

Looking back on The Washington Group

BY [OREST DEYCHAKIWSKY](#)

After more than a year of writing columns about the war, I thought it time to switch gears and take a look back at The Washington Group (TWG) – a remarkable organization that helped fill a void at a transformational time. TWG was especially active at a crucial point in history, as enormous changes were afoot leading to the collapse of the “Evil Empire” and the emergence of an independent Ukraine.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a large influx of young Ukrainian American professionals to the nation’s capital. Most were the children of the highly-politicized post-World War II emigration and came from large Ukrainian population centers in the Northeast and Midwest, such as Philadelphia, New York, Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago.

Bi-weekly social gatherings at St. Sofia’s Religious Association (formerly the Embassy of Gabon) hosted by its resident custodian, Peter Fedynsky, provided an important venue for these newcomers to meet. It was at these “open houses” that the idea of having a professional organization emerged. On October 18, 1984, The Washington Group, An Association of Ukrainian American Professionals was born. It was the brainchild of Natalie Sluzar, who was elected its first president.

In addition to providing members with an important vehicle for professional networking and promoting social ties, TWG had another key mission: to promote greater knowledge about Ukraine and her aspirations for freedom among policymakers in Washington as well as the public. TWG hit the ground running, holding Friday evening forums and many other events that featured prominent guests from government, academia, industry and the cultural world. Within a few years, this volunteer organization became one of the most active diaspora organizations in the United States and rapidly grew its membership, becoming the largest Ukrainian American professionals’ organization.

But the crown jewel of all of TWG’s activities and events, and what gave the organization its prominence in the Ukrainian American community, was the extremely successful and popular TWG Leadership Conference. The annual conferences propelled the Washington-headquartered organization into a highly visible, truly national organization, as Ukrainian-Americans from around the country would attend and join TWG. The list of prominent individuals who appeared at these conferences or other TWG forums included the legendary former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski; Secretary of Defense (later U.S. vice-president) Dick Cheney; Helsinki Commission Chairman (later U.S. House majority leader) Steny Hoyer; a U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union and other top diplomats. Especially noteworthy was that TWG provided a key venue in the late 1980s during glasnost and perestroika for visiting Ukrainian political activists (including former political prisoners and leaders of Ukraine’s independence movement Rukh), religious figures, scholars and writers. Enhancing the popularity of the TWG conferences were gala dinner dances and cultural programs.

Following independence, U.S. ambassadors to Ukraine and other high ranking State Department officials, Central Intelligence Agency directors, as well as top Ukrainian officials, Ukrainian ambassadors to the United States and other prominent Ukrainians made frequent appearances at the conferences and other TWG forums.

It was extremely fortuitous that TWG came into being and was most active when it was most needed – at a time when Ukraine was not a household word, to put it mildly, and even a relative unknown among Washington, D.C., policymakers, except for its friends in Congress (notably the Helsinki Commission). TWG provided an invaluable platform for informing Americans about Ukraine and it brought together members of the Ukrainian American community with government decisionmakers and the larger Washington policy community, especially prior to independence.

TWG events continued to be well-attended and played an important role even in the decade or so following independence, as it took a while for even an independent Ukraine to fully come onto Washington's radar screen. As time went on, more and more prestigious foreign policy think-tanks and non-governmental organizations began to focus on Ukraine. Now, of course, not a day goes by in the D.C. area without at least one event – more often than not there is more than one – dealing with Ukraine.

One of TWG's successful projects was its Fellowship Fund. Between 1987 and 2004, the organization awarded more than \$30,000 in funding at least 25 different projects. From 1996 to 2004, the Fund placed interns annually at the Embassy of Ukraine in Washington, D.C.

Another hugely successful TWG endeavor has been the Cultural Fund, spearheaded in 1994 by Laryssa Courtney to foster and promote Ukrainian culture in the D.C. area. Throughout its near 30 years of consistent activity, it has sponsored and organized numerous concerts, lectures and exhibitions. Although a part of TWG, the Cultural Fund has its own leadership and management as well as its own website (www.twgcf.org).

Throughout its first two decades of its existence, TWG was an incredibly dynamic and vibrant organization, increasing the visibility of Ukraine and Ukrainian Americans in Washington and beyond. What were the ingredients of its success? From having served on many TWG boards and having led the organization from 1998-2000, I'm convinced that the secret sauce was the commitment, dedication and energy of its members, presidents and most Board members. We took our roles seriously. To us, TWG was a different kind of Ukrainian American organization. There was great camaraderie and fewer squabbles than was the case in many other organizations. People were not there for their own glory or to somehow prove themselves. Almost every active TWG member was a professional with a respectable career. The goal was to accomplish something – to help Ukraine tell its compelling story. It was all about the mission. And yes, it was even occasionally about having fun.

There are too many wonderful people responsible for TWG's success during its "glory days" and I am reluctant to name all of them, for fear of missing someone. However, I cannot fail to single out two individuals who I feel were key to TWG's success during its period of greatest activity and influence: George Masiuk, who served as president in 1995-1998 and helped to organize many of the TWG Leadership Conferences, and Yaro Bihun, who, in addition to serving

as president during the transformative years of 1988-1990, was by far the longest serving TWG News editor. The monthly newsletter, TWG News, provided a valuable source of information and communication among members.

It is incredibly difficult to sustain an organization that relies strictly on volunteers with busy lives and careers. After its first few incredibly dynamic decades, TWG lost its steam and has been largely dormant since the mid-2000s. In recent months, however, TWG has begun the process of revitalization, including restarting the TWG Fellowship Fund and sponsoring a summer internship at the Embassy of Ukraine. We will see what happens.

Whatever its future might hold, though, there is no denying that The Washington Group served an incredibly important purpose at a critical, historical time when such a Ukrainian American organization was badly needed in the nation's capital.

But don't take my word for it. Check out the new TWG website documenting the organization's history, which was developed by Mr. Masiuk. That website – The Washington Group – An Association of Ukrainian-American Professionals – can be found at www.thewashingtongroup.org. The site contains numerous TWG publications, some 20 photo albums and videos documenting the robust life of TWG, as well as the larger Ukrainian American community and its extensive interactions in Ukraine at a time when few others were doing it. In looking through the materials, you will see many familiar and prominent names – American and Ukrainian. And don't be surprised if you come across names familiar to you, or you see, in the photo section, younger versions of your friends and acquaintances – and even yourselves and your parents. Enjoy!

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