

Culture as the Hardest Power

I - The Sunflower

What is war?

My three-year-old daughter asked me this question. Not because anyone told her anything about war, but because she sensed it through me, through the silence in my phone calls home to Ukraine.

I looked at her while she was painting a flower. A sunflower. And I thought: how do you explain war to a child, when even adults in important suits invent lies to avoid facing it?

The sunflower helped. I told her: war is when the sunflower fields of Ukraine — those endless fields in my native Kherson region, seas of yellow under blue skies — are broken, burned, and ruined by those who come to destroy. By those who cannot stand to see you surrounded by flowers.

She was silent. And so was I, wondering if my answer was fair for a three-year-old. Then she asked: “Can we plant them again?”

Yes, we can plant the flowers again if we defend the fields, I said.

She saw my tears, and then she said: “But if we cannot protect the fields, we can always just draw a flower.”

That is the message I bring to you today, a message shaped not by a politician or a scholar, but by a child. As it is also the essence of culture.

Culture is drawing a flower when the field is gone.

Culture is rebuilding the house of memory when the walls of stone have fallen.

Culture is preserving the story when the witness has disappeared.

Culture is turning silence into testimony.

Culture is not ornament but infrastructure; it's the invisible architecture of meaning that holds a society together. And when fields are burned, that architecture is what survives.

Just like sunflowers: they always turn their face toward the sun. Even in ashes, they search for light. Culture, too, turns toward light — stubbornly, irrationally, indestructibly.

II. Culture as Hard Power

We speak of peace in times when an archaic war, the largest in Europe since WWII, is back on our continent. But war is not only fought with weapons. Land is silenced not only by tanks. Authoritarianism does not only destroy with armies. The first targets are always the stories, the voices, the memory, the truth.

For it is not tanks that erase languages.

It is not bombs that ban books.

It is not missiles that silence theatres.

It is silence, fear, censorship, indifference.

And that is why I don't feel comfortable claiming culture is a "soft power." Culture is survival power. Culture is resistance power. Culture is the hardest power we have.

I learned this myself. There was nothing soft about being dragged into a forest by the Belarusian KGB for a political art performance. I learned then that art is never harmless play. It is a threat to all dictators.

What is "soft" about smuggling a banned manuscript through a checkpoint?

What is "soft" about women in Afghanistan singing in secret, risking prison for a lullaby?

What is "soft" about Iranian women turning a strand of hair into a revolution?

What was "soft" about Polish actors performing theatre in basements during Nazi occupation?

What is "soft" about Ukrainian librarians hiding Ukrainian language books on occupied territories so Russian soldiers cannot burn them?

Culture is the hardest power I know. The only one that outlives empires and dictatorships, that resurfaces after battlefields are abandoned.

History proves it. When the Soviet empire disintegrated, its censorship vanished but its banned poems and forbidden songs remained — alive, ready to be sung again.

Even here in Vienna, the Nazis staged book burnings and "degenerate art" exhibitions. They sought to erase culture, but it is those very works — the ones condemned as dangerous — that now define Austrian and European culture far more than the regime that tried to silence them.

As Milan Kundera once wrote: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

When my daughter said, "We can always draw a flower," she was reminding us that as long as imagination survives, surrender is impossible.

Allow me to show you what that means. Please take the drawing of my daughter, that sunflower, in your hands and lift it up for me. And now look at this room. Here it is, the sunflower field of Ukraine. The field that was burned. This field won't be destroyed by any authoritarian as long as it exists in our imagination. Thank you.

III. Neutrality and Complicity

When we speak of war, we too often imagine it as something distant: a battlefield, a geography that does not belong to us. But war is not only territory. It is also the struggle for meaning, for memory, for the right to name reality.

Authoritarian regimes know this. They rarely begin by killing people. They begin by killing truth.

Russia rewrites the history of Ukraine before it fires the first missile.

The Taliban closed schools for girls before erasing women from the streets.

In Iran, a woman's hair becomes a battlefield long before bullets are fired at the protesters.

Even in the United States, denial of elections and distortion of facts pushed democracy to the edge of violence.

Conflicts always begins with the erasure of memory and the manipulation of language.

This is why culture is never neutral. And neutrality, in times of violence, never gives safety. It is exposure to silence, and silence quickly becomes complicity.

