

Glasnost in Ukraine in the Aftermath of Chernobyl

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 20 2020

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My continuing research into Chernobyl was not over, because on the following morning, June 15, I had an interview with the staff of the Institute of Clinical Radiology at the Center for Radiation Medicine, affiliated with the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR. The Center was under the directorship of the Ukrainian Minister of Health, Anatolii Romanenko, and was concerned with the monitoring of Chernobyl victims. After the excitement of the previous day, it was very hard to readjust to dry analysis of the situation and what was likely to ensue for its victims. My emotions were mixed: I felt some anger at the irresponsibility of the authorities, gratitude that I had been allowed such open access to Chernobyl and Prypiat, and fatigue after the excitement and shock of the previous day. I had little time to gather myself and reflect on the experience.

The Center was located in the northernmost part of Kyiv. Valerii Ingulsky of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I were accompanied by another Yurii who was a translator with the Institute. He presented me with the newly released Russian-language book on the medical effects of Chernobyl, with contributions from Ilin, I. Likhtarev, and Romanenko, and from various Western specialists. The Institute was a converted sanatorium, located in a pleasant, wooded area. We were greeted by three specialists under the lead of Oles Piatak, winner of a state prize, and a deputy director of the Institute. Both Likhtarev and B.G. Bebeshko, the most senior officials, were in Moscow, but Piatak was certainly a senior and well-known figure. The other specialists were I.P. Los, head of the Laboratory of Radio-Ecology, and V.V. Chumak, head of the Immunological Laboratory. Our meeting room was impressive, the table being decorated with cookies, cherries, and a choice of drinks. Piatak gave a description of the Center, noting the attention being paid to the welfare of the 209 patients who were subjected to very high levels of radiation from Chernobyl.

I sensed some apprehension as to the questions I might raise. After the discussions at Chernobyl, it would have been rash to assume they did not know my views. Piatak was particularly concerned to assure me of the openness of the results of the research, citing the book I had just been presented (although I had doubts about the openness of people like Romanenko and Ilin). We soon moved on to the topic of Narodychi, and I again mentioned *Zapridel* and an article in the district newspaper, *Zhovtnevi Zori*. They were well aware of the contents of both, but dismissed the idea that radiation was the chief cause of their problems.

For the first time I noticed a clear discrepancy between a statement and the apparent reality. Thus, it was pointed out that the Center had received records of the radiation level from the Narodychi district center only five days after the accident. Yet the civil defense chief in Narodychi had pointed out that the levels were recorded from the outset. How was this conceivable? Rather than respond to this question, the three doctors commented that if radiation levels on April 26, 1986, had been as reported, then today they would be ten times higher than officially recorded. What about hotspots, I asked? Hotspots could have fallen from the tires of trucks, it was acknowledged, but would not account for the lower levels today either.

We continued for about an hour. It was clear that there was a lack of middle ground between the staff at the Center and the bulk of Ukrainian writers and journalists investigating the issue. Over and over it was stressed – particularly

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by Los, the radiation specialist – that the critics were not experts, the intimation being that they should not be commenting in the scientific sphere. Thus, the Narodychi district authorities were described as well-meaning but essentially ignorant people when it came to radiation fallout. We discussed radiophobia and the psychological effects of the accident. Again, a very long and detailed response was provided.

The tour of the Center was more comprehensive than I had imagined would be possible. I was shown therapeutic rooms, a laboratory, showers, a meeting room, and then, to my astonishment, two of the patients were brusquely awakened so that I could talk to them. Both had been witnesses to the initial events at Chernobyl. One, named Ihor Symonenko, recalled the blast and his friends suffering radiation burns. He still had burn marks on his neck. The other was the well-known fireman, Vladimir A. Pryshchepa, clad in dark green pyjamas, who looked deathly pale, and announced that he was sick and unable to work. He had been one of the first on the scene but had somehow survived. I was asked if I wanted to question them, and even today I wonder if I should have requested a private interview. As it was, Piatak and a nurse were hovering by his bedside, along with Ingulsky and Yurii. Quite clearly, it was difficult for him to say much. I told Pryshchepa about the monument to Chernobyl firemen erected in Edmonton, but he appeared disinterested. My impression was that he was simply too sick to care.

