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Why Oleg Sentsov's Hunger Strike Ended (Op-ed)

The end of the Ukrainian filmmaker's hunger strike illustrates the state's extreme callousness.

By Pavel Aptekar

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Oleg Sentsov / AP / TASS

When the authorities threatened to force feed Oleg Sentsov, he announced he was calling off his hunger strike. Some have described the decision as a personal defeat. Others claim it discredits hunger striking more broadly as a last resort in demanding justice and compassion from the state. Others, however, see it as a sign of the profound indifference leaders have to the root causes behind these kinds of protests.

Sentsov, the Ukrainian filmmaker held in Russian on terrorism charges, began his hunger strike in May to demand the release of several dozen other Ukrainian political prisoners. Last

Friday, he issued a statement through his lawyer, Dmitry Dinze, saying he would end the strike as of Saturday.

Sentsov explained in his statement that the Federal Prison Service (FSIN) authorities were not responding to his wishes, but to the critical condition of his health and to pathological changes in his internal organs. The FSIN promised that top nutritionists would oversee the process.

Related article: Ukrainian Filmmaker Oleg Sentsov Ends 145-Day Hunger Strike

Sentsov's decision to end his 145-day-old hunger strike sparked conflicting reactions from the public and a heated debate on social networks. Some who opposed the decision and viewed it as a personal defeat added that they had never considered it a full-fledged hunger strike because Sentsov had earlier taken supplements. Some said his decision was a sign of personal weakness and added that it would encourage the authorities to discount future hunger strikes that prisoners might stage as a last-ditch effort at restoring their rights and personal dignity.

The decision to either stage or end a hunger strike are among the few that a person deprived of liberty is free to make. Alexander Daniel, a historian who focuses on Russian dissidents, says criticism of Sentsov's decision is unfair when coming from people who are neither hungry nor incarcerated. He said that people who criticize a starving person for being weak-willed should admit to themselves that they are essentially prodding him into committing suicide.

Very few protracted hunger strikes have ended successfully. One example is Cuban dissident Guillermo Farinas Hernandez, who managed in 2010 to secure the release of 52 prisoners held by the Communist government.

At the same time, a number of people have ended their own hunger strikes, people whom nobody would reproach for weakness of spirit. These include Soviet dissidents Mustafa Dzhemilev, Andrei Sakharov, and Anatoly Marchenko – who died only days after ending his hunger strike. Their decision did not discredit hunger strikes as a method of protest: the refusal of food is still considered an exceptional measure.

The decision to end a hunger strike that focused greater attention on the fate of political prisoners but did not secure their release is more a recognition of the cruelty and ruthlessness of a state system that can ignore such a radical form of protest than it is an acknowledgment of defeat.

Pavel Aptekar and Vladimir Ruvinsky are columnists at the Vedomosti business daily, where a version of this article was originally published. The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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