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Paul Robert Magocsi, Toronto

## Language and National Survival

As a result of the Revolution of 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union, the post-Communist period in east-central and eastern Europe has witnessed national awakenings among many peoples who during the era of totalitarianism were unable to function normally or, in certain cases, forbidden to exist. Within the past five years, some of these peoples have been able to achieve statehood, such as the Slovenes, Croats, Macedonians, Slovaks, the Baltic peoples, Belarusians, and the Ukrainians. Others have undertaken a struggle for cultural emancipation whose goals are to receive recognition as a distinct people (nationality) and to obtain perhaps a degree of autonomy, but not independent statehood. Among such groups are the Gypsies, Moravians, Gagauz, and the Rusyns or Ruthenians.

The Rusyns, who may number about 900 000 people, live primarily in the Transcarpathian *oblast'* of Ukraine (650 000). There are also significant numbers living in neighboring Slovakia (130 000) and Poland (60 000), and beyond the Carpathian homeland in Serbia (25 000), Croatia (5000), and the Czech Republic (12 000). Ever since World War II and the imposition of Soviet-style Communist rule, the Rusyn nationality was banned in all countries except former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Croatia). At the same time, all Rusyns were administratively declared to be Ukrainians and the Rusyn language was designated to be a dialect of Ukrainian in much the same way that Macedonian had been designated a dialect of Bulgarian during the earlier decades (and for some writers still today) of the twentieth century.

During this most recent national awakening Rusyns have, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, put a great emphasis on language. As with so many other stateless peoples, language has become for them both the symbolic and practical instrument of national survival. The initial stage in the language-building process took place in Bardejovské Kúpele, Slovakia, in November 1992 at the First Congress of the Rusyn Language, which brought over fifty Rusyn writers, journalists, and scholars from Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia, together with several sociolinguists from abroad.

The opening speaker, Professor Joshua Fishman of Stanford University, spoke about "first" language congresses among nineteen peoples worldwide. When asked about the criteria for judging the success or failure of these diverse congresses, Fishman replied that it was less a matter of what took place at the "first" congress than what occurred subsequently. Before leaving their own "first" language congress, the Rusyns resolved a very important practical issue. They decided to adopt the "Romansch model" outlined by a speaker from Switzerland, where for the past half-century five literary norms of the Romansch language and more recently a unifying *koiné* (*Romansch Grischun*) exist. The Rusyns agreed that they too would create different norms, one each for Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia, and while doing that they would simultaneously be working on a "fifth norm", a Rusyn *koiné* that would eventually be used as a common literary standard for all. In fact, the Yugoslav variant known as Vojvodinian Rusyn already exists and has been in use in local schools and administration since 1945.

As for the other three norms, the Rusyns in Slovakia quickly became the most active. In January 1993, less than two months after the First Rusyn Language Congress ended, the Rusyn Renaissance Society of Slovakia established an Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture in the group's culture center, the eastern Slovak city of Prešov. During the next two years, the institute's small staff headed by Professors Vasyľ Jabur and Jurij Pan'ko periodically met with Rusyn writers and grammarians from other countries to resolve common linguistic problems at the same time that they worked with local writers and journalists to create a Rusyn standard specifically for Slovakia.

The result was the publication in late 1994 of a *Rusyn Orthographic Rulebook* (*Pravyla rusyn'skoho pravopysu*, 134 p.), a *Rusyn-Russian-Ukrainian-Slovak-Polish Dictionary of Linguistic Terminology* (*Rusyn'sko-rus'ko-ukrajins'ko-sloven'sko-pol'skŷj slovnyk lingvistič-nŷch terminiv*, 230 p.), and a 42 000-word *Orthographic Dictionary of the Rusyn Language* (*Orfografičnŷj slovnyk rusyn'skoho jazŷka*, 304 p.). These three works, together with an elementary primer (*Bukvar' pro rusyn'skŷ dity*) and reader (*Čitanka pro rusyn'skŷ dity*) by a local teacher, Jan Hryb, provided the basis for the new Rusyn codified norm.