The patients brought home to me more than ever the horror of the event. I felt somewhat queasy as we walked through the grounds. I was shown individual trees planted by various renowned scientists. The names of Ilin and IAEA Director Hans Blix were included. Was there not something paradoxical about the fact that Blix, one of the world's major proponents of nuclear energy, should be planting trees in memory of its victims? I was also shown a monument to the Chernobyl victims erected on the grounds by Italians from Florence. At the end of the morning, we returned to the center of Kyiv in the Institute's ambulance.

After a short break, Ingulsky returned to the hotel. Evidently, his task for the week was to escort me around because he had even suggested lunch together. We walked down the Khreshchatyk to the offices of Radio Kyiv (it was called Kiev in 1989), and walked down a maze of corridors to a dingy meeting room, where Dmitrii Markov, Editor-in-Chief of the radio station, awaited us. There were some five staff members present. Although I received a warm welcome, I did not get the impression that Markov was anxious to respond to all my questions. On the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, for example, he said that the group was so insignificant that it would be a waste of time to discuss it. My queries were getting nowhere, so I asked the staff members what they would like to discuss.

One suggested a radio bridge between Radio Kyiv and CIUS, the costs to be shared. However, we did not get beyond the basics of such an idea. I was asked to explain the activities of CIUS and did so as thoroughly and carefully as possible. Finally, the International Service of Radio Kyiv conducted an interview with me, during which I brought up the Narodychi revelations, although whether the comments were actually aired in full I never discovered.

Although the evening was ostensibly set aside for recreation, what transpired hardly fell into that category. We were now joined by Andrii Fialko, Third Secretary of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a man in his 20s. Ingulsky, Fialko, and I took the metro to the stadium to watch Dynamo Kyiv play Zenit Leningrad. Along the way, Fialko began to take issue with some very specific points in my new book, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster*. Had he been assigned the task of reading it before I arrived, I wondered? In any event, his opinion was favorable, but I was surprised how carefully he had read it. It had been much more than a casual glance through.

Back at the hotel, the three of us sat down to dinner. After a vodka toast, I was suddenly plied with questions in a most unobtrusive manner, and from both sides. Such an interrogation was not altogether unexpected, but we had been in each other's company for so long that I thought the time may have passed. What did I know about the World Congress of Free Ukrainians, Petro (Peter) Savaryn, the Banderivtsi (followers of Stepan Bandera, the nationalist leader of the 1930s and 1940s in Western Ukraine)? I pleaded ignorance in all cases, although I admitted acquaintance with Savaryn's son Michael.

Andrii asked me, in his slow, quizzical manner:

"How did the Banderivtsi react to Glasnost?"

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I was not in the habit of attending meetings of the Banderivtsi, I responded.

“But if you were, how do you think you would respond,” he continued.

Well, I decided, if I had been complaining of the evils of Stalinism for 40 years, and then the Soviet media began to agree to everything I had been saying, I imagine that I would feel vindicated. Andrii stated that he had not considered such an angle.

The next morning, a Friday, Ingulsky and I took a taxi to the offices of the newspaper *Literaturna Ukraina*. Once there, we were greeted by Vitold Kyryliuk, Chief Editor of the section on international relations, a thin, balding, extremely alert man in his 50s. What looked like the entire staff of the newspaper attended the interview. I should add that at this time, *Literaturna Ukraina* was the most advanced newspaper in the Ukrainian SSR in terms of the progress of Glasnost. Kyryliuk began with Chernobyl, explaining that his newspaper had been the first to cover the Soviet nuclear industry in a critical manner. He cited the publication of the article by Lyubov Kovalevskaya about the problems of constructing the fifth Chernobyl reactor, which had been published in a prophetic manner one month before the explosion at the fourth reactor. His colleagues were very interested to hear where I had been in Kyiv. Upon hearing that I had visited the Center for Radiation Medicine, several people present assured me that I would be wise to discount everything I had been told there.

