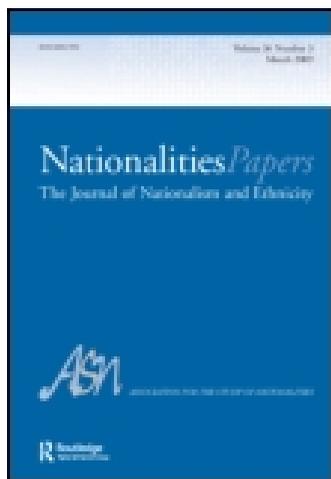


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“The Magocsi Problem” (*Problema Magochoho*): a preliminary deconstruction and contextualization

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An academic gathering – be it a symposium, a conference, or a round-table – to examine the work of a fellow scholar is invariably timely. At the very least it presupposes a consensus on the basic significance of the subject being addressed and a collective decision to address it. As a launch of a new book (in Ukraine a phenomenon known as *prezentatsiia*), it provides the welcome opportunity to discuss a new contribution and with that to fill in and redraw our map of the field. If more than one work or project is involved, it provides a still greater opportunity, and indeed poses a scholarly obligation, to see the larger picture and to engage in stock-taking and rethinking. By contextualizing, problematizing, and where need be, deconstructing, we recalibrate our understanding and thus revive the field and our commitment to it. Clearly, the process of *laudatio*, of paying homage to achievements spanning a whole career, also contributes to this.

Keywords: Ukraine; Magocsi; nationalism

Discussing Professor Paul Robert Magocsi’s contributions to scholarship and the field of Ukrainian Studies at large has an altogether striking component in this context. As a symposium held at St. Vladimir’s Institute, the center of Ukrainian cultural activity in Toronto, it was timely precisely because it was so long overdue – indeed it was the first such discussion at this institution since Professor Magocsi began teaching at the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto some thirty years ago. While over the years his work had been the object of concerted attention and discussion in various venues, both in North America and Europe, only much later, after the welcome evolution of this institution, could it come home to its natural setting.

In other words, is there a “problem”? Should there be a “problem”? The simplest answer, based on personal experience, is that such a paradigm, such a construction of data and interpretation – in fact reception – is altogether possible, perhaps even inevitable. Having been the recipient of such a construction, in the guise of a *problema Hrabyvycha* (Klochek 1–7), one is naturally tempted to take that tag and pass it on, as a mark of distinction and an intellectual *estafeta* as it were. In a real sense, it is not a question of precedent, but of the very nature of things: any good, let alone outstanding scholar should presumably pose problems – if not him or herself *be* a problem – by the very fact that he or she necessarily recasts, re-thinks, and in such or another fashion shakes up the field.

Problematizing the discipline, or at least some of its key assumptions, is itself a value, an academic desideratum. One can easily postulate that all scholarship, all *good* scholarship, is implicitly revisionist. But the question, of course, is how tolerant of such

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revisionism is the academy? What in its makeup encourages and what discourages such activity? Without being unduly essentialist, one can also postulate that such tolerance or openness to revisionism is the key indicator of the vitality of a discipline or a scholarly institution.

From the perspective of scholarship Professor Magocsi's work has easily passed the test of time: his presence and his importance in the field are not in question. There is certainly no problem here. The latest edition of his bibliography, published some 10 years ago and subsequently updated, presents an impressive catalogue of works, even if one were to pare it down to only the strictly academic (Scardello).¹ To merely list and briefly annotate them all would occupy considerably more time than what is allotted here. So I will just single out a few works that have made a singular impact on both my understanding of the field and my appreciation of the author.

In first place I would put his *Galicja: A Historical Survey and Bibliographic Guide* (1983), precisely because it opened up for me – someone supposedly versed in the field – new vistas on the wealth of resources available, and above all on how much I did not know. For a scholar this is always very tonic. In a different key, I was and still remain most impressed by his *Ukraine: A Historical Atlas* (1987 and 1992) and, by virtue of its greater scope and comparative impact, his *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (1993 and 1995), which appeared in an expanded edition under the title *Historical Atlas of Central Europe* (2002). Both are exemplary aides for a clear and highly contextualized understanding of Ukrainian history, and they remain recommended background reading for a number of my courses.

