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“Documenting human rights abuses in totalitarian regimes”

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-Final research report-

In the last few years the civil society sector in Central and Eastern Europe has met increased state repression. We have seen limitations on NGOs activity, their funding, harassing of NGOs and sneer campaigns aiming at delegitimizing NGOs. Under such conditions it becomes imperative to try to consolidate the human rights movement and to strengthen the work of human rights defenders. One of the ways to do this is by better understanding it, understanding its roots and guiding principles.

With this in mind, during my research period at the Open Society Archives I looked at the archives of the International Helsinki Federation (IHF) which contained documents describing the work of the IDH and national Helsinki Committees formed in the signatory countries of the Helsinki Accords. I sought to put together pieces of a common history of European Human Rights activists, with the belief that by learning about our common history and understanding it, the work of human rights activist can be stronger.

I wanted to look into the early activity of the Helsinki Federation and national Helsinki Groups because these were some of the first human rights defenders and founders of modern NGO activism. Also, having worked closely with several Helsinki Committees which are still active in Central and Eastern Europe I wanted to go back and trace their early struggles and activities.

The first Helsinki Committees were formed in 1976. In May 1976 the Moscow Helsinki Group held their first press conference. In the same year Helsinki Committees were formed in Ukraine and Lithuania and in 1977 they were formed in Georgia and Armenia.¹

In 1982 the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) was founded. The IHF monitored human rights in all the countries which signed the accords. The national Helsinki collected and distributed information about human rights violations in their own countries they established contact with underground movements, tried to raise awareness, while the IHF

1 Andras Mink, *The defendant: the State. The story of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee*, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2005, p. 26

worked as a clearing house of all the information gathered by the different committees, it distributes the info to other committees, to the press, diplomats, politicians and other NGOs.²

The early Helsinki Groups carried out their work under very hostile conditions. My research revealed only some of the obstacles that these brave people had to face in order to carry out their work. In all of the countries analyzed they had to face constant state repression. I documented cases in which, because of their work, human rights defenders were arrested, placed in psychiatric detention, deported and even committed suicide under unclear circumstances.

Human rights defenders were under constant surveillance and threat. Also, they had to operate in a general climate of distrust in which communicating with others was always dangerous, as one risked severe repercussions even for talking about abuses suffered.

Throughout my research I documented several such instances and limitations which human rights defenders had to overcome in order to achieve their goals and objectives. As to what these goals were, the research shows that the main objective of the early Helsinki Groups was to promote the implementation of the newly signed Helsinki Final Act. In doing so, they sought to first of all document human rights abuses and then use this evidence to advocate, mostly internationally, but also nationally, for policies aimed at curtailing such abuses.

Following up on this objective, in my research I tried to see how exactly did these human rights groups manage to document human rights abuses and then see what could be done once this information was gathered, what were the possible avenues to use in order to put pressure on their governments to implement human rights standards.

I identified several means of documenting human rights abuses and analyzed them in the context they were carried out. Some of the means identified were:

- Reporting of foreign journalists
- Testimonies from people who left the country
- Fact-finding visits
- Communications from within the country

For all of these specific means of documenting human rights abuses I analyzed some of the obstacles faced in the various communist countries on which I conducted the research and the ways in which human rights activists still managed to make use of these opportunities.

During the research I also tried to identify ways in which the human rights defenders managed to use this evidence in order to advocate for change. The research suggests that there were few ways in which one could exert pressure on the communist countries.

One such avenue was to use the Helsinki Review Conferences, which took place regularly and involved all the nations that signed the Helsinki accords. This event served a good forum to discuss and learn about human rights concerns in signatory countries of the Helsinki accords. There were also annual meetings of the IHF which were another opportunity for activists to get together and discuss developments in respect to human rights in the countries they monitored. Another opportunity to exert international pressure on communist countries was to

² Letter of the Hester Minnema of April 1987 describing the role of the IHF, available at the Open Society Archives, reference number HU OSA 318-0-3, box no 16

use the hearings organized in the framework of the Most Favored Nation status. The US granted preferential trading agreements to countries it offered the Most Favored Nation Status. For this, the country would undergo a periodic review at which moment the human rights situations in the country would be brought under discussion.

I analyzed instances in which these avenues were used and documented them. Interestingly enough it seems that many of the avenues used by the early human rights defenders are still very relevant for today's work in the human rights field.

Putting international pressure is still one of the main tactics used by NGOs to advocate for implementation of human rights standards. Also, trying to link economic cooperation to human rights standards has developed a lot and now foreign aid and economic relations are many times tied with providing guarantees for human rights protections and this is thanks to the work of human rights defenders.

Also in order for such advocacy efforts to work human rights defenders still have to work hard at documenting human rights abuses. However, the conditions of doing such work have changed significantly. Now human rights defenders can rely on a lot more data, even government data and can more easily talk to victims and carry out their work.

One of the striking findings of the research was the role artists played in the human rights movement during the communist regimes. Currently it seems that the human rights movement is dominated by the work of lawyers and it important to remember the contribution that artists have made and are still making to defying norms and advancing human rights principles. It is also interesting to see how solidarity between ethnic and religious minority members can help the human rights movement and can prove to be a strong weapon against repressive states.

Files consulted

During my stay at the OSA I analyzed archival documents from the IHF up to the fall of communism (until 1989). I read the documents which were available in English and Romanian. I mostly looked at files relating to Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary because these countries still have very active Helsinki Committees and in this sense the research could be used to draw comparisons to the present for advocacy purposes. I also looked at the former Soviet Union because of the historical importance the human rights movement had in the Soviet Union.

I analyzed the documents contained in the following archival boxes:

1. Administrative Files - HU OSA 318-0-1, boxes: 2, 3;
2. Files of the Executive Director - HU OSA 318-0-2, boxes: 12, 13, 2, 6;
3. Correspondence and memoranda - HU OSA 318-0-3, boxes 4, 11, 12, 13, 5, 6, 7,8, 9, 24, 26, 22, 17, 15, 16;
4. Reference Files - HU OSA 318-0-4, boxes: 8, 10,1, 3, 22, 27, 19, 20, 17, 14, 13, 7,6;
5. Country files -HU OSA 318-0-5 - boxes 30, 31, 32, 71, 89 , 64, 62 , 63, 7ö, 71, 89, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 105, 106, 107, 108, 110, 111, 112, 113, 115, 133, 134;
6. Photographs - HU OSA 318-0-9;
7. Publications HU OSA 318-0-8, boxes: 33 and 34.