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# Vyacheslav Chornovil: A personal portrait

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**Vyacheslav Chornovil** was a Ukrainian dissident who later became politically active in the young Ukrainian democracy. His romantic idealism led him to a tragic fate.

There are people who become symbols of their times and representatives of their epoch's achievements and illusions. A trend in Ukraine's post-war generation, known as *shistdesyatnyky* ("people of the sixties"), has given us a galaxy of such distinctive personalities, including Ivan and Nadiya Svitlychny, Ivan Dziuba, Yevhen Sverstyuk, and Mykhaylyna Kotsubynska. Vyacheslav Chornovil, who became a symbol of the politically-oriented People's Movement of Ukraine (*Rukh*), also belonged to this circle.

Chornovil was a political "gem" that suddenly emerged from the ancient and fertile Cherkasy region. Born in the geographical heart of Ukraine, Chornovil was able to understand the logic of both its West and East. His life experiences influenced him strongly: the years studying in Kyiv asserted his civic posture; his work and contacts with Galicia's national intelligentsia polished facets of his character; and the Gulag tempered him as a fighter and politician. He lived a fascinating and tumultuous life, and the milestones of his life reflect the course of Ukrainian history in the second half of the twentieth century.

## **Shistdesyatnyk and dissident**

While preparing his master's and doctoral dissertations on the work of Ukrainian poet Borys Hrinchenko, Chornovil often referred to Hrinchenko's sarcastic phrase, "Each Ukrainian stove is a fortress / patriots guard them lying." It was around this time that he understood that he would never become one of Hrinchenko's patriots and began to realise that the indestructible *Rukh* would become the most enduring symbol of his life.

Chornovil's first important milestone was his active participation in the Kyiv Cultural Club during the first half of the 1960s. Conscientious cultural opposition and expressive political romanticism were on the club's agenda at that time, and there was the prevailing belief that "socialism with a human face" was actually possible.

The second milestone in Chornovil's life was a series of arrests in Ukraine in 1965. The KGB had convinced leaders in the Kremlin that the opposition should be nipped in the bud and Chornovil was on the frontline of the protests.

The ability to go outside and make a public protest has always been a symbol of courage among Russian dissidents. This ability to "stand up demonstratively" against the authorities when you hear the call to protest has also been a similar symbol in the history of the Ukrainian dissident movement. The memory of September 4th 1965 has remained in Ukraine's history thanks to Ivan Dziuba, Vasyl Stus and Vyacheslav Chornovil, who rallied the staff of the *Ukraina* cinema in Kyiv to protest against the crackdown and arrests. It was a symbolic act of civic "standing up straight".

Chornovil's basic research, *Woe from Wit* (Portraits of twenty "criminals") contains the biographies of people imprisoned in 1965 and was published as *samizdat* (illegally printed and distributed literature) shortly after his arrest. The book, which was published in the West in 1967, asks an important question about whether prison re-education is actually a "sophisticated system of abuse".

Another of Chornovil's collection of works, *Justice or Recurrence of Terror?* described the process of investigation and conviction. Thanks to broadcasts by "hostile" radio stations such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the BBC, Voice of America, and Deutsche Welle, both books destroyed the informational black hole which Ukraine had become in the Western media when they were published. Nobody was surprised when Vyacheslav Chornovil later won the international Nicholas Tomalin Prize for Journalism for his books in 1975.

### **Political prisoner and leader of dissident resistance**

Young Chornovil's courage and audacity was so obvious that the authorities quickly understood that the example he was setting had to be isolated. While his books were the main reason for his first arrest, the suspicion that Chornovil was an editor of the underground magazine *Ukrainsky Visnyk* (Ukrainian Herald) led to his second arrest, although this was never proven in court. Five issues of the magazine had already been published by the time he was arrested for the second time. Chornovil's third arrest took place while he was still in exile, and this time the authorities "chose" falsified criminal charges in order to discredit his name. The conditions under which Chornovil was imprisoned were severe: exhausting work,

poor and low-calorie meals, extreme cold, and methodical abuse. I remember the popular legend in Ukraine at that time about the uneasy love between Chornovil and the poet, Atena Pashko. After Chornovil's arrest, they were hindered in their attempts to get married and were prevented from having any personal contact.

