

The Ukrainian Helsinki Group as a Litmus Test for Soviet Totalitarianism

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The emergence of the Helsinki movement in the Soviet Union

On the eve of the Helsinki Accords, Ukrainian society—like society in other republics of the then USSR—was experiencing an ideological crisis. The hope that the existing totalitarian system could be transformed into “communism with a human face” had vanished. In Ukraine, the so-called “Khrushchev Thaw” ended with two waves of arrests in 1965 and 1972, the victims of which were representatives of the freedom-loving creative intelligentsia. Therefore, it was not yet clear what forms future protest activities would take.

And it was at this moment that the OSCE Conference in Helsinki took place in 1975, unexpectedly opening up a new niche for the struggle for freedom. When signing the Final Act of the Helsinki Accords, Leonid Brezhnev was calm: the Soviet Union was primarily interested in the first two “baskets” of the Final Act, namely the consolidation of post-war borders and economic cooperation. The Brezhnev regime had no intention of paying attention to the third “basket,” i.e., respect for human rights. It was convinced that the aforementioned arrests had reliably “cleansed” society of any protest elements.

Fortunately, however, Leonid Brezhnev miscalculated. His signature on the Helsinki document, which guaranteed respect for human rights, simply provoked a test of the extent to which the Soviet regime was complying with its commitments. Thus, within a year, five Helsinki Groups appeared in the former Soviet Union: Moscow Helsinki Group (May 1976), Ukrainian (November 1976), Lithuanian (November 1976), Georgian (January 1977) and Armenian Helsinki Group (April 1977).

The idea of creating the Ukrainian Helsinki Group first appeared during a conversation between Ukrainian writer and dissident Mykola Rudenko and General Petro Grigorenko in Moscow. After returning to Ukraine, Mykola Rudenko traveled to different cities and invited those who, in his opinion, were psychologically and ideologically ready to join the Group.

Finally, on November 9, 1976, Mykola Rudenko announced the creation of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group to Western diplomats and journalists at the apartment of Alik Ginzburg in Moscow. Ten persons are considered to be the founding members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group. I am honored to be among them.

It is not surprising that out of the first ten founding members of the Group, six had already served their previous prison terms during the Stalinist or Khrushchev periods, and two had been persecuted in the form of punitive psychiatry. Mykola Matusevych and I were the only two of the first ten members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group who were not heavily persecuted by the Soviet regime before joining the Group. We were also the youngest.

While joining the Group, we both felt the first murmurs of our new fate. On the one hand, we had no illusions. We both understood that we would inevitably end up getting arrested. On the other hand, we also understood that if we declined to join this group now, we would never be able to forgive ourselves. So, we decided to accept the invitation.

Activities of the Group

The first official document of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group was its Declaration, written by Mykola Rudenko and signed by all its members providing their names and addresses. The principal goal of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group was to monitor the implementation of the Helsinki Accords on the territory of Ukraine. Civic and cultural rights together with religious freedom were among the most important topics. Nowhere in the Declaration did we talk about the political system of the Soviet Union, nor did we suggest the need to overthrow the Soviet regime. However, without explicitly stating it, we made it clear that a totalitarian system prevailed in the country, and it had to be changed.

We issued reports (Memoranda) regarding violations of the Helsinki Accords in Ukraine and distributed them among those member states that stood out in their active efforts to defend human rights, such as: the USA, Canada, Great Britain, and West Germany. Foreign diplomats and journalists in Moscow were our intermediaries. Thanks to Radio Liberty, Voice of America, the BBC, and Deutsche Welle, information about the creation of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, as well as the documents we were producing, spread quickly. We managed to issue 11 Memoranda by the time of my arrest.

Relations with other Helsinki Groups

At first, people in the West considered our group to be a Ukrainian branch of the Moscow Helsinki Group. Mykola Rudenko, the head of our Group, denied that: “Our relations are built on friendship and cooperation, not on subordination.”

Although we were completely independent where the content of our documents was concerned, we were not independent in our ability to transmit them to the West. Here the assistance of the Moscow Helsinki Group turned out to be priceless. Even though they might have considered the Ukrainian Helsinki Group’s preoccupation with national issues somewhat excessive, or feared it might harm the essence of democratic principles, they never attempted to hinder any of our efforts to contact international representatives.

It must therefore be said unequivocally that without their help, the “national” Helsinki Groups would simply not have been able to function. However, even then there was a noticeable difference between the positions of the Moscow group and other national groups. In short, Russian dissidents recognized only one flaw in the Soviet system, i.e., its totalitarian nature. Instead, they were insensitive to its imperial nature, believing that the regime should only be democratized.

Today, it seems rather strange that there was virtually no contact between the four “national” Helsinki groups – at least, I have not heard of any. This can be explained by

the fact that all the materials of these four groups could be transmitted to the West by their members only through Moscow. Therefore, it was with the Moscow Helsinki Group that they had the strongest contacts.

Persecutions

Very soon, it became clear, however, that non-underground groups were even more dangerous for the Soviet regime than those underground. After three months of hesitation, KGB decided to punish the first four members of Moscow and Ukrainian Helsinki Groups for “spreading anti-Soviet propaganda aiming at undermining of the Soviet state and social order” – the guilt considered, according to the USSR Criminal Code, to be the “most dangerous state crime”. During the next few years, authorities arrested eight members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, including me, and expelled from the country the other two.

