

# **Freedom could be stolen from us**

## Nobel laureate Herta Müller

Nobel Opinion with Herta Müller, writer and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature

### Abstract

The fall of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania in 1989 marked the end of a dictatorship characterized by fear, propaganda, and suppression, but the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe has been fraught with challenges. While hopes for freedom, justice, and democracy initially ran high, corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and disillusionment have taken hold in countries like Romania, Hungary, and Poland, while external threats like Putin's regime undermine democracy across Europe. Fear, a defining tool of past dictatorships, persists in new forms – both through external aggression and internal erosion of democratic values. In her keynote, Herta Müller reflects on the importance of protecting freedom and the dangers of forgetting the oppressive realities of dictatorship, emphasizing that democracy requires vigilance and active engagement to prevent its destruction.

When Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu were executed in a military barracks in the small Romanian town of Târgoviște on December 25, 1989, I sat in Berlin watching the television and wept. My first thought was, “I outlived them.” Even in Berlin, I still received death threats from the Romanian secret police. But I wept also because, for the first time, I saw human vulnerability in the Ceaușescus before their execution. They appeared as two peasants with piercing eyes, sharp with fear. I felt a pity that defied my reason.

The last rally Ceaușescu orchestrated to glorify himself turned into a frenzied chorus of whistles and jeers. Confused and disbelieving, he waved a few more times from the balcony before fleeing by helicopter. A few days later, he reappeared before a makeshift tribunal, where a death sentence was abruptly handed down. It was December, and only in November, the dictator had been re-elected unanimously with prolonged standing ovations at the Communist Party Congress. Times change so swiftly, I thought.

At that time, I was living in exile in Berlin. Through tears of both joy and pity, I thought, “The death threats will finally stop.” But they continued – for another year, delivered by telephone. In that impoverished country from which countless people had fled, I believed a new era was beginning. Everything must and would change.

There would no longer be desperate escapes or failed attempts to flee. No one would be shot at the borders or shredded by ship propellers in the Danube.

In Romania, before the dictator’s fall, there was only one television channel broadcasting two hours a day. Those two hours were filled solely with propaganda

and Ceaușescu’s stammering speeches. Censorship would disappear, I thought, and a free press would emerge. A legal system without political persecution, interrogations, and house searches would arise. No more political prisoners. No more mysterious “suicides” of political opponents falling from windows. Murderers would face trial.

The state-sanctioned misery would end. Ration cards for bread and milk would vanish. Hospitals would no longer use scraps from hosiery factories as bandages.

Yes, I thought, Soviet occupation would cease across Eastern Europe. Communist dictatorships would transform into democracies, like those in Western Europe. And this hope wasn’t mine alone. We all shared it, intoxicated by the prospect of freedom. But no one in the East knew how to build a democracy.

And today. Today, Putin fights against this awakening of 1989. He wages a conquest war against Ukraine with sadistic special forces. And he targets all democracies that emerged in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. And he targets Western democracies too. His internet trolls attempt to destabilize all of Europe. He has an internet army as unscrupulous and vulgar as he is. They flood the internet with fake news, erasing the boundary between truth and lies. And in every European country, Putin supports far-right parties. Even his antisemitism has reached Stalinist proportions – back when Israel was considered the imperialist enemy. The war against Ukraine has been antisemitic from its inception, as he claimed he needed to “denazify” Jews there. He did not even condemn Hamas’s bloodbath in Israel, to avoid jeopardizing arms shipments from Iran. Because his warfare is Stalinist in nature, his soldiers are ruthlessly sent to their deaths. Russian women are expected to provide reinforcements.

Since 2022, Stalin's "Mother Heroine" medal has been reinstated for women with ten or more children, along with a bonus of one million rubles.

He had already annexed his neighbor Belarus long ago. His puppet Lukashenko remains in power. All critics have fled or are in prison, i.e. in forced labor camps. There, as with Navalny in Russia, they are broken through isolation torture. From Maria Kolesnikova to author and lawyer Maxim Znak and many others, we have heard nothing for over ten months. Not even whether they are still alive: no phone call, no letter, no visit. Everything has been abolished.

In Ukraine, the late awakening to democracy is being fought with a brutal war. In Belarus, the awakening to democracy was violently crushed under Russian guidance. That is one thing. And the other is: In Poland and Hungary, the awakening was successful until it was stifled. This time not from the outside, but from within. Judicial independence is gone, and a free press is endangered. They stand once again with one foot in the past.

