

Minority Rights in Eastern Europe: How Slovakia's Rusyns can help Ukraine towards EU membership

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Abstract

The Rusyns (aka Ruthenians) are a small European linguistic and ethnic group that straddles international borders: approx. 20,000 live in eastern Slovakia, where they have gained greater autonomy than the approx. 30,000 in western Ukraine. The European Union funds Rusyn cultural and language education, but the Ukrainian government has yet to recognize this people as a distinct minority. The momentum of Rusyn culture in Slovakia, which is partially an outgrowth of the EU's support for minority peoples, has the potential to shift Ukraine's position towards its ethnic minorities and thus increase its likelihood of meeting the terms of accession to the EU.

Introduction

The former communist states of Eastern Europe that are interested in joining the European Union must make considerable reforms in order to do so. Eastern members of the European Union are in a strong position to Ukraine on its path to joining the Union. The obvious way is to work within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, which was formed in 2008 to bring “enhanced effectiveness in promoting democratic governance and human rights; As set out in the European Agenda on Security, our efforts will prioritise ... full compliance with international law, including international human rights law” (“The Eastern Partnership – Frequently Asked Questions,” 2016). Some professional linguists, such as Drs. Csernicškó and Ferenc, have discussed the role played by language planning policies in honouring human rights (2014).

Of the six countries in the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), so far only Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia are seriously pursuing EU membership. Brussels wants to help Ukraine join, but recent social unrest has raised concerns of the country's human rights violations. The nationalists who took control of the country after the 2014 ‘Euromaidan’ revolution may actually be preventing their country from realising its European aspirations. Besides sparking a civil war in the East, President Petro Poroshenko's government faces enormous obstacles in reforming Ukraine, including its treatment of ethnic minorities. For example, in August 2015, hundreds of Ukrainians turned out in front of the parliament to protest laws that would grant more autonomy to Eastern regions occupied by Russian separatists. Amidst violent protests, these (pro-Western) nationalists killed one state guardsman and injured over 100 people (“Ukraine crisis,” 2015). At this time, level-headed Rusyn activists from southwestern Ukraine and Slovakia gave a refreshing contrast to this bloodshed by peacefully advocating greater autonomy to ethnic minorities.

The Rusyns are a separate Slavic people who live primarily in southwest Ukraine and eastern Slovakia. Since the fall of communism, Slovakia has recognized the Rusyns as an official minority and allowed them cultural freedom, but Ukraine has not. This paper will first discuss a brief history of the Rusyns, describe the EU's approach to minority groups, compare and contrast Ukraine's approach, and make suggestions for how it should improve. The research of Drs. Kushko and Plišková has paved the way for the current debate (2007). If President Poroshenko's

government were to grant the Rusyns more rights—accepting the help of Slovakia’s EU-backed organisations—it would improve its PR with the Western world and prepare the way for a more prosperous future.

History of the Rusyns

Similar to the Basques of Spain and France and the Sámi of Scandinavia, the Rusyns are one of Europe’s nations without a state. Although the term “Ruthenian” has been traditionally used in English, after the end of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe the people chose to call themselves *rusíni*, or “Rusyns.” The Rusyn homeland has been controlled at times by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, and is today split between the Slovak Republic (Slovakia) and Ukraine. Between the two World Wars, Ruthenia was Czechoslovakia’s easternmost province (in Czech, *Podkarpatská Rus* - “Subcarpathian Ruthenia”) and enjoyed extensive autonomy. After the Red Army liberated Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia in 1944, the Soviet Union annexed the province to Ukraine, where it came to be called “Zakarpattia.”¹

For the past 70 years, the government has insisted that Rusyns are, simply, Ukrainians. More broadly, after 1945 the Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia banned the name “Rusyn” and refused to acknowledge that Rusyns comprise a distinct people or nationality (Magocsi & Pop, 2002). Doctors Magocsi and Pop explain in the *Encyclopaedia of Rusyn History and Culture* that “from 1945 to 1989 state-imposed ideological guidelines in [Eastern Bloc] countries actively discouraged research and tried to eliminate historical memory about much of Rusyn history and culture, where it did not conform to Communist ideology. Part of that ideology was the classification of Rusyns as Ukrainians.” In this suffocating atmosphere, Rusyn autonomy withered, but survived. In urbanised countries like France and England, minority languages have died as their rural populations move to cities, but Rusyn endured because many of its speakers lived in villages isolated among the Carpathian Mountains.

