in the United States' direct bombing of Iran. Yes, the United States, the same country that promised to end the war in Ukraine in one day. European policy has been one of regrettable subordination, which has not done anything of significance to reduce the intensity of the conflicts or to bring the parties to the negotiating table. It seems that Europe no longer has the strength to defend its own values. Europe's silence cannot hide the rupture of the West, which is nothing less than the decline of the West **(1)**.

I will now repeat what I said in Bled. This new emerging political class is threatening the rule of law worldwide, establishes a system that exercises power in a completely top-down manner, and pulverises democracy by not respecting the rules and institutions called to protect the rights of individuals, their social bodies, the inclusion of the most disadvantaged, and the freedom of expression.

In the face of this, we the writers of PEN International who defend human rights must demonstrate our resilience, and raise our voices against these threats, just as we have done against totalitarianisms of all sorts that have sought to curtail freedom of thought and expression since our founding in 1921.

(1) This text was composed in early August 2025 and therefore does not reference more recent meetings between U.S. and European leaders. It also omits the meeting between President Zelensky and President Trump at the White House on August 18, 2025. The text solely emphasizes the urgency of taking action.

WELCOME SPEECH DURING BLED MEETING 2025

BY TANJA TUMA
(DEPUTY CHAIR OF PEN INTERNATIONAL BOARD, PEN SLOVENIA)

(Welcome speech to the delegates of the 57th PEN Writers for Peace Meeting at Bled, Slovenia – 8 April 2025).

Dear delegates online and in-person, welcome to the 57th Bled Writers for Peace Meeting!

Thanks for coming to this meeting. This year we have over 100 hundred registered.

Allow me to greet among us our Executive Director Romana Cacchioli, Board Member of PI Kim Echlin, Chair of the PIWWC Judyth Hill, Head of the Search Committee Angela Christofidou, and last but not least the chair of the WfPC German Rojas whom I will pass on the leadership of this meeting in a minute.

Since our last meeting, it seems that world politics has been struggling, plunging from deep crisis into recession and unimaginable turmoil. After we believed that the Armenian Genocide during World War I, the Holocaust during World War II, and the Srebrenica massacre during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s were crimes of the past and that international law would bind the very states that built and signed agreements to protect people we awoke to one nightmare after another: the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza, a genocide aimed at erasing the Palestinian population. In a recent interview, the Palestinian Ambassador to Slovenia, Salah Abdel Šafi, said:

“Do you know what the greatest wish of the people of Gaza is? Death. It’s not a rhetorical answer. Life there is unbearable.”

In this world, I feel it is my duty to cry out the Munch’s *Scream* of horror. My scream is a scream for life. For all the women and girls denied basic human rights. For the transgender and binary people of America who overnight found themselves stripped of their humanity. For the countless poets enduring prison and torture simply because they wrote or spoke critically. The *Case List of PEN – Identity on Trial* represents not only personal identities that are on trial — humanity itself is on trial, while certain individuals raise their hands in the fascist salute, using hate speech as a smokescreen to fill their pockets with money. Their wealth comes at the cost of half the world’s population, who starve and perish under the weight of missiles.

Death is the word of the day. And yet, as always, *life* and *water* find their way.

Hope is not far from Bled. In Serbia, students are protesting for the rule of law and against corruption, demanding an end to the embezzlement that channels public funds into the hands of the few. In Türkiye, people have flooded the streets, demanding fair elections and democracy. In Slovakia and Hungary, leaders are feeling the

pressure of mass protests. At Easter, peace marches will be flooding Europe.

Brave people bring hope to humanity. Their will to fight for a better life, for freedom, democracy, and peace is like water—always finding its way.

In her novel *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, Elif Shafak begins with a hypothesis: each drop of water carries within it the memory of where it has been. A snowflake, a raindrop, a river—each one holds the echoes of worlds and ages past. A poetic thought.

Water, a force both nurturing and destructive, unites and divides, gives and takes, cradles life and claims it. It is the breath of the earth, a silver thread weaving through time, gliding past empires and civilizations, watching them rise and fall with quiet indifference. Across oceans, rivers, and

lakes, the peoples have found one another, traded, embraced, and loved.

And yet, as one of the world's scarcest treasures, water also separates the rich from the poor, carves borders between nations, and fuels wars and conflicts.

It is the mirror of the sky—the reflection of Heaven, if you will—the mother of creation, the sculptor of landscapes, the silent keeper of life. We cannot exist without it; we drink, we bathe, we build, all by its grace. And yet, it asks for nothing—only to flow, to give, to endure.

I wish my words, as a writer, would flow like water.

I wish all writers of the world had the freedom to let their pens move as freely as rivers to the sea.

Have a great meeting, dear participants. Enjoy our time together with a glass of clear water!

STORYTELLERS AND POETS IN TIMES OF WAR

(Keynote speech by Paolo Giordano (Aspiring PEN Rome) in the WfPC meeting, Bled, Slovenia, 8 April 2025.)

Thanks a lot for having invited me because we spent time together yesterday with Tanja, Romana and Germán in the car. I think those are the best starts for new projects: being together in a car in the night.

There are so many things to talk about. Peace has become such a complicated word in the last years. Such a twisted world sometimes. But this led me to think that when I started doing this job about 15 years ago in the part of the world where I live, Italy, we thought that we would be writers in peacetime.

