

THE PRESERVATION FACTORS OF THE RUTHENIANS IN SERBIA/VOJVODINA*

FACTORII DE CONSERVARE A RUTENILOR ÎN SERBIA/VOJVODINA*

Mihajlo FEJSA

University of Novi Sad,
Faculty of Philosophy,
Department of Ruthenian Studies
fejsam@gmail.com

Abstract

Although the Ruthenians / Rusyns in Serbia (less than 15,000 members of the Ruthenian / Rusyn national community today) were cut off from their brethren in the Carpathian area they have managed to survive on the Panonian Plain. Comparing to the Ruthenians in all other countries the Ruthenians in Serbia have the highest level of minority rights. The Serbian / Vojvodinian authorities do their best to implement international conventions and there is a hope for the Ruthenians in Serbia / Vojvodina to preserve their culture, language and national identity in the future.

Rezumat

Deși rutenii/rusinii din Serbia (mai puțin de 15,000 de membri ai comunității naționale de ruteni/rusini astăzi) au fost excluși din zona carpatică au reușit să supraviețuiască în Câmpia Panonică. În comparație cu rutenii din toate celelalte țări cei din Serbia au cel mai ridicat nivel de drepturi ca și minoritate. Autoritățile sârbe își dau silința să implementeze convenții internaționale și există o speranță pentru rutenii din Serbia /Voivodina să își păstreze cultura, limba și identitatea națională în viitor.

Key words: *Ruthenians in Serbia/Vojvodina, Carpathian homeland, factors of preservation, Ruthenian language, Ruthenian culture.*

Cuvinte cheie: *ruteni din Serbia/Voivodina, patria din Carpați, factori de conservare, limba ruteană, cultura ruteană*

For centuries the Ruthenians / Rusyns lived within the borders of Hungarian Kingdom. They lived in the northeast Hungarian counties, namely, in Zemplen, Saros, Abauj-Torna, Borsod, Szabolcs, Ung, Ugocsa, Maramaros and Gemer. Most of these counties are today in eastern Slovakia, and others in Hungary, Ukraine and Romania. Some 270 years ago, groups of Ruthenians began migrating south from their homeland in the Carpathian mountains to the Srem and Bačka regions of what is now Vojvodina in Serbia and Eastern Slavonia in Croatia (Fejca, 2010: 11).

After the defeat and retreat of the Ottoman Empire from Bačka, Srem and Banat in 1699, the Austro-Hungarian authorities needed more population in the south of their state and supported colonization of Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks and others, among them Ruthenians as well (Gavrilović, 1977: 153). That is why the ancestors of the Vojvodina Ruthenians, citizens of free status under Habsburg Monarchy («Ruthenus Libertinus», as they were called) and of Greek-Catholic (Uniate) faith, in total number of around 2.000 were allowed to settle under the contract

with the state authorities in the »dessorata possessio Keresztur« and nearby locality of Kucura in the central Bačka region in the mid of the 18th century (Хорњак, 2006: 25).

At the end of the First World War the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed. Now for the first time several branches of the Ruthenian people were somehow cut off. The Ruthenians in Bačka had to find their own way. They felt that the founding of the Ruthenian Popular Educational Society, the so-called Prosvita (Education), was the first step in which they manifested their striving for an independent national cultural life. At the founding meeting, on the 2nd of July 1919 in Novi Sad, the Ruthenian national community decided to elevate its colloquial language (not the Russian or Ukrainian languages) to the level of a literary language. The first cultural-educational organization adopted resolution to use its everyday speech in the education, cultural life and the press. This decision was based on the fact that books of religious and literary character had already been published in this language (Medješi, 1993: 146). The first Ruthenian cultural organization published several books of great significance. The most influential book of the time was the first Ruthenian grammar *Grammar of Bačka-Ruthenian Speech* (1923) by Havrijil Kosteljnik.

