

# Subcarpathian Rusyns in the debates of the Chamber of Deputies of the inter-war Czechoslovak Republic

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## Abstract

The paper presents a very different view of the Rusyn question in inter-war Czechoslovakia through the eyes of Rusyn representatives from across the spectrum of political parties in the Czechoslovak parliament. Although Subcarpathian Rus and its inhabitants were often idealised in Czechoslovakia for their unspoilt nature and patriarchal character, and Czechoslovak public opinion was very favourable towards the region, some Rusyn politicians certainly did not share this ideal. The Communist deputies in particular criticised all government policies and the persistence of general backwardness, but the question of the region's autonomy was probably the most prominent among the Czechoslovak deputies representing Subcarpathian Rus. The paper highlights four main issues that emerged most frequently in the parliamentary debates: the quest for autonomy, the solution to the poor economic situation, the situation in education and disputes over the use of the language, and the dual treatment of Rusyns living in Slovakia and in Subcarpathian Rus.

## Keywords

Rusyns, Subcarpathian Rus, Czechoslovakia, parliament, political representatives, autonomy

## Introduction

On the basis of the stenographic records of the debates in the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic in the period 1918-1938, the article aims to show the relationship of the representatives of the Czechoslovak Republic to the Rusyn population, and then (on the basis of an analysis of the speeches of the Rusyn deputies) the relationship of the Rusyn politicians to the Czechoslovak government and its style of dealing with the Rusyn question. As far as the source base is concerned, the first attempt was made to extract data from the paper version of the parliamentary archives. In view of the volume of stenographic records for the period 1918-1938 and the fact that a very high quality and detailed digitisation of these

documents had been carried out, electronic documents were finally used for the purposes of this study. The clear advantage of this approach was the possibility of covering all parliamentary debates on Rusyn issues through the Joint Czech-Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library and its full-text search engine.

The relationship between Czechoslovakia and Subcarpathian Rus' was first legally defined with the ratification of the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which determined the final form of the Czechoslovak state borders - here Subcarpathian Rus' is referred to as the Rusyn territory of the Czechoslovak state. This artificially created and simplistic impression of the ethnic unity of the Subcarpathian Rus' persisted, at least among the general public, for the entire duration of Czechoslovakia and was perpetuated even after its partition. Politically, however, the Rusyns formed very disparate groups that often could not even hint at agreement on the solution of administrative, political or economic problems related to the territory of Subcarpathian Rus and its population. The deputies representing the population of Subcarpathian Rus could not even agree on the uniform use of language - depending on their affiliation to different political parties, they preferred Russian or Ukrainian (Malorussian) or a language based on local dialects (jazyčje). There was further disagreement about the administrative organisation of Subcarpathian Rus.

The first representatives of the Czechoslovak Republic who held de facto political power were primarily Czechs. The union of other Slavic peoples - Slovaks and Rusyns - was seen by Czech politicians as a suitable counterbalance to the very numerous non-Slavic peoples - Germans and Hungarians. Since the Germans were a larger group than the Slovaks in the Czechoslovak Republic, the Czechoslovak government created an artificial construct of a Czechoslovak nation. Thus, in both censuses of the First Republic, Czechs and Slovaks had a single nationality - Czechoslovak. For this reason, the Czechoslovak leaders had little sympathy for Slovak autonomism, just as they had little sympathy for the Rusyn demands for autonomy for Subcarpathian Rus. The underestimation of these two issues was one of the reasons for the first break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1938-1939.

Although the interwar period and the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic are almost described as a golden age in contemporary Czech historiography, the actual situation was much more complicated. It was a period of extraordinary political instability, as evidenced by the number of governments - Czechoslovakia had ten prime ministers and nineteen governments in twenty years.

Interestingly, although the Rusyns were described by ministers in the Czechoslovak government as a Slavic state-building element (as opposed to the German and Hungarian minorities), it was German MPs who supported their efforts for autonomy.

This article attempts to show several phases in the resolution of the Rusyn question in the Chamber of Deputies. Among the main themes of the Rusyn speakers were:

- the autonomist efforts of some of the Rusyn political representatives
- the bleak economic situation in Subcarpathian Rus
- the educational situation, including disputes over the use of the language,
- disputes over the recognition of Rusyns in the territory of present-day Slovakia and the denial of education by local governments (efforts to include Rusyns among Slovaks).

These thematic areas of Rusyn politics in the Czechoslovak parliament were created for the purposes of this paper based on the frequency and thematic focus of the speeches of Rusyn MPs. In this paper, these themes are elaborated on the basis of the speeches and arguments of individual Rusyn MPs in the period 1918-1938. Of course, Ruthenian MPs also spoke on other issues of the functioning of the state (e.g. in debates on the state budget), but the frequency of their speeches in this respect was significantly lower than in the discussion of the above-mentioned issues.

