

Political and Ethno-Cultural Aspects of the Rusyns'  
problem:

A Ukrainian Perspective

Research paper prepared within the framework of the Programme on European Security (PROGRES) sponsored by the Centre for European Security Studies and the University of Groningen (the Netherlands)

by **Natalya Belitser,**

**Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy, Kyiv, Ukraine**

*“...Nobody knows exactly who, how many, or where they are. They live in six states and in none. They are loyal to each of these states, and to none of them. Their language is written in five different versions; in the Cyrillic alphabet, but also in the Latin. Some regard themselves as Ukrainians, others as Slovaks, others as Poles. Or Romanians. Or Hungarians. Or Yugoslavs. But many insist they are “Rusyns,” or “CarpathoRusyns,” or, Rusnatsi. Or they throw up their hands and give the ancient answer of the peasant from Europe’s Slavic borderlands: “We’re just from here”.*

**(From: “Hail Ruthenia!” by Timothy Garton Ash, The New York Review of Books, 22 April 1999).**

The very sequence of the words chosen for the title of this working paper itself hints at the specifics of the problem relating to Rusyns living in the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine. It is sometimes noticed that “it is only in Ukraine

that Rusyns are not recognized as a distinct ethnic group”<sup>1</sup>. Addressing the main reason for this non-recognition, this paper attributes it to the fact that from the very beginning of the re-appearance of the Rusyn question in the then Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s, their movement for emancipation and accompanying events became heavily politicized. Therefore, the main issue at stake has not been the ethno-cultural identity of Rusyns as a separate sector of the Transcarpathian population, but, rather, the so-called “Political Ruthenianism” perceived as a potential threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine and its sovereignty following Ukrainian independence.<sup>2</sup>

During the early and mid-1990s, these fears and forebodings influenced the Ukrainian authorities, as well as patriotically minded Ukrainian scholars and academics engaged in studying the ethno-political history of Transcarpathia, and shaped to some degree the opinion of society as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The rather complex history of a region that had been throughout the 20th century been subjected to multiple changes in status and jurisdiction imposed by several European states and empires, also affected the sides participating in heated debates over this issue both within Ukraine and beyond. As a result, the perception of the very idea of a separate Rusyn self-identity did not simply arise from the notion that they were just another minority group living on the territory of Transcarpathian Ukraine. Instead, it has been shaped by perceptions of Rusyn identity as a barely disguised separatist threat actively supported by the local authorities, most of whom belonged to the former Soviet nomenclature. The close links of some leaders of the “Rusyn nation” with such notorious Russian political figures as Vladimir Zhyrinovsky and their overt pro-Russian orientation have made impossible any reconciliation between them and Ukrainian “national-democrats”.<sup>4</sup> This explanation is needed to better understand why even those nationally-conscious Ukrainians who can be broadly defined as “liberal-democratic and pro-European” do not display the same sympathy and moral support towards the Rusyn cause that they usually display towards other nationalities and minorities in Ukraine.

Taking into consideration the above points, a brief overview of the history of Transcarpathia, from the perspective of Ukrainian historians whose interpretations may differ from those of historians from other Central/Eastern European countries, seems appropriate.

---

<sup>1</sup> William McKinney (European Centre for Minority Issues), message to the Ethnopolitics List of 13 January 2000, author’s archive.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis on the topic, see: “Political Ruthenianism” by M.Panchuk, in: *Demons of Peace and Gods of War*, Kyiv, 1997, p. 323 (in Ukrainian); “Political Ruthenianism”: A Transcarpathian Version of a Peripheral Nationalism” by Oleksandr Mayiboroda, Kyiv, 1999 (in Ukrainian), and the references within.

<sup>3</sup> According to informal survey conducted by the Ukrainian WEB site “Brama” in October 1999, 52,7 per cent of more than 700 respondents view Rusyns as being Ukrainians, 37 per cent believe that they are not Ukrainians, and 11 per cent were undecided. (From: “Trans-Carpathia: Multi-ethnic outpost” by Brian J. Pozun, *Central European Review*, Vol. 2, No 40, 20 November 2000).

<sup>4</sup> “Self-Named “Fathers” and “Leaders” of the “Rusyn People” by Oleksa Myshanych (in Russian), 1996, author’s archive.

## History of the Transcarpathian oblast

According to Ukrainian historians, the Slavic population appeared in Transcarpathia in the early Middle Ages. In the 9th Century, the territory was conquered by Hungarians and between the 10-13th Centuries, rule over Transcarpathia was transferred from the Hungarian crown to the Kyiv or Halitsko-Volyn princes.<sup>5</sup> In 1381, it was retaken by the Hungarian kingdom, and remained under its rule till 1918. During the Enlightenment of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire encouraged Greek-Catholic religious traditions and provided education. As a result, the local population developed an increasing sense of belonging to the same people as those living in “Little Russia”, Poland, Galicia and Bukovyna, sharing with them the same language that was then called “Ruthenian”. Following the 1848 revolution in Hungary, a kind of forced assimilation (Magyarization) began that lasted almost until the end of the World War I. Similar assimilatory processes of the Ukrainian population by Poles and Austrians occurred in neighbouring Galicia and Bukovyna. This separation and a feeling of being oppressed led to the emergence of a so-called “Moscophilism” based on a belief that under the Russian Crown - presumably benevolent to those Ruthenians preferring Orthodoxy, the Cyrillic script and Russian culture – the local Slavic population would be better protected and cared for. This feeling, inspired to a large extent by the Russian government itself, made many Transcarpathian intellectuals and clergy view union with Russia – then the only independent Slavic state - as a highly desirable goal.