The first language authorities took for granted that the Ruthenian language was a dialect of Ukrainian and attempted "to bring Ruthenian near to the Ukrainian literary language". They neglected, on the one hand, activation of the genuine features of the Ruthenian language that has been activated in the Ruthenian lexicography by Prof. Dr. Julijan Ramač (Рамач, 2002: 572-577), and, on the other hand, original models of the Ruthenian / Rusyn variants of the Carpathian area that has been activated by Prof. Dr. Mihajlo Fejsa (Фејса, 2013). Nikola Kočiš's a priori approach in the second half of the 20th century originates from the Soviet practice in the Carpathian area, which in 1953 led to the administrative closure of hundreds of Ruthenian schools. Such a policy prohibited the existence of the Ruthenians and their language. Kočiš accepted the Ukrainian point of view and did not bother with the facts that in the Carpathian homeland more than 1,300 Ruthenian schools were transformed into Ukrainian schools administratively, that the Greek Catholic church was outlawed, and that the Ruthenians / Rusyns in the Carpathian homeland were not even allowed to call themselves Ruthenians / Rusyns. With regard specifically to Slovakia, one scholar wrote: „As a result of such short-sighted linguistic practices and the abrupt and administrative manner in which Ukrainian was introduced – all carried out during the height of Stalinist repression – the Rusyn populace reacted by sending their children to Slovak schools in neighboring towns or by demanding Slovak instead of Ukrainian schools in their villages. This process of voluntary Slovakization spread rapidly during the 1960s. If in 1948, when the Communists came to power, there were 322 Rusyn schools with over 23,000 pupils, when Communist rule disappeared in late 1989 there were only 15 schools left with just 900 pupils, in which a few subjects were taught in Ukrainian. Thus, the Rusyn language question in Slovakia was 'resolved' as in the Soviet Transcarpathia by the adoption of Ukrainian. The cost, however, was national assimilation and decline by more than two-thirds the number of Rusyns willing to identify as Slovaks“ (Magocsi, 1996: 33). Nothing like this happened to Yugoslavia's Ruthenians (today mostly in Serbia and Croatia). While Stalin's policy made the Carpatho-Rusyns disappear for four decades in the Carpathian homeland (today mostly in Slovakia, Ukraine and Poland), Tito's policy enabled the Bačka-Srem Ruthenians both to exist and even to flourish. Two decades after 1989 and the fall of Communist rule it is clear that the Carpatho-Rusyns were never completely wiped out from their homeland. Today, the governments of Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Croatia recognize Carpatho-Rusyns as a national minority. Apart from that, the Ruthenians of the Republic of Serbia, particularly in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, are recognized officially as a distinct national minority with their own literary language. When the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina gained extensive rights of self-rule under the 1974 Constitution, five of the Vojvodina's peoples were given the status of official nationalities – Serbs, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, and Ruthenians. For the first time it was possible to use the Ruthenian language in court, in offices, on public signs etc.

It is hard to understand how such a small population managed to preserve its language, religion, schools, customs – in short, its national being for 27 decades. Journalist Miron Žiroš gives

14 factors which, according to him, contributed towards the final outcome – the existence of a small population of conscious Ruthenians, the establishment of their national language, the maturity of the Ruthenian literature, journalism, folklore, and drama. These are: 1. the existence of the two Ruthenian centers – Krstur and Kucura; 2. the firm recognition of belonging to the Ruthenians of the Transcarpathian region; 3. the strong inclination to “stick together” among foreigners; 4. the Greek-Catholic Church and the preservation of the national identity; 5. the Ruthenian school (all subjects are taught in Ruthenian in the primary schools of Ruski Krstur, Kucura and Djurdjevo; apart from the three schools, there are 12 more that provide instructions to their pupils in Ruthenian in addition to all the rest of subjects instructed in Serbian); 6. the constant contacts with the Hornjica (the Carpathian homeland, the Upper Lands of Austria-Hungary); 7. receipt of books and a printing press from Hornjica; 8. the education of the Ruthenian intelligentsia; 9. the preservation of traditions and national customs (for example Church holidays – Christmas, Easter, Kirbaj), the Ruthenian wedding and the public life; 10. the foundation of the Ruthenian Popular Educational Society; 11. the new restoration, post-war development from 1945 to 1990; 12. the role of the Society for the Ruthenian Language and Literature; 13. the Cultural Festival Red Rose; 14. the Stage Memorial of Petro Riznič Djadja and the Ruthenian Amateur Theatre Djadja (Жирос, 1998, 463).