At that moment, it seemed that a writer in peacetime should be mostly part of the market of books. The whole thing was about making your individual career. There was actually no real need of something that would even make writers gather together. Somehow it even felt like something you couldn't stand against. Amitav Ghosh wrote about this in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate change and the Unthinkable*. He said that novels rely on the idea that the future will be somehow a coherent continuation of the past and the present we know. And that was also the idea I based my work on for many years. Then it turns out that this is not the case anymore. We ended up being writers in wartime.

In the last couple of years, I've been traveling a lot. I visited Ukraine, Georgia, the Central Mediterranean for a search and rescue project, Greenland more recently, and Israel and the West

Bank. You very well understand from this list that what I'm trying to understand are somehow the borders of Europe, and what I see is that all the borders of Europe are now somehow bleeding.

Europe is at war in almost each one of its borders, including Greenland now. We can draw a very strong parallel with climate change, because one of the worst problems tackling climate change is the long-lasting idea that climate change is something that is upcoming. That it will be there at some point. That there will be a point of no return. There will be extreme weather events in the near future. We are deep into that for at least ten years now. There is a lot of talk now in the last month in Europe about a "ReArm plan"—how we should prepare, maybe with a common army, for an upcoming war. My point on this is that the situation is exactly the same as it is with climate change.

There's not an upcoming war. There is a war. And even if we don't see any sign of that war here in Bled, it doesn't mean that other places are not at war at the moment. My personal feeling, since I went to Ukraine for the first time more than two years ago now, is that Europe is at war.

Let me say something about Georgia. Georgia really is part of Europe. They were on track to join the European Union. And this process of aspirations has been severely repressed by the government, which has the backing of

Russia. There is something very interesting in going to small countries like Georgia because you can see some processes more clearly. They're like small labs for understanding how things go. And one of the very interesting things that is happening in Georgia since 2022 is the form of propaganda expressed through the idea that in the world there exists a so-called "global party of war." This global party of war has a mysterious plan to push Georgia into a war against Russia. Within Georgia, they call this the "Ukrainization" of Georgia. So the propaganda goes by the idea that, "Okay, you want to end up as Ukraine ended up? If not, you have to stick with us, with Georgian Dream."

Another example of a small country: Greenland. No possible "Ukrainization" of Greenland. So how is the propaganda machine working there? You know, they recently had elections. And one of the things that happened in the months before the elections was that on Facebook - the most used social media in Greenland - there was again a lot of sudden talk about the Danish colonization of Greenland. Greenland has been for decades now in a process of thinking their relationship to Denmark, but suddenly all the most brutal aspects of colonization were again in the social media debate. And this somehow opens up the possibility of a new colonization. The one Trump and the United States are looking for. This new form of colonization relies, as a narration, on a previous one. Just seeking, trying to divide the community in Greenland to make space for a new form of threat. So why did I start from "writers in peacetime" era? Because one of the things that was thoroughly discussed in the peacetime moment

was the importance of storytelling. Well, it turns out now that the ability for storytelling is the most weaponized thing in the present. So all the wars that are happening - including the invasion of Ukraine even in the years before 2014 - have been prepared by some very targeted, deliberate, and well-done storytelling.

As writers and poets, probably we're not experts in a lot of things, but we should be the experts in storytelling, and in the way minds can be influenced by stories. I guess that's my idea of a "ReArm plan." What I think is important to add to the public debate about this plan is that we surely need a psychological rearm plan. I'm not sure what it means, but I know it's something that has to do with preparedness—about these narrations that are happening everywhere. And in that, writers play a crucial role.

I wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for the two trips I made to Ukraine. Those trips were made possible by Ukrainian people with whom I was in contact because of my previous books. Then I was able to go back there in the time of the invasion because PEN Ukraine had immediately set up a net of communication with foreign writers. They invited me to the front line to see what was happening. It was all based on PEN Ukraine. Victoria Amelina was part of that network. I talked to her a few days after the invasion. It was thanks to PEN Ukraine, that I realized how important preparedness is in a moment like this. Ukraine was able to respond to the big-scale invasion because they had been prepared at least since 2014. They had built a network. They had built projects. They were in contact.

And that's what slowly led me to the idea that also in Italy we should build something similar because there's already a fair amount of threat in the country, including freedom of speech. It was thanks to them that I started this process of founding a new PEN Centre

in Italy. This is the first presentation of it to the PEN community. I hope it will work out. I was born and raised in an individualistic environment, but I really hope this will be just the first meeting—and that I will have your full support.

THE THREAT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND PEACE

(Keynote speech by Miquel Àngel Llauger (PEN Català) in the WfPC meeting, Bled, Slovenia, 8 April 2025.)

Saying that this is an honour may not sound original, but it's absolutely true. I'll say first that when I speak in public, I prefer not to read. I believe communication is better when it's spoken freely. But that rule doesn't apply when I have to speak in English.

I'd like to start on a personal note. Eleven years ago, I attended one of these meetings in Bled, representing PEN Català. It was 2014, and the war that had begun a century earlier was being remembered. Slovenian PEN, our beloved host, took us to one of the bloody sites of that war. We visited the Isonzo River and someone told us that in that region, everything has three names: one in Slovenian, one in German, and one in Italian, or in a local Italian dialect. Every hill, every river, every village bore a name in a Latin language, a Slavic language and a Germanic language.

