

Vitvitsky Response to the Letters of Hryn and Grabowicz

Our president Dr. Halyna Hryn has sent out a “Letter to Full and Corresponding Members” dated October 28 (the “Hryn Letter”), and on October 31 Professor George Grabowicz has sent out his “A Response by Former President George G. Grabowicz to the Letter of Dr. Bohdan Vitvitsky of Oct. 18, 2021,” (the “Grabowicz Letter”). Each of these letters raises or tries to raise numerous points. The Hryn Letter is 8 pages long and the Grabowicz Letter is 9 pages long plus addenda. A few of their points require a response, and a few prompt a response.

The Central Issues Regarding Conflicts of Interest at NTSb

Hryn and Grabowicz, respectively, acknowledge the accuracy of the points contained in the questions/issues raised in my initial Open Letter. Specifically, they acknowledge, either explicitly or by failing to deny, that: (a) an advance *was* paid to Prof. Grabowicz for the writing of a Shevchenko monograph; (b) this monograph was due in 2012 and has not been produced; (c) Hryn has not asked Grabowicz to return the advance; (d) Grabowicz has been one of her superiors, albeit perhaps not her immediate superior but one higher up in the hierarchy; (e) the books published in the series advanced and directed by Grabowicz and funded by our Society were published by one Ukrainian publisher, namely, Krytyka; and (f) that Grabowicz has been the personal owner of Krytyka. The Hryn and Grabowicz letters, respectively, are a “yes, *but* . . .” kind of letters. Some combination of “yes, but the conduct about which you have written is not so important,” and “yes, but this conduct is not so unusual,” and “yes, but we have refurbished the lobby to the NTSb building. . . .” That is certainly a position that each of them is entitled to take. Some who are persuaded by it may vote for the Hryn-Grabowicz slate of candidates; those who are not may decide to vote against it. My own position is clear.

The Auditing Committee and its “Review”

At the beginning of the Hryn Letter, a point she also repeats towards the end of that letter, Hryn informs the membership that the Society’s Audit Committee (the “Kontrol’na komisija”) “is initiating a full review and will report on its findings to the membership.” (Hryn Letter, p. 1). For the following reasons, any such “review” would be altogether irrelevant to the issues raised above and might only constitute some type of awkward whitewash.

To begin, my initial Open Letter, as twice explicitly there noted, addresses the upcoming *election*, it does not seek any censure or anyone’s removal. The Auditing Committee has no role to play in the electoral choice for the Society’s president and other members of the Board. A failure to understand this is akin to not understanding the distinction between speech directed at an electoral result and speech that seeks impeachment.

Second, as noted above, Hryn has already in her Letter acknowledged all of the points that I had raised, so what exactly is there to “review”?

Third, the one issue into which the Auditing Committee could and should look is the “packing the hall” issue involving the sudden addition of new voting members. In a letter dated August 9, 2021, and addressed to, among others, Dr. Halyna Hryn, President, and Dr. Roman Kuc, Chair of the Auditing Committee, Michael Hrycak asked, on behalf of what he refers to as the “alternative slate,” that the Society impose a moratorium on any membership upgrades to voting status. Independently of this letter and without any communication with Mr. Hrycak, whom I do not know, I by email asked Prof. Kuc what, if anything, his Auditing Committee was going to do about the “packing the hall” situation. I do not know whether he has responded to Hrycak, but he certainly has not responded to my query.

Fourth, remarkably Kuc seems not to have any understanding of what conflict of interest principles mean or what their implications are. He is simultaneously the Chair of the Auditing Committee on the current Board *and* he is a candidate for office on the slate of election candidates for the next Board that has been assembled by Hryn. In an email dated October 25 to Roman Brukh, who I understand to be the head of the natural sciences Section in our Society, which email Kuc also copied to all members of Brukh’s Section, Kuc wrote:

I was surprised and dismayed that you forwarded the Vitvitsky letter to the full voting and non-voting membership of the Phys/Math section as it contained no information of scientific or mathematical merit. The letter contained aspersions regarding the slate that I am associated with. It has been a long-held tradition of NTShA that a first-term president be allowed a second term to complete the goal and programs started in their first term. President Halyna Hryn certainly deserves to continue her accomplishments . . .
..

Was this reproach to a Section head sent in Kuc’s capacity as a candidate? Was it sent in his capacity as the Chair of the Auditing Committee? Was the “full review” about which *three days later* Hryn wrote in her Letter that the Chair of the Auditing Committee is initiating already concluded? This is all an embarrassing comedy of errors.

False Allegations About an Alleged Conflict of Interest

The allegations that Mr. Vasyl’ Lopukh, the former administrator at our Society, was guilty of a conflict of interest (and needed to be dismissed on the spot) from the outset struck me as curious and as probably pretextual because it was less than obvious to me exactly what the nature of the conflict was supposed to have been. Now that I have had an opportunity to gather more information, I see that the allegations are simply bogus.