In the context of these historical events, a terminological confusion emerged which can be perceived as lasting until today, and which has been to some extent responsible for many of the uncertainties regarding recognition of the Rusyns as a separate ethnic group in Ukraine. As Yaroslav Pylynskyj comments in his essay,<sup>6</sup> the terms “Rus” and “Carpathian Rus” in particular, were used by 19<sup>th</sup> Century scholars to describe the native population of both Galicia and Bukovyna, as well as that of Transcarpathia (with the latter also being known as the “Hungarian Rus”). Meanwhile, Polish scholars had been using the term “Rus” to define the whole of Ukraine up to World War I. The population of the areas in question was called “the Austro-Hungarian Rusyns” or “the Rusyns of the Austro-Hungarian State”. Many locals still continue to use the self-name “Rusyns” in parallel, or rather as a synonym for “Ukrainians”. Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the terms “Rus” and ‘Rus’kyji” had nothing in common with the phonetically similar Russian words. In fact, they bore a different meaning, describing entirely different territories and ethnic entities: the Russians (or the “Great Russians”) were referred to by the Ruthenians/Ukrainians as “the Muscovites” or “the Moscals”. Following the 1848-49 revolution, when Moscophilism began to develop in western Ukraine, this coincidence in terminology became even more confused and since then has been

---

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed history of Transcarpathia, see: “Rising Ethnic Self-Awareness: Carpathian Rusyns – Birth of a New Nation or a Political Game?” by Yaroslav Pylynskyj, Copenhagen, 1998, and the references within.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.6.

actively exploited by advocates and proponents of Russian imperial policy within and beyond Russia itself. In particular, it had been used to justify Moscow's view of Galicians and Transcarpathians as "Russians" who had been "spoiled" by contact with Poles, Germans, and Hungarians, and who needed to be re-oriented towards Greater Russia and to accept Great Russian traditions, language, and culture.<sup>7</sup>

It is necessary to note that this terminological uncertainty continues in contemporary research studies. For example, Norman Davies in his famous "Europe: A History"<sup>8</sup> uses the term Ruthenia (Ukraine) to define not only the Transcarpathian area of earlier centuries, but rather the whole territory covered by modern Ukraine. An impressive illustration of this can be found on page 857, where the author writes that: "Traditionally known as Rusyns, or Ruthenians, they (*this people*) turned now to the self-name "Ukrainians", because that was their reaction to the wrong and humiliating label "Little Russians" invented for them by Czarism."

At the same time, many scholars and academics appear to rely mostly on the numerous writings of Prof. Paul Robert Magocsi<sup>9</sup> – the assertive promoter of a separate Rusyn ethnicity and Rusyn language, who is often referred to, somewhat ironically, as "Father of the Rusyn nation" - while numerous research studies by, inter alia, Transcarpathian Ukrainian scholars seem often to go unnoticed.<sup>10</sup>

Although Moskophilism did not prevent the further assimilation and Magyarization of the province, it did impede the development of a national consciousness and the consolidation of the Transcarpathian population with the rest of the Ukrainian people. It also influenced significantly the formation of the regional sub-ethnic identity.

---

<sup>7</sup> This trend existed not only until the collapse of the Tzarist Russian Empire, but to some extent persists even after the dissolution of its successor the USSR. Some Russian intellectuals, as well as a large proportion of the Russian population, still do not recognize Ukrainians as a separate ethnos and consider them part of the Russian people using a dialect of the Russian language.

<sup>8</sup> This book is being quoted according to its Ukrainian translation published by the "Osnovy", Kyiv, 2000. See, for example, such sentences as "after elimination of Cossacks autonomy, the historical difference between Russia and Ruthenia was officially abolished. Ukraine was named "Little Russia" ("MaloRossia"), and all traces of its separate tradition were wiped out" (p. 675). On p. 854: "...Poles in Halychyna were able to (discriminate) against Ruthenians (Ukrainians)."

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Magocsi P.R.: "Historical Atlas of East Central Europe". Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1993; "An Historiographical Guide to Subcarpathian Rus". Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Ukrainian research Institute, Harvard University; "A New Slavic Language is Born: The Rusyn Literary Language of Slovakia". New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Among the latter, Oleksa Myshanych, philologist, Professor of the Uzhhorod University, should be named. He has published a number of papers hotly substantiating Ukrainian identity of Transcarpathian Rusyns (see, for example, his "From Subcarpathian Rusyns to Transcarpathian Ukrainians" in: The Persistence of Regional Cultures, P.R. Magocsi, ed., New York: Columbia University press, pp.7-52). This author often sharply criticizes Prof. Magocsi for what he calls "political manipulations around the artificially created Rusyns' question," see, for example, his paper "Self-Named "Fathers" and "Leaders" of the "Rusyn People", 1996, author's archive.

However, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in parallel with the revival of a national consciousness in Galicia, a similar trend emerged in Transcarpathia. The Moscovilic idea became less popular and the local population – Rusyns of Austro-Hungary – strove for union with Ukraine. Facing the danger that an independent Ukrainian state could arise during W.W.I or after, and that this new Eastern European state would then incorporate the Carpathian Rusyns, the Hungarian authorities and scholars countered this threat by declaring the Carpathian Ruthenians a separate people distinct from Galicians and Eastern Ukrainians. This people was presumed always to have been closely linked to the Hungarian Crown. This theory was eagerly supported by a number of Magyarized Rusyn scholars, whose activities were aimed at establishing and strengthening the ethnic, cultural, and political separateness of the Subcarpathian Rusyns by inventing arguments that, for example, the latter had nothing in common with the Ukrainians living to the East of the Carpathian Mountains.