I felt I was at the heart of Europe—a place where so much blood had been spilled. Not far from there, other atrocities happened in the 1990s—wars we followed closely from Catalonia and Mallorca. The landscape was breathtaking. Someone said a sentence that has stayed with me: “The most horrible things happen in the most beautiful places.”

This planet in which we navigate through space is incredibly beautiful,

yet it's also the setting of horrific events. Many of these are committed by people against other people, or against nature itself—which is, in the end, another way of hurting people. And other beings—other species—also suffer.

Two years ago, PEN Català created a new committee: the Climate Emergency Committee. I'm here to talk about it and to answer the question: Why should a writers' association address something like the climate emergency? Why venture into this territory when we already have so much to do? The most obvious answer is that we are facing a true emergency. And in an emergency, everyone must help.

When a house is burning, everyone carries water. I could flood you with data: temperature rise, CO₂ levels, glacial retreat, desertification, and so on. I won't. I'll only say this: we are already crossing the threshold of 1.5°C in global warming—beyond which human suffering becomes unbearable. In English-speaking countries, they call it an *existential threat*. I find that term accurate. Let's be clear: with the phrase “climate emergency,” we are referring to a broader environmental crisis. We must also speak of biodiversity loss—the terrifying collapse of life that has evolved over millennia.

Other planetary boundaries have already been crossed—or we're on the

verge of crossing them. I won't go into technical detail, but the core idea is vital. We are stepping into the unknown. So, again: Why should we writers speak about this? Someone might say, "Let the UN deal with it." Or: "That's Greenpeace's job," or "That's for Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion." Here's my answer: We, too, are citizens of this planet. We must add our voice. We must stand up for the planet. That doesn't mean we must stop writing about the thousand other things that interest us. It doesn't mean abandoning our commitment to literature—especially to good literature.

The draft resolution you've received for this meeting says something important: a writer may be an activist—but that is not a writer's primary role. Literature is about using words to create meaning—meaningful structures, meaningful stories. We are writers that can create literature without ignoring that we are citizens of a planet in danger. Let me offer the example of Ukrainian PEN. Despite facing an unimaginable crisis, they are organizing a meeting on the environment and climate. That's inspiring.

Nature, in many literary traditions, is sacred. I want to read a few short quotes. The first is from *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind." In another essay, *The Poet*, he wrote: "Every word was once a poem." This is the idea: If we have language—our primary tool as writers—it is because long ago we began naming the natural world.

And here's a quote from *Los hijos del limo* (Children of the Mire) by Mexican poet Octavio Paz: "Faith in the power of words is reminiscent of our most ancient beliefs: nature is animated; each object has a life of its own; words, which are doubles of the objective world, are also animated."

Whether or not we believe nature is sacred, no one can deny that literature is indebted to it. Nature is a wellspring of imagery—a source we use to write about emotions, about life itself. Let me cite Baudelaire: "Nature is a temple where living pillars / sometimes utter confused words. / Man passes through forests of symbols / which observe him with familiar eyes."

Without rhyme and meter, those verses lose beauty in translation—but they still serve to remind us: we owe much to nature. And that's a powerful reason to defend it. Defending the planet is also a logical extension of the PEN Charter. According to it: "PEN members pledge to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world." In 2025, it is impossible to pursue peace and equality without acknowledging the threat of the climate crisis. Over the last century, PEN has taken up causes consistent with that vision of a peaceful and equal world: anti-colonialism, anti-racism, gender equality, linguistic rights, sexual freedoms. We've done it because it naturally follows from our founding principles. Now is the time to take up the planet's cause.

I'd like to stress the link between equality and the climate emergency. One of the most striking features of this crisis is inequality in its causes, and inequality in its impacts. Greenhouse

gas emissions are distributed obscenely unequally. And it is the vulnerable who suffer first and most. This may be obvious, but there's also a link between environmental struggle and one of PEN's core missions: freedom of expression. Today, activists are arrested. Oil companies file SLAPP suits to silence groups like Greenpeace. Democratic governments pass laws that treat environmentalism as terrorism. And yes—writers are affected too. Near the end of the PEN Charter, there's another line that feels especially relevant today: "PEN members pledge themselves to oppose deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for

political and personal ends." This is a perfect description of today's political and cultural landscape. Fake news and climate denial are among the planet's most dangerous threats.

Let me end with a reference from Catalan literature. We minority-language writers often have a certain *propaganda streak*. The most famous poem written in Mallorca is about a pine tree—one that grows on rocks near the sea. The tree becomes a symbol of moral strength. The poem is *Al pi de Formentor* by Miquel Costa i Llobera:

*My heart loves a tree! Far older than the olive trees,
Far stronger than an oak, far leafier than the orange tree;
It preserves, in its leaves, an eternal springtime
And it fights against the fierce winds that hit the seaside
Like a gigantic warrior.*

So let us stand for the natural world—if only for this reason: because we need it to speak about the human soul.

IN THE NAME OF UKRAINE

BY IRYNA STAROVOYT
(PEN UKRAINE)

There are experiences and gestures that a writer's imagination could never invent. Do you know why modern Ukrainians in big cities, when going to bed, put dog food in one pocket of their pyjamas and flower seeds in the other?