With Ingulsky bearing a pained expression, I was informed that *Literaturna Ukraina* had sent two reporters to the Narodychi district two days earlier, and that they had discovered radiation levels in the forests that were up to 80 times the natural background. (Their story was published as “The Truth About Narodychi” on June 22, 1989). In a related story on the same day, an article in *Radianska Ukraina* by V. Skoropadska and Volodymyr Kolinko contained photographs of a Geiger counter showing levels at Narodychi of more than 200 times background).

The discussion at the newspaper ranged over a wide series of topics, including the children affected with alopecia (hair loss) in Chernivtsi in western Ukraine and ecological questions. The responses were lengthy and always detailed. Finally, I asked them whether they had ever pondered the fact that whereas anyone associated in any way with Hitler’s regime was considered a potential war criminal in the West, in the Soviet Union, historians such as Roy Medvedev were continuing to insist that Stalin alone was responsible for all the crimes of the 1930s and 1940s. This made little sense to me, I added. Virtually everyone attending made a response.

Kyryliuk’s was especially notable. He referred to a well-known criminal who had carried out heinous crimes in Ukraine but was living as a very old, free man in Moscow – Lazar Kaganovich. Our newspaper would like to bring Kaganovich to justice, he declared – among other things he was regarded as responsible for the famine in Ukraine in 1933. Then there were others, somewhat less clear-cut, like the case of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, the party leader in Ukraine from 1939 to 1949 and a protégé of Kaganovich. Khrushchev, in his view, was without doubt an accomplice of Stalin, but one who had realized and tried to rectify his mistakes. I noted this apparent reluctance to criticize Khrushchev at several meetings between 1987 and 1989, which I attributed to Gorbachev’s sympathy for the former Soviet leader.

In my view, there would generally have been little difference between the views of the newspaper’s staff and those of Western observers, but for one. They maintained that under Lenin, the USSR had followed the correct course, but that under Stalin many of Lenin’s associates also followed a devious path. All the same, the statement that many of those persecuted by Stalin had themselves committed crimes held more than an element of truth.

I was very comfortable during this meeting, though Ingulsky, clearly, was less so. When we left the premises, he told me that it was easier to write articles, having talked with just a few people. The more people one talked to in Kyiv, he added, the more confused one became about the real situation. He warned me that many people did not adhere to the views of *Literaturna Ukraina*. I reminded Ingulsky of the story of the Israeli tourist who left Tel Aviv on Friday, arrived in Moscow on Saturday, and took a plane home Sunday, before writing a book entitled “The USSR: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.” He grimaced – but later told the same story to Shcherbak so he must have appreciated it. Kyryliuk himself had said that he was pleased I had enjoyed my visit because “We don’t often hear

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nice things said about us in Kyiv.”

Shcherbak joined us for lunch, full of news about the impact of his article in the June 15 issue of *Literaturna Ukraina*, published the previous day, in which he had praised Ukrainian-language education in Canada and compared it favourably with the situation in Kyiv, and had also attacked the Ukrainian Prime Minister, Vitalii Masol,[1] for what he felt was a very poor speech at the Congress of People’s Deputies.

Shcherbak and I talked about ecological issues. I mentioned that the World Congress of Free Ukrainians had established an Ecological Commission, and that I had been asked by George Kurys, a board member of the Congress from Toronto, to offer Shcherbak an honorary membership in this commission. Shcherbak felt that he could give no such commitment to an organization that was inherently political in nature. When I questioned this statement – something I would not feel inclined to do today – Fialko, who had joined our lunch table, said that the very name had a political connotation.

Shcherbak had become quite a celebrity in Kyiv. As we walked out of the hotel together, passers-by would come and greet him, or he would wave in acknowledgement as people shouted their good wishes to “Yurii Mykolaevych.” I told him to recall Andy Warhol’s comment that everyone is famous for 15 minutes. “15 minutes? That’s far too long!” was his response. I photographed him outside the Ukrainian government building, deliberately, I informed him, “so that Masol can take a pot shot at you through the window.”

At the Union of Writers, our next stop, a meeting was in progress, but the mercurial Dmytro Pavlychko suddenly burst through the door of the meeting room, sat down opposite me at a table, and demanded questions. He answered them at length but in machine-gun style. Shcherbak sat alongside him. Pavlychko was most concerned to convey the impression that while the Shevchenko Ukrainian Language Society – of which he was one of the founders – had decided not to accept foreign memberships, close relations between the Society and created sister-organizations abroad should be established. Thus, in the United States a society was being officially founded in the fall of 1989, and he would attend the ceremony. Canadians should do the same, he snapped. Have the organization in Canada, keep the money there – you can send us some if you need a tax break – and we can maintain relations.