The end of the W.W.I signified the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the emergence on the map of Europe of a number of newly independent states through the realization by peoples - formerly subjects of that Empire - of their right to political self-determination. As a result of these events, Hungary managed to keep only two national minorities – the Rusyns and Germans. But soon, the Transcarpathian Rusyns also made an attempt to separate from Hungary and join the Ukrainian Republic. This attempt failed because by that time Ukraine was fighting several enemies – the Russian Red Army, the White Russian Guards, and Poland. As a result of losing these struggles, Ukraine was divided between Poland, Russia, and Romania. The Transcarpathian region became a part of the Czechoslovak Republic. This settlement was included in the peace treaty signed in Saint-Germain, France, on 8 September 1919. It reflected a compromise of sorts between the Great Powers and the different political forces in Transcarpathia and the Transcarpathian diaspora in the United States, including the personal involvement of President Woodrow Wilson. The main argument in favour of such a decision was that the Czechoslovak Republic was considered a democratic state able to accommodate the local Transcarpathian population unwilling either to remain under Hungarian rule or join a Poland that was then at war with Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> Since the Czechoslovak authorities pursued a policy of treating the Transcarpathian population as non-Ukrainian, this period had a strong influence on the further development of a regional Rusyn self-identity and promoted a trend, shared by many educated local people, towards a rejection of their Ukrainian origins. At the same time, pro-Ukrainian forces of the same local population were struggling to develop a national Ukrainian consciousness, and called for union with the rest of the Ukrainian nation.

---

<sup>11</sup> For more information about a role of the American Transcarpathian Diaspora, and the circumstances of the Transcarpathia incorporation into the Czechoslovakian state, see: “Rising Ethnic Self-Awareness: Carpathian Rusyns – Birth of a New Nation or a Political Game?” by Yaroslav Pylinskyj, Copenhagen, 1998, pp. 9-19.

Another major event affecting Transcarpathia was the Munich Conference held on 29-30 September 1938, which decided the fate of the Czechoslovak Republic. In order to appease Germany, its territorial claim to Czechoslovakia was recognized, by the transfer of the Sudeten region to Germany. This prompted the Ukrainian and Moscovophil parties of Transcarpathia to declare their union, the formation of a common government, and self-rule for Transcarpathia within the Czechoslovak Federation. More turbulent events and the further re-drawing of state borders in Europe resulted in a new episode in the history of Transcarpathia and its population. Following the declaration of the independence by Slovakia (with Germany guaranteeing the inviolability of its borders), and the Czech government's call for no military resistance to the German invasion, Dr. A. Voloshin – the then Premier of the government of Carpathian Ukraine – proclaimed the independence of Carpathian Ukraine on behalf of the government, the deputies recently elected to the parliament, and the Ukrainian people.<sup>12</sup> This occurred on 14 March 1939, and the following day this decision was approved by the deputies of the Parliament of Carpathian Ukraine, which also adopted a constitutional law according to which Carpathian Ukraine became an independent, presidential state. However, there was never the slightest chance for these aspirations to be realized; the newly gained independence lasted for only a few hours, when the breaking wave of W.W.II brought a new occupation to Transcarpathia in the shape of Germany's ally, Hortist Hungary, which ruled the region until October 1944. By that time, following the defeat of Hungary and the entry of the Soviet army onto the territory of Transcarpathia, People's Committees were immediately formed and on 26 November 1944 they held their first Congress and announced the re-unification of Transcarpathian Ukraine with the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The consequences of this act were obvious: according to the decision taken by the victor-states, an agreement was made between them on a new division of many of the Central/Eastern European territories. Transcarpathia was thus joined to Soviet Ukraine and thus came under Soviet rule. Although one can certainly argue as to how free the expression of will by the Transcarpathian population actually was, the deed, as Dr. Yaroslav Pylynskyj rightly commented,<sup>13</sup> was apparently performed in full compliance with the then existing international legal norms and regulations.

Though pre-destined joining of Transcarpathia to the Ukr. SSR might be seen retrospectively as an act of mere annexation agreed upon between the great powers - winners of WWII, and consequently, its population as a sheer victim of this act, in fact a whole event had been of a much more complex nature, and a psychological factor of long-awaited Ukrainian re-unification should be not discarded but surely reckoned with. In this context, personal perceptions of such a noble, honest and sincere witness and participant of this episode of WWII as was General Petro Hryhorenko, who became later a famous Soviet dissident and passionate

---

<sup>12</sup> See: "Transcarpathia Essay of History" by Yu. Khiminets (in Ukrainian), Uzhhorod: Karpaty, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> See: "Rising Ethnic Self-Awareness: Carpathian Rusyns – Birth of a New Nation or a Political Game?" by Yaroslav Pylynskyj, Copenhagen, 1998, p. 20.

fighter for the rights of repressed peoples, would be most relevant and of great value. And indeed, in his memoirs<sup>14</sup> Hryhorenko wrote that this successful campaign was even more brightened by the extremely warm attitude of local population who had met the arriving troops with exulted rejoice, bottles of home-made wine and baskets of food. By the way, he also wrote about his first encounter there with those whom he called “Carpathorusses”. Highly praising extreme hospitality and warm-heartedness of local Carpathian Ukrainians, he recalled, at the same time, his bewilderment at having met with local people who insisted on being “not Ukrainians but Russians, Rusyns, Rusychs, Carpathorusychs”. According to that same evidence, they then have spoken “a pure Ukrainian language”. And when asked why consider themselves Russians while using Ukrainian, the answer was like: “It is a language to be used at home only, whereas our books are in Russian, and we write in Russian, too”. Having been not a scholar in this area, Hryhorenko simply noted that he was just stunned by such a phenomenon and was never able to understand it.