The first, so that search and rescue dogs can sniff them out faster if they're still alive but unconscious under the rubble—the quicker they can locate a person in distress, the better the chances of clearing the ruins in time to save someone. The second, in case they don't manage to survive. Then a person wants to leave at least some trace at the site of their murder in this unpunished terror—let their favourite flowers sprout and bloom there.

Do you know why migrating storks fight among themselves when returning to their Ukrainian villages in the war zone? No, not because people fight on the front lines and set a bad example for them to follow, but because part of last year's houses were destroyed along with their nests, and there aren't enough nesting spots for everyone—new ones must be created. And storks do indeed weave new nests in the old places, inventively using new makeshift materials of war, for example, fibre optic cables that hang everywhere like giant spider webs endlessly woven by flying drone-spiders. Actually, storks have been flying here every March for millennia as totemic animals that people love and protect, and whom they watch with longing as they fly away in formations to North Africa six months

later, having raised their chicks from small eggs into large and strong birds. So yes, storks return even during war, for the 11th year now.

You will know exactly how well you are protected when you test your protection. In recent years, storks have seen how non-flying humans abandon their half-destroyed nests and become defenceless displaced persons.

When does something become unbearable? When it's too painful and disgusting to endure any longer. That is, this something didn't just happen—it tested our endurance, physical and psychological, it hurt, bothered, hindered normalcy, forced us to stand at attention, then clench into a fist, crossed all boundaries, manifested and engaged all reserves of our strength, and now has exhausted it. All that a person and community can hope for in the unbearable is that it has an end and a limit. "It cannot be like this!" as Ukrainian poet Tychyna said in 1919 with emphasis and an exclamation mark. Where there is suffering, there is also something that must stop it. The eye of death's needle finds its red thread each time and strings along, strings along. We experience ordinary, banal, statistical experiences of evil and wartime losses, but also uncounted, undescribed ones. Not passed down from previous generations.

The vulnerability of helplessness is a very bad default setting when "to be or not to be?" is no longer your own

decision—it's in the hands of the aggressor.

Ukrainians instead chose a different strategy—to be fragile in their resilience.

Simply being a witness to deliberately inflicted repeated suffering, simply seeing it with your own eyes while aware of your own helplessness and vulnerability, can already drive a person to moral paralysis.

And where is the role of the writer and literature in this? It lies in the great and the small. It seems to me that for a writer from a country that has been defending itself from an aggressor for years now in a war of attrition and survival, there are several tasks.

How do we tell the story of contemporary Ukraine so that it penetrates people's minds and souls hundreds and thousands of miles away? How do we brew unarticulated feelings? How do we translate daily nightmares? Or the vibrant life which goes on? How doesn't everybody live in bunkers and underground. War is the setting of the story, but it is not the whole story. How people live, love, cope, and produce kindness and care for each other—this is the story.

There's also another level of task, even more demanding. The focus on massive crime, anger and seeking justice. Writers should write about how to bring about at least some justice, how to restore and rehabilitate victims' dignity body and soul. And how to move forward. We lose friends and loved ones almost daily, in their beds or at daily chores strolling through their cities where there's no secure place all over

Ukraine for the fourth year. We are in the debilitating non-stop process of mourning. Is joy stolen forever?

And lest we forget that the Ukrainian army effectively deterring Russian aggression along the 1000 km long front line is the people's army. It is comprised of ordinary citizens from all walks of life of all ages like you and me. And many of my fellow writers told themselves on the bad morning of February 2022: "I will write more poetry and prose, but I am fighting this war first."

And the enemy fears not only our weapons, but also our humanity. It destroys points of warmth, rescue, mutual aid. That's why, besides housing, so many hospitals and medical stations have been destroyed, schools and universities, humanitarian volunteer centres, libraries and resilience centres—all those third places where people can gather and serve as support for one another. But Ukraine is strong in horizontal connections, and we do not stop. Every life is priceless, every feat is priceless, and we have the courage to save. We have real heroes now, we don't need to invent them or pretend—their deeds are real and lifesaving for us—and for you.

My grandfather told me when I was still little that intelligence, decency, and great trials should not be written on a person's forehead. But your effort paves the way.

The key difference between what happens to Ukrainians under Russian occupation and what happens to them when they are free but randomly die under daily air attacks, under cruise missiles, bombs and shaheds from Russia, is this: here everyone must

realize their own mortality and say goodnight each time as if it were the last, without excessive pathos, but in a way that shows all their care and love; there, in the occupied territories, everyone must realize their own lawlessness and humiliation—you will be raped, tortured, separated from your family, stripped of agency, home and property, and only then will you die.

Protect the protectors—that's the lesson from this. This very slogan should become the great political and cultural idea for the century ahead, because this is not simply Russia's war against Ukraine, this is war against all rules and against humanity itself.

Let us remember, the strength to endure in inhuman conditions is not limitless. And it's better for the world community to move faster, because "it cannot be like this." In all the hot spots of the planet, we must protect life saturated with love and unity, the lifestyle of nurturing, local rootedness in communities, non-orphanhood.

More than once it has happened that within our Ukrainian PEN trips to unbreakable libraries in frontline zones with new books, necessary humanitarian aid and literary meetings-readings, we asked ourselves: who charges whom more? So much light, hope, human warmth, food, stories and quiet care we have received from those who are truly exhausted and tired from the war and its ever-growing threats and losses.

