

Moral Aspects of the Dissident Resistance in Ukraine: From Rosy Expectations to Sober Reality

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,¹

This conference is devoted to the history of dissent in the former Soviet Union, and I, as a former Ukrainian dissident, would like to use this opportunity to offer a special introductory reflection. It is my moral duty and great personal privilege to thank all those who made our mission possible: those who risked their diplomatic or professional positions by meeting with us in that “empire of evil”; those who transferred our materials to the free world; the ones who helped our voices be heard; all those who gave us their invaluable support. Here, I mean governments and ordinary citizens, diplomats and journalists, editors and media communicators, cultural figures and religious communities. I mean people of varied ethnic origins (in my case, Ukrainian) living in diaspora, but also those whose connection with Ukrainian or Russian, Baltic or Caucasian cultures had been established simply through human solidarity and compassion. Let their efforts be blessed, let their support be never forgotten. On behalf of all former dissidents, I would like to express our deep gratitude to our well-known, and maybe still unknown, beneficiaries, and I ask you to be the recipients and mediators of this gratitude.

Toward a History of the Resistance Movement

The genesis of the Ukrainian dissident movement was twofold, predetermined by the twofold nature of the Soviet regime, both as a totalitarian state and as the Russian Empire camouflaged under the communist “union.”

On the one hand, the dissident movement was an attempt to provide serious resistance to the totalitarian state and aimed at the democratization of the society. In this sense, Ukrainian dissidents shared the position of all Soviet dissidents and had the Russian human rights circles in Moscow as an example to follow. And let me say at the very beginning: the support of our colleagues in Moscow was invaluable. At its early stages, the cross-Soviet dissident movement had been fed by the hopes generated by the debunking of the so-called “cult of

Stalin” after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party (1956) and by a certain democratization often addressed as the “Khrushchev thaw.” A crisis of the official communist identity occurred: the former Stalinist ideological standards had been reconsidered and the official history of the state had been rewritten. Belief in the justice of the Soviet system had been damaged, but not fatally. The most active core of the dissident movement at that time consisted of optimistic and, to some extent, idealistic communists who wished that “distortions of the Lenin official policy” be removed and the existing system to be transformed into “communism with a human face.”

On the other hand, the Ukrainian dissident movement derived its inspiration from the liberation struggle of Ukrainians, which had grown markedly in the first half of the twentieth century. In some sense, it was a continuation of this struggle, but using different means. The movement for cultural, religious, and, later, civil rights had objectively weakened the Moscow colonial regime and, therefore, promoted independent trends within various subjugated nations. This liberational aspect made Ukrainian (like Lithuanian, Georgian and other) dissidents different from Russian dissidents who often considered national movements (including the Ukrainian one) to be “not truly democratic” and “polluted with national/nationalistic demands..

Therefore, the Ukrainian dissident movement also included those politically-oriented figures for whom the struggle for human rights was a promising instrument for achieving the main goal – the political independence of Ukraine – rather than a “religion of their soul.” They prefer even to use the term “resistance movement” instead of “dissident movement”; they deliberately avoid defining themselves as “dissidents,” preferring to be addressed as “political prisoners” or “fighters for the independence of Ukraine.”

The Ukrainian dissident movement underwent several phases of development. The first one was the period of romantic hopes and this started in the public sphere with the foundation of free cultural clubs at the beginning of the 1960s in Kyiv and Lviv. During their discussions, intellectuals cautiously expressed opinions on literature and culture that differed from the official ones. This period lasted until the first arrests of 1965, which were used by the government to put an end to dangerous freethinking.

The second period could be called a period of confusion and depression. The phase of public protests

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against arrests gave way to embarrassment and confusion. People hoped (although with less and less conviction that those arrests were simply a mistake. This period lasted until the second wave of arrests in 1972-73.

The third period was, therefore, one of reorientation. Of course, many people were disappointed and experienced despair because illusions about the humanitarian evolution of the regime were completely shattered while the “light at the end of a tunnel” had not yet appeared. However, the disposition of dissidents had been radicalized, and it became clearly visible in the materials of *samvydav* (the Ukrainian equivalent of the Russian *samizdat*), that is, oppositionist literature illegally printed at home on a typewriter. Cautious culturological freethinking had been gradually replaced by substantial criticism of the regime and the ever more resolute conclusion concerning the inevitability of change.