But whatever the evaluation of the act of reunification of Transcarpathia with the rest of Ukraine, if some advocates of the Ukrainian idea genuinely greeted it, their joy was short-lived. Magyarization, Czechization, and Slovakization of Transcarpathia were quickly supplanted for the much more severe process of Russification. For example, the linguistic policy of the USSR in this newly acquired area was carried out in such a way that each large city had only one Ukrainian school. All other schools used either Russian or, sometimes, Hungarian, as the language of instruction whereas Ukrainian was not taught at all.<sup>15</sup>

The story of the turbulent history of the population of Transcarpathia throughout the XXth century has been reflected in a number of local jokes and anecdotes. To present just one of them as an illustration: There was an old man who says that he was born in Austria-Hungary, went to school in Czechoslovakia, married in Hungary, worked most of his life in the Soviet Union, and now lives in Ukraine. “Traveled a lot, then?” asks his interviewer. “No, I never moved from Mukachevo.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The Situation in Transcarpathia in the 1990s.**

This brief history of Transcarpathia may shed some light on the events that preceded and followed Ukraine’s independence. The so-called “Political Ruthenianism” became evident as soon as the Ukrainian independence movement developed. Very soon, Rusyn associations and NGOs, which originally claimed to focus on cultural matters, became increasingly politicized. As early as September 1990 the Society of Pidcarpatsky Rusyns issued a declaration “On the Return to the Transcarpathian Oblast of the Status of Autonomous Republic.” The following year,

---

<sup>14</sup> In: In a Cellar Only Rats to be Met, by Petro Hryhorenko, Memorial Publication Programme, Moscow, 1997, pp.240-241 (in Russian)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cited from: “Hail Ruthenia!” by Timothy Garton Ash, The New York Review of Books, 22 April 1999.

the same society addressed the government of Czechoslovakia with an appeal to support their claim to unite Pidkarpatska Rus with Czechoslovakia, thus renewing its autonomous status within the borders of the Czechoslovak Republic. In light of these developments, the local referendum of 1 December, 1991, that accompanied the national referendum on Ukrainian independence is often erroneously interpreted as something dealing with claims for Rusyns' national autonomy.<sup>17</sup> In fact, however, the question to which about 78 per cent of the population gave a positive answer, concerned the territorial autonomy of the Transcarpathian oblast within Ukraine.

In March 1992, the Pidkarpatska Republican Party was formed with the stated aim of: "Establishing the independent, neutral Republic of Pidkarpatska Rus with Switzerland as the example... To gain full political and economic independence..." Its head, V. Zayats, emphasized his party's orientation towards Pan-Slavic union, and close cooperation with the pro-Russian and Great Russian forces in the CIS countries. He also hoped to receive support from the international human rights movement, as well as foreign governments.

In the summer of 1993, an illegitimate Provisional Government of Pidkarpatska Rus was formed. Following this event, the activities of the political Ruthenian movement gained in impetus, as expressed by the many appeals to the Ukrainian authorities, international organizations, and foreign governments. Their main demand was the repudiation of the 1945 treaty between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, according to which Transcarpathia had been transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian SSR. All of these appeals were accompanied by accusations that the Ukrainian government and the "Ukrainian nationalistic fascist regime" were conducting a chauvinistic or even ethnocidal policy against the Ruthenian people. Such declarations were also sent, inter alia, to the US Congress and the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation. The tragic events in Russia in October 1993 did not deter the Rusyns' separatist leaders, and did not halt their activities. In December 1994, Tybor Ondyk, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of the government of the self-proclaimed "Republic of Pidkarpatska Rus" (RPR) turned to Russian President Boris Yeltsyn with a request to repudiate the above-mentioned treaty, and urged the Russian President to take decisive steps to make the RPR a subject of the CIS.<sup>18</sup> This appeal stressed that the reason for addressing the Russian President lay in the fact (denounced by many in Ukraine) that the RF was the only officially recognized successor-state of the USSR.

That same year, Ivan Turyanytsa, the Prime Minister of the RPR provisional government, sent a memorandum to the presidents of the US and Hungary that contained further charges of a policy of discrimination and persecution of both Hungarians and Rusyns, presumably pursued by Ukraine, and asked for protection

---

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, "Ruthenian minority in Slovakia" by Dagmar Kusa, working paper prepared for the Concluding Conference of the Programme for European Security, Groningen, the Netherlands, 8-12 November 2000.

<sup>18</sup> See: "Political Ruthenianism": A Transcarpathian Version of Peripheral Nationalism" by Oleksandr Mayiboroda, Kyiv, 1999 (in Ukrainian), and the references within.

against Ukrainian chauvinism. Due to the activities of this “government”, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) passed, in 1996, a special resolution “On the Status of the Autonomous Republic of the Pidcarpatska Rus and the Right for Free Self-determination by Rusyns”. This resolution condemned both the first and second presidents of Ukraine for not taking measures to renew the autonomy of Transcarpathia, and not recognizing the Transcarpathian Rusyns as a separate nationality. Regional meeting of the UNPO turned to the local UNPO branches asking them to initiate the submission of the Rusyns’ case to the European Court.

