

“Obviously, many challenges and difficulties will fall to you”

On Sunday, 9 December, Moscow Helsinki Group’s annual conference began in Moscow. The MHG is the oldest human rights protection organization in Russia. Ludmila Alexeeva, the head of Moscow Helsinki Group, addressed participants. She was already in the hospital but managed to write a speech which has effectively become her political testament. In her address, she summarized the work of the human rights movement, pointed out current problems and gave advice to the new generation. Kommersant has [published](#) this speech in full in Russian. Human Rights Watch translated it into English.

My dear friends and colleagues!

I’m so sorry that my health has not allowed me to be with you on such an important day for all of us, as today we mark 70 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We truly have something to celebrate and think about on this day. 70 years ago, the most important document was adopted, which, following the tragic experience of the awful Second World War, lay down universal rules for society on our planet, based on respect for human dignity and human rights.

Over the past decades, we have worked to the best of our strength and talents to ensure that this important declaration is imbued with real substance; that it becomes part of culture and politics, it is protected by laws and institutions, and it is embedded into our daily lives. It has been a difficult movement with varying degrees of success: victories and disappointments, gains and bitter losses. Looking back, overall, the unconditional progress in the development of international law, the rejection of the colonial system, the gradual abandonment of the death penalty, the global fight against discrimination and racial prejudice, the fight for equality between women and men, deserve to be mentioned. Increasingly more people on the planet live in conditions of freedom and democracy. We have still, so far, managed to avoid a new global war. The intensity of military conflicts has tended to decrease. This progress would have been impossible without an active movement of human rights defenders and humanists around the world!

At the same time, we must recognize that as we move further away from the Second World War and its lessons, accordingly the new generations’ attitude towards the system of values and institutions which although built, remains weak, is characterized by a large

dollop of cynicism and carelessness, constantly and more frequently testing their strength. The growth of political populism and nationalism against the backdrop of the migrant crisis, religious conflict, the renaissance of authoritarian governments and the thicket of nationalistic outlooks in certain parts of the world, the repudiation of international obligations on the part of individual governments (including Russia, which is particularly regrettable for us) places all our important, but fragile, gains under threat and new, difficult tasks fall on your shoulders.

I sincerely hoped that we would succeed in leaving a more perfect and fairer world, in which there would not be a place for hardship and suffering that fell on my and previous generations. I still hope for this, but, unfortunately, it is already obvious that many challenges and difficulties will fall to you. I merely want to believe that your generation will not repeat all our previous mistakes but will be able to rely on some achievements and experience.

One of the important problems of the modern global movement for human rights is that part of it has become bureaucratized and has become an element of ensuring of national government or international organizations activities (above all in Europe). Some are actively involved in the immediate political fight which limits the opportunity to influence the outlook of the majority of their fellow citizens, limiting themselves to working within a narrow circle of their political allies. This does not mean that I am opposed to working with the authorities or politicians, it only means that we need many more people in the movement who are ready to communicate and share their values in wider audiences, especially among young people.

It seems to me that our most important task is to leave the “ghetto” conditions of comfortable discussions with like-minded people or narrow thematic specialist work and go to the masses, to raise awareness on a new level with new approaches, technologies and people.

It is precisely broad human rights and, more broadly, humanistic education that should be one of our most important tasks.

We must also strive with all our strength to preserve our unity and good will within our movement! We may have different tactical approaches on how to achieve stated goals and individual points of view, but to achieve common strategic aims we must be tolerant of our differences, respect and support each other and not allow authorities to provoke internal strife and mutual distrust amongst us.

International solidarity has always been a distinctive feature of the human rights movement. With civil society in Belarus, Central Asia and other countries. Solidarity actions with human rights defenders in Ukraine, and particularly Crimea, are important for us now. Support of the Crimean Tatar peace movement has always been a special task for MHG and our entire human rights movement.

It seems to me that there are complicated times ahead, especially in Russia. We can see perfectly how weak civil society, rights culture and democratic institutes are in our country. It is naïve to think that only our authorities are exclusively to blame for this. Yes, we are truly unlucky with our authorities, but we are also to blame if the authorities can, through simple propaganda and manipulation, rely on the support of the majority of our fellow citizens. We underestimated the extent of influence of the wounded imperial chauvinistic consciousness and the heritage of the totalitarian past. We did not always know how to choose the right arguments, style or form of communication with people in order to convince them. Without this knowledge, even in the event of a change in power which would be more aligned with our views, we would still be dependent on the will and views of politicians who are inclined towards populism and cynicism and who will continue to manipulate society.

We must learn how to communicate and share our points of view and values among our fellow citizens without giving up on anyone. Not authorities or opposition; not victims of tyranny; not perpetrators of crimes. For they are all our fellow citizens and simply people with human dignity, for whom we work and with whom we live with together and create a better world.

We must defend our convictions, the remaining and constantly narrowing rights and freedoms, resist isolationism, militarism and clericalization of civic life, showing the authorities and society the errors of the chosen path. We must not allow full ideological obscurantism to prevail, providing, even in the most difficult conditions, opportunities for the existence and dissemination of an alternative opinion.

We must continue to protect the victims of tyranny on the part of the authorities, uncompromisingly protect each other and those critics of the authorities who are persecuted, in the face of increasing political repression. Please convey my warmest words of support to dear Lev Alexandrovich Ponomarev and I urge all colleagues to urgently join together and take action in his defense! We must remember all the other remaining

political prisoners and prisoners of conscience and constantly seek their unconditional immediate release!

Modern Russian officials continue to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, limiting freedoms in the hope of retaining power through dictatorial means, but in doing so they only worsen their position and increase the likelihood of an uncontrollable collapse of power through confrontation with society and, God forbid, violence. It seems to me that we should not be complicit in such a scenario, but should, in spite of everything, patiently explain to the authorities that it is in their own interests and in the interests of the country to change the chosen course, to ensure free political competition and to guarantee civil liberties. We cannot and should not be guides of the course “the worse, the better,” because it will not only be the authorities which will be worse, but all of us, and the way out of this spiral will ultimately be even longer and more complex.

We must appeal to values, historical experience and common sense. It is very difficult, but necessary, and if we are convincing, consistent and steadfast, then success will absolutely be on our side. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. When we began our difficult path in the defense of human rights, we had far less reason for optimism than today, but we believed in the success of our hopeless cause! Today, I wish you all the same faith and strength and good luck from the bottom of my heart!