In the Grabowicz Letter (as well as in Hryn's Letter and also in statements made during the March 27 Meeting of the Board), the allegations against Lopukh are semi-hysterical. Grabowicz writes about "the particularly egregious case of conflict of interest surrounding Mr. Lopukh's initial state of his campaign for the Society's Presidency." (Grabowicz Letter, pp. 2-3.) Later Grabowicz writes:

To run for office in secret, thereby also deceiving his employer[,] was unethical. By deceiving his colleagues and his employer he was breaking trust with them and in effect organizing a kind of palace coup. This was Soviet- and post-Soviet-style *adminresurs* at its most blatant, and a classic case of conflict of interest—where Mr. Lopukh is both employee and a secret candidate to supplant, literally engineer the defeat of his duly elected employer. (Grabowicz Letter, p. 3.)

These claims do not hold water. They also verge on the bizarre. I begin with the reasons why they are wrong. First, in any situation in which elections are expected to be competitive, it is perfectly normal for someone contemplating a run for an office to start with exploratory communications of the type: "If I run for office, would you support my candidacy?" "If I am assembling a list of candidates to run for office, would you be willing to join me?" No potential candidate for a competitive election starts out without sending out some proverbial "feelers." That is, no one in his right mind starts out by publicly announcing a candidacy and only then seeing whether anyone out there will support that candidacy. Beginning in February of this year, Mr. Lopukh did exactly that, namely, he engaged in exploratory outreach. That is not in any way objectionable.

Then by a letter from three former presidents who endorsed the Lopukh slate of candidates, the Hryn-Grabowicz Board was informed of the Lopukh candidacy on March 26 of this year, the day before its quarterly meeting on March 27. *Prior to that point in time, no one, neither Lopukh nor anyone else, at NTSh had performed any actions in preparation for elections to the Board.* So leaving aside for a moment the question whether there is even in fact anything about a NTSh administrator's election-related duties that could create a conflict of interest if he were also a candidate in that election, *clearly no election action had been taken by March 27*—the date on which Lopukh's candidacy was made public and the date of the Board meeting at which he was then excoriated by Hryn and Grabowicz and dismissed from his job—that could even theoretically constitute a conflict. If Hryn and Lopukh had had a close personal friendship, one might imagine how Hryn might have been hurt or offended by Lopukh's initially keeping his possible candidacy under wraps, but a personal slight does not a conflict of interest make.

The other accusation, namely, that Mr. Lopukh employed administrative resources by having access to the membership list has no merit. Any member of our Society has the right to access the membership list.

And now to that which is more than a little curious. Prof. Grabowicz accuses Lopukh of seeking to organize a “palace coup.” (p. 1.) He also writes of Lopukh attempting to “ambush” the Board (p. 3) and of seeking “regime change.” (p. 4.) Lopukh’s purported sin was to seek the defeat of “his duly elected employer.” (p. 3.) And, Lopukh had allegedly “broken trust with her, his direct employer.” (p. 3.)

Is the Shevchenko Scientific Society some kind of fiefdom or minor kingdom in which elections constitute palace coups, ambushes and regime changes? What is the name of the occupying regime in our current palace? Is it the House of Grabowicz? The House of Harvard? And when did an employee of our Society become not an employee of the Society but of her Highness, our president? Our queen? Talk of palace coups, regime change, ambushes and of an employee of the Society purportedly becoming an employee of the Society’s president rather than the Society is talk that is off the proverbial reservation.

A Few Peripheral Issues to Be Treated in the Form of Footnotes

1. On p. 6 in her Letter, Hryn writes that “three former presidents [of this Society] were caught up in this deception,” apparently referring to the former administrator not going public with his explorations of forming an electoral slate. Writing that someone was deceived *without* providing very specific supportive detail, such as, for example, that “I spoke with former president X, and X informed that he/she now acknowledges that he/she was deceived about _____” is *not* an acceptable part of any serious discourse.
2. On p. 5 in her Letter, Hryn writes “Dr. Vitvitsky’s letter is thoroughly personal, rooted in conflicts from the distant past. It is also explicitly political, directly linked to the upcoming election.” And Grabowicz opens his Letter by claiming that my Open Letter “appears to be the first salvo of the Motyl-Lopukh campaign. . . .” Yes, of course, my Open Letter was directly linked to the upcoming election insofar as, as I openly stated, that was the entire point of my letter. But I am not a candidate for any NTS office on anyone’s list, and I do not represent the “Motyl-Lopukh” or anyone else’s “campaign.” Either the points I raised are accurate or inaccurate. As is evident from the Hryn and Grabowicz Letters, respectively, my points are accurate. Everything else is a distraction.
3. I believe that there is a typo, which I hope was unintentional, in Hryn’s Letter on p. 5 where she writes that Prof. Grabowicz retired in 2020. It is my understanding that he finally retired from Harvard in June 2021.
4. On pages 3-4 in the Hryn Letter we read that: “It is something of an irony that the organization of which Dr. Vitvitsky is now president, the Ukrainian Studies Fund [“USF”], supported this publisher [i.e., Krytyka] for a number of years. . . . It was only with the decision of the USF to initiate and direct all its resources to the Ukrainian Studies program at Columbia that the subsidies [to Krytyka] stopped.” Grabowicz in turn goes on at greater length about the Ukrainian Studies Fund, Harvard and Columbia. On p. 4 he claims that “in recent years [the USF] has taken to criticizing HURI [the Harvard Ukrainian