Chornovil's imprisonment created a great deal of difficulties for such a sociable man and huge efforts were needed in order to urge the authorities to make his living conditions better during this period of his life. For the authorities, however, the verdict of the court was not enough to punish Chornovil and they enjoyed creating additional practical difficulties of a spiritual nature at every end and turn.

Imprisonment in the Gulag  
didn't break Chornovil.

Particularly painful was the imprisonment on the falsified charge of rape. It was extremely easy to organise this kind of aggravation in Yakutia, where Chornovil was in exile, and I remember one of my camp supervisors saying, "Now we are going to be wiser and won't create any more martyrs." Branding Chornovil as a rapist was supposed to destroy his reputation and authority. But it never happened. People understood the government's plan perfectly.

Organising the change in status of internees *en masse* to the status of political prisoners between 1974 and 1978 was probably one of Chornovil's greatest achievements during his stay in the Gulag. During Brezhnev's rule, the Soviet government officially denied the existence of political prisoners claiming that, by definition, it was actually impossible in a socialist country. As a result, the status of "especially dangerous state criminal", which was "gifted" to the majority of dissidents, became the equivalent to the status of a common criminal. Nobody was taken in by this euphemism and even the camp guards used to call us "the politicals". In the end, Chornovil and a group of his dissident colleagues, refused to do forced labour and began to pursue certain rights that corresponded to their status. In order to support their claims, a number of prisoners announced that they were going on a hunger strike in 1977, which became an excuse for further persecution. Chornovil was given the famous title of "internee general" by the camp supervisors for his initiative and its implementation.

### **Galicja's democratic leader**

Chornovil's imprisonment didn't break him, and as soon as the first wind of Gorbachev's *perestroika* began to pick up, he set his rebellious sail once again. He edited seven issues of *Ukrainsky Visnyk* in the space of two years (1987 to 1989), published by the Ukrainian diaspora in the United States by the Smoloskyp publishing house.

In 1988 he initiated the creation of the first oppositional political organisation, the Ukrainian Helsinki Group. The organisation advocated not only national, religious and cultural rights, but also political rights. However, for tactical reasons, it did not call for Ukraine's immediate separation from the USSR.

During the spring of 1990, the struggle for Ukrainian democracy and independence entered a decisive phase. This was the golden age for Chornovil, who was always found at the epicentre of numerous political meetings. He was passionate,

brave and happy. Chornovil's main task during this period was to clear Ukraine of communist evil; to tear it from its city halls and out of its human souls.

It was obvious that Chornovil  
would stand for **president**  
in the 1991 election.

These really were incredible times. The rise of the national flag, the abolition of Moscow's influence, freedom of the press, and the demolition of Lenin's monuments were just some of the first steps taken by the newly elected government. These actions impressed the whole country. In many administrative issues, such as land reform, land privatisation, creation of the middle class (financially independent and politically free citizens who were the foundation of a democratic opposition), and an independent media, Chornovil was able to put a few of his own ideas into action. However, the situation was not all a bed of roses and was made difficult because Chornovil's team had to act under conditions of a legal, economic and informational siege. In addition to the legislative loophole that did not allow the implementation of most of his ideas, there was pressure from Kyiv which perceived Galicia as a "contaminated reservoir". Thus, it was put on strict administrative and financial quarantine. Chornovil was a "sprinter with his legs tied", and those who pointed out his failures without seeing these constraints were being dishonest.