Our friends from the Kharkiv Literary Museum called their new exhibition and performance around it, "In the Name of the City." (Let me remind you that under pressure from Russian forces,

two-million Kharkiv emptied by two-thirds, but held out, neighbours became like family to each other, and now people are returning, youth is returning and the city lives its resurrection and transformation). The exhibition is about dear Kharkiv as a city in a bulletproof vest, a city under the protection and care of its own residents. It is hieroglyphically simple, like a visual 3D telegram to the future, carved by skilled hands from a piece of wood. Here is an apartment building. Here's another and another. Here's a map of the city between two rivers, like the Tigris and Euphrates and their Mesopotamia. Here are death masks, many deaths. Here's a flower and a tree, a person and a book, and a bird. And the black hole will not swallow them, never, because they have already become symbols. And here is the rough, thick thread that binds everything firmly together, and if one of them falls, the others will fall too, and if after falling they need to straighten up, they all have to do it in turn, carefully, in one rope team, like mountain climbers. And victory—Peremoha—will also be one for all, though many will not live to see it.

My country now is like a teenager whom you can ask: who do you want to be? Because it's growing and developing so rapidly, and it definitely won't be the same as before this war. What my foreign colleagues from various countries sometimes envy me for is our wonderful youth, our students, already so mature, wise, responsible, seasoned idealists among the experienced. Let me tell you a story from Savyntsi, a large village whose community was under occupation for six months in 2022. Many material losses, many fellow villagers killed—essentially every twentieth person—there were also

stories of collaboration and denunciations. But who has now become the core of the community, who strategizes, as they say, a community without outskirts, where no one is left unaccounted for and not at the centre of attention? That same wonderful youth. They have 110 project ideas for how to arrange their new better life, and more than twenty are being implemented right now, not after, but *during* the war.

And to my question whether they understand that, following Savyntsi's example, their generation will gradually have to rebuild almost all of Ukraine? The answer was: Yes. And that's wonderful. Because we will rebuild it not as everything was, brick by brick, but with love and thought, with respect for heritage, and as we will need for the future – with a "heart unsubdued to evil". (*)

(*) See poem by Ivan Svitlychny in the Poetry Corner section.

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS PROTESTS IN SERBIA

At this year's meeting of the Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International (WfPC), held in Bled, Slovenia between the 8th and the 10th of April, a group of more than 160 writers from 6 former Yugoslav PEN centres (Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian and Slovenian) approved a joint statement in support of peaceful student protests in Serbia.

This document is not an official statement of the WfPC because it was approved after the 2025 Bled Meeting, but we fully appreciate its content because, considering the wide variety of PEN Centres and the diversity of writers who sign the statement, a great contribution is being made to the defence of human rights and democracy in Serbia, as well as opening a path to hope and shared values.

The full list of writers who endorse this statement can be found in the following link <https://penbih.ba/2025/05/podrska-za-studentske-proteste-u-srbiji/>

May 2025. As members of PEN International, we, writers from the countries of the former Yugoslav region, offer our full and unambiguous support to students protesting in Serbia, as well as to the professors who stand by them in their struggle for a life more dignified, just and free.

These protests represent a struggle against corruption, authoritarianism, breakdown of the institutions, throttling of the freedom of speech, as well as of academic and media freedoms. Students in Serbia are advocating for fundamental democratic freedoms, respect for human rights and liberties, as well as for European values such as the rule of law, responsibility of government and open society.

What started as a local student resistance has grown in a symbol of hope for the whole region. Inspiration that this movement offers has crossed

the borders of Serbia, as students and citizens in the whole of the former Yugoslav region recognise hope, strength and courage in these young people. Increasing numbers of young people in the region are starting to act inspired by these protests, which is a reflexion of the authentic strength and honesty of their resistance.

We strongly and decisively condemn all violence and repression directed by the regime in Serbia at the peaceful protesters. We especially condemn threats and intimidation directed at students, their professors, as well as against public figures who have supported them. All violence against the young people who are fighting for their right to speak, to think and to be educated in a free society must cease.

We demand that all political prisoners be immediately released, as well as for the cessation of all criminal

prosecutions which are clearly politically motivated and aimed at suppression of free speech and thought in Serbia.

At the time when the authoritarian government is trying to silence and humiliate the bravest among us, our duty as writers and defenders of the freedom of expression is to stand with them.

MILITARY SPENDING AND EUROPE: A NON-EXISTENT DEBATE

BY JORDI ARMADANS
(PEN CATALÀ)

The NATO Summit, held in The Hague recently, has certified the absolute and widely shared commitment to rearmament, militarization and investment in defence. The 5% of GDP dedicated to military spending is already the new horizon.

It is a very relevant decision taken without debate, and it would be worth reflecting on it.

Firstly, on the remarkable speed with which this decision was taken.

The proposal to invest 2% of GDP in military spending arose when, at the NATO Riga summit in 2006, this percentage was suggested to incentivize military spending. That 2% commitment was formalized at the NATO summit in Wales in 2014, although as an indicative and very long-term proposal.

In fact, in 2014, only 3 countries met this guideline and in 2022, 3 years ago! only 7 did. In other words, more than 75% of NATO members were far from achieving it.

After the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022, everything accelerated. Some countries reached 2% and others pledged to reach it. But not everything is explained by the war in Ukraine.