There was some debate in the West at that time over whether foreign memberships had been curtailed by Pavlychko in order that the Society could be registered in Ukraine. I believe that there was much truth to that view. While Pavlychko made it plain that opposition to the Society was far less formidable than against the Popular Movement for Perestroika (Rukh), initially this was not the case. The previous February, he indicated, when Gorbachev spoke with him, the Soviet leader was concerned that Rukh and the Society might be the embryo of an alternative political party in Ukraine. Upon hearing the Society’s goals, however, Gorbachev was prepared to add his endorsement. Yet the promotion of the Ukrainian language evidently had its price, which in this case was the dropping of the clause that allowed membership to foreign groups and individuals.

After this meeting, Shcherbak, Fialko, and I walked back to the Dnipro Hotel. Shcherbak had about an hour before he was due to face the Kyiv citizens at a public meeting to discuss the performance of the Kyiv-based deputies at the Moscow Congress, which was being held at the Dnipro House of Culture. As we approached the building, anxious organizers approached Shcherbak, relieved that he had appeared. Although the auditorium was crammed to capacity, the front table, which was reserved for the deputies, was empty. I thought that Shcherbak might be the only deputy to show up, but eventually Valerii Hryshchuk[2] walked to the podium.

Fialko and I took up a position to the right of the auditorium. There were no seats left, and even the aisles were occupied with people sitting alongside the seats. Most of the audience, clearly, was thoroughly dissatisfied with the performance of the Ukrainian deputies in Moscow. In fact, as one man shouted, there had been no Ukrainian presence in Moscow. The question was why. Hryshchuk’s response was that he had not been given the chance to go to the podium to make his speech. In the first place, his “slip of paper” containing his request to speak had been misplaced and thus others who had applied after him were permitted to speak while he waited.

At this point, someone interrupted him loudly, asking him if he had forgotten his native language. Hryshchuk’s reply

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was that his Ukrainian was somewhat faltering and would result in some delays in response. The excuse failed manifestly to satisfy the crowd, particularly as by profession Hryshchuk was a professor at the University of Kyiv.

Shcherbak fared somewhat better at first, because his speech, while not given in Moscow, had been published in *Literaturna Ukraina*. His attack on Masol was very well received, but the audience wanted much more. Some wondered why the poet and deputy Borys Oliynyk [3] had chosen to visit Cherkasy rather than attend the Kyiv meeting. Many had denounced the Ukrainian President, Valentyna Shevchenko,[4] while others spoke contemptuously about Ukrainian Communist Party leader Volodymyr Shcherbytsky and how he had sat with other party members of the Politburo, disdainfully surveying the Congress from a distance.

Why hadn't Ukrainians supported Andrei Sakharov[5] and Yuriy Vlasov,[6] people asked? Why were there no calls for Ukraine's economic sovereignty, what about the Ukrainian Rukh? How could the Baltic presence have been so powerful and that of Ukrainians so negligible? Before long, there was some activity in our area. A banner was unfurled and eventually nailed to the wall. It demanded radical changes to the electoral law to remove all party control over the elections. Implicitly, it was a call for pluralism. A small, bespectacled man, who looked remarkably like one of the early Bolsheviks, had the contents of the banner handwritten on index cards, which he would distribute periodically amongst the audience.

As the accepted means of raising questions to the speakers was to hand a slip of paper to someone seated ahead so that it would eventually be passed forward to the front of the hall, many initially ignored this man, but shortly people began to retain the cards and to read them. Doubtless most people present would have agreed with the sentiments. One uniformed man was grinning widely at the message on the banner. Fialko made no comment.

I retained contact with Yurii Shcherbak in future years but lost contact with Fialko. I learned that he later became Foreign Policy Advisor to then Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich in 2006, and attained the rank of Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Ukraine but died on March 17, 2013 at the age of 49. Oddly, Ingulsky also died in the same year, January 21, 2013, at the age of 67. Both missed the dramatic events that would follow. Ingulsky's main legacy was his initiation of the Press Center and Office of Information of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the early 1990s.