## **The situation of the Rusyns after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918**

The newly formed Republic of Czechoslovakia functioned as a de facto unitary state. Part of Czechoslovakia (effectively the Czech Republic today) was part of Austria-Hungary during the Austro-Hungarian period and took over the division into three historical countries (Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia). Slovakia was formed from the former Hungarian part, and in 1919 the territory of Subcarpathian Rus was also annexed to Czechoslovakia.

The annexation of Subcarpathian Rus' to Czechoslovakia was certainly not an act that had the unequivocal support of all Rusyn leaders - a merger with Hungary, Ukraine, Russia or the creation of an independent state was also an option.

In many ways, the Rusyns of Subcarpathia had a special position within the Czechoslovak Republic. Their original situation - even before the creation of Czechoslovakia - was similar to that of the Czechs and especially the Slovaks. It was mainly the foreign

representatives of the Slovaks and Rusyns who decided to incorporate the territory and population into the newly formed Czechoslovak Republic. Before the First World War there were about as many Rusyns living in the USA as there were in their original homeland - but estimates of the number of Rusyns vary widely, and one can also come across another statement according to which the ratio of Rusyns in the USA to those who remained at home was 155,000 : 450,000, i.e. about 1:3. However, everything depends on the understanding and perception of the Rusyn identity.

Paradoxically, the national movement of the Rusyns was not formed in their homeland, but in the completely different cultural and political conditions of the United States of America. The Rusyns in Hungary were unable to express their critical position and assert themselves nationally because of the Hungarianisation policy of the Hungarian governments and the persecution of all those who opposed such a policy, e.g. by accusing them of Pan-Slavism, which was regarded as treason. The situation in the USA was quite different. The poor situation of the Rusyn population in terms of national consciousness was also due to the fact that until 1918 the area of Subcarpathian Rus was heavily Hungarianised and many representatives of the Rusyn intelligentsia, including Greek Catholic priests, were imprisoned. Moreover, members of the Ruthenian intelligentsia, and not only them, could be imprisoned during the war if they were accused of treason. This happened, but especially to the peasant population after the crossing of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian fronts in 1915. At the same time, it should be remembered that the Subcarpathian region was one of the most backward places in Europe.

However, Czechoslovak public opinion was very positive towards the region and its inhabitants throughout the period when Subcarpathian Rus was part of one state. The Carpathians were seen as exotic and untouched. In order to educate and disseminate information about Subcarpathian Rus and to document the current state of affairs, representatives of various cultural fields travelled to the region and reflected its distinctive form in their work, be it artistic, documentary, sporting or touristic.<sup>35</sup>

From the very beginning, the annexation of Subcarpathian Rus was linked to the creation of autonomy - this was also enshrined in international agreements. According to the parliamentary reply to the message of the President of the Czechoslovak Republic of 27

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<sup>35</sup> Veronika NĚMCOVÁ, *Podkarpatská Rus z perspektivy československé fotografie v meziválečném období*. Kulturní studia 2019, 7.13, s. 101.

March 1919, the demand for autonomy of the Ruthenian territory was recognised, which would bring about "a welcome immediate connection of our state with Romania".<sup>36</sup>

However, the drawing of the border with Romania was still seen as an injustice by some Rusyn MPs years later. For one thing, the Romanian army occupied Subcarpathian Rus at the end of the First World War, and for another, part of the land remained in Romania after the border was drawn - it was part of Marmaros County. MEP Kurt'ak comments<sup>37</sup>: "After the coup, the Romanian army occupied most of Subcarpathian Rus, the Romanian authorities, under military dictatorship, collected taxes, imposed counter-taxes on the population, confiscated the remaining cattle, allowed the army to loot freely, and in the end returned nothing, The population did not receive any compensation - the files have been in the provincial office for 10 years - on the contrary, Romania occupied the Russian town of Marmaroshskaya Sihot (Сигіт-Мармароський) and its Russian surroundings, and the borders with Romania were established in such a way that more land from Russian villages and Czechoslovak citizens remained in the hands of the Romanians."

Despite the declared rights of all national minorities in Czechoslovakia, there was a clear condition of the leading role of the Czech nation - from the parliamentary reply to President Masaryk's message in March 1919: "All this with the leading position of the Czechoslovak nation and its language. It was certainly the Czech nation that had already established a Czech state on the same territory in the past; it was the Czech nation that upheld the idea of its restoration...".