Joining the Soviet government was a big experiment for the democrats. However, its success was not so obvious to everyone and some democrats were actually quite afraid of "pouring new wine into old wineskins", using the old Soviets to implement new democratic ideas. Chornovil understood this: "The Soviet form of state organisation which was created to cover the single-party dictatorship, cannot be improved; it can only be eliminated by being replaced with one of the proven systems from the democratic world." Chornovil also understood something else: "It would be a crime to not undertake the experiment that has been provided to us by history." Thus, it was a risk without a real alternative and impossible to tell the people: "We thank you for your trust, but we won't take power into our hands until the constitution of Ukraine is changed." It was necessary to take responsibility and jump in headfirst, hoping for people's solidarity and understanding.

Today, it is possible to say that the democratic forces' task has still not yet been completed in Ukraine. Radical reforms were postponed because a bigger margin of safety for democratic power was needed in order to implement them. However, there was no such margin, and when it did finally appear, albeit for a short period of time during the Orange Revolution, there was no desire to dismantle the whole system.

### **Criticism from all sides**

When Chornovil was the head of the Lviv Oblast, there were often discussions throughout the region about the endless errors that he was supposed to have made. He was criticised from both the right and the left. In particular, he received a lot of criticism from nationalist organisations which sometimes opted for radical steps. His allegiance to democratic principles and human rights was regarded as a violation by the nationalists. Chornovil constantly explained:

“Generally speaking, I consider myself a nationalist, but in the sense that I am a patriot of my homeland, and that I want an independent and democratic Ukrainian state. There is also integral nationalism, which may have been justified when we were surrounded by totalitarian communist and fascist regimes and had no other weapons against them. But why do we need these structures and ideas today?”

At the same time, Chornovil was constantly criticised by the communists. He was accused of carrying out a “witch hunt”, persecuting the communists and taking revenge against his old opponents. It is sometimes surprising how calmly and patiently (but at the same time brilliantly from the polemical point of view) Chornovil explained his actual attitude to these issues in his speeches and interviews: “We are fighting against a totalitarian social system, not against the people. People are as they are. Only circumstances and time can change them.”

However, some decisions were particularly painful. Above all, I remember the situation when Chornovil had to manage the Lviv Oblast at a time when Galicia began to ease out of the old Stalinist thinking. A “great migration” of believers took place which did not happen smoothly. In particular, the Greek-Catholic communities were dissatisfied and expected Chornovil to advocate the unconditional return of church property, which had been taken away from them in 1946. Chornovil understood that it might cause conflict among believers because “a new generation brought up in Orthodoxy was being born”.

### **Candidate for president**

When the 1991 coup d'état against Gorbachev took place in Moscow, as head of the Lviv Oblast, Vyacheslav Chornovil, unlike many of his colleagues, was ready for it both ideologically and organisationally. In the very first hours after the coup, Chornovil publicly qualified the rebellion as being a "performance of a group of adventurers", and his authority among the people started to grow.

Thus, it was no wonder that when the Supreme Council adopted the Declaration on State Sovereignty of Ukraine, preparing the path for presidential elections in December 1991, Vyacheslav Chornovil's bid was obvious. However, attempts to achieve agreement on his candidacy failed, and several democratic candidates representing the democratic wing ended up running. Their supporters accused Chornovil of having "excessive self-love". Chornovil described the whole process as having the makings of a "great Russian comedy".

Chornovil ran his presidential campaign with honour and never attacked his competitors who represented the same democratic wing, even if they didn't act in a similar manner. For him Leonid Kravchuk, the communist candidate, was his main opponent.

During the 1991 presidential elections, Chornovil was supported by 76 per cent of voters in the Lviv Oblast (23.3 per cent of voters in the whole country) and thus came second after Leonid Kravchuk, who was supported by 61.6 per cent of Ukrainian voters.

Chornovil described the result of the 1991 elections in the following way: "We have an independent state, which reminds me of Orwell's vision: we don't have the state itself, rather we have only an outline of it."

### **Politician and member of parliament**

In April 1992, Vyacheslav Chornovil left his position as head of the Lviv Oblast and moved to Kyiv as a member of Ukraine's parliament – the Supreme Council. In this role Chornovil proved himself as a master of political dispute and political combat. His political instinct and reaction were impeccable.