I invited Yurii Risovanny to my home in Edmonton the following year and conducted a formal interview with him during the latter part of his stay. He confirmed that to his knowledge about 5,000 people had died at Chernobyl during his time there. I published the interview in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and the citation of the number of mortalities was picked up by *The New York Times*, contrasting with much lower figures offered by UN agencies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and World Health Organization. Few would doubt their accuracy today.

The same rift became further evident in 1990 at a conference in Kyiv sponsored by the 'Green World' environmental association (later the Green Party), led by Shcherbak and others. One of the few offers of Western aid to Chernobyl accepted by the Soviet authorities was that of businessman Armand Hammer, who had developed personal friendships with all Soviet leaders from Lenin onward. Hammer's designate was Dr. Robert Peter Gale, a 40-year old bone marrow transplant specialist and Associate Professor from the UCLA School of Medicine. Gale had conducted several transplants after the accident though ultimately all the patients died. He became a prominent voice, meeting with Gorbachev. In 1990, he was invited to speak at the Kyiv conference held by Green World, which I also attended.

Gale had cut an unusual figure in 1990s Kyiv, wearing clogs and sockless. As he walked down the aisle to deliver his speech, the clogs made a considerable noise, causing people to turn around. His speech focused on the bad habits of Ukrainians, particularly smoking, which he declared was far more dangerous to them than anything linked to excess levels of radiation. His speech was marked by a chorus of booing and thereafter he became identified among Ukrainian environmentalists with the "scientific establishment," someone who tried to water down the health effects of Chernobyl in line with the two UN agencies, the World Health Organization and the IAEA. In fairness, he was consistent. Over two decades later, when speaking about the effects of Fukushima at a meeting organized in Washington, DC, by the Health Physics Society, he declared that the risk of contracting cancer for the general public had increased by 0.002%.

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The year 1989 is best known for the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, starting with East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and followed by Bulgaria and Romania. Only in the latter country was there any violence, with the removal of Nicolae Ceaușescu, who had been in power since 1965. The psychological turning point was the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, in place since 1961 to prevent East Germans from defecting to the West. Gorbachev carries a lot of responsibility for the end of the Cold War, which is usually regarded as taking place by the end of 1989. In particular, his refusal to use force to keep the old regimes in place, in contrast to his predecessors Khrushchev (1956 in Hungary) and Brezhnev (1968 in Czechoslovakia). Glasnost, in short, extended beyond the Soviet Union to regimes that were far less secure than the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

In both Ukraine and Belarus, the changes came slowly, mainly because of the entrenchment of the Communist parties of these two republics. In Belarus, national consciousness was quite low, the population was mainly Russian-speaking, and the main inducements for change were economic conditions rather than political grievances. The economic decline of the Soviet Union was reflected with particular adversity in the republic because its industries were tied to other republics, mainly focusing on machine building, automobiles, and fertilizer products. Thus, when changes came here, it seemed initially that little had happened other than the disappearance of central control. Suddenly, political leaders had to consider issues like borders, banking, security, foreign policy, and – not least – future relations with Russia. But I am moving ahead of myself.

Linked to these tumultuous events, in October 1989, I was invited to a meeting of the CSCE in Sofia, Bulgaria, which would focus on environmental issues. My studies of Chernobyl had evidently been noted by some government people and I was invited to join the Canadian delegation at the meeting, which was attended by the highest Bulgarian leaders. Todor Zhivkov had been the First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party since 1954 – he took the appellation General Secretary in 1981 as well as the title of President, adopted a few years earlier. His regime had main headlines because of its new policy to assimilate Turks, forcing them to change their names. Protests against this policy were at their peak at the time of our arrival, In May, Zhivkov ordered the removal of Turks and Muslims to Turkey, leading to riots.

