

SPEAKING ABOUT RIGHTS

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THE CHRF WELCOMED IN EASTERN EUROPE

PEACEFUL OFFENSIVE IN EASTERN EUROPE

by Boris Tsilevich

Eastern and Central Europe is relatively new terrain for Canadian Human Rights Foundation's activities. With the advent of perestroika and glasnost, human rights as a concept gained widespread support and respect in the region. Unfortunately, commitment to human rights is not generally accompanied with practical knowledge of the "letter and spirit" of this concept, including implementation and enforcement of human rights principles at the level of national legislation and practice.

Furthermore, in addition to the "old guard" dissidents of the Communist era who have the

"schooling" of prisons and labour camps, the present body of human rights activists is mainly comprised of young people who are eager to work but, as a rule, lack professional education in the field.

This is why human rights activists from this region greatly appreciated the opportunity to gain more knowledge and experience at the CHRF regional human rights training program. In an effort to address this growing demand for training and development in post-Communist Europe, CHRF organized a training program in Bratislava, Slovakia, May 22-27, in cooperation with the

UNESCO Human Rights Chair, Comenius University.

In 1994, Silvia Mihalikova and Ivan Kuhn from Comenius attended the CHRF human rights summer school in Montreal, which turned out to be the beginning of further promising collaboration.

About 25 human rights activists, who participated in the CHRF summer school over the last three years, were invited to the seminar in Bratislava. Almost everybody knew each other. It was a pleasure meeting old friends, like Zuza Czato from Hungary, Slawek Lodzinsky from Poland, Iлона Tomova and Haralan

Alexandrov from Bulgaria, among others. Some people (Aap Neljas, a member of the Estonian parliament) faced problems in crossing the Slovakian border. But thanks to the international rescue team, which showed excellent negotiating skills with the Slovakian border guards, our Estonian friend successfully joined us. The delegation from Russia was impressive. It was headed by Alexei Smirnov who spent five years in prison struggling

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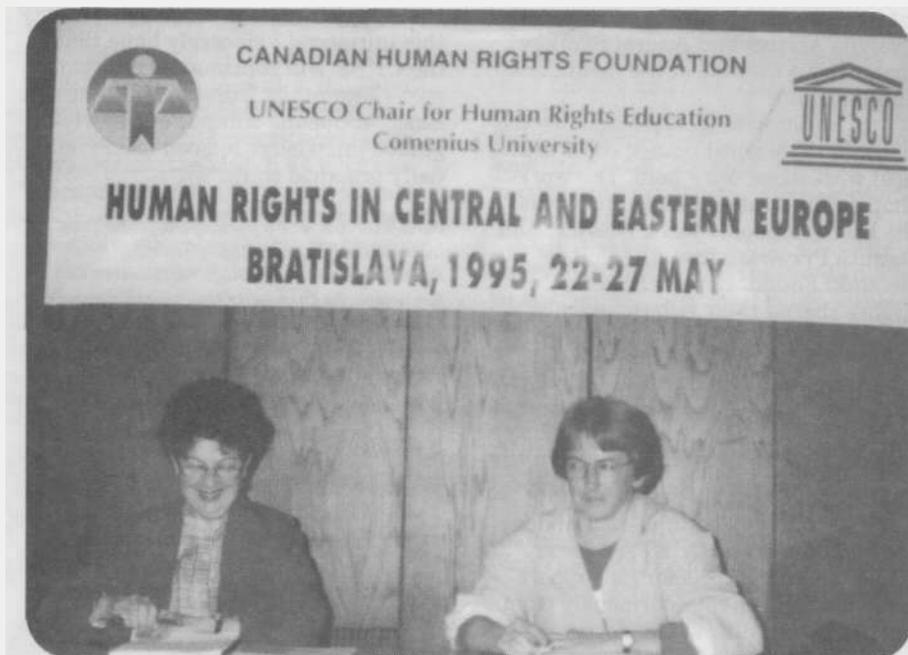
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against the Soviet regime together with Andrei Sakharov, Sergei Kovalev and other famous human rights activists. Today, Alexei runs the Moscow Human Rights Research Center.