During parliamentary sessions most of Chornovil's political ideas were victorious. He had always been on the edge of the struggle for independence and his political mind was constantly looking for different ways to implement it. Chornovil's role had a central meaning in such ideas as, for example, the proclamation of the Declaration on State Sovereignty in 1990 and the creation of a national-democratic People's Council in the Ukrainian parliament.

Some of Chornovil's ideas, such as the introduction of a federal system in Ukraine based on the German model, were heavily criticised. This concept was particularly



disliked in Galicia, which nourished the hope of a greater unity with Ukraine. From a patriot's point of view, the unitary nature of the state provided the best chance to build an authentically Ukrainian state. At the same time, federalisation could have divided the country. Ukrainians live in accordance to the principle of regional "feuds" and feudal principalities. Thus, what Chornovil tried to permit and put under legal control still functions today without regulations and develops rather spontaneously.

Chornovil died in a **tragic car crash** in 1999.

There is still no consensus among Ukrainians on another of Chornovil's ideas which was to transform *Rukh* into an organised political party. This idea was based on other countries who had functioning democratic movements that had chosen this formula (Solidarity in Poland, *Sajudis* in Lithuania). Chornovil understood this pattern and started to promote it in Ukraine. Though, when this general pattern was combined with the specificity of the Ukrainian reality, it did not bring the desired results.

The fragmentation of its national leaders is often Ukraine's historical fate, and what was supposed to be a structuring of political parties, turned into a process of "chieftainisation". The solidarity of belonging to a single *Rukh* fell to pieces and a division between "us" and "them" developed among its members. In the end, a group of *Rukh* leaders, in particular Yuriy Kostenko, Oleksandr Lavrynovych and Ivan Zayets, refused to obey Chornovil and organised an alternative *Rukh*. Yet this split did not influence Chornovil's chances in the next presidential elections.

Vyacheslav Chornovil was always a constant danger to the quasi-communist authorities. It seemed that only something extreme could stop him and in the end, this is exactly what happened: on a Boryspil highway, one dark March evening in 1999, Chornovil's car slammed into a truck that blocked the road with its headlights switched off. Chornovil and his driver were killed instantly. A short time later, the truck driver and some of the other witnesses also died in a suspicious manner.

Despite the fact that Chornovil's death has been examined by several investigatory commissions, no convincing conclusions have yet been presented. Many people, including members of his family as well as ordinary citizens, maintain the opinion that his death was an ordered murder.

### **The legacy**

Was Chornovil's political talent reckless? Chornovil rushed into battle with such courage because he believed in the honesty of his friends and the nobleness of his enemies. His behaviour was reckless from the point of view of his family and those who had foreseen that he would be betrayed by both sides. His main



opponent didn't come to fight face-to-face, but hired an assassin. When Chornovil drew his sword and rushed into battle, some of his regiments remained unmoved.

Was Chornovil a stubborn romantic? After gaining power in the Lviv Oblast he said, "The dictatorship of conscience is the only dictatorship our authority is going to introduce." He also acknowledged himself to be a romantic: "I am, but I cover this secret diligently. A politician should be a realist, not a romantic, in order not to blur the perspective between a 'blue or pink fog'. A politician's perspective should be clear. But there is a romanticism somewhere deep inside of me. Its presence ties me closely to our history and has contributed to my spiritual highs. But state building is hard work; it is a series of clear political assessments. However, both of these elements have brought me closer to the people and have given me a lot."

Thus Chornovil himself provides the key to his personality: romanticism and realism were fused together inside him. There was no conflict between the two, because they nourished and limited each other at the same time. The "realism" of Chornovil's opponents was very often cynical. They felt that their finest hour was about to come and strongly rejected their most dangerous political rival.

After all, nobody kills romantics; they destroy themselves by flying too close to the sun. Only those who stay firmly on the ground and cannot be removed in any other way are usually killed. 🏰

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