At the conference was a group called EcoGlasnost, an informal association of environmental activists. Bulgaria was well known as the East European power most dependent on nuclear power plants. Evidently, they were invited by the Foreign Minister, Petra Mladenov, but initially not allowed into the meeting hall. The opening ceremony was formal and Communist style, and I watched it from the balcony. I and several other guests were watched in turn by several men, who could only have been from the intelligence services. One approached afterward and told me he had been asked to give me a tourist visit around Sofia. He spoke in English and was courteous, if predictable. He even showed me an impressive Orthodox Church, but insisted that very few people ever attended services, other than the elderly.

Much of the conference focused on the treatment of ethnic Turks. The Americans had brought a large delegation while ours was formally led by the Canadian Ambassador to Hungary, Derek Fraser. When it was time for Turkey to speak the tension was palpable, but its delegate spoke in flawless English to the anger of the Bulgarians. About halfway through the proceedings we learned that security forces had attacked and beaten the EcoGlasnost members outside the hall. Some were taken to a forest and forced to walk back to Sofia. Subsequently, there were more anti-Bulgarian speeches, and Zhivkov and company appeared powerless to stop them. The Americans invited EcoGlasnost to join their delegation.

Fraser made a very impressive speech, in French, in support of the rights of ethnic Turks. Canada's role was important because the Americans had been expected to take such a route; Canada might have adopted a role as mediator. I was very pleased at the forthright nature of Fraser's comments, which pulled no punches. His and others' from the UK and France were humiliating for one of the Warsaw Pact's last hard line leaders; one, it appeared, who had no support from Gorbachev, who regarded him as a relic in the same category as the leaders of East Germany, which was now on the verge of collapse on its 40th anniversary.

Shortly after my return home, I learned that the Zhivkov regime had fallen, as a result of an internal revolt. Zhivkov was later arrested on charges of embezzlement and for his human rights violations, though he only served a short

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sentence under house arrest. Despite all my visits to the Soviet Union therefore, my most vivid recollection of the end of the Cold War was in Sofia, an ornate city surrounded by hills, and because of a policy that would darken the Balkans region in the near future – “ethnic cleansing” – this time for Turks because of their Muslim background and refusal to adhere to assimilation with the Bulgarian majority. In future years, Derek, who became Ambassador to Ukraine before he retired, always brought up the comment in conversations with myself and others afterward at dinner: “David and I brought down the Bulgarian government.” The Cold War was ending in Eastern Europe. Could the Soviet Union be far behind?

The end of the year also brought wonderful news. Lan gave birth to our second son, Keelan, almost exactly a year after the death of Nicole. Thankfully, he was completely healthy, though born six weeks prematurely. His birth seemed to herald the beginning of a new age, bringing hope and the prospect that the system crystallized by Stalin was beginning to change. And for me, it was a minor miracle. Our family doctor had encouraged us to have another child and there were no reasons the new infant should not be healthy.

Notes

[1] Vitalii Masol (1928-2018) served two spells as Prime Minister: Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR, July 1987-October 1990 and Prime Minister of Ukraine, June 1994-March 1995. He received a Doctorate of Technology in 1971, and was a member of the Communist Party of Ukraine.

[2] Valerii Hryshchuk (b. 1952) is a physicist from Zhytomyr region who served as a People’s Deputy of the USSR between 1989 and 1991. In 2012, he was a candidate for the Ukrainian Parliament from the Kyiv district but failed to get elected.

[3] Borys Oliynyk (1935-2017), born in Kharkiv region, was a Communist deputy in the USSR Supreme Soviet from 1989 to 1991, and a deputy in the Ukrainian Parliament from 1992 to 2006. He was also a member of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences from 1987 to 2017 as a prominent poet and writer, and winner of many awards.

[4] Valentyna Shevchenko (b. 1935) is a native of the city of Krivyi Rih who was elected Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR in March 1985 and served until June 1990.

[5] Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989) was a Russian nuclear physicist famous for his role in the development of thermal nuclear weapons. He later became a prominent human rights advocate and dissident and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975. Gorbachev brought him out of internal exile and he was elected to the USSR Congress of Deputies in March 1989 as a member of the Democratic Opposition.

[6] Yuriy Vlasov (b. 1935) is an Olympic gold-medal winning weightlifter and writer, also elected to the Congress of 1989 when he broke with the Communist Party. He also ran for president of Russia in the elections of 1996, but received only 0.2% of the vote.

About the author:

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