At that period, the broader name “Ukrainian dissidents” defined a diverse group of the “non-agreeing” consisting of: a reasonable intelligentsia which dreamt, first of all, about freedom of expression; human rights activists who responded to the international human rights call; and political fighters who expressed their longing for the change of the regime and for the independence of Ukraine.

The fourth period of the dissident movement in Ukraine was inspired by the 1975 Helsinki Accords, signed by members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), including the USSR. The first Group for Promoting the Fulfillment of Helsinki Accords was founded on May 12, 1976, in Moscow. The Ukrainian Helsinki Group was next. It was founded on November 9, 1976, by a group of ten dissidents, myself included, headed by the writer Mykola Rudenko. The Group published its Declaration in the Western media, proclaiming its purely human rights, non-underground nature and, following the example of the Moscow Group, providing names and addresses of its members.

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, the KGB decided to punish the Ukrainian Helsinki Group members for “spreading anti-Soviet propaganda aimed at undermining the Soviet state and social order” – the crime considered, according to the USSR Criminal Code, to be the “most dangerous state crime.” During the next few years, authorities arrested eight Ukrainian Helsinki Group members, myself included, and expelled from the country another two. The persecutions had not frightened the “non-agreeing”; instead, they served to mobilize a protest movement in Ukrainian society. As a result, during the 1980s, the Group experienced two more waves of “kamikaze” membership which were inevitably persecuted. Today it is being suggested that there were 41 Ukrainian Helsinki Group members in total. The Group had never announced its dissolution and continued its activities either in prison or abroad. For the whole period of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group’s existence, only one renunciation (Oles Berdnyk)

and one suicide (Mykhaylo Melnyk) took place. On July 7, 1988 (that is, during the time 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 the prototype of a political party.

At the time of Ukrainian independence, members of the 1960-80 Ukrainian resistance movement had become differentiated according to different socio-political orientations. Those who were working to change the system headed the political opposition and made political careers. They became members of parliament and leaders of political parties. The smaller portion of dissidents, again myself included, refused to take part in political activities and continued to defend human rights or act in the cultural or religious field. Finally, a third group of former dissident, either because of their age or health problems, withdrew from any activity, limiting themselves only to participation in some public events.

The diversity of different political orientations chosen by former dissidents met harsh criticism later on. Instead of one consolidated opposition party, it was a conglomeration of rival groups for the most part united around former dissident leaders who stood in opposition to the Communists. This was considered to be a weakness (or even a particular fault) of the dissident movement because its diversity resulted in conflictual divisions. In fact, the dissident movement had never been monolithic and, therefore, could not satisfy all people’s expectations. Indeed, dissidents were united, first of all, in the non-acceptance of the imperial and totalitarian communist system, though each of them viewed the future development of Ukraine differently.

The importance of the dissident movement, at least in Ukraine, lies in the fact that just as a chemical particle can crystallize an oversaturated solution, the appearance of dissidents allowed the crystallization of people’s expectations and their disobedience. As Andrey Amalrik accurately said, they “... made a brilliantly simple thing – in a country that was not free, they began to act as free people and, because of that, started to change the moral atmosphere and the traditions that ruled the country.” Their merits in this are invaluable and beyond doubt.

At the same time (unlike in the Czech Republic) Ukrainian dissidents did not lead their society to the final victory of democracy. The victories they achieved were temporary, and their enormous passionate energy was misused by other political forces. However, in spite of the evident human weakness and failures of the Ukrainian dissidents, one should not censure them. This is because the third wave of democratization (according to Huntington) ran up against the invisible, but very real, cultural “wall” that existed between the two cultural civilizations, namely, the Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asian ones. Ukrainian dissidents were not able to overcome this wall in principle.

