TED Talk

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Faith, Resistance, and the Courage to Be Peaceful

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In Belarus, in our national hymn Mahutny Boža, we pray to God Almighty: “Over Belarus, so quiet and bright, scatter the rays of Your glory.”

Written during the war, it is not about victory, but about patient work, silence, and peace — the ideal of life for Belarusians.

A people so gentle, so humble, that they are sometimes seen as overly tolerant — even submissive.

In 2020, this song about peace and quiet turned out to be so powerful that it was forbidden to be sung.

Instead, the official anthem begins: “We, Belarusians, are peaceful people.”

Convenient for the authorities, it turned peace into obedience and calm into fear of speaking out — yet it still resonated with Belarusians, whose longing for peace came from the deep trauma of war.

Those “peaceful people” have been living under fear and repression for years. After the protests of 2020, thousands were beaten, tortured, and imprisoned. Priests were detained for praying and preaching, women with white flowers were thrown into police vans, students and journalists lost their jobs or fled the country. The state turned its violence inward — against its own citizens — long before it helped to export that violence beyond its borders.

And later, it was those same “peaceful people” whose land was used to help Russia invade Ukraine. From our soil, missiles were launched and tanks rolled south toward Kyiv. Now Belarus is fenced off — a minefield to the south, a five-meter fence topped with barbed wire to the west, and a sky closed to civil planes, yet open to military ones. This is what “peace” looks like today in Belarus.

My name is Natallia Vasilevich. I come from Belarus — a country where faith and courage have been tested in the hardest ways. I coordinate a movement called Christian Vision and the project Christians Against War.

Together with my colleagues, we supported the peaceful protests in Belarus and always stood for nonviolent resistance. In 2020, we went out to the streets of Minsk with icons, Bibles, and rosaries in our hands. We prayed and sang together, called to stop the violence and remembered its victims. We believed that moral strength, solidarity, and white flowers in our hands could stop the machinery of repression.

But we were wrong. The wave of violence grew like a snowball. No one was spared — not priests, not mothers of many children, not the elderly, not people with disabilities, not the sick, not professors, not even Nobel Prize laureates.

People were sentenced to years in prison simply for organising tea gatherings in their neighbourhoods or posting on Facebook.

On April 1, 2025, the Belarusian KGB declared Christian Vision an extremist formation — and me, a person "affiliated with an extremist group." In today's Belarus, those who speak against violence are labelled extremists.

Were we wrong? Our nonviolent protest did not reach its goals. Thousands remain in prison — many cut off from the world, some never return alive. Those released are often forced into exile. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians now live abroad, unable to go home.

Then came 2022. The Belarusian authorities supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

They allowed Russian troops to enter from our land — from the north of Kyiv — the same army that carried out the massacre in Bucha.

They offered their airfields and airspace for missiles that struck peaceful Ukrainian cities — bringing fear, destruction, and death.

In 2022, Belarus saw new heroes.

No longer peaceful women with white flowers — but men in camouflage, with rifles. Volunteers who joined the Ukrainian army to defend freedom.

The same people who, in 2020, took off their shoes before stepping on a bench — not to make it dirty. That photo became a symbol of peaceful protest. And two years later, those same people put on military boots. Literally — the same ones from that famous picture.

To believe in peaceful change while war rages nearby now seems naïve — even foolish and defeatist.

And yet, I keep asking myself: Is there still a chance for nonviolent initiatives to make a difference? Can they bring peace and justice in times of war and repression?

This is what we will reflect on together in my workshop — how faith, conscience, and solidarity can remain powerful even when peace seems impossible. Because peace is not weakness. It is the hardest form of courage.