At the NATO Summit in Vilnius in 2023, there was already talk of *“investing at least 2% of GDP annually in defence”*,

considering it not as a ceiling but as a starting point.

And from there a crazy bullish run started.

In 2024, at a rally, Donald Trump said that NATO countries had to spend 3% or otherwise he would not defend them. Quickly, the then NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that member states had to move towards 3%.

In early 2025, Trump, already as US president, said that NATO countries should invest 5%. And the new NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, got down to work.

Given what has been seen, a rather obvious doubt - unfortunately - arises: if Trump had spoken of 3.9% (or 5.8%), would that have been the percentage approved by NATO?

Secondly, it is striking how, without a serious debate on security and defence, without a technical analysis of threats and risks and without planning on capabilities to face these threats, we have gone at a dizzying speed, from 2% -as a simple objective- to the obligation under threat of 5%.

It seems to be overlooked that a militarily strong Europe is not a guarantee of anything. If we review some of the most relevant crises of recent years (Iraq, Syria, Gaza, etc.) we

see that there have always been strong disagreements between EU countries. And while with Ukraine there has been unity of action, in recent months there have been notable differences. It is said that Europe lacks military muscle but there is a fundamental prior question: what sense does it make for Europe to consider a military force to defend a shared foreign policy that almost never happens? Europe's problem is not that it is debating between more military forces or more diplomatic commitment, but that it often lacks a joint vision.

The weakness of EU defence is always mentioned, ignoring the fact that the military expenditure of European countries has been much higher in dollar terms, than that of Russia. Should EU military capabilities be increased or should they simply be better coordinated and shared to be more viable and effective?

It is also surprising to forget that the pressure to increase military spending, driven by the inertia of a policy that associates security with rearmament and militarization and applauded by the profit motives of the military industry, has always been present in recent years. The reality is that, apart from and long before Ukraine or Gaza, with different justifications, military spending has not stopped growing over the last 25 years.

And something that, incomprehensibly, is always left out of the debate: if we have been increasing military spending for more than two decades and the world has witnessed a brutal increase in wars, is it sure that increasing military spending even more is the solution to the violent and unjust world we are suffering or is it part of the

problem that has brought us to this point?

If the enormous collective effort put all these years in favour of a militaristic vision of security had been put into reinforcing democratic global governance, strengthening international humanitarian law, promoting the guarantee of human rights, preventing armed conflicts or favouring disarmament and demilitarization, perhaps the present and future prospects for peace would be much more satisfactory.

But there is one last detail of the Hague Summit that is enormously disturbing.

That a president like Trump who, among many other things, refused to accept the result of the democratic elections by which he lost his presidency, arbitrarily detains and expels American citizens, persecutes freedom of speech in universities, insults Europe, allows all kinds of barbarities to Netanyahu, laughs at Zelenski while he considers himself a friend of Putin, belittles the United Nations, Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law and instead of collaborating with the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prosecute war crimes, threatens to sanction ICC officials who prosecute and document such crimes, that such a president should be the one to set the agenda and priorities of Europe's security and defence policy, while all government leaders applaud him without complaint, causes real political and moral vertigo.

Jordi Armadans, political scientist, journalist, and peace and conflict analyst is also the Coordinator of the

Committee of Writers for Peace at
Català PEN, in Barcelona.

A PALESTINIAN GIRLHOOD: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

BY ALICE S. YOUSEF

Imagine this: your grandmother is tucking you to sleep with a bedtime story, one about a girl betrayed by her friends—Jubeineh. The women told each other stories like inheritance, and I grew up hearing them. Growing up in Palestine is a unique and profound experience, shaped by the rich history, culture, and realities of life under occupation. In the midst of these challenges, I found books.

Conflict tainted everything in Palestine, including literature. Much of the national literature that was taught to us as kids was intended to foster a special affection for the land. Once that was filled, I turned to fiction as a lifeline. I saw checkpoints, soldiers, and loss—the harsh realities of war—but I also caught a glimpse of tranquillity. Books became a world where I could escape. When I think of my Palestinian girlhood, I think of the myriads of Arabic tales I read. The clean-up versions of the Arabian Nights, folktales, and the animal tales of Kaila and Dimna immediately spring to mind. But as a voracious reader, the tales of strong women and courageous young girls are the ones I recall the most clearly.

I remember curling up in a quiet corner of our home, the world fading as I lost myself in the power of the princess Shehrazad, weaving tales night after night to outwit a vengeful king. In a place where voices are frequently silenced, her ability to transform stories into a means of survival struck a deep chord. Shehrazad taught me that storytelling is a form of resistance, a

way to preserve identity and raise one's voice. Shehrazad was more than just the first female character I ever met in fiction; she was presence, she was power, and she used fiction as a means of floating, a technique that will eventually enable me to transform suffering into poetry.

Then came my namesake; I followed Alice through the looking glass, totally captivated by her curiosity. Alice's courage came from her willingness to ask questions. In a place where so much seemed uncertain, her boldness reminded me to ask questions. Similar to how I struggled to accept the injustices and changes in my environment, Alice did not accept the ridiculousness of Wonderland. Her resilience in a confusing world mirrored the resilience I saw everywhere around me.

I learned how to find beauty even in the most trying circumstances from Anne Shirley's imagination in Anne of Green Gables. By refusing to let anyone define her value, Anne transformed adversity into experiences. I found comfort in her story, especially during days when the sound of bullets reverberated in the night sky. Anne's fierce independence inspired me to dream beyond the limits of my reality.