In Ukraine, the late awakening to democracy is being fought with a brutal war. In Belarus, the awakening to democracy was violently crushed under Russian guidance.

In Romania, the awakening has grown weary. It staggers back and forth, as if time had lost its direction. The Securitate's murders were never resolved judicially. A large part of the Securitate files remain under lock and key. Former agents and informants secured high positions in business. The former communists remained in government, and their successors are in power once again. The fear of Russia is as present as it was 30 years ago, and not without reason.

And in East Germany, the former GDR, the awakening to democracy is now seen as a loss. Yet the GDR, compared to all other Eastern European countries, was the most fortunate. Through reunification with the Western European part of Germany, the awakening was politically and materially supported. Unfortunately, this is called imported democracy today. And the confinement behind the Wall, the obedience and silence, the arbitrariness of the party and its Stasi – all this is now romanticized as a carefree life. People lament the breaks in East German biographies – and that means freedom is mourned as an intrusion into a state-programmed life plan. This sentiment spreads in East Germany with increasing audacity. The disgruntled officials of the Socialist Unity Party cultivated this collective feeling immediately after 1989. For years, the Left Party's election program was a petty-minded homeland program. The far-right extremists immediately realized they could expand this sentiment into an ethnonationalist agenda.

It fits that 62 % of the population in Saxony wish for a "strong party" that "represents the people as a whole." According to a recent survey, 23 % of the population in East Germany are strongly or very strongly right-wing populist. They believe that party democracy does not work. That the press lies to the people. That politicians are only puppets of

foreign powers. That the “unified will of the people” is thus suppressed. The “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) claims that we must think “ethnically” again, nationally and socially. At many major rallies in Eastern Germany, Angela Merkel was insulted as a “traitor to the people,” while Putin was hailed as the savior.

Ethnonationalism promises a good, simple world with a collective identity. Björn Höcke of the AfD says that if his party comes to power, not all “parts of the people” could be taken along. Nevertheless, “enough members of our people will still remain.” He dreams of a “large-scale remigration project,” that cannot exclude “well-tempered cruelty”. These phrases are more than just the undermining of democracy. In Eastern Germany, the AfD seduces a population that romanticizes the socialist dictatorship with promises of an ethnonationalist dictatorship. And it works. Strangely, East Germans are not even bothered by the AfD’s constant pilgrimages to Moscow and praise for Putin, despite having experienced over 50 years of Russian occupation. When they demand peace for Ukraine, they mean unconditional submission.

In the West, people have become so accustomed to the presence of democracy that they cannot imagine dictatorships.

It seems to me that the disdain for humanity under dictatorships has already been forgotten in the East. And in the

West, people have become so accustomed to the presence of democracy that they cannot imagine dictatorships. And they do not want to acknowledge that democracy can also be destroyed from within. In the West, it seems to me that many are tired of individual freedom, because it is tied to responsibility. Because democracy – unlike dictatorship – does not have a tow rope to pull you along. It demands independent thought. The politics of democracy are slow and complicated because they adhere to ethical values.

Democracy must not tire us. I have felt dictatorship. I can only remind the East of how it was. And I can tell the West what it is like when a human life has no value.

On a winter day, I walked three kilometers with my mother through the snow to a neighboring village to buy a fox fur for a coat collar. The fur collar was to be my mother’s Christmas gift. The pelt was a whole fox, gleaming copper-red like silk. It had a head with ears, a dried snout, and at the feet, the black dried pads of the paws with porcelain-white claws and a tail so bushy it seemed the wind was still inside. The fox was no longer alive in the forest but preserved in its beauty.

The hunter’s hair was as red as the fox’s fur. That made me uneasy. Perhaps that’s why I asked him if he had shot it himself. He said, “You don’t shoot foxes; they go into traps.”

It was all meant to be a coat collar. I was still in school and didn’t want to wear a whole fox with head and paws around my neck like old ladies did, but only a piece of fur as a collar. But the fox was too beautiful to cut. So it stayed with me for years, lying on the floor like a pet wherever I lived.

One day, I accidentally bumped the fur, and the tail slid away. It had been cut off. Weeks later, the right hind leg was

cut off, then the left. A few months later, the front legs disappeared one by one. The secret police came and went as they pleased. They left signs when they wanted to. The apartment door showed no signs of tampering. They wanted me to know that the same could happen to me as had happened to the fox.

