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A resident is seen at a site of an apartment building in Odesa, Ukraine, March 4, 2025, hit by a Russian drone strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters/Nina Liashonok)



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The recent Oval Office exchange left many of us Ukrainians watching in disbelief. But beyond the shocking diplomatic display lies a deeper truth: Ukraine's fight isn't just about territory — it's about breaking free from the fossil fuel system that enables dictators like Putin to wage war.

For three years, my country has bled, resisting Russian aggression with unwavering resolve. When we're told to "accept any peace," it ignores a fundamental reality: as long as Russia's fossil fuel empire remains intact, there can be no lasting peace. Putin's war machine runs on oil and gas revenues. In 2024, Russia's oil revenues grew by 26% and Russia received \$116 billion in oil and gas revenues, which made up about 30% of their federal budget. With approximately 40% of budget expenditures directed toward military spending, this effectively means their energy revenues covered nearly all military costs of the war.

This isn't just Ukraine's problem. The fossil fuel system that funds Putin's aggression also accelerates the climate crisis and oil production on the other side of the Atlantic. Every liquefied natural gas tanker arriving at European ports, every new fossil fuel infrastructure project, every delay in transitioning to renewable energy — these aren't just business decisions. They are moral choices that determine whether dictators retain their grip on power.

I've spent years working at the intersection of climate activism and energy advocacy. What I've learned is that these struggles are inseparable. When Western companies continue trading Russian oil and gas, when politicians water down renewable energy targets, when financial institutions keep investing in fossil fuel expansion — they're not just undermining climate action. They're actively funding authoritarian power.

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Make no mistake: this power will turn against your own freedoms. The same forces suppressing democracy abroad will threaten your right to peaceful protest, freedom of speech, and right to self-defense at home. When that day comes — and it will come — if your moral compass is lost, if democratic values have been traded for fossil fuel profits, you'll find yourself defenseless against the very autocratic machine you helped build.

The church understands this connection. Yet instead of treating fossil fuels as the weapon of mass destruction they've become, we see attempts to normalize their continued use. The same MAGA diplomacy that lectures Ukraine about peace simultaneously works to dismantle climate action and maintain a brutal addiction to fossil fuel. This isn't just politics - it's a choice between freedom and dictatorship, between an energy independent future and one held hostage by autocrats.

This is where faith communities can play a crucial role. But individual action isn't enough. We need systemic change.

The European Union's RePowerEU plan aims to break dependency on Russian energy, but it's falling short of its investment goals. The United States, despite its climate commitments, continues to expand fossil fuel infrastructure. When the world's most powerful democracy starts mirroring the behavior of petrostates — attacking environmental protections, undermining international cooperation, and sacrificing allies for fossil fuel partnerships — we must call it what it is: a democracy's descent into petrostate authoritarianism.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates how fossil fuel dependency threatens not just our climate but our fundamental human rights. This isn't just about Ukraine, though my country's suffering makes the stakes brutally clear. This is about whether we'll allow fossil fuel interests to determine our collective fate. It's about whether we'll finally recognize that energy independence from dictators and climate action are the same fight.

We need an all-out mobilization to build renewable energy infrastructure, strengthen international cooperation on human rights and climate action, and treat fossil fuel expansion as the security threat it truly is.

The path forward requires moral clarity and decisive action. We must demand that our political leaders, financial institutions and religious organizations align their actions with the urgency of this moment. The alternative — continuing to fund dictators while watching Ukrainians be forced to negotiate with a country that tortured and murdered tens of thousands, kidnapped 20,000 Ukrainian children and committed more than 120,000 registered war crimes, using their oil and gas reserves — is simply unacceptable.

We stand together. We fight for climate justice. And we will not be silenced until both our people and our planet are free.

*Dr. Svitlana Romanko is the founder and director of Razom We Stand.*