

Word of welcome by Hester Bijl

Ukraine meeting, 3 March 2022

I want to welcome you all to this meeting today.

A week ago, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, war started in Ukraine, It was just a week ago, but it feels like a very long time. And it feels very ominous. It brings with it tremendous devastation, losses, suffering, worries, anxiety, and questions. Most of this is happening in Ukraine itself, of course, in the region and the countries that are involved. But this situation touches the whole world, including our community here at Leiden University. This is why we are coming together here today: I warmly welcome each and every one of you present here in the hall at our Campus The Hague, as well as all those who are following the meeting online.

It is so good to come together. To have this conflict explained in scientific terms, to look for answers, and as a community to think about what we can do. But especially to listen to one another, to talk with and support one another.

I would particularly like to welcome our students, staff and guests who have a personal connection with Ukraine and the region, and those who are affected directly or indirectly by the tragic events. We want you to know that we stand in solidarity with you and that we will give you all the support we can. Although we realise that we cannot take away all your concerns and suffering, we are here for you and want to do whatever we can to help. You will have the opportunity later this afternoon to ask for any help you may need. I will say more about this shortly.

I would also like to welcome the researchers who will be taking their place on this platform this afternoon: we are very grateful that you were prepared at such short notice to be present here today and to use your expertise to shed some light on this terrible conflict. Particularly when facing such a complex problem, it is an enormous benefit to have scientists from different fields and faculties who are able to discuss and examine the issues that this conflict is giving rise to. This fits with our role of providing insights, of interpreting information and engaging with society. Crucial to us are international collaboration, our commitment to open science and education and our core value of academic freedom: we are very

concerned that these principles will also come under threat in this conflict.

We have many questions and concerns: about the people in Ukraine, about the conflict itself and about its background and possible solutions, as well as about the consequences for international relations. We are looking for answers to such questions as: How can Putin be stopped? What role is Europe playing? These and many more issues will be addressed by the speakers this afternoon, led by Jan Melissen.

For me, this meeting is also an expression of our university's core values. These values – freedom, responsibility, connection and innovation – are not things we take lightly. We want to propagate them actively and in practical terms. This also explains why we have come together today. And it is no coincidence that we are at our Campus The Hague, in the city of peace, justice and security – the city where we as a university work together with and contribute to politics, administration, policy and international law and organisations. We are *connected* both with the city and with one another.

We want to – and indeed we can – talk to one another here in complete *freedom* and share our opinions, perspectives and concerns with one another openly. In doing so, we accept the *responsibility* to listen to and respect one another; to show understanding not only for people from Ukraine who suffer under the attack but also those from Russia, many of whom are opposed to the war and are themselves suffering its consequences. It is also our responsibility to show respect and understanding for what may be very different individual views of this conflict.

As well as researchers, there is also staff here this afternoon to support students and staff with advice and practical assistance. We appreciate that, besides questions about the conflict itself, students and staff also have many questions about issues that affect them personally. Questions such as: Can I still access my bank account? What will happen with my residence permit if I can't or don't want to go back? Can I still travel to the region for my studies or research? Can I continue to cooperate with colleagues from the region, or is that no longer possible? Concerns about family, finances, the future. After the discussion part of today's meeting, please take the opportunity to discuss your questions and concerns with the staff of Student Support Services, the Service Centre for International Staff and the

Diversity and Inclusion Expertise Office, as well as with us and with one another.

This meeting is an excellent initiative, and I want to thank the organisers: Koen Caminada, Leo Harskamp, Victor Koppelmans and all those people who managed to arrange this afternoon in such a short time. But we are doing much more than this.

There is also the reception of refugee students by the Meeting Point, and collaboration with the UAF Scholars at Risk organisation. I know that many other initiatives are also being taken up by colleagues and students: such as the *ScienceforUkraine* website that offers support, meetings at faculties, and the collection of goods that students here at Wijnhaven are organising. It is heart-warming to see all these initiatives taking place.

Are there other things we could do? If you have any other wishes or ideas, we'd like to hear from you. Let your study adviser know, or your supervisor; mail your Faculty Board, or send me a mail.

I would like to close with a quote from the famous speech that Professor Cleveringa gave during the Second World War, about what binds us together in times of crisis and violence:

*I sense that the same thoughts and feelings are being communicated back and forth between us, without the need for words, yet completely and precisely understood by all of us.*

I hope that we can share our thoughts and feelings during this meeting this afternoon and in the coming period, and that we can continue to show solidarity with one another, and give one another all the support that is needed.

I would now like to hand over to Jan Melissen.