Harry Potter's Hermione Granger was the epitome of loyalty, courage, and intelligence. She proved that knowledge was a form of power, using one's mind could be a tool for resistance. Her commitment to protecting others

echoed the values I admired in my community. Hermione's tale reaffirmed the notion that compassion and wisdom are just as important as physical prowess in achieving strength.

Pippi Longstocking crashed with a horse on her back into my life, with her wild red hair and fearless attitude, she was a symbol of freedom and rebellion. She advocated for those unable to defend themselves and lived by her own rules. In a world where power often felt distant and unreachable, Pippi's refusal to conform offered a sense of empowerment. She showed me that being different was not a weakness, but a strength.

Beyond these literary realms, my community's elders' stories of Jubeineh were replete with lessons about courage and tenacity. My grandmother's story served as a reminder to me that courage could be found in others as well as in books. The transformational power of

girls living their "normal" girlhood with "out of normal" powers and worlds I managed to navigate—confusions and questions about my changing city, waiting in dead lines across checkpoints, and seeing walls and soldiers everywhere I turned my head—was how these stories, whether from distant places or close to home, shaped my understanding of strength, hope, and identity.

Later on, I was able to navigate these stories with other girls working in the libraries on activities centred around girlhood: to show them what a girl hero does to one's life. Growing up in Palestine meant navigating a world where hardship and beauty intertwined. However, by reading about the girls' bravery, I discovered how to be a woman who questions injustice, maintains hope, and believes in the strength of her own narrative.

PAKISTAN'S FORCED DEPORTATION OF AFGHAN REFUGEES TO TALIBAN-RULED AFGHANISTAN.

25 May 2025.- The Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International notes with grave concern that the State of Pakistan is forcibly deporting hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. These include second and third generations of children who have never set foot in Afghanistan.

After the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, about 3 million Afghans fled to Pakistan. The children and grandchildren of these refugees have been born in Pakistan. Pakistan faced a fresh wave of refugees and third-country asylum-seekers after Afghanistan fell to the Taliban insurgency in 2021.

The Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International joins the UNHCR, Pakistani human rights activists, and Afghan refugees around the world in their repeated appeals to Pakistan to pause the current wave of forced, indiscriminate, undignified deportation en masse. This is not “voluntary repatriation”. Forced deportation

contravenes UN Conventions and humanitarian principles.

Pakistan must continue to offer refuge to Afghans who are at high risk of death, imprisonment, torture, or severe maltreatment if they are deported, especially professional women, female students, minorities (religious, sectarian, ethnic), progressive independent journalists, media persons, academicians, lawyers, human rights activists, humanitarian aid workers, and cultural/literary personalities.

We also call upon the international community, particularly those countries offering asylum (2001-2021), which are lagging behind in processing their pledged asylum documentation of a significant number of Afghans stranded in limbo in Pakistan for the past four years, to speed up their third-country asylum procedure.

We cannot stand silent when innocent people and children are being forcibly deported into a highly perilous situation

Germán Rojas, Chair WfPC

WHICH WAY FOR A STARVING AFRICA?

BY MAXIMILLIA MUNINZWA (PEN KENYA)

Despite her enviable resources, Africa remains the most food-insecure region globally, with one in five people reportedly facing hunger. During a recent tête-à-tête with a friend, he contended that to avoid starving the continent to oblivion, African governments must learn from the past to shape the future of our food systems! As it is, existing agricultural frameworks are a total failure. Why would the continent be dependent on food imports, yet her farmers are perennially farming? And I couldn't agree with him more!

It is not difficult to think back to a time when food was simpler and healthier in African communities. Back then, our grandparents didn't have to worry about the scarcity or cost of seeds. Neither did they have to wait for some board or related agencies to provide "patented" seeds for planting. Families had tried and tested seed banks. At the end of every harvest season, some choice ears of millet, sorghum, maize and whatever else would be stacked on wooden stumps above the kitchen hearth where the daily portion of smoke preserved them. Nuts, beans and vegetable seeds would be stored in large earthen pots filled with wood ash as a natural anti-pest agent. No one touched this crop as it determined the community's future food security.

Diversification and inter-cropping eliminated diseases. Health-friendly farm- and kitchen-based organic materials were readily available in homes. There was always some food to

turn back to even during the worst of seasons. Not anymore! Today, Africa is strife with heart-rending stories of failed crops and starving masses.

This scenario seems to be a well-calculated long-term plan under the watchful eye of Western governments and multinational agro-businesses. Policies and sanctions such as the wave of "free trade" and liberalization imposed on Africa are unfavourable to the continent's healthy agricultural and developmental growth.

For example, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) obliges African governments to open their markets to international companies and products, yet the same rules do not allow Africa to set policies which support or protect the continent's food basket and farmers. As such, many multinational agro-companies are taking over local markets, ultimately forcing African countries to change their national legislation in a way that agrees with WTO.

Another inhuman strategy of multinational organisations that is turning Africa into a perpetually famine-stricken region is the push for and patenting of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Whereas traditional crops offer more than one use, Genetically Modified crops are a different story altogether. They are programmed to categorically refuse to flourish, fruit, mature, or reproduce. Getting them to "behave normally" requires more chemicals bought from

the same companies that sell the once-only-use seeds at exorbitant cost. If GMOs have any impact at all, this is neither for the benefit of the small-scale farmer, nor for starving populations in Africa. The question that begs is, just how did Africa get to a point where GMOs have infiltrated so much of what is eaten in an agriculturally rich land?

