

An Open Letter to the Voting Members of the Shevchenko Scientific Society

I am writing this letter in anticipation of the next general elections to the leadership of the Shevchenko Scientific Society (“the Society”). Its purpose is to share my opinion that neither Halyna Hryn nor George Grabowicz should be reelected to leadership positions in the next administration.

For some time now I have heard complaints from fellow members of the Society about it having become a kind of piggy bank for the projects of and/or projects directed by Prof. Grabowicz. As I have been engrossed in other matters and since, short of myself seeing concrete evidence in support of some claim, I tend to remain open minded, I had not formed any opinions regarding this matter. But evidence relating to several related issues has recently come my way, which evidence now prompts me to write this Open Letter.

As reported in the Minutes of the Society’s Board (the “Uprava”) meeting on December 4, 2010, the Board agreed to provide Prof. Grabowicz with a honorarium of \$30,000 to write an English language book about Taras Shevchenko, an endeavor that would be part of the Society’s celebration of the 200th anniversary of the poet’s birth. As I understand it, \$15,000 was provided to Prof. Grabowicz as an advance and the remainder was to be paid out when the project was completed. The date for the completion of the project, i.e., the book’s publication, was set to be two years later, in March of 2012. And this \$30,000 amount was to be part of a total of \$300,000 that the Board allocated to Shevchenko projects, most or all of which would be directed by Grabowicz.

Before launching into a discussion about the curious saga involving this project, it bears mention that the idea of providing the Harvard Professor, avowedly someone who had spent a good portion of his long career as an academic and intellectual developing his knowledge and understanding of Shevchenko, with a honorarium to write a book about Shevchenko is a bit odd. To be sure, the Board did vote in favor of this arrangement, but isn’t writing books about their respective subjects of study what professors are supposed to do? And hadn’t the Ukrainian community already been paying the professor’s salary all those years insofar as it was Ukrainian community donations that had funded the endowed chair of Ukrainian literature that the professor occupied all of these years? But be that as it may, let’s return to the issues at hand.

It turns out that, almost a decade after the due date for his Shevchenko monograph, for which he had received an advance on his honorarium, there is no monograph. This state of affairs prompted me to make an inquiry with Dr. Hryn, someone with whom I had been acquainted for decades, to find out whether indeed there had been no monograph and, if so, whether she had ever asked Prof. Grabowicz to return the advance. Further, if she had not, why she had not done so. This inquiry was communicated to Dr. Hryn in an email from me dated August 26, 2021.

I did not receive a response. Two weeks later, on September 11, 2021, I again emailed Dr. Hryn and wrote the following: “Do please now respond to my questions, which I cannot imagine would take longer than just a few minutes. And, again, if I am mistaken about something factual that was referred to in my initial email, kindly tell me what that may be. Thank you, and I am looking forward to your response.” I have not received a response to this email either.

Back in the spring of this year, I received a Society communication in which Dr. Hryn informed about the sudden termination of Vasyl Lopuch’s employment at the Society, which termination was explained as resulting from Hryn’s having “lost confidence” in Mr. Lopuch. Not knowing Lopuch personally or much about him, I presumed that Hryn was being gentlemanly (gentlewomanly?) with her choice of words so as to avoid unnecessarily making public the exact nature of the misfeasance or malfeasance that Lopuch may have committed that then led to his termination. But it turned out that, strangely, Hryn’s words were actually meant to be taken literally and not as a substitute for greater or more revealing candor.

As reflected in recorded remarks at the March 27, 2021, meeting of the Board, Dr. Hryn in fact stated, in Ukrainian, that she had “lost confidence” in Mr. Lopuch because Lopuch had, unbeknownst to her, been recruiting potential members for an alternative list of candidates for the upcoming elections. What apparently aroused Hryn’s ire was that Lopuch had not alerted her to his activities in advance. So that, apparently, was the extent of his transgressions. But what is of relevance to this letter is that during her explanation of *why* she had found Lopuch’s non-publicized approaches to potential members of a second list of candidates to have been so purportedly egregious, she twice invoked the risk of Lopuch’s actions creating a possible conflict of interest. It’s not exactly clear what would constitute a possible of conflict of interest here, but that is of secondary importance. What is of primary significance is that Hryn, in her capacity as Society President, several times emphasized the importance for the Society of avoiding possible conflicts of interest.

The actions of Dr. Hryn and Prof. Grabowicz as Society office holders implicate a hornets nest of actual and possible conflicts of interest. Most or all of the publications funded by the Society as part of the projects over which Grabowicz has control were issued by a publishing enterprise of which Grabowicz appears to be the 90% owner. But neither Hryn nor anyone else on the Board seems to have been troubled by this apparent conflict of interest. Then, since many or most of these publications appear to have enjoyed joint sponsorship, i.e., sponsorship from the Society as well as other institutions, it is unclear to what extent, if any, there may have been a kind of double dipping, which is a potential issue only because of who the owner of the publishing house at which all of these books were published is. Furthermore, Grabowicz is one of Hryn’s bosses in her day job. Hryn is an employee of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and as such is subordinate to that Institute’s leadership, which consists of the three holders of the chairs in Ukrainian studies, of which three chairs Grabowicz has long held one. For whatever reason, Hryn apparently has not asked Grabowicz to return the advance provided by the

Society for the Shevchenko monograph that to date he has not produced, although it is obvious why any such request could be rather awkward for her.

Apparently the individuals who encouraged and endorsed Mr. Lopuch's candidacy for President (as I understand it, Lopuch is now a candidate for Vice President on a different, non-incumbent list) were three former Society presidents. That is somewhat of an unusual state of affairs for the Society. I have not spoken with any of those earlier presidents to find out what prompted their action in support of Lopuch's candidacy for President, but I do know that if avoiding conflicts of interest is a priority for our Society, as Hryn certainly appears to think it is or should be the case, then neither she nor Prof. Grabowicz should be elected to leadership positions at the Society so long as there exist open questions of the kind mentioned above.

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A Full Member