The crew of lecturers comprised several noted scholars, governmental representatives and human rights practitioners from Canada, as well as from Eastern Europe.

Of course, we had a lot of informal talks, but owing to the very full agenda, we started to work as soon as everybody arrived. The first day was devoted to a general discussion on the trends in the field of human rights today. Participants made brief reports on the human rights situations in the various post-Communist States, followed by discussion. Such comparative analysis, moderated by Canadian experts (Professors Piotr Dutkiewicz and Ivan Jaworsky), was very useful and educational.

The discussion of minority rights was the most animated as it is a very urgent issue in Central and Eastern Europe. Much of the attention was focused on Slovakia (discussion led by Zora Butorova, Peter Huncik and Grigori Meseznikov) which, on the surface, appears peaceful and quiet.



Boris L. Tsilevich (Latvia)

Unfortunately, even this country, despite its stable movement towards complete democracy, is facing serious problems with minorities.

An overview of the legislation on minority rights in the region was prepared and published by three participants especially for this seminar. Slawek Lodzinsky from Poland, Silvia Mihalikova from Slovakia and Boris Tsilevich from Latvia were the authors; the editors were Canadian professors Magda Opalski and Piotr Dutkiewicz. The book will be published shortly by Oxford Press - yet another concrete example of fruitful cooperation between the CHRF and East European human rights activists.

Each day, the seminar focused on interesting topics. The problem of refugee flows, though rather new for the region, is becoming increasingly urgent. The session on the concept and various perspectives of multiculturalism as well as its possible applications in Eastern Europe was very controversial and the subject of heated debate. Judy Young from the Department of Canadian Heritage, Terrance Mooney from the Canadian embassy in Bratislava, Professors Raymond Breton and Vince Wilson made excellent presentations, followed by a lively exchange. Discussion on the development of civil society and development of NGOs in the region, led by Miroslav Kusy, Alexei Avtonomov, Martin Ill and others, was obviously of vital interest for nearly all the participants. Evelyne Abitbol and Andrei Skolkay spoke about the role of the media and human rights.

In addition to lectures and discussions on theoretical issues, some practical workshops were held. The workshop on fund raising techniques was the best attended. Marek Nowicki and Danuta Przywara from the Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights shared their rich experience.

Naturally, I remember my own training course, entitled "Computers for Human Rights Practitioners", best of all. Educated as a physicist, I worked as a programmer for ten years and the subject is still very dear to me. I believe that the human rights activists' network, established under the auspices of the CHRF, requires proper technical tools for its support. Activists can benefit enormously from the use of computers and electronic

mail, in particular. It seems to me that people, educated in the humanities, often have a kind of inferiority complex or diffidence with regard to computers. Besides, we East Europeans have much less opportunity to use computers than our North American colleagues. Nevertheless, I hope that quite soon we will feel much more comfortable with them as computers will considerably facilitate and help our human rights activities.

Although the program was both intensive and comprehensive, we still managed to get acquainted with picturesque and friendly Bratislava and its environs. We visited different historical places, like old castles. We even visited a well-known distillery and sampled their excellent Slovakian wine!

I will never forget our late-night conversations near the bonfire, on the marvelous Danube shore, and songs sung by Gregory Marianovsky from the Ukraine who, in addition to his human rights activities, writes lyrics and composes music.

It was an excellent week. We absorbed a lot of ideas which were challenging intellectually. But even more importantly, this was a week spent with people sharing the same beliefs and convictions. Being together with like-minded friends is extremely inspiring and encouraging for those who are involved in human rights which, as we all know, can often have its frustrations.

Many thanks to Ruth Selwyn for this initiative! I sincerely hope that the CHRF will continue its efforts in post-Communist Europe, and that we East Europeans will put our newly-gained knowledge to good use in our daily practical work.

Boris Tsilevich was a participant in the 1994 International Human Rights Training Programme and in the Regional Seminar in Bratislava. As Director of the Social Research Department of Insight Ltd., he is an advisor to the government of Latvia on human rights legislation and on ethnic issues in particular.