At that time, I worked in a factory translating operating instructions for machines imported from Germany. Now, a Securitate captain appeared every few days in the office. He wanted to recruit me as an informant. First with flattery. And when I refused, he threw a vase against the wall and threatened me. His parting words were: "You'll regret this. We'll throw you into the water."

First, however, I was thrown out of the factory. Now I was a state enemy and unemployed. During subsequent interrogations, the secret police called me a "parasitic element." It sounded like vermin. The same secret police that had caused my dismissal now accused me of unemployment, reminding me that it could result in prison. So much for secure jobs. It was like the military. Everyone had to report to the state every morning. When you arrived at the factory yard at six-thirty in the morning, martial music played, reaching up into the sky. You marched in step, whether you wanted to or not. Everyone arrived at their designated place. The workers at the conveyor belts and we office staff at the desks. Then you took a shower and washed your hair. That wasn't possible at home because there was rarely electricity in the apartments, no hot water, and no heating even in winter. After the shower, coffee was brewed, nails were painted. In between, we worked a little, and then it was already lunchtime with patriotic workers' choirs blaring from the loudspeakers. Our presence was far more important than our productivity. For this obedience, there was a salary

every month from the first day of work until retirement. It did not matter whether anything was produced or not. Our motto in the factory was: Don't do today what you failed to do yesterday because it might not be necessary tomorrow. We thought the state is stealing our lives anyway – so we'll at least steal its time.

When I told my mother about the fox, all its paws had already been cut off.

My mother asked, "What do they want from you?"

I said, "Fear."

And that was true. This short word explained itself. The entire state was a house of fear. There were the rulers of fear and the people of fear. Every dictatorship consists of those who instill fear and those who are afraid. Fear-makers and fear-biters. I always thought fear is the daily tool of the fear-makers and the daily bread of the fear-biters. That's how it was back then in all of Eastern Europe before 1989.

When my mother saw the mutilated fox, she too was afraid. Afraid for me and afraid for herself.

She said, "One day you'll be dead in a ditch. I didn't raise you for that."

Then she swallowed, rolled her eyes, and added, "Others applaud and make money. And you're putting our family in danger."

She had a double fear. Fear for me and fear of me. I encountered this double fear throughout the country.

I never again found permanent employment and didn't know how I was going to live. I had no money at all. Occasionally, I got a temporary teaching job at some school. Coming from the street, I could hear the loud hum of voices in the teachers' room. As soon as I

entered, it fell silent like in a church. They glanced at me briefly and then whispered. The more “colleagues” surrounded me, the more alone I was. When the school day ended, I went to the bus stop like everyone else. No one wanted to be seen with me on the street. Some teachers lingered far behind me, while others hurried far ahead. This happened without any agreement – it was the choreography of fear.

Just as bad as the threats from the state and its secret police was the loneliness. I was shunned by other teachers. Their double fear isolated me. They were afraid of the state, and they were afraid of me. I was a threat.

I was only a temp at the school and was surprised: At the end of the school year, several students from different classes wanted to give me coffee beans as a gift. There was no coffee in the country. A kilo cost more than a month’s salary on the black market. I refused the coffee. Word spread, and other teachers confronted me, asking why I thought I was better than them. They counted on that coffee, and I ruined their deal – improving bad grades through coffee gifts.

To manage fear, daily life relied on corruption. It was the economy of oppression. In the state’s planned scarcity, necessities could only be obtained through corruption. For the surveillance state, corruption was practical; it filled people’s minds, distracting them from the shortages. Every state official benefited, and fear set the price, not the market as in a free society. Everyone was involved. The fear-makers moved the big things. The fear-biters were left with the small things. They could pay for stolen meat from the slaughterhouse with candles stolen from work. Or buy good grades in school with coffee beans from the black market. Even university exams could be bought with tape recorders. The motto for this trade was: only steal at night;

during the day, just take. Even feelings became commodities. Casual sexuality was commonplace for securing a good position, sometimes for a job, sometimes to avoid dismissal. There was a bustling trade in material and emotional goods. It was a substitute for missing freedom; it was even the only permitted freedom. The state looked on as morality disappeared among people. Everyone was somehow criminalized. And if someone politically no longer suited the regime, the secret police could declare the everyday corruption a crime at any time. This was then called theft, not political persecution.