It comes as no surprise, that these and other actions undertaken by leaders of the ‘Political Ruthenianism’ have resulted in rather negative reactions by the Ukrainian authorities and Ukrainian society as a whole. Trying to calm manifestations of political Ruthenianism, and to direct it to looking for solutions in the area of the ethno-cultural “Rusyns’ identity, the State Committee of Ukraine on Nationalities and Migration developed a special programme called “Measures to be Undertaken to Solve the Problems of the Ukrainians/Rusyns”. This programme outlined steps focusing on improving the region’s socio-economic and cultural situation. However, the proposed solutions, being articulated within a framework of a unitary state model, did not satisfy the demands of “political Ruthenianism” in Ukraine and was highly criticized by Rusyn advocates abroad<sup>19</sup>. The movement continued to develop, establishing new Rusyn NGOs whose officially proclaimed objectives were the promotion of the Rusyn language and culture, while actually strengthening the position of political Ruthenianism or supporting its claims. As an example of such activities, one might cite the 20 September 1997 Declaration issued by the Rusyns’ Scientific and Educational Society.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond Ukraine, such claims often meet with a sympathetic response. Among them, special attention should perhaps be paid to the Recommendations of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) following a Conference held in Uzhorod on 4-7 September 1998.<sup>21</sup> Point 8 states that: “Keeping in mind that, according to international law, “the existence of minorities is a question of fact, not of law”, the right of freedom of association must be guaranteed to all persons belonging to national minorities. In this context, ECMI welcomes the establishment of direct contact between representatives of the higher echelons of the Ukrainian government and the Transcarpathian Rusyns within the framework of this conference”. In such a way, ECMI confirmed the existence of the Rusyns as a

---

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, “Ruthenian minority in Slovakia” by Dagmar Kusa; Working Paper prepared for the Concluding Conference of the Programme for European Security, Groningen, the Netherlands, 8-12 November 2000, and “Trans-Carpathia: Multi-ethnic outpost” by Brian J. Pozun, *Central European Review*, Vol. 2, No 40, 20 November 2000.

<sup>20</sup> “Political Ruthenianism”: A Transcarpathian Version of Peripheral Nationalism” by Oleksandr Mayiboroda , p.13.

<sup>21</sup> See Recommendations of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) based on the results of the International Conference “Inter-Ethnic Relations in Transcarpathian Ukraine”, Unofficial translation from the Russian original, the author’s archive.

separate nation distinct from Transcarpathian Ukrainians. A similar position can also often be found in publications by ethnologists, sociologists and other researchers who seem to take for granted that Transcarpathian Rusyns are not Ukrainians, and that the majority of the population of Transcarpathia consists of a separate ethnos, namely, the Rusyns.<sup>22</sup>

But is this so? Or, at least, should such a view be acknowledged as an established fact, without any doubts, reservations or hesitations?<sup>23</sup> In an attempt to clarify the situation, a number of sociological surveys have been carried out in Transcarpathia. None of them confirmed the predominantly Rusyn self-identification of the population of Transcarpathia. One of the surveys was undertaken by the faculty of Social and Political Studies of the University of Cambridge within the Project on “Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict in the Central European Region”. It was held in the summer of 1994 – a peak time for “political Ruthenianism” - in five regions of the Transcarpathian oblast. These regions were selected because they had the most pronounced Ruthenian movement. 495 respondents, fully representative of the population structure, were interviewed. When the respondents had answered the question about their national identity, the following data were obtained (presented in %): Ukrainians – 51, Rusyns-Ukrainians – 3, Rusyns – 6, Slovaks – 6, Hungarians – 20, Russians – 11, Poles – 0, Gypsies – 1, Others – 1, difficult to say – 1.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted, however, that some “independent experts”, although providing no exact sociological survey data or any other kind of evidence, still argue that the size of the Rusyn population in Transcarpathia is somewhere between 650,000 and 750,000. According to their logic, the population statistics of 1991, showing that 976,749 or 78.4 per cent of the Transcarpathian population are Ukrainians, actually includes these 650,000 to 750,000 “mislabeled Rusyns”<sup>25</sup>.

### **Perception of Rusyns versus Ukrainian identity from within and outside Ukraine**

In Ukraine, confusion, disagreement and resentment often surfaces whenever the question of Rusyn versus Ukrainian identity is discussed. This might be attributable to the fact that certain parts of the local population of the Carpathian region, now divided by old - historically rooted – and new, usually politically motivated, schisms, originate from that same ancestry traditionally inhabiting the same territory and bearing the same (or very similar) cultural traditions. Therefore,

---

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, a Working Paper on “The ethnic dimension to bureaucratic encounters in postcommunist Europe: perceptions and experience” by Ase B. Grodeland, William L. Miller and Tatyana Y. Koshechkina, Dept. of Politics, University of Glasgow, March 2000, author’s archive.

<sup>23</sup> By the way, the comprehensive reference book named “World Directory of Minorities”, published in 1997 by the Minority Rights Group International, contains no mention of Rusyns as a separate minority of Ukraine (see pp. 317-322).