Difficulties of subsequent decades lead me to the conclusion that the task of all Ukrainians who want a better country must lie in the creation of an intermediary

body that will not allow destructive conflict to pull apart both civilizations but will rather transfer mechanically Euro-Atlantic models of democracy into a qualitatively different Euro-Asian civilization. This would permit the fulfillment of a two-fold task. First, in this way the unity of the Ukrainian nation – which is predestined to exist on both sides of the “barricade” – can be safeguarded. Secondly, by fulfilling this national task Ukraine at the same time may fulfill the civilization task of harmonization of two cultural worlds.

Values of Dissidents and the Present Time

Today Ukrainian dissidents may simultaneously take pride in their participation in manifest national democratic achievements and yet be in despair about no less evident moral failures.

One of the most important values supported by fighters of the movement of resistance was freedom: civil, national, religious freedom and the freedom of self-expression. These goals were mainly achieved though everything can be understood relatively.

Until the year 2010 the level of civic freedoms was much higher than that in Soviet times. In the country there was real freedom of the press though it was based not on the existence of the middle class, which is relatively weak in Ukraine, but rather on the reality of political clans. The major achievement of Ukrainian democracy, especially after the Orange Revolution, was freedom of elections, though electoral legislation had some holes that made some falsification and manipulation of voices possible. Finally, the fate of Ukrainian democracy seems to be that of all weak democracies. As a result of the free elections of 2010, those who came to power are actively changing the legislation to avoid losing power in the future. Therefore, weak democracy has logically been transformed into an imitative democracy.

Violations of human rights did not disappear – they only changed their character. Ukrainian authorities still infringe upon human dignity which leads to the diminishment of the scope of people’s rights and the level of citizens’ responsibility. Corruption is destroying the state system of justice and the courts. Thus, the former dissidents cannot rest on their laurels.

Ukrainian independence was achieved, but due to various factors the actual independence has become considerably weakened. The inner inter-regional differences that ought to be viewed as a potential richness for a state in harmony assume contradictory forms that are hard to overcome. These differences are being abused by some political forces who incite one part of the nation against the other. This also influences the geopolitical position of Ukraine because it happens to be divided into two parts. One part of Ukrainian society has chosen a Euro-Atlantic geopolitical orientation wanting to legitimately join the EU and find shelter in a collective security system, above all NATO, from the neoimperialistic aspirations of Russia. Incidentally, this is exactly the position most dissidents identify themselves

with. The other part of Ukrainian society considers itself to belong to the Russian (Eurasian) cultural region. This makes Ukraine more vulnerable, with its energy dependence on Russia. In this case the concept of the geopolitical security of Russia does not presuppose the true independence of Ukraine.

Inter-ethnic peace is being maintained in Ukraine and the freedom of ethnic minorities is, for the most part, safeguarded. In this sense, the goal of the dissidents has been fulfilled. However, the inertia of the previous Soviet model “Russian and Russian-speaking majority vs. non-Russian minorities” is still very much present. According to this model, Ukrainians were a discriminated minority. After twenty years of independence Ukrainians have not succeeded in the realization of their status of ethnic majority and in safeguarding their cultural rights in certain regions in Ukraine, that is, in the East and South of the country and in Crimea. Moreover, after the 2010 elections the counter-offensive of Russian-speaking politicians began to take place. In order to safeguard the comfort of a one-language (Russian) regime they demagogically insist that there are two official languages in Ukraine – Ukrainian and Russian. In addition, these political forces attempt to misuse international mechanisms developed for defending weaker, or vanishing, languages to safeguard the monopoly of the Russian language which is strong even without this ploy. This not only foils the expectations of dissidents that in an independent state Ukrainian culture and language will have the opportunity to develop freely, but also the counter-offensive of these Russian-speaking “extremes” move Ukraine away from a balanced harmony between the titular nation and ethnic minorities which was also the dream of the dissidents.