After decades of dictatorship, everything had become distorted. There was no ethical foundation anymore. Society had lost its compass completely. Everything was materially and morally ruined. The people too. For decades, they did nothing, and then they rebelled against the regime. But equally against themselves. The perpetual bad mood in socialism also stemmed from the disgust with their own opportunism.

To manage fear,  
daily life relied on  
corruption. It was  
the economy of  
oppression.

In these and many other similar moments, I had to understand that there were not only fear-makers and fear-biters. The so-called colleagues at school and earlier in the factory – yes, the majority of people in this country were fear-carriers. Just as they had learned to manage their own fear, they had also learned to profit from the fear of others. They were selfish, ruthless, and made the best of misery, sometimes ignorantly, sometimes

shamelessly. They believed they were just making life easier for themselves and not being political. But was double fear really apolitical? I don't think so. It prevented political thinking, which could have led to self-doubt. The management of fear was, in and of itself, anticipatory obedience.

You were only considered an individual if you were persecuted, because being an individual was an insult. You could even be fired for "non-conformity with the collective". Individuality was not allowed to exist, not even in people's clothing. Every shop displayed the same ugly drabness. Two or three designs each season, in dusty gray colors, boxy and stiff. And hideous, squeaky fabrics that smelled of chemical derivatives. You saw the same outfit hundreds of times on the street because there was nothing else in the stores.

I met myself dozens of times afterward in my newly bought dress on the street. And it seemed to me that our identical clothes were slightly embarrassed in front of one another and that they knew better than we did how shabby they looked. Socialist fashion was like a uniform. Equally shabby were the furniture, the houses, the parks, the streets. Dictatorship in every area of life was the banishment of all beauty. Beauty is idiosyncratic and distinct and diverse.

The state eradicated all diversity. But most people wanted to be inconspicuous. Their managed fear required paternalism. I even had the impression that they were grateful for it. Their mere existence in the world was almost perceived as a gift from the state.

When the Securitate officer became angry during an interrogation, he shouted: "Who do you think you are?"

I said: "I am a human being like you."

To which he replied: "That's what you think. We decide who you are."

Freedom, the great Polish director Andrzej Wajda once said, is something that some need and others do not. The fear-carriers of the past didn't need it then, and today they are the supporters of the new fear-makers.

The greatest fear-maker of today, the war criminal sought by the International Criminal Court, was once a small fear-maker. Putin has long since abandoned Marxism but rehabilitated Stalin. He now cloaks himself in religion. He kills people worldwide and loves to light candles in Moscow. He has a confessor and is rarely seen without Patriarch Kirill. His church leader considers human rights "blasphemous idolatry." True Christianity, for him, means "voluntary self-enslavement." And he admires Lenin for wanting to make the Russians "cogs and screws" of a state machine. He says: "A servant of God does not vote but humbly accepts his fate."

I never want to live as a servant again. Not even without elections. After 1989, I couldn't have imagined even in my wildest dreams that freedom could be called into question again. And that fear-makers would re-emerge, trying to turn me into a fear-biter. Yes, freedom is something that some need and others do not. And it is something that some fear and others do not. We must not take freedom for granted. Otherwise, it might be stolen from us.

## Source

*Speech by Herta Müller, originally delivered in German on November 13, 2023, at the Kongresshaus Zürich during the UBS Center Forum for Economic Dialogue on the theme “Democracies under threat”.  
Translated and edited for layout purposes by the UBS Center.*

*You can find a recording of Müller’s speech and other material on the topic on the Center’s website: [www.ubscenter.uzh.ch](http://www.ubscenter.uzh.ch)*

*Photo: © The Nobel Foundation; U. Montan*

## About the speaker

Herta Müller was born in Romania in 1953. She studied Romanian and German literature in Timișoara and later worked as a translator in a machinery factory. Because she refused to spy on her colleagues for the Romanian secret police (Securitate), she lost her job and became a target herself. Herta Müller moved to Germany in 1987, but she could not shake the oppressive shadow of Romania’s communist regime and the terror of the Securitate for a long time. The constant threat of persecution by the regime echoes in her numerous award-winning works. In 2009, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her work has been translated into more than 50 languages.



*Nobel laureate Herta Müller*  
Writer