<sup>24</sup> For more detailed data and original tables, see: “Rising Ethnic Self-Awareness: Carpathian Rusyns – Birth of a New Nation or a Political Game?” by Yaroslav Pylynskyj, Copenhagen, 1998, pp. 21-33.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, “Trans-Carpathia: Multi-ethnic outpost” by Brian J. Pozun, *Central European Review*, Vol. 2, No 40, 20 November 2000).

their descendants have been expected to share at least the same kinds of regional, if not national, identity and loyalties. Older divisions between Ukrainophiles (who argued that the Rusyns are actually Ukrainians), Russophiles who claim to be closer to the Russians or even being the very founders of the Russian nation, and Rusynophiles insisting on being altogether different, were revived after the collapse of totalitarianism. Sharply contrasting “Ukainophilic” and “Rusynophilic” affiliations are also true for many similar groups, living in Slovakia and Poland in particular. In the latter case, they are usually named “Lemkos” or “Lemko/Ruthenians.”<sup>26</sup> This provides an additional source of terminological confusion because the Lemkos of Ukraine seem to have no ambitions to distance themselves from the common Ukrainian ethnos. But it is likely that only in Ukraine can one sometimes observe such a split within the same family. Close relatives, even the offspring of the same parents would then argue about their firm belief in belonging to completely different – actual or imagined? – communities. Some academics engaged in research may well consider such cases as just one more confirmation of the “postmodern” trends in dealing with ethnicity - not in its traditional sense, but rather as a matter of personal choice<sup>27</sup>. But in Ukraine, these family stories create a highly charged emotional background, thus adding more pain to the issue of Rusyn versus Ukrainian identity and rendering it extremely sensitive.

In this context, it should be emphasized once again that the very term “Rusyns” is usually perceived by the majority of Transcarpathia’s inhabitants as their own, traditional, ancient self-name attributed to the local Ukrainian population. This is an important point to remember, especially when dealing with descriptions of the Transcarpathian situation of the following kind: “Transcarpathia, or historic ‘Subcarpathian Rus’, was conceived and treated by the international community as a distinct territorial entity not because of its multinational composition, but because of its indigenous inhabitants – the Rusyns”.<sup>28</sup> Or, even more explicitly: “...every country... felt obliged to recognize the Rusyn factor and to propose granting autonomy to the region based on the general principle of national self-determination for the region’s most numerous indigenous people, the Rusyns”<sup>29</sup>, thereby evidently confusing local Ukrainian identity with the specific Rusyn/Ruthenian one.

Some of these considerations could shed some light on the “puzzle” of Ukrainian democracy which is, in general, quite benevolent to the ideas and practices of the restoration of minorities’ own identity, but at the same time strongly denies Rusyn identity as being separate from the Ukrainian. Is it therefore the case (paraphrasing the well-known saying about the Ukrainian question within the

---

<sup>26</sup> Human rights and minority issues: the case of the Ruthenian communities in Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine. Suggestions to Cultural Policy Options and Strategies. Research paper by Prof. Kazimierz Krzystofek, November 2000, prepared in the framework of the Programme on European Security (PROGRES) sponsored by the Centre for European Security Studies and the University of Groningen (the Netherlands).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Inter-Ethnic relations in Transcarpathian Ukraine, Uzhhorod, Ukraine, 4-7 September 1998, ECMI Report # 4, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

context of Russian democracy) that “Ukrainian democracy ends where the Rusyn question arises?” How is it, then, that Hennady Udovenko, Chair of the parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, National Minorities and International Relations, also leader of the Narodny Rukh – the first national-democratic party - in a recent interview, when asked about Rusyns, called for the “de-politization” of the issue, but at the same time articulated his own conviction that Rusyns are just one of the branches (sub-ethnoses) of the Ukrainian people, like Hutsuls, Lemky, Boyiky etc.<sup>30</sup> How can this attitude be compatible with the decisive support provided by the same parties and persons to claims made, for example, by the Crimean Tatars? Indeed, the latter, insisting on being not a national minority of Ukraine, but an indigenous people or a nation with a right for national self-determination, might have been regarded as a more serious potential threat to Ukraine’s internal stability since they feel that the way to exercise this right is through the creation, inter alia, of their own national-territorial autonomy in Crimea.

For a better understanding of the essence of the debates, it should always be remembered that in every other Central/Eastern European country, Rusyns, or Ukrainians, or Rusyns/Ukrainians are minority groups whose current self-identification depends on many factors, including history, a desire (or lack thereof) to keep closer ties with their fellow Ukrainians in Ukraine, and also, to a great extent, official policies that display significant differences with regard to the Rusyn question. At the same time, only in Ukraine are members of this group perceived as simply belonging to the Ukrainian titular ethnos, though heatedly denying their Ukrainian identity because of some often externally instigated political motivation. Moreover, although the Rusyns’ leaders have never actually called for either armed or violent struggle, their harsh anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, often used in public speeches and publications, provokes those reactions of pain and outrage that are actually reactions to a perceived or real “Ukrainophobia”<sup>31</sup>, separatism and/or irredentism inherent in political Ruthenianism.

In contrast to this specific aspect of the Rusyn problem in Ukraine, in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe where Rusyn minority groups can be identified, those that express a clear distinctiveness from Ukrainians appear not to

---

<sup>30</sup> Kievskiye Vedomosti, 14 June 2000 (in Russian).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the paper on: “Rusyns: a part of the Ukrainian people, a separate nation or a method of political blackmail?”, May 1997, by Leonid Pilunski, a journalist and human rights activist from Crimea; and “Self-named “Fathers” and “Leaders” of the “Rusyn People”, 1997, by Oleksa Myshanych, Professor of Philology, University of Uzhhorod (author’s archive). The first paper compares Transcarpathian and Crimean separatism, assuming certain similarities between the attempts to create artificially the “Crimean people as a subject of self-determination”, and endeavours aimed at establishing the “Rusyn nation”. The second paper describes in detail some domestic and international activities of leading figures of the Provisional Government of Pidkarpatska Rus and of Prof. Paul Robert Magocsi in particular - such as the 29 June, 1995, appeal denouncing the treaty between the USSR and Czechoslovakia on the joining of Transcarpathia to Ukraine - and provides abundant anti-Ukrainian (often pro-Russian or pro-Hungarian) quotations from speeches and publications by the above-mentioned public figures.