Only after the fall of Eastern Europe’s totalitarian regimes could Rusyn cultural life revive itself. Unfortunately for Rusyns in Ukraine, their post-1991 government never abandoned its practice of labelling Rusyns as “Ukrainians”; Perhaps Kiev made this fateful choice in order to consolidate rule over its newly independent territory. Meanwhile, Rusyns living in a newly pluralistic Slovakia reawakened public awareness of their culture that had lain dormant for years. In the last 20-plus years, this people has grown in international recognition, thanks in part to the world’s most famous Rusyn, an artist born in 1928 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to two Rusyn immigrants from north-eastern Slovakia: Andy Warhol.

The EU Approach to Minorities

Because Slovakia belongs to the European Union—a transnational organisation committed to human rights—its government is more likely to accelerate Rusyn language and cultural revival than Ukraine’s. The EU upholds Article 22 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to ... social and cultural rights

¹ This new name means simply “behind the Carpathian mountains”; it does not acknowledge the historical name “Ruthenia” that is tied to the native inhabitants.

indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality” (“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” 1948). For an applicant country to join the EU, its leaders must demonstrate that they adhere to the Union’s core values, such as democracy, free markets, and human rights. Unfortunately, post-Soviet Ukraine has had a poor track record in these fields. When the country gained independence, more than 78% of population of the Zakarpattia region voted in favour of autonomy for their region, and in May 1993, the interim government of the Autonomous Republic of Carpathian Ruthenia was organized, but was never recognized by Kiev. Despite the liberal political atmosphere of these transformative years, the government maintained the same nationalistic policy towards Rusyns as during the communist era.

The post-1989 Czech and Slovak Republics took a different approach. Slovakia’s 1992 Constitution labels Slovak as the country’s official language, but gives rights to minorities. Ukraine could have taken the same course, but its leaders chose not to. To this day the Rusyn language is not used in public spheres like courts, schools, or universities. Kiev’s restrictive policy has sowed the seeds of discontent with other ethnic groups. Ukraine’s ethnic Russian minority—which forms about 17% of the national population—has felt particularly discontented, as ethnic Russians have been denied the right to use their language in schools and government functions. For the past three years, Moscow has capitalized on this discontent, stoking a civil war to punish Kiev for aligning itself too closely to the West.

Since 1989, the Slovak government has supported Rusyns’ grassroots efforts for cultural autonomy. Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, recently told President Poroshenko that Ukraine will not join the European Union sooner than in 20 years’ time (“Juncker Says Ukraine Not Likely To Join EU, NATO For 20-25 Years,” 2016). If Kiev were to speed up reforms, such as its treatment of minorities, this time frame could be shortened. Ukraine ought to follow the path of Slovakia by taking steps such as the following:

1. **Provide Rusyn language education in primary schools.**
2. **Provide Rusyn language education in universities.**
3. **Provide Rusyn language and cultural programs.**

Conclusion

It is unlikely that Poroshenko’s government will seriously reform its approach to the Rusyns. The rights of this minority group are a mere footnote to Ukraine’s never-ending concerns; Rusyn rights are much less pressing than armed rebels in the East. The European Union can afford to fund Rusyn education, but when Ukraine receives development money, it is likely to put it towards more pressing needs.

Nevertheless, in order to join the European family, Kiev must acknowledge the Rusyns’ rights. If laws were passed that devolved more autonomy, Poroshenko and his cabinet would enjoy more international support. Such a move would deflate fear-mongering rhetoric from right-wing leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (who has spoken of the need to protect the Rusyns [living near the border with Hungary] from radical Ukrainian nationalists), and Vladimir Putin (“Long Live Ruthenia,” 2015). French President Hollande and German Chancellor Merkel would also be reassured that Kiev is implementing the reforms of the Minsk II ceasefire, and thus deserves further diplomatic and economic aid (“Germany, France Pressured Kiev on Constitutional Reform,” 2015). For Ukraine, the brightest future is one aimed firmly towards

Europe. The sooner the leaders in Kiev follow Bratislava's example and grant minorities the rights that they deserve, the better the future will be for their country.

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