Bearing all above mentioned in mind, we would like to draw a parallel to the factor-assumption analysis made by Miron Žiroš at the beginning of the nineties of the 20th century. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the analysis should be expanded with several factors which, by all means, contribute towards the final outcome – the existence of a small population of conscious Ruthenians. So, the 15th factor is: the foundation of the National Council of Rusyn National Minority (2002); the 16th factor is: the foundation of a professional Ruthenian theatre (Ruthenian National Theatre Petro Riznič Djadja) (2004); the 17th factor is: the establishment of the Institute for Culture of the Vojvodinian Ruthenians (2008) together with formation of the National Museum, the National Gallery and the National Archive; the 18th factor is: the establishment of the Apostolic Exarchate for Greek-Catholics in Serbia and Montenegro (2004).

As the 19th factor we see the existence of both Ruthenian High School in Ruski Krstur, and the Department of the Ruthenian Studies in Novi Sad. And it is not only the existence of these two educational institutions that is to be mentioned. They have developed their curriculums in the direction that there are some new subjects to be elected. As far as the Department of the Ruthenian Studies is concerned, apart from the Ruthenian Phonetics, Morphology, Syntax, Historical Grammar, Ruthenian Literature, Ruthenian History and Ruthenian folklore, new courses are: Carpatho-Rusyn Language and English-Ruthenian Contrastive Grammar (professor Mihajlo Fejsa's courses), and Ruthenian Children Poetry, Novel and Drama (professor Julijan Tamaš's courses). The professors work in special circumstances and they should both describe their subjects of research and teach them at university level. Several capital works have been published: *Ruthenian literature: History and Status*, *Havrijil Kostel'nik Between Doctrine and Nature*, *Ruski Krstur – Chronicle and History* (Julijan Tamaš), *Economic and Public Life of the Ruthenians in South Hungary (1745-1848)*, *School in Ruski Krstur* (Janko Ramač), *Ruthenian Lexicon*, *SerboCroatian-Ruthenian Phrasal Dictionary*, *Havrijil Kostel'nik's Lexicon Dictionary*, *Serbian-Ruthenian Dictionary*, *Prepositional Constructions in the Ruthenian Literary Language*, *Ruthenian Language Grammar*, *Ruthenian-Serbian Dictionary* (Julijan Ramač), *The English Elements in the Ruthenian Language*, *Kucura in the Present and the Past, Tense and Aspect in Ruthenian and English*, *Rusini / Rusnaci / Ruthenians (1745-2005) I-II*, *Functioning of the V_o Construction / Form in Expressing Temporal-Aspectual Relations in the Havrijil Kostel'nik's Stories*, *Sentence Constructions in Ruthenian and English*, translations: *Hamlet* by W. Shakespeare, *Alice in Wonderland* by L. Carrol, *People From Nowhere* by P. R. Magocsi into Ruthenian, *The Ruthenians in Serbia* by the National Council of the Rusyn National Minority into English, editorship: *Orthographical Dictionary of the Ruthenian Language* (Mihajlo Fejsa) (Фејца, 2010: 39). The Department is specific for a relatively

small number of students because of small Ruthenian population in Vojvodina / Serbia (less than 15,000). Fifty students have graduated from the Department so far.

The 20th factor is the existence of not only one but several Ruthenian publishers and new Ruthenian journals today. The Newspaper Publishing Institution *Ruske slovo* from Novi Sad is no longer the only existing publisher. The NPI *Ruske slovo* publishes the weekly newspaper *Ruske slovo / Ruthenian Word*, the children's monthly magazine *Zahradka / Garden*, the literary, cultural and art journal *Švetlosc / Light*, the cultural-political journal for youth *MAK*, the annual almanac and several books yearly. As publishers also appear: Institute for Publishing Textbooks in Belgrade – Department in Novi Sad (published around 1,000 titles by now), Greek-Catholic Church (publishes monthly *Dzvoni / Bells*), Society for the Ruthenian Language, Literature and Culture from Novi Sad (publishes yearly *Studia Ruthenica*), Ruthenian Home from Ruski Krstur (publishes quarterly *Rusnak / Ruthenian*) and Cultural Educational Society DOC - Kucura from Kucura (publishes yearly *Erato nad Kucurom/Kocurom / Erato Above Kucura* and yearly *Kocurska čutka / Kucura Corncob*).