pursue any overtly political aims, focusing instead on the social, cultural and educational needs of their communities.<sup>32</sup> It might also be pointed out that there is an essential difference from country-to-country in the manner in which the Rusyn groups express their distinct self-identity. This ranges from the more insistent form found in Slovakia,<sup>33</sup> to the barely perceptible one in Romania. In the latter case, the whole group and its shared language is often defined as Ukrainian/Ruthenian – as, for example, in the World Directory of Minorities, edited by the Minority Rights Group International in 1997. While there are some recent indications that Ukrainians in Romania are looking to restore their identity heavily suppressed under Communism<sup>34</sup>, I am currently unaware of any information revealing similar trends within the Ruthenian community in Romania, or about the claims of Romanian Ruthenians to create their own secondary schools and other educational institutions.

The controversial case of Rusyn identity might in fact best be regarded as not unique but be considered in the broader context of a sharply increased interest in one's own ethnocultural identity and ethnic belonging observed throughout the world as a response to the challenges of globalization. Such a trend is especially pronounced in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, where “traditional” and “new” minorities alike appear to be striving to establish or re-establish their group identity. Recall, for example, the heated debates on Silesians and Moravians as being separate from the Czechs. These claims produced either painful or indifferent reactions from the Czech government and mainstream society, thereby providing grounds for accusing the state authorities of pursuing a policy of “forced assimilation”, and of “unrecognizing (sic) of nationalities/ethnicities” and other sins.<sup>35</sup> And recent developments show that the case is not yet closed. In December this year, for example, the Moravian Democratic Party of the Czech Republic announced its intention to take legal action against the governmental commissioner for human rights, Peter Uhl, who recommended to the Slovak Deputy Premier that since Moravians are not recognized by the Czech Republic as a separate nationality, no representative of the Moravian association of Slovakia should be included in the Slovak Council of Nationalities. Peter Uhl is also opposed to acknowledging that nationality as an option in the 2001 census.<sup>36</sup> And indeed, according to the recent information from the Slovak Deputy Premier Pal Csaky, a forthcoming census will

---

<sup>32</sup> This particular aspect of the Rusyn minorities in Poland and Slovakia was addressed in the two working papers presented to the Concluding Conference of the PROGRES (Groningen, the Netherlands, November 8-12): “Human rights and minority issues: the case of the Ruthenian communities in Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine. Suggestions to Cultural Policy Options and Strategies” by Kazimierz Krzystfek, and “Ruthenian minority in Slovakia” by Dagmar Kusa.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, “The national identity of the Rusyns of East Slovakia” by Ludovit Haraksim, in: *Minorities in Politics: Cultural and Languages Rights* Bratislava, Symposium II, November 13-16, 1991, publication by the Czechoslovak Committee of the European Cultural Foundation, 1992, pp. 228-235.

<sup>34</sup> “Romania’s Ukrainians slowly enhance identity” by Rin Popeski, MINELRES electronic network, 9 August 1999.

<sup>35</sup> These debates have been partly covered by the MINELRES electronic network, with the letter by Avinty Lanaikey, Czech Republic, dated 7 September 1999 as an example.

<sup>36</sup> RFE/RL Newslines Vol. 4, No 240, Part 11, 13 December 2000.

not have a separate entry for a “Moravian nationality”.<sup>37</sup> That the Union of Silesian Minority also provoked some political tensions in Poland in 1997 could also be cited.<sup>38</sup> To some extent, this general phenomenon could be viewed as a reaction against the recent past when any indications of either political or ethno-cultural preferences and orientations, differing from those prescribed from above, were brutally suppressed, and when in Soviet Ukraine a separate Rusyn identity was not recognized officially.

### **Possible scenarios for solving the “Rusyn question”**

Quite different approaches for settling this problem could have been developed depending on the perception of the Rusyn case in Ukraine (or in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe). The two extreme, clearly defined and mutually incompatible approaches have been most visible to date. One of them, pursued by pro-Rusyn advocates, consists of a call for the unconditional recognition of all Rusyn groups either living in certain countries or traditionally inhabiting certain areas of Central Europe as constituting a coherent Rusyn nation separate from the Ukrainian nation. Another calls for a full rejection of the Rusyn identity and regards them instead as just one of a number of Ukrainian sub-ethnoses.

In the first example, in order to protect and secure the Rusyns’ ethno-cultural identity, it seems impossible to proceed using those international instruments and mechanisms emphasizing the prevalence of individual human rights. Approaches focusing on collective (group) rights would seem more appropriate. It is not yet clear what international or European conventions or treaties could apply to this case. The most popular today - the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe<sup>39</sup> - might not be even partially applicable in the Ukrainian context. This is because in Ukraine (and to a certain extent, in Poland, too) there is a noticeable trend towards considering “national minorities” per se as ethnic groups traditionally living on the territory of a given state but representing parts of those peoples that (unlike “indigenous peoples”) have already achieved the highest form of self-determination by establishing their own nation-states. Obstacles in the practical implementation of such an approach might arise because the Rusyns do not have a nation-state which otherwise might have greatly supported and promoted the Rusyns’ cultural institutions, national education, mass media and so forth. The implication therefore is that the Rusyn case differs from that of a “classical” national minority that has its own ethnically related kin-state.