In the first year of the Czechoslovak Republic, this leading role was demonstrated by many tendentious and even pseudo-scientific proofs of the origin of the Slavic population on Czechoslovak territory. Opinions that did not conform to the official government view of history, or calls for a plebiscite on the question of the relations between the nations and the Czechoslovak Republic, were dealt with, for example, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs (the future second president of Czechoslovakia) Dr. Beneš: "As for the fact that the Hungarians claim that the Slovak and Rusyn and other non-Hungarian populations are also demanding a plebiscite, we must state that there is not a single Slovak or Rusyn who is demanding a plebiscite, unless he has been sold out".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 27. 3. 1919

<sup>37</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 3. 2. 1930

<sup>38</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 19. 2. 1920

Here it is possible to point out how Czechoslovak governments treated national minorities - German MPs often expressed sympathy and support for the Rusyns when they failed to assert their autonomous demands. An example of this is the bill to limit the influence of the People's Judges. German MP Dr Koberg stated<sup>39</sup>: "As a human being, and especially as a member of the German National Party, which, as is well known, has written on its banner the right of self-determination, the right of self-determination, which, like us, has also been denied to the Russians of the Sub-Carpathians, I am practically taking part in the discussion of this question. This bill sheds a penetrating light on the treatment of all national tribes who do not belong to the ruling nation, who therefore have the inherent defect of not being Czech. The Government's proposal is a small but eloquent example of the methods by which minorities are to be silenced in this country, just as much as by linguistic regulation."

### **Administration of Subcarpathian Rus**

Although Subcarpathian Rus was given its own government in 1920 and the Czechoslovak government appointed Grigoriy Žatkovič as its first governor, this was by no means autonomy, but the appointment of an official who reported directly to the government in Prague. Moreover, the de facto government was exercised by the deputy governor, who was always a Czech.

Žatkovič's appointment was criticised mainly by left-wing MPs. In his parliamentary speech, the Hungarian Communist deputy Gáti described Žatkovič's inexperience in his first negotiations with the future president of Czechoslovakia, Masaryk, in 1918. He easily believed the promises of extensive autonomy, of which nothing remained. "According to the Scranton resolution of 12 November 1918: 'The Rusyns of Subcarpathian Rus shall join the Democratic Republic of Czechoslovakia with the greatest possible autonomy as a state on a federal basis, on the condition that their territory must include all the original Rusyn districts of Subcarpathian Rus: Šariš, Zemplín, Abauj, Gemer, Borsod, Uzhorod, Ugoča, Bereg and Maramaroš'". President Masaryk, through Captain Pisetsky, also sent this memorandum to the Russian (=Rusyn) National Council in Uzhhorod as an accepted condition". Here it is appropriate to note that Gáti was mistaken or misled, for Masaryk could hardly have accepted the Ruthenians' demand for the whole of eastern Slovakia (Šariš, Zemplín, Abauj, Gemer). Had he done so, the Slovaks would certainly have raised sharp objections against Czechoslovakia.

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<sup>39</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 4. 3. 1926

According to the Communist deputies, the main problem with the first governor, Žatkovič, was that he did not represent the Rusyn population: 'We, however, who represent over one hundred thousand voters, and therefore the unconditional majority of the local people and workers, today solemnly declare that neither Žatkovič nor the so-called councils have ever represented the people of Subcarpathian Rus, and that they have never been authorised to do so by the people.'<sup>40</sup>

The demand for autonomy of Subcarpathian Rus' could not be met even after the adoption of the Constitution of the Czechoslovak Republic of 29 February 1920. The first governor of Subcarpathian Rus' resigned, and his performance was judged unsuccessful in subsequent parliamentary debates.

Žatkovič's main problem seems to have been a misunderstanding of the policy of the Czechoslovak government, which was clearly nationalist in the sense of favouring the Slavic peoples (in the order of Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians). The Germans and Hungarians, on the other hand, were declared to be former oppressors and, as such, were in many ways denied national development. For Žatkovič, the main goal was to achieve autonomy for Subcarpathian Rus, primarily on the basis of the territorial principle. That is why he wanted to reach an agreement with the Hungarian representatives in Subcarpathian Rus. This, however, made him a traitor in the eyes of many Czechoslovak politicians, because "liking the Hungarians" was in itself disqualifying.

Of course, there was also the fear that in the event of immediate autonomy, the government in Subcarpathian Rus would fall into the hands of a more educated and culturally and politically advanced Hungarian population, followed by a large Jewish population and, in addition, pro-Hungarian Rusyns, and the associated threat of a plebiscite on the annexation of the territory to Hungary. The left-wing and politically committed population, i.e. the Communists and Social Democrats, had a large Hungarian presence in their ranks and were therefore critical of anything that limited their position and opportunities.

Žatkovič's relationship with the Hungarians was underlined by the fact that Communist deputies interpellated the prime minister about the unacceptable conditions in Subcarpathian Rus<sup>41</sup>: "After thanking them, Chairman Žatkovič said that he was very fond of the Hungarians and that he was so dismissive of the efforts of the Hungarian parties only as far as the

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<sup>40</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 5. 10. 1925

<sup>41</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 4. 4.1921

Bohemians were concerned. With the slogan: 'Conquer the autonomy of the Subcarpathian Rus' he called on the irredentist Hungarian parties to fight together".