Yet another mode is revealed in his editing of the proceedings – and before that organizing – the 1984 Toronto conference on “Andrei Sheptyts'kyj: His Life and Work.” At work here is both scholarly initiative and affirmative action, in effect, the ability to recognize an important scholarly issue and to reach out to recognized world authorities (the Sheptyts'kyi volume presents this with great clarity with the presence of such figures as Jaroslav Pelikan, Lubomyr Husar, Shimon Redlich, among others), and to redefine, what is central. Simple as it may sound, it is in fact a difficult task, predicated on scholarly achievement, status and perspective, and no less so on energy and the ability to follow through (two qualities which do not always go hand in hand).

Scholarly achievement and standing, however, is not only built on a record of research and publications. It is also, particularly in North America, based on teaching and nurturing of young scholars. And here, too, Professor Magocsi has an outstanding record, one which others at this symposium, particularly his colleagues at the University of Toronto, are more qualified to assess.

Where, or more precisely what, then, is the problem? In one sense it is a perceptual topos in the field of Ukrainian Studies. Characteristically, this is not a component of the academic perspective as such, but rather of a para-academic or more directly a political one. For as witnessed by the recent *prezentatsiia* (launch) of the Ukrainian-language edition of Professor Magocsi's *History of Ukraine*, which was held in 2007 in Kiev at the Institute of History of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, there was a broad public and academic discussion of this work and, implicitly, of its author, his methodology, and his approach to the subject. But as wide-ranging and lively as the discussion was, there was no hint that some problem, some fundamental reservation or qualm, lurked in the background. This, of course, is only one instance, and a fuller discussion of the broad, not merely the academic reception of Professor Magocsi's work is also in order. This example however, may, serve to locate and contextualize the issue. In short, the “problem” in question may be said to exist precisely on the interface of scholarship and

non-scholarship, with the latter coinciding broadly with the realm of social and political activism. Given the fact that the scholar-as-activist is certainly not a rare phenomenon – and in the nineteenth century it was more the rule than the exception, particularly in the case of emerging nations – the problem may in fact be much more common, or paradigmatic, than at first assumed.

Specifically, however, the “Magocsi problem” infers a perception that there is an inherent conflict of interest between, on the one hand, his scholarly work in Ukrainian Studies and institutionally his activity as holder of the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto, and, on the other, his engagement in various Rusyn or Carpatho-Rusyn issues. The latter includes both the academic, as for example his work on the *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture*, and his various publicist, popularizing, educational, and organizational efforts on behalf of the Carpatho-Rusyn community. The existence of the alleged problem is predicated on the fundamental assumption that these two communities and their “causes” (*spravy*) – the Ukrainian and the Carpatho-Rusyn – are necessarily opposed and mutually exclusive. This notion has become inscribed into the post-independence Ukrainian discourse under the heading of “political rusynism” (*politychne rusynstvo*), which connotes not only political separatism but also participation in a larger, international anti-Ukrainian conspiracy (Donii).²

As is often the case, the perception of such a danger is itself strong enough to obviate the need for corroborating proof, thus establishing, or at least contributing to, a paranoid and conspiracy-fearing mind-set. At the same time (as the witticism has it) external reality does often seem to corroborate the paranoia, as attested both by the separatist tendencies in Ukrainian politics, particularly in the east and south of the country, and even more so the ongoing and very prominent propaganda war against Ukraine being conducted in the Russian media, with the topos of the necessary and inevitable dismemberment of Ukraine at the very heart of the argument. It is not surprising, therefore, that Carpatho-Rusyn extremists would invoke this “natural alliance” with Russia in the hope both of securing support and even more, perhaps, of provoking the expected patriotic Ukrainian response.³

This separatist, or “political rusynism” argument should also be seen in the following contexts:

- (a) The right of self-identification, particularly of collectives, is immanent and inalienable. If people feel they are different – they are; if they feel a separate identity – they have it. The manner in which ethnic, linguistic, and regional identity are given political status is regulated by law, and democratic societies have various traditions and mechanisms for applying the law. Blanket denial is not part of these mechanisms, particularly not in the new Europe with its focus on, and tolerance for, regional and ethnic groups/minorities.
- (b) In the case of Ukraine, its blanket denial (to wit, “There never was and never can be a Rusyn/Carpatho-Rusyn nation because they are all simply Ukrainians”) not only is politically incorrect, it should also remind Ukrainians that this is precisely the argument that for so long was used – and indeed is still used – by the Russian side when dealing with Ukrainians and their identity and aspirations. For Ukrainians to now repeat it, to pass on this *estafeta*, as it were, is not only unseemly, but politically unwise, especially in light of Ukraine’s avowed intent to join the European community. And one must assume that it is precisely this concern that has recently led Ukraine, at least on the level of the Transcarpathian oblast, to formally declare the Rusyn/Carpatho-Rusyns a separate nationality.

- (c) In the broadest of contexts, and in light of the catastrophic disappearance in the course of the last century of small groups and particularly their languages and cultures, work on researching and preserving any of them would seem to be of the highest, humanist priority.⁴ And Professor Magocsi's interests are particularly focused on such micro-nations and cultures. In light of the above, to argue that publishing grammars or primers of Carpatho-Rusyn is somehow unnecessary or, indeed, harmful is simply indecent – or more correctly perhaps is a kind of indecent, rechauffé imperialism picked up from such neighbors as Russia and Poland. Such views are all the more untenable, considering the obvious close proximity of Carpatho-Rusyn and Ukrainian cultures and what should be equally obvious – the value of studying the two cultures.
- (d) In our context, however, scholarly moments do, or should, trump the political or geopolitical. Regardless of whether or not the relationship of the Carpatho-Rusyns to the Ukrainians will eventually be more like that of the Bavarians to the Germans or the Tyroleans to the Austrians, the merit of studying the issues of this relationship is beyond dispute. And the record of Professor Magocsi's ongoing work in both areas, but particularly in the area of Ukrainian Studies, is ample evidence of this.

The preceding observations introduce a new context for our discussion of the “Magocsi problem,” that is, the issue of nationalism and its role in scholarship, specifically in the humanities. They also suggest that some disciplines or clusters of disciplines – whole fields, in effect – are all but “genetically” imprinted to articulate a national or nationalist mindset. A neatly paradigmatic formulation of this, and one that highlights the essential (and problematic) circularity in question, is summed up in the formulation, “nationalism in a nationalist science,” which is the very title of a review by Olli Alho of William Wilson's important work, *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*.

Alho agrees with Wilson that “from the very beginning of the discipline Finnish scholars have placed their folkloristic problems within the larger frame of nationalism; this has not only led to the application of the results of research to the cultural and political practice but also – in few but notable cases – to the influence of this nationalistic context on the research itself” (293). He argues, further, that this interpenetration of scholarship and identity-making ideology, and beyond that “an effort “to strengthen the self-consciousness of a society in relation to others by means of a hypothetically constructed past,” is applicable to various times and cultures, particularly in moments of stress or transition (298–9).

The larger issue of how some disciplines or sciences are imbedded in a “nationalist,” that is, in a national identity-constructing discourse, clearly deserves separate attention. In our context, however, it helps us to focus on a distinctive feature of Professor Magocsi's scholarship: the fact that precisely in contrast to the above paradigm it is animated not by nationalist, but rather by transnational, comparative, and inclusive values and criteria. As has so often been noted in reference to his *History of Ukraine*, Magocsi's approach programmatically focuses on the ethnic diversity and multicultural fabric of Ukrainian history and in so doing makes it not only more complex and attractive, but also unfetters it from the teleology (or primordialism) that often obtains in this discipline. In effect, rather than constituting a “problem,” the scholar problematizes, i.e. revitalizes the discipline.