The 21st factor is that several new cultural manifestations are organized and even new cultural-artistic or cultural-educational organizations (for ex. Home - Society of the Ruthenians of Novi Sad in Novi Sad, Nongovernment Organization Ruthenian Forum GEA in Novi Sad, Nongovernment Organization of Young Ruthenians Pact Ruthenorum in Ruski Krstur, Youth Forum in Novi Sad, Cultural Educational Society DOC - Kucura in Kucura, Ethno Club Brought Out of Oblivion in Kucura) are formed. Let us mention only a few manifestations organized at the beginning of the 3rd millennium: Festival Vodova Fest in Ruski Krstur, Festival of Monodrama and Duodrama in Novi Sad, Fine Arts Colony Meetings at Boodnarov's in Gospodjinci, International Festival of Humour and Satire Kucura Corncob in Kucura, Festival of Authentic Singing Not to Forget in Đurđevo, Festival of Folk Orchestras Melodies of the Ruthenian Court in Šid and several others (Jakim, 2009: 34-48).

The 22nd factor is, according to us, the existence of radio and TV broadcast. Radio Novi Sad annually broadcasts about 1,500 hours of radio programming in Ruthenian. Every week there are 4 hours of talk- and music-format Ruthenian programming, complemented by several special programs in the course of each year, such as coverage of important cultural events and church services on important holidays. Radio-Diffusive Institution of Vojvodina broadcasts about 143 hours of Ruthenian-language TV programming annually. There is a ten-minute news broadcast in Ruthenian five times per week, and on Sunday there is a 60-minute magazine show. There are also several other special programs aired throughout the year. Within the Public Service – the Radio Diffusive Institution of Vojvodina, the Ruthenian Editorial Board exists more than six decades (since 1948) in the Novi Sad Radio and more than three decades in the Novi Sad Television (since 1975).

The 23rd fact is represented by the revolutionary changes in Central and Eastern Europe that brought the rebirth of cultural identity for Carpatho-Rusyns. Mutual awareness and closer contacts between Vojvodina Ruthenians and their brethren in the Carpathian homeland – a process initiated in 1989 – can in the future assist all Carpatho-Ruthenians in their ongoing struggle to survive as a national minority. Since the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic have acknowledged Ruthenians as a distinct minority as well the Ruthenians of Serbia are no longer alone. They have many opportunities for joint projects of different kinds. For example, a book containing Ruthenian poetry of all Ruthenian enclaves *Rusinski / Ruski pisnji* (1997), edited by Natalija Dudaš; a bilingual English-Ruthenian manual *Let's Speak English and Rusyn / Bešedujme po ruski i po englijski* by Paul Robert Magocsi and Mihajlo Fejsa (1998); *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture*, edited by Paul Robert Magocsi and Ivan Pop, was published in English (2002); Paul Robert Magocsi edited *Rusinskyj jazyk* (2004). After 1989, Carpatho-Ruthenians have obviously risen like Phoenix out of ashes, and we may conclude that the Ruthenian question has not been solved in the Stalin way.

The 24th factor that ensures the existence of Ruthenians in Europe is the international factor. The Ruthenians are recognized in all countries in the world, but in Ukraine. As far as the Republic of Serbia is concerned it has adopted international standards concerning national minorities rights. The two most important international documents of the Council of Europe signed by our country are the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (signed by the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2005) and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (signed by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 2001). The essence of these documents has been incorporated in the 2006 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia.

Our local national organizations – Ruthenian Home, Society for the Ruthenian Language, Literature and Culture, and Cultural Educational Society DOC - Kucura – are expected to create many more projects of national importance. The National Council of the Rusyn National Minority, as the founder of NPI Ruske slovo, is expected to have more influence on the content of *Ruske slovo* and the Institution's publishing programme, as well as on the curriculum of primary, secondary and faculty education. The National Council of the Rusyn National Minority, the Institute for Culture of the Vojvodinian Ruthenians, the Ruthenian Home, the Society for the Ruthenian Language, Literature and Culture, and the Cultural Educational Society DOC – Kucura should join their efforts in order to preserve and improve the existence and life of the Ruthenians in Vojvodina / Serbia.

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