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Memory, war and democracy in today's Russia

Within the framework of the Trento Festival of Economics, the dialogue "Historical Memory and Rights" featured Silvia Marzialetti (Radiocor - Il Sole 24 Ore) and Jan Rainskij (President of Memorial, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2022) in a discussion on the importance of preserving historical memory in times of war, censorship and growing authoritarianism.

As part of the Trento Festival of Economics, the dialogue "Historical Memory and Rights" featured **Jan Rainskij, president of Memorial - the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organization banned in Russia by the Putin government.** The conversation explored the links between Soviet repression and contemporary Russia, reflecting on civil society, freedom of expression, the war in Ukraine and the role of culture and historical awareness in defending democratic values.

Jan Rainskij reflected on the growing repression in Russia after Memorial was declared an "extremist" organization and banned from operating in the country. He described the move as an attempt to scare society and the media and silence independent historical memory. **The discussion then focused on the importance of memory** in preventing the repetition of past mistakes. Yet Rainskij argued that historical lessons require time and constant public attention, especially in societies overwhelmed by contemporary crises and political instability. "Just like you need time to learn how to drive, so you need time also to learn from the past", he said. **Reflecting on contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union**, Rainskij stated that "there are more similarities than differences", particularly regarding the suppression of dissent and the absence of freedom of speech. He noted that in today's Russia expressing opinions against the government can still lead to punishment, despite post-Soviet rehabilitation laws introduced after 1991 to restore justice to victims of repression. Civil society continues to exist but is unable to express itself freely "neither on the streets nor in the papers". **On Russia's future,** he admitted that "it is difficult to be optimistic". In his view, Russia's difficulties stem from a long historical continuity of Soviet rule that prevented the development of an autonomous civic culture. Unlike Eastern European or Baltic countries, Russia lacked a direct memory of pre-Soviet society, creating a profound historical break with the past. At the same time, he rejected stereotypes about Russian passivity, recalling that resistance and opposition persisted throughout Soviet history despite violence, repression and the trauma of the Great Terror. "I think Russia will eventually be democratic", he concluded, stressing that many active and critical voices still exist.

Reflecting on Europe's past approach to Vladimir Putin, Rainskij argued that the roots of today's authoritarianism go back decades and cannot be explained by one individual alone. Post-Soviet Russia progressively abandoned democratic principles through constitutional violence, the Chechen wars and the normalisation of emergency measures and repression. The real mistake, he suggested, was "not understanding until the end the Russian vision", and underestimating the long-term consequences of those developments. **Discussing the future of Ukraine,** he acknowledged the devastation of the present conflict but expressed cautious optimism about long-term prospects. He argued that, compared to many other post-Soviet states, Ukraine has demonstrated democratic resilience and a strong sense of national self-determination. Despite the war and the uncertainty surrounding European integration, he maintained that "Ukraine eventually will be a EU country", even if that objective still appears far today. **Finally, addressing the debate surrounding the participation of Russian artists at the Venice Biennale,** Rainskij warned against collectively blaming individuals for the actions of the state. "Art is not a possession of the

state”, he argued, defending the autonomy of culture even under authoritarian systems. Citing writers and intellectuals such as Sakharov and Grossman, he emphasised how artists can preserve spaces of freedom and critical thought even when political opposition is impossible.

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