By the end of August 1977 the interrogations had suddenly stopped. When my interrogator announced this, he even hinted: “Perhaps they will not put you on trial at all.” Since I had been reading the press, I understood what he was getting at. The OSCE Belgrade Conference was about to begin, and the American delegation was demanding the release of all the incarcerated Helsinki Group monitors. So Moscow was ready to release us, because they suspected that during negotiations they would have to give up something. It appears, however, that the American delegation was the only one that had appealed for our release, while Europe chose to observe its infamous “Realpolitik.” Thus my interrogations resumed, and the process promptly reached its conclusion: my “crime” had been established.

This incident taught me once and for all, that one can never trust the self-assured bragging of tyrants, who were professing that they would not react to any international pressures. Tyrants do get frightened, perhaps even more deeply – they get scared the most.

Our court trials were closed to the public – or, more precisely, opened exclusively for the public chosen by KGB. None of the members of the Ukrainian Group repented during the trial and, therefore, all were sentenced to maximum terms. Seven members of the Group served their terms in labor camps of a strict or special regime in Perm region, the Russian Federation. Oksana Meshko who was almost 76 at the time of her second arrest served her term in exile in extraordinarily difficult circumstances in the Far East of Russia.

The persecutions had not frightened the “non-agreeing” in Ukraine – vice versa, they had mobilized a protesting part of Ukrainian society. As a result, during the 80s, the Ukrainian Group experienced two more waves of membership which were inevitably persecuted. It has been suggested that there were 41 members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group in total.

Our Group had never announced its dissolution and continued its activities either in a prison or abroad. For the whole period of its existence, only one renunciation (Oles Berdnyk) and one suicide (Mykhaylo Melnyk) took place. On July 7, 1988 (that is in the times of Gorbachev’s perestroika) some members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group

declared the foundation of the Ukrainian Helsinki Union with clear political goals. The latter, in fact, was a prototype of a political party.

Conclusions

One can only marvel that the Ukrainian Helsinki Group could exist at all, given the horrific conditions of the time. Lyudmila Alexeyeva, a member of the Moscow Helsinki Group and a staunch defender of the rule of law, always emphasizes that she and her colleagues considered the members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group to be kamikazes headed for inevitable sacrifice.

Today, it is difficult to even imagine the harsh conditions in which our Group worked. Every scribble left on the table would be scrutinized by the KGB or confiscated during searches. Any person mentioned in those notes was automatically at risk of interrogation by the KGB. Even visiting someone's home or meeting a person on the street would automatically place that person on the KGB's list of suspects. We were therefore responsible not only for our own lives but also for the lives of others.

Thus, the meaning and historical value of our documents lay not so much in their intellectual perfection as in the effect that they had, namely that they were expressed at that particular historical moment. The situation in the Soviet Union needed people to serve like a litmus test to illustrate the totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime. Statements by the various Helsinki Groups cut through the silence and thus had an explosive effect.

It is also important to assess the Helsinki movement from today's perspective – of course, as seen from my Ukrainian perspective. Without diminishing the significance of the first two “baskets” of the Final Act, it must be acknowledged that the third “basket” with its human rights commitments was the most transformative. Through it, European civilization spoke to the peoples behind the Soviet “iron curtain” with a powerful ethical appeal that inspired human hearts. Based on these values, new international structures grew and appropriate procedures were developed, which served as a great support for the new international security system.

But fifty years later, the world is different and the actors are different, and yet the challenge is the same. No one in this hall today, or outside it on the streets of Helsinki, is unaware of Russia's extraordinary actions over the past three years, and I would be condoning them if I remained silent in this august gathering. The Helsinki Accords gave us all a voice and an obligation to state the obvious, namely the utterly destructive activities of the Russian Federation, a state party to the Helsinki Accords.

It has turned out that the OSCE was simply not prepared for a situation in which the successor to the USSR, the Russian Federation, began to methodically destroy the aforementioned international security system. The OSCE procedures did not provide for sanctions against states that violate the fundamental principles of this organization. By launching a large-scale war against Ukraine, Russia violated all possible security agreements concluded with Ukraine and openly declared its ultimate goal – the dismantling of Ukrainian statehood and the destruction of Ukrainian identity as such. The Kremlin publicly announced to humanity another “final solution to the national question” — only this time not Jewish, but Ukrainian. And at this decisive historical moment, the

OSCE failed to mount a strong protest against the radical breakdown of the international order. It turned out that the OSCE – like the UN Security Council, the Red Cross and other security structures that emerged after World War II – is practically paralysed by its own procedures. These procedures no longer reflect its ethical foundations. Just as Nazi Germany's aggression buried the League of Nations, taking advantage of its inertia and helplessness, so Russia's aggression has undermined the reputation of the UN Security Council and the OSCE.

I realize how drastic my conclusion may be for many of those present. However, I have the moral right to say this, because 50 years ago it was the powerful ethical appeal of the Helsinki Accords that encouraged me and my colleagues to respond to it, paying for it with our long prison terms. The values of the Helsinki Accords became part of my life, and I have never regretted it. I still cherish them today.

There is no doubt that such an organization should exist. But its effectiveness will depend on its ability to respond swiftly to the illegal actions of any aggressor. The speed of the response will depend on a differently organized legal framework and decision-making procedures. This event of ours celebrates not just dissidents who spoke up later but also those creative diplomats and political experts who 50 years ago crafted an effective means to speak the truth in difficult circumstances. Therefore, I urge everyone present to do everything possible to ensure that the OSCE once again speaks the language of values and, in particular, stands up for the victims of aggression.

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