Research Institute]” whereas earlier it had “passionately supported the Ukrainian studies program at Harvard. . . .” Grabowicz then asserts that “[w]hile criticizing HURI, however, he [Vitvitsky] is silent about Columbia, about its present work and its prospects, and about its program which to me and some of my colleagues seems rather limited. . . . It is a shame, I feel, that little is done to remedy the situation—especially by explaining why their program is so modest.”

Where in my Open Letter did I say anything about the Ukrainian Studies Fund or Harvard or Columbia? I did not. So what is the relevance of any of these claims made by Hryn and Grabowicz to any of the points that I raised? None. Regrettably, Hryn’s and Grabowicz’s statements about the USF, Harvard and Columbia are not only irrelevant but also inaccurate, so some factual corrections are in order.

(A) The Ukrainian Studies Fund, Krytyka and Prof. Grabowicz

During the years 1997-2002, the Ukrainian Studies Fund (the “USF”) provided Krytyka with about \$100,000 and it also purchased and arranged for transportation to Ukraine for computers for Krytyka. It did not continue to provide further funding for the simple reason that the USF does not provide endless support to any single project. Ending support for Krytyka after the USF had already invested over \$100,000 in that project had nothing to do with whether or not the USF was supporting Ukrainian studies at Columbia, which support the USF has provided and is providing. But to correct another piece of misinformation in the Hryn and Grabowicz Letters, the USF has never decided to put *all* of its resources into supporting Columbia. To cite but a few examples, since 2002 the USF has supported numerous projects, both large and small, that do not involve either Columbia or Harvard, including, at present, a multi-year project at the Ukrainian Catholic University researching the number and identities of Ukrainians killed by various Polish formations before, during and after WW II. Another USF project involves helping UVAN preserve its archives. These are not USF or USF-related archives, these are UVAN archives whose preservation is important for Ukrainian scholarship, so the USF has stepped up to the proverbial plate by organizing and paying for such preservation, something it has also done for some Ukrainian archives in Europe. And the USF continues to provide support to Harvard insofar as the USF provided Harvard with funds for two projects as recently as two and three years ago.

In or about 2002, the USF provided Prof. Grabowicz with a total of \$15,000 in response to his request for help in preparing a monograph that was to be called “Comparative Images.” Twenty years later, that book has yet to appear.

On p. 6 of his Letter, Prof. Grabowicz makes somewhat of a puzzling claim, namely, that for the 2014 exhibition at the Ukrainian Museum in New York of Shevchenko's artwork, he had prepared and written an introduction to the book-length catalogue for that exhibition. And about that catalogue, Grabowicz writes that:

in terms of content and impact it surely satisfied the original intent of my contracted book, that is a basic treatment of Shevchenko's biography *and* of his multifaceted role as poet, artist, prose writer and national icon. Various people I spoke to felt that with this I had implicitly done my task, that this was an equivalent of [the book for which NTSh had provided an advance]. . . .

But if memory serves, Grabowicz received separate compensation from the Ukrainian Museum to prepare that catalogue and a YouTube video, so what is the sense of trying to suggest that somehow the preparation of the catalogue for the Museum could be construed as equivalent to writing the book for which the NTSh had provided him with its advance of \$15,000?

(B) The USF and Support for Ukrainian Studies at Harvard and at Columbia

Beginning in 1957, the Ukrainian Studies Fund has raised funds in the North American Ukrainian communities to support and promote Ukrainian studies. Since about 1969 and as a result of this fund raising, the Ukrainian community has provided Harvard with about \$20 million. Since this money began to be donated over half of a century ago, it has now grown to a much larger sum, which sum now generates over \$3.8 million annually. Such funds have now for decades paid the salaries of the three holders of the endowed chairs in Ukrainian history, literature and philology, and they have supported the operation and activities of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute etc. Ukrainian studies at Columbia have received less than a quarter of the money that Harvard has received, and because the donations it received tend to be much more recent, the annual amount of money generated by its much smaller endowments is less than one-tenth of Harvard's annual amount.