In Austria, neutrality is a cherished word, even a national identity, some would say. And yes, it has given this country a special role — as mediator, as bridge, as host to dialogue. But neutrality in culture cannot mean withdrawal.

Is a library neutral when books are burned?
Is a museum neutral when history is falsified?
Is a theatre neutral when its stage is silenced?
Is silence itself neutral when it allows the aggressor's speech?

Neutrality is never absence of position. It is always a position in itself. And in culture, that position can too easily turn into self-censorship and indifference.

Austria has been called a bridge between East and West. But bridges are useless if no one dares to cross them. Cultural diplomacy must be the opposite of not taking sides: it must be the loudest articulation of our shared values.

IV. Women as Culture's Battleground

Culture is never only books or buildings. When regimes attack culture, they do not stop at archives or theatres. They also attack bodies. And most often, they attack women's bodies.

Why? Because women carry culture in ways no authoritarian regime can fully control. They pass on memory in lullabies. They guard language in the home when it is banned in schools. They preserve rituals, gestures, stories — the invisible threads of identity.

As the Iranian activist Masih Alinejad reminds us in our documentary *Girls & Gods*:
“What is the one thing you notice in countries ruled by religious dictatorship? One common thing they all share? Women — covered, silenced, hidden.”

That is why authoritarians fear them.

In Ukraine, women told me that they carry their history across borders, sometimes in a suitcase, sometimes in a whispered song.

One of them told me, in my book *Une lettre de l'Est*:
“The bombs were falling, but what I feared most was to die silent. When the explosions came closer, all that mattered to me was not to be buried in silence — but to have my voice scream louder than a missile, and heard at least by someone.”

This is not a side story to war. This is the war. Authoritarians strike at women for the same reason they burn books or close theatres: because women, like culture itself, are vessels of memory and carriers of truth.

Every authoritarian regime fears women for the same reason it fears culture: because both carry life forward in ways no dictatorship can fully control.

V. Collective Act — Erasure & Seeds

So of course in this room, the question is not whether culture matters. We all know it does.

But I do have another question for you. Do we have the courage to treat culture as seriously as authoritarian regimes do?

They see it as dangerous.
They censor because they know words can break them.
They burn because they know memory outlives them.

So my question is: are we ready to embrace culture as dangerous? Dangerous to authoritarianism. Dangerous to warmongering. Dangerous to silence itself.

When my daughter told me: “We can always draw a sunflower,” she was not only comforting me. She was reminding me that culture is fragile, naïve, and yet indestructible.

When reality is shattered, culture still insists on meaning.
When fields are burned, it dares to plant memory in the imagination.
When history is denied, it keeps the trace alive.

And imagination is not innocence. It is resistance. Every drawing of a flower is a refusal: a refusal of silence, a refusal of despair, a refusal of erasure.

So now I ask you: write a word. Not any word, but a seed word. Choose a word you are willing to carry with you into your work, into your institution, into tomorrow.

A word that, when watered with courage and carried forward by culture, can grow into something larger than ourselves.

And these words will not remain here on paper. They will shape tomorrow’s discussion, they will write our manifesto, and they will be carried back by you as a living archive of what Europe chooses to imagine in its darkest hour.

VI. The fields will bloom again

Authoritarian regimes believe they are eternal. They believe tanks will always roll, propaganda will always echo, censorship will always win.

But I believe in something older, more stubborn, more enduring. I believe in culture as survival. I believe in culture as rebellion. I believe in culture as a rehearsal for freedom.

Empires fall. Dictators die. Wars end. But the poem remains. The song remains. The painting remains. The testimony remains.

Politics is concerned with the next election. Culture is concerned with the next century, with the next generations. That is why authoritarians fear culture, because it writes beyond their lifespan.

Authoritarians know the truth: the real battlefield is not territory, but time. Culture always writes longer than their rule.

Politics decides the present. Culture decides what will be remembered. And what will be remembered decides the future.

The sunflower fields of Ukraine will return.

And until they do, we will carry them here — in drawings, in words, in commitments.

And when they bloom again, they will not only belong to the children of Ukraine. They will belong to all of us who dared to imagine them back into existence.

They will bloom only if we are many enough to imagine them back into existence. Together.

And this is the hardest power of all:
that what we dare to imagine together — we can make real.