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A Soviet Poet Speaks Out

"Gorbachev initially put out *glasnost*' and *perestroika* for Western consumption," Irina Ratushinskaia told the Harriman Institute February 25. "In the Soviet Union we used to pronounce these words with an American accent." Ratushinskaia, who left the Soviet Union in 1986, is a poet and human rights advocate. She spoke to Institute students and faculty on "Human Rights and Gorbachev's Policies."

"I think the Soviet Union is a totalitarian society because only in a totalitarian society would there be prisoners of conscience," said the poet, who was sentenced in 1983 by a Soviet court to seven years in prison and five years exile for "illegal dissemination of poetry." She noted that Soviets not only are prevented from leaving the country but are also restricted from moving within the USSR. When she moved from Odessa to be with her new husband in Kiev, she could not work until getting a special stamp in her internal passport. Even whole nations, like the Crimean Tatars, have been relocated and forbidden to return to their homelands.

Personnel changes in the Soviet leadership do not mean lasting changes. When Khrushchev and Brezhnev came to power they removed people from the previous administrations, and Gorbachev is just doing the same. "It doesn't matter who will work in this huge bureaucratic machine, because anyway the machine will work in the same way."

Human Rights

"When we speak about human rights I really cannot see any basic change in this direction," she said. Two hundred prisoners of conscience have been released in recent years but many other new people have been arrested. Recently an Estonian dissident was arrested for trying to publish the Non-Aggression Pact which Stalin and Hitler signed in 1939. And there are still about 3000 prisoners of conscience in the USSR, including religious and human rights advocates.

Ratushinskaia noted she was in labor camp while Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev were in

power, and "the times under Gorbachev were the worst." There was constant pressure on the inmates to renounce their positions, to say "I admit I am a real criminal. I renounce my views." She felt this was primarily intended to show to the West. "I have no right to believe in Gorbachev's human rights policy until the last prisoner of conscience is released."

She added, "I am not a political thinker. There is no perfect society, but there are democratic societies. I know there are problems in the United States, but your problems are those of human nature, not of freedom." In order to change things, the Soviet people must have courage to refuse to participate in and follow the orders of the Soviet bureaucratic machine; any new system in the Soviet Union must be the product of free elections. When asked what changes in the USSR would satisfy her she said, "I will be satisfied when there are real human rights. The less the government will control peoples' lives, the better. The function of government should be to stop real crimes and communicate with other governments, not tell people what to do."

Collaboration

The only safe way to live in the Soviet Union is to collaborate with the system, whether you believe in it or not. All citizens are compelled to take part. For instance, everyone "has to have one hour a week of so-called political information. No one can avoid this lecture," during which people are expected to regurgitate newspaper and television reports. Ratushinskaia pointed out that the purpose of this is not to make people believe what the news organizations say, since many do not, but to force them to be a part of the system.

She noted that the cultural liberalization we are seeing could end quickly. "I am happy to hear that books by Pasternak and Bulgakov are published now. But it is very easy for the government to turn the screws, because the government controls all the publications." Just because there are



changes, "it doesn't mean Gorbachev is going to give freedom of speech to everyone — just correspondents and part of the intelligentsia."

The government still controls the media and most artists. She noted that "Evgenii Evtushenko is a good example of a controlled poet." Evtushenko was a brave reformer during the Khrushchev era. But when times changed under Brezhnev, he changed his tune; now, under Gorbachev, he again is a reformer. Evtushenko does not speak beyond the limits of what is officially acceptable. Ratushinskaia was challenged at this point by a member of the audience who said that Evtushenko was working within the system to try to make it better. She replied that she does not judge those who give into pressure because "the system which forces people to behave like this is responsible." But she did not change her tune, and that is why she was put in a labor camp.

Recent Changes

"Gorbachev is much wiser and more realistic than other Soviet authorities. He is wise enough to admit that the Com-

munist Party is not popular in the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union is not popular outside the USSR." Despite her views on Gorbachev, she praised him for one of his reforms, saying, "I respect his initiative to stop alcoholism in our country. But unfortunately I have to admit he is not very popular among our people because of this, and this is one time I disagree with the majority of the population."

Ratushinskaia is pleased with a few other developments in the Soviet Union. She noted that there is now discussion in the media of the "double-bind" of women, who are expected to work full-time and then do all of the housework and cooking at home. Ironically, in labor camp one of her fellow inmates was a feminist who had been jailed for writing about the same subject. She is also pleased at how many young people in the USSR are turning to God, saying that before she left she was surprised by how many children she saw baptized and added, "Society cannot survive for long without believing in God."

Reported by Paul Lerner with assistance from Robert Monyak

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