For reasons that are not clear, Grabowicz appears to need to denigrate the Columbia program: he asks why, purportedly, it "seems rather limited" and goes on to write that "[i]t is a shame, I feel, that little is done to remedy the situation—especially by explaining why their program is so modest."

To remind everyone again, none of this has anything to do with the conflict of interest issues at NTSh about which I have written. That said, it is Grabowicz's criticisms of Ukrainian studies at Columbia that are ironic. Columbia has thus far received a fraction of the money that Harvard has received from the Ukrainian community. The Ukrainian studies program at Columbia has only two full time personnel, some adjunct personnel and some

visiting personnel. But in this semester, Columbia is offering eight courses in Ukrainian studies: (i) Elementary Ukrainian Language; (ii) Intermediate Ukrainian Language; (iii) Advanced Ukrainian Through Literature, Media and Politics; (iv) Ukrainian Foreign Policy: Russia, Europe and the U.S.; (v) Soviet and Post-Soviet Colonial and Postcolonial Film; (vi) Ukraine and Ukrainians in New York; (vii) Revolutionary Ukraine, 1917-2017, History's Flashpoints and Today's Memory Wars; and (viii) Ukrainian Nationalism and its Mythmaking from Interwar to Postwar Years.

How many Ukrainian studies courses are being taught at Harvard? A half of that number? A third? And the two full-time lecturers at Columbia have also recently produced three books between them, one of which is the only major Ukrainian to English dictionary that has appeared in North America in the last 50 years, and this 970-page volume is the only Ukrainian-English Collocation Dictionary ever to have been written. It was not produced by any of the holders of endowed chairs at Harvard. So perhaps Columbia's Ukrainian studies program is not so "limited" and "modest" after all.

(C) Prof. Grabowicz's reference to the USF's "dispute with HURI about a will"

Among a host of other irrelevant claims, Grabowicz writes that I am now the head the Ukrainian Studies Fund, which is true. He then goes on to claim that whereas from the late 1960s to the early 2000s this organization passionately supported the Ukrainian Studies Program at Harvard, it has in recent years taken to criticizing HURI. And, that "[r]ecently the USF was involved in a dispute with HURI about a will—and the resentment and rancor from that is still palpable in Dr. Vitvitsky's letter." (Grabowicz Letter, p. 4.)

For the historical record, the USF has raised many millions of dollars to establish the endowments at Harvard that created the chairs, one of which Prof. Grabowicz was blessed to occupy for many decades; it provided the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute with current expense funds and paid off significant debts that the Institute had run up; it helped many of the individual professors associated with Harvard; and it faithfully defended HURI and the various professors there from frequently unfounded and misdirected criticisms and attacks.

I'm not certain that it was in Grabowicz's interest to raise the issue of the will, but since he has done so, it invites some explanation. In 2016 a Ukrainian community member in California who had on four occasions donated to the USF and who had never donated to, communicated with or had any other direct relationship with Harvard left an estate that he willed exclusively to Ukrainian organizations in the U.S. and to relatives in Ukraine. The bulk of the estate was left to the "Harvard University Ukrainian Studies Fund," one of the names (used only in English, not in Ukrainian) that the USF used back in the 1970s and 1980s when the California gentleman who had

left this estate made his four donations to the USF. This will also left modest bequests to NTSh, UVAN and the Foundation in Support of the Ukrainian Free University.

Prof. Grabowicz learned of this will in his capacity as an officer at NTSh. He then took this information back to Harvard and HURI, and Harvard launched litigation to try and wrest the estate from the USF for itself. After three years of litigation, substantial legal fees and many hundreds, if not thousands of hours of wasted time, the matter settled. There is an old and well worn adage that one shouldn't bite the hand that has fed you. It is obviously not a piece of wisdom to which Harvard subscribes. Harvard is not only quite happy to bite the hand that has fed it but even to chew an entire arm off. This was a shameful incident. That said, and despite various criticisms of it that I have heard in Ukraine, I to this day still personally pay for a subscription to Krytyka in order to support it. When one of the Harvard professors writes a book that I think deserves praise, I so praise it. And when, for example, the need arose two and three years ago to support a scholar at Harvard's Kennedy School, I supported the decision at the USF to fund that scholar. But when I see behavior that is questionable, wherever that may be, I call it the way that I see it.

Addendum

A personal observation: I have throughout my life been a member of numerous Ukrainian community organizations, I have served in the leadership of a good number of them, and I have been the president of four or five. In my entire experience with such organizations, I have found that when it comes time to pass the leadership baton, it is almost always necessary to lobby, cajole and even beg new persons to take over. I have never seen a situation in which an incumbent slate of people fights this hard to maintain the levers of power as is happening this year in our Society.

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