

Putin Won't Be Swayed by Hunger Strikes (Op-ed)

The Russian president is making an example of Oleg Sentsov.

By [Leonid Bershidsky](#)

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Last week, the hunger strike by the Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov in a Russian prison crossed the 100-day mark. That exceeds the 66-day protest that caused the death of Irish Republican Army member Bobby Sands in 1981, and is close to the length of the 1986 fast by Soviet dissident Anatoly Marchenko, who stopped at 117 days, but died 10 days later.

Sentsov's decision to refuse food until Russia frees all of its Ukrainian political prisoners (various lists contain between 64 and 71 names) has drawn attention. World leaders including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as the U.S. State Department and members of Congress, media and public intellectuals have called for his release. He was sentenced to 20 years in a prison camp on shaky charges of setting fire to the Crimea headquarters of Russia's ruling United Russia party (no one was injured in the

incident) and allegedly plotting more terrorist attacks in the annexed peninsula. His high profile makes his case a test of the effectiveness of the prison hunger strike in the 21st century.

Scholars describe these protests as a symbolic way of turning weakness into strength. “The weak body becomes the strong body due to the amount of inner strength and moral dedication expressed through the deterioration of the body itself,” Britta Timm Knudsen and Carsten Stage wrote. In a 2012 book on prisoners of conscience, Gerard Hauser said the fasts were a powerful declaration of agency, of a human being’s ability to act even within the extreme constraints of prison.

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In that sense, the method has been effective many times. The IRA hunger strike, during which Sands was elected to the British parliament, made Margaret Thatcher’s government intensely uncomfortable and fueled waves of popular support for the IRA’s cause. It ended up shifting the direction of the political process in Northern Ireland toward the settlement that remains in place today. The international uproar over Marchenko’s death motivated Mikhail Gorbachev to release the Soviet Union’s political prisoners in 1987.

Many hunger strikes, however, have failed to achieve much. In Turkey in the 2000s, hundreds of inmates refused food to protest inhumane conditions, and the government allowed dozens to starve to death before making insignificant concessions that led the last of the hunger strikers to desist in 2007. Multiple hunger strikes in the U.S.-run detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have led to nothing except force-feeding. What is known as history’s longest hunger strike, the 16-year fast by Indian activist Irom Sharmila (much of it in detention, almost all with a feeding tube in her nose) ended with no result.

It’s not enough for a hunger striker to be prepared to die (the Turkish prisoners were and failed to have their demands met) and for the cause to generate attention (Sharmila’s did). The opposite side must be willing to show compassion or accept moral responsibility, if only after protesters die. That’s often a matter of political calculation. The U.S. didn’t see much to gain by making concessions to the prisoners of Guantanamo, nor did the Turkish government, at least at first. Force-feeding is the modern-day fallback for governments dealing with hunger strikers whose demands they cannot imagine accepting. The European Court for Human Rights and other international bodies have acknowledged that the practice is acceptable when it’s done to save a prisoner’s life.

Related article: [Can Oleg Sentsov’s Hunger Strike Be Successful?](#)

Sentsov has avoided force-feeding by agreeing to take a couple of spoonfuls of a nutrient mix each day. This keeps him alive and allows him to sustain the hunger strike past the threshold of around 60 days that Sands and his comrades were unable to cross. But his health is deteriorating, and like Marchenko, he may have trouble absorbing food once the hunger strike is over. In any case, there is no sign that President Vladimir Putin will make even the slightest concession or release Sentsov.

Putin appears to be waiting to see how long Sentsov will command international attention. The Russian leader, who has made toughness on terror one of his trademarks, appears to be more interested in making an example of the Ukrainian than in showing a human side. As in other unsuccessful hunger strike cases, Sentsov lacks a flexible opponent or even an empathetic one.

The possible failure of Sentsov's hunger strike, which began May 14, is a dire prospect to contemplate. In undeclared, hybrid wars like the one between Russia and Ukraine, civilians are often as threatened as soldiers. There should be a way to treat them as prisoners of war rather than criminals. The two countries urgently need a deal, if only an informal one, to set mutually acceptable criteria for what would essentially be hostage exchanges. No matter what, Sentsov's time is running out fast.

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