One of the most obvious achievements of Ukrainian democracy was (and, I hope, still is) the progress in the sphere of religious freedom. Thanks to some parity between different religious and confessional groups this freedom demonstrated an ability for self-stabilization and self-adjustment. Certain dissidents played an important personal role in the revival of previously persecuted religious organizations and in initiating inter-religious and inter-confessional cooperation. During the year 2010 there was also an attempt of pro-Russian forces to turn this situation back to the past by giving some preferences to the Moscow Patriarchate. The idea of the “Russian world” developed by Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow is being used by the Moscow Patriarchate and its supporters in state authorities to make the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate the established church of Ukraine and press back all of its rivals. The religious rights of some Orthodox rivals of the Moscow Patriarchate have obviously been violated. However, I believe that putting the genie of religions back into the bottle of the Third Rome will be most difficult.

Thus, in many spheres of national existence the dissident mission has been successful, but it has not become irreversible and has not received the necessary legislative and system guarantees. Therefore, the question of its future importance for the nation is still open.

There are two spheres, however, in which this mission met with deadly failure: the dissident belief in establishing the rule of law and in the post-communist revival of social and personal ethics. The injustice and immorality of the communist period has been reproduced under different ideological slogans but, at the same time, has even been strengthened in certain areas. The old mechanisms of regulating injustice and immorality have lost their efficiency, but new ones have not been developed. The court system has become the instrument of the ruling authorities for settling accounts with the opposition. Mass corruption undermines the self-confidence of the nation in the possibility of influencing the course of events and making social recovery possible. The Orange Revolution managed to revive the hope of part of the nation in their own abilities, but not for long.

Solzhenitzen's old slogan "not to live a lie" remains a dream. In spite of all the achievements in the sphere of freedom of speech, modern Ukraine does not live the truth. As I mentioned earlier, freedom of speech and the press is based on a variety of clans, each of whom, according to its own interests, speaks only a part of the truth, and at the same time adulterates it with propagandistic lies. Therefore, a whole set of semi-truths are in circulation in the country and this causes confusion among the people and is accepted by them as one big untruth.

Few people in Ukraine nowadays believe in the possibility of building a just order. The weakness of civil society permits economic and ministerial abuse. The crisis of the court system engenders feelings of being defenceless. Thus, the dissidents' hopes of establishing the rule of law have not been fulfilled.

This raises a question about the correctness of the dissidents' position taken after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the matter of bringing communists to justice for the crimes of the communist regime. In retrospect we now realize that it was not possible, contrary to dissidents' beliefs, to start with a "blank page." Non-repentance for the sins of the communists and non-punishment for their crimes quite naturally resulted in the abuses committed by later administrations. As a result, legal nihilism has developed in the nation, and the national discourse easily adapts to clan loyalty and servility. Untruths and cunning behavior are tolerated.

One more belief of the Soviet opposition as a whole also failed, namely, the belief that post-communist governments would be wiser and more intellectual. In Ukraine today intellectuals try to formulate new and prospective strategies of development, but the latter cannot be fulfilled because of the closed nature of the ruling powers. The authorities use intellect only for their political egos.

Voices of rare moral authorities (for example, the voice of Yevhen Sverstiuk) are also less effective. Because of the self-isolation of the ruling elite in the fortress of power these voices cry out in the desert in vain. The weakness of their voices is caused not because the nation allegedly does not share their conclusions about the moral degradation of the ruling elite. According

to some studies more than 55 percent of those surveyed mentioned moral degradation as the main reason for the present social problems of Ukraine. The real problem lies in the fact that people are not eager to be in opposition to legal and moral highhandedness because it seems to them that without people's solidarity it would be too dangerous, unprofitable and, consequently, unattractive.

Under these circumstances Ukraine needs a new solidarity civic movement – a movement for the implementation of the rule of law and for the moral recovery of the society. The ability of former dissidents to initiate such a movement is limited: some of them are too old; others, because of political compromises of previous years, have ceased to be moral authorities for the nation. So the question remains open as to who will lead this, in my opinion, inevitable civic movement in the future.

Instead we may rather firmly state that former dissidents laid down the main precondition for that – the life of freedom. During the last two decades the Ukrainian nation has moved through a valuable school of freedom. And even if the experience achieved is partially negative, it is still invaluable for the ability of an individual to mature from the totalitarian "vice" to the level of a responsible citizen.

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