To save the continent from imminent doom, African leaders must focus on a genuine transformative vision for agriculture. They urgently need to incorporate agroecology as the core strategy for safeguarding Africa's biodiversity and improving nutrition and health. This will increase resilience to climate and other crises. Furthermore, stronger bio-safety

protocols against corporate control of the continent's genetic resources need to be effected. This includes correcting warped global trade deals. Similarly, a call for the rejection of GMOs and technologies that threaten Africa's seed sovereignty or promote dependency on multinational corporations for seeds and inputs is long overdue.

What's more, all these must be integrated into functional policies. The future of Africa's agriculture and food security must reflect the needs and aspirations of its farmers and communities, as well as its cultural and environmental heritage. This includes investing in small-scale farmer-managed seed systems and organic and bio-fertilisers.

POETRY CORNER

Ernesto Cardenal - This living earth (Nicaraguan poet)

The largest living creature on earth
is the Earth.

We've seen it in photographs:
a sapphire sphere covered in white fleece
with gleaming white caps at its poles.

The new notion of Gaia – a living Earth.
The planet Earth, all one single living being.
That's how it was long before "life" began on its surface.
There's no place to live except the heavens,
and so,
emerging from the sun's equatorial region
the Earth became round in order to spin.

A living being that didn't need legs or arms or mouth or anus
just to be round and spin and spin around the sun.
It turned fast (5-hour days and 5-hour nights),
the moon creating tides ever since then.

By itself it created conditions for sustaining organisms
and then organisms with consciousness, people; and then
an organism that's at once a community and individuals.
Burning and arid, smoking, spewing lava, molten glass,
it seemed the Earth had no future.

Who would have ever said that from that flaming magma
would come forests and cities and songs and longings.

Published in the book 'On Earth as it is in Heaven' (2017).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o - Dawn of darkness (Kenyan poet)

I know, I know,
It threatens the common gestures of human bonding
The handshake,
The hug
The shoulders we give each other to cry on
The Neighbourliness we take for granted
So much that we often beat our breasts
Crowing about rugged individualism,
Disdaining nature, pissing poison on it even, while
Claiming that property has all the legal rights of personhood
Murmuring gratitude for our shares in the gods of capital.
Oh, how now I wish I could write poetry in English,
Or any and every language you speak
So I can share with you, words that
Wanjikū, my Gikūyū mother, used to tell me:
Gūtirī ūtukū ūtakā:
No night is so Dark that,
It will not end in Dawn,
Or simply put,
Every night ends with dawn.
Gūtirī ūtukū ūtakā.
This darkness too will pass away
We shall meet again and again
And talk about Darkness and Dawn
Sing and laugh maybe even hug
Nature and nurture locked in a green embrace
Celebrating every pulsation of a common being
Rediscovered and cherished for real
In the light of the Darkness and the new Dawn.

Includes expressions in Central African languages:

- *Wanjikū: female name in the Gikūyū language (also Kikuyu)*
- *Gikūyū: ethnic group in Kenya and also one of the Bantu languages*
- *Gūtirī ūtukū ūtakā: 'the day will come' in the language of the Hausa, an ethnic group in West Africa.*

Ivan Svitlychny - And in the heart, unsubdued by evil. (Ukrainian poet)

A letter to speak out, not to say something.
A non-creation of non-art, collective, not mine.
Many, many days spent in energy-saving mode.
Our advantage was once considered vitalism—life-affirmation.
There was so much passion around, such vibrant colors.
And now, like in a hospice, nothing is unfading.
Every day they come for someone.
Sensors have atrophied, it's hard to feel anything,
except anger or rage.
It's hard to understand what's unclear here.
If cows could write, they would also write
about care and guardianship,
about how important it is to be milked carefully and on time.
Caregivers live, like people of war, in circular time,
where there's no end in sight.
No novelty indeed; we've seen it all before,
we've gotten used to everything, layer by layer.
No progress, everything is exactly as it was for our grandmothers.
Again and again, without vacation or rest,
without normal sleep, without a comprehensible goal.
Every person needs someone caring, loving,
especially at the beginning and at the end.
Attention is such a rare and generous gift.
Daily care without exaltation, without elevation.
Hello, we survived the night, we lived to see the morning.
Feed with warmth, wash with fragrance, wipe dry,
listen to the same funny story for the five hundredth time and smile wearily
to understand that you can no longer handle this but handle it somehow.
Take into account the given conditions,
not the ideal ones, as in a school problem.

Care and nursing are blood, piss, shit, and a bowl of vomit.
Even under bombs, especially under bombs,
the crucial question remains the same:
'How much of someone's pain and decline are we able to alleviate?'
This is part of the cause-and-effect human connection.
Like a heat-seeking missile launched from MANPADS,
a letter belongs more to the addressee than to the author.

Writers for Peace Committee, Newsletter No.13, October 2025

Published by: Slovene PEN, Tomšičeva 12, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Edited and designed by Sara Katarina Engelsberger

The publication is free of charge.

It is accessible online only on the link:

<https://www.penwritersforpeacecommittee.com/newsletter>

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