---

<sup>37</sup> RFE/RL Newslines Vol. 5, No 13, Part II, 19 January 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Human rights and minority issues: the case of the Ruthenian communities in Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine. Suggestions to Cultural Policy Options and Strategies. Research paper by Prof. Kazimierz Krzystofek, November 2000

<sup>39</sup> For some useful information and explanation concerning the Framework Convention see: “The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: A Guide for Non-Governmental Organization” by Catherine Barnes & Manon Olsthoorn, published by the Minority Rights Group International, 1999. For the latest proceedings concerning an issue of definitions, the state of ratification and implementation of the FC, see the CoE Doc. 8939, 22 January 2001, and Doc. 8920, 29 January 2001 (revised).

Accordingly, a mechanism such as a bilateral interstate treaty or agreement on a mutual, “symmetrical” protection of national minorities, that operates quite successfully in certain borderland regions – like, for example, between Denmark and Germany – is not relevant in this particular case.

If acquisition of a status of a separate “national minority” is not be viewed as a practical solution for the Rusyn question, then, theoretically, their proponents might consider this group as belonging to the category of “Nations without States” – like those inhabiting, for instance, Catalonia, Quebec, Scotland, the Basque Country and Flanders<sup>40</sup>. The situation of such communities is usually aggravated even more if they are divided by state boundaries – like the Kurds or Sami people. If this would be the case, then some special measures ought to be considered (or invented) to provide for the protection of their group rights. A hypothetical multilateral agreement on a collective support of the Rusyns’ identity, concluded between the countries where Rusyn groups are identified, might be proposed or might at least be viewed as a possible solution. Realizing such a project seems hardly possible, however, because of the wide variety of their languages/dialects, because of diverse political and cultural preferences and orientations, and because of differences in religious denomination and other factors that prevent a recognition of the Rusyns groups in different countries as a coherent ethno-cultural entity.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, a complete and blind rejection of any Rusyn claims to self-identity could be defined indeed as very illiberal and undemocratic, particularly if not taking into account the specific intra-Ukrainian context discussed above. The most critical point is that a complete rejection may well undermine self-identification, or the so-called “subjective criteria” of group identity which is an indispensable principle of developing international law concerning minority groups and their rights. This very principle must, by all means, serve as the foundation for any just and democratic solution for this kind of problem, especially when addressing endangered minorities and indigenous peoples.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> For more information about “Nations without States” see “Nationalism and Intellectuals in Nations without States: the Catalan Case” by Monserrat Guibernau, on: *Political Studies* 2000, Vol.48, pp. 989-1005, and the references within.

<sup>41</sup> These differences continue to exist and become even more pronounced despite all the efforts to consolidate Rusyn groups into a coherent “Rusyn people” – such as an international meeting of “Friends of Pidcarpatska Rus” in Prague, or “World Council of Rusyns” that had met in Presovo (Slovakia) on 24 August 1994. More of that, some researchers believe that the term “Rusyns” applies actually not to any ethnic group but defines rather religious denomination of people belonging to Eastern Christian Church - Orthodox and later, Greek Catholic (see, for example, “Ruthenian” Question and its Edges’ by Aleksandr Duleba, in: *OS*, 1997/2, pp. 46-50.

<sup>42</sup> For the most recent and clearly defined distinction between “ethnocultural minorities”, “national minorities”, and “indigenous peoples”, see: *The Rights of Minorities – A Declaration of Liberal-Democratic Principles Concerning Ethnocultural and National Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*. This impressive document was drafted by a group of nine outstanding international experts, and then 38 experts representing different minorities from 26 countries discussed it and approved its final version. This occurred in Berlin on 16 September 2000, at the initiative and sponsorship of the Liberal Institute of the Friedrich-Naumann Foundation.

Therefore, it appears that today, the whole Rusyn (or “Ruthenian”) question remains open and without any clear solution. Perhaps more careful, thorough and objective research, devoid of the obvious “political component”, is needed. The actual size of the Rusyns (non-Ukrainian) group should be assessed, and for this purpose, Rusyn nationality should be incorporated into the all-Ukrainian census expected to be conducted in 2001. Also a clearer trend in the Rusyns’ movement in Ukraine might develop with the passage of time. The most recent quite astounding developments in “political Ruthenianism” that seem completely out of place in the context of what was said above - namely the voluntary dissolution of the self-proclaimed Carpathian Ruthenian government after seven years of virtual existence<sup>43</sup> - speaks eloquently in favour of such a “passive” position. It is also remarkable that the “prime minister” Ivan Turyanytsa, notorious for his extreme anti-Ukrainian position, has unexpectedly changed his aggressive rhetoric for something quite different. For example, he now says that “Ruthenians have appreciated the strategy and efforts of President Leonid Kuchma and his firm course toward democratic changes and the observance of human rights, the rights of ethnic minorities and their free cultural development”.<sup>44</sup> In the same statement, he expressed the hope that Ukraine will finally recognize Ruthenians as a nation.

Does this finally mean that “Ruthenianism” has failed as a political separatist movement? Or has its leadership realized that as yet, mass mobilization in this cause is an unrealistic objective? Or, is this simply one more tactical step, governed by hidden motives? Or have the sources of financial and other kind of support for this movement from beyond Ukraine been exhausted? Currently, it is difficult either to make an accurate assessment of developments, or to provide a direct, unequivocal answer to any of the above questions. But whatever the future of the Rusyns in Transcarpathia, this demonstrative public rejection of a former course based on political separatism and emotionally charged Ukrainophobia might indeed channel the general perception of the Rusyn problem in Ukraine in a more favourable direction.

---

<sup>43</sup> RFE/RL: Poland, Belarus and Ukraine Report, Vol. 2, No 2, 11 January 2000: Ukraine: Has “Political Rusynism” ended?

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.