In order to emphasize the importance of their achievement, a celebratory event was held in Slovakia's capital, Bratislava, on January 27, 1995. In the presence of Rusyn writers and scholars from several countries, representatives of the Slovak government and scholarly institutions, and church and civic leaders, the head of the Rusyn Renaissance Society announced: "We solemnly declare that from this day forward our Rusyn language is a normative and codified language." During the first part of the celebratory event, Dr. Ján Bobák of the Matica Slovenská, compared the present work of Rusyn linguists with what L'udovit Štúr had achieved for the Slovak language in the mid-nineteenth century. Many words of congratulations and further encouragement came from the United Nations Center for Human Rights (Switzerland), the Federal Union of European Minorities (Germany), the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (Ireland), the International Association for the Defense of Menaced Languages and Cultures (Belgium), the European Federation Maisons des Pays (France), the Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations (Netherlands), the Minority Rights Group International (Great Britain), the Society for Threatened Peoples (Germany), the United States ambassador to Slovakia, and the Greek Catholic and Orthodox churches in Slovakia. There were also greetings from Rusyn cultural organizations in Poland (Stovaryšnja Lemkiv), Yugoslavia (Ruska Matka), and the United States, whose Carpatho-Rusyn Research Center for the occasion presented to the Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture a microfilm collection (over 10 000 frames) of rare Rusyn newspapers dating from 1848.

The second part of the program was a scholarly conference attended by over 75 cultural activists and scholars from the institutes of language, history, and ethnography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. It included three presentations: "The Carpatho-Rusyn Language in the Context of Contemporary Slavic Regional Literary Languages," by Professor ALEXANDER DULIČENKO (Tartu University, Estonia); "The History of the Rusyn Language Question from the 18th Century to the Present," by Professor PAUL ROBERT MAGOSCI (University of Toronto, Canada); and "Aspects of the Rusyn Literary Norm in Slovakia," by Professor VASYL' JABUR (Šafárik University, Slovakia). These lectures and other mate-

rials from the celebratory event will be published in late 1995 in the East European Monograph Series of Columbia University Press.<sup>1</sup>

Before and after the January 1995 celebratory event, the codification of the Rusyn language received widespread media attention in Slovakia and in neighboring countries. This was in part due to the efforts of Ukrainians (more precisely, Rusyns in Slovakia that adopted a Ukrainian national identity), who oppose the codification process as “anti-Ukrainian,” “unscholarly,” and a further step toward assimilation with Slovaks. As part of a campaign since 1989 against codification of the Rusyn language, the Ukrainian-language press in Slovakia and neighboring Ukraine argued that a “Rusyn language never was and cannot be” – an ironic paraphrase of the words used by imperial Russian publicists and authorities who had outlawed the Little Russian (Ukrainian) language in the nineteenth-century tsarist empire.

Despite such interventions, the Rusyn language has been codified in Slovakia. This formal act has many practical implications. While the Rusyn Renaissance Society with its weekly newspaper (*Narodný novynký*), bi-monthly magazine (*Rusyn*), and book publishing program have been supported since 1991 by Slovakia’s Ministry of Culture, further use of the language in public life was stalled by government bureaucrats who argued there had to be a literary norm before other kinds of activity could be undertaken. Now that the formal codification has taken place, the procedural way is open for the creation of a Rusyn-language radio program for eastern Slovakia and for Rusyn-language courses (initially two hours weekly) in elementary schools, at least ten of which have already requested a program in Rusyn culture. To prepare teachers for the new program, Slovakia’s Ministry of Education provided in late 1994 funding to create a Department (Katedra) of Rusyn Language and Culture at the Pedagogical Faculty of Šafárik University in Prešov. The new university department is to replace the Rusyn Renaissance Society’s Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture and to begin functioning in the near future.

The celebratory occasion on January 27, 1995, announcing the codification of the Rusyn language in Slovakia was both the culmination of a democratic and emancipatory process that began with the Revolution of 1989 as well as an important concrete step that has created a medium for the further propagation of Rusyn culture. The government of Slovakia is to be commended for implementing in deed as well as word a democratic and humanistic policy toward nation minorities within its boundaries and, in particular, toward a fellow Slavic people, the Rusyns, with whom Slovaks have for centuries shared a common fate in the heart of Europe.

<sup>1</sup> PAUL ROBERT MAGOSCI (Ed.) *A New Slavic Language is Born / Zrodil sa nový slovanský jazyk*. Introduction by Nikita Tolstoj. New York 1996 = East European Monographs.