Two more interconnected moments need to be addressed, each of which constitutes the outer reaches of the “Magocsi problem.” At this point, the issue is no longer the scholar himself, nor his work, nor even its reception, but rather his ability to function in the

field. For in the broadest sense the *problema Magochoho* reflects upon the problem of the scholarly environment and the prospects of the field, of Ukrainian Studies in general. As such it is problem shared by many of us.

We may begin with the North American context. The narrower issue here is that the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto is not endowed to the degree that it can confidently pursue its work into the near future; further efforts are needed to ensure an adequate level of funding. This, alas, is also true of most if not all the chairs of Ukrainian Studies that were endowed in the last forty years or so, beginning with the Chairs of Ukrainian Studies at Harvard.

In virtually all of these cases, once a Chair or program was endowed the fundraising declined or, more likely, ceased altogether. The goal, after all, was met. But this, as we know, is not at all the approach that obtains in the real world. A given university, be it the University of Toronto or Harvard, does not launch a fund drive “once and for all” and then, when it is completed, desist from any future fundraising. On the contrary, it periodically renews its efforts, recommits itself to its fundamental and ongoing task. Building a program of study is not like building a cathedral (and even cathedrals require upkeep). The fact that such an ongoing commitment was not considered at the outset and built into the work of the chairs is a major flaw, the workings of which will become ever more apparent with time.

To be sure, some chair endowments (Harvard’s are the obvious example) were configured in such a way – that is, embedded in successful financial investments—that an income for the foreseeable future seems altogether assured. This does not remove the problem, however. An even more fundamental issue is that the “perpetuity” for which these chairs were allegedly endowed is, alas, not all that perpetual. The reality of academic life in North America is that after a span of three or four decades, when a chairholder needs to be replaced, it is the departments in which a given chair is located and the deans that administer them who will decide the profile of the new chairholder. This also means that the degree of adherence to, or departure from the initial conception of the chair will be negotiated in the context of the academic setting and the time when the issue is addressed. If the support system for a chair at a given institution and in the field at large is strong, then the outcome in all likelihood will be positive. If not, the outcome is at best uncertain.

In a globalized setting, the framework for Ukrainian Studies is determined by its international dimension, but most of all by the state of the discipline in Ukraine itself. It is in Ukraine, after all, where the sources, archives, and above all human resources are located. And it is now more obvious than ever that without access to such resources Ukrainian Studies in the West and particularly in North America will not develop, let alone flourish. One need only look at where our graduate students come from and whom we have recently been appointing to our professorial positions. In that context, the present bleak state of the humanities in Ukraine and the absence of any policy to remedy such a state of affairs should be of utmost concern. This, I would argue, is where the ultimate problem lies. While we celebrate the achievements of our colleague Professor Paul Robert Magocsi and his evident commitment to our discipline, we should also remain concerned and focus our attention on the overarching context.

Notes

1. An earlier edition carrying the same title but covering the years 1964–1985 was edited by Luba Pendzey with an introduction by Bohdan Budurowycz. U of Toronto P, Toronto, 1985.

2. The literature on this is substantial. For recent internet material, see Donii.
3. Cf. the "Open Letter," signed by Paul Robert Magocsi and Steven Chepa, disassociating the World Congress of Rusyns from extremist positions, particularly attempts to establish a Russian "protectorate" over the Transcarpathian oblast', as well as Professor Magocsi's note arguing that Ukrainian government inaction provokes such extremism (21).
4. The literature on language death is voluminous, especially on the Internet; see http://www.ethnologue.com/show_subject.asp?code=LGD for one such bibliography. The rates of language death in various regions of the world are difficult to assess, especially because of the range of criteria and statistical evidence employed. Nevertheless, as noted in 1992 by one leading authority, Michael Krauss: "I consider it a plausible calculation that – at the rate things are going – the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind's languages" (cited in Crystal 18). For a study of the Ukrainian language under the pressures of Soviet linguicide, see Masenko.

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