Autonomy was not achieved in the years that followed. On the other hand, the measures taken to unify the local administration (1920), as well as the later reform of the political administration (1927) and the creation of the provincial system, which lasted until 1938, had nothing to do with the realisation of the autonomous organisation of the Subcarpathian region.<sup>42</sup>

The 1927 (and 1928) reform of the political administration, which consisted in the division of the Czechoslovak Republic into four countries (Czech, Moravian-Silesian, Slovak and Podkarpatsk-Russian), was strongly opposed, especially by German and Hungarian deputies. The German deputies commented on the draft law on regional self-government (Stenoprotokol, Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 28 June 1927) as follows: "The advocates of centralism ... pretended to divide the state into regional administrations and thus lured the Czech autonomists. At the same time, however, they have succeeded in concentrating the reins of administration so firmly in Prague that provincial self-government turns out to be self-government of the eye and means the complete victory of centralism".

At first glance, it might seem that the creation of a separate entity, Transcarpathian Russia, would satisfy the Rusyns' desire for autonomy. However, the reality was quite different, as the division into four countries increased the influence of the central government, which was able to interfere in almost every aspect of the administration of each country. In this context, the Rusyn MP Kurt'ak, whose speeches often criticised the appointment of Czech officials and the use of the Czech language in Subcarpathian Rus, sharply criticised the government's reluctance to establish its own autonomous assembly: "The affairs of the autonomous territory are managed without the control of the autonomous organs of the nation and without accountability by officials who are generally exposed, ignorant of our conditions, ignorant of the spirit and wishes of the people, and who on more than one occasion have acted directly against their cultural and economic interests. It is not local Rusyns who have been and are being recruited as state and autonomous officials. The Czech language is being used everywhere, which has led to general dissatisfaction among the people, aggravated by the sad economic situation of the country and the terrible unemployment.

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<sup>42</sup> Peter MOSNÝ, *Podkarpatská Rus. Nerealizovaná autonómia*. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2001.



The proposed administrative reform contradicts the general principles of autonomy of Subcarpathian Rus established and guaranteed by the Peace Treaty and the Constitutional Charter of the Czechoslovak Republic. It is being prepared without the participation and consent of the legitimate representatives of Subcarpathian Rus, although in this matter the government is obliged to observe the basic provisions of the Peace Treaty and the Constitutional Charter of the Czechoslovak Republic. The people of Subcarpathian Rus strongly demand from the present government the implementation of their autonomous rights, in particular the convocation of the Subcarpathian Congress".

This example shows the very different preferences of the deputies from Subcarpathian Rus. The deputies who emphasised economic development recognised the contribution of the Czechoslovak Republic to this region, which was in every respect the most backward part of Czechoslovakia. At the same time, the convening of an autonomous parliament was not a priority for them. MP Ščerecký: 'The Carpathian population is overwhelmingly satisfied with the government and administration of Subcarpathian Rus'. The Carpatho-Russian population, especially the peasants, have never shown hostility towards the Czechoslovak government, on the contrary. Even if the Government of the Czechoslovak Republic had done nothing more for Sub-Carpathian Rus' than to build hundreds of houses, to open for us peasants dozens and dozens of schools and 7 civic schools, no one would have the moral right to demand more from it, and whoever would demand more from it is an enemy of the Czechoslovak Government and of the Republic itself. The Government of the Czechoslovak Republic, from the first day of its existence, has taken Subcarpathian Russia seriously, and for ten years, as is obvious, it has not been able to heal what was destroyed in a thousand years by foreigners, enemies of the Russian people.

The government first gave us the opportunity for cultural development, so that today, after a short time, we have our engineers, our doctors, our scientists, and this is a good sign. Foreigners know that the government of Czechoslovakia did everything it could for Podkarpatska Rus. Our demands are minimal. We are not asking for the impossible. The government of the Czechoslovak Republic has done everything possible for us, but we, the peasants, ask first and foremost that, in addition to economic aid, cultural aid should also be given. Without culture, without science, economic aid is useless".

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The government first gave us the opportunity for cultural development, so that today, after a short time, we have our engineers, our doctors, our scientists, and this is a good sign. Foreigners know that the government of the Czechoslovak Republic did for Podkarpatska Rus what it could have done. Our demands are minimal. We are not asking for the impossible. The government of the Czechoslovak Republic has done everything possible for us, but we, the peasants, ask first and foremost that, in addition to economic aid, cultural aid should also be given. Without culture, without science, economic aid is useless".<sup>43</sup> This led to sharp disputes between the Slovaks and the Rusyns, who demanded that the territory of their future autonomous region should extend to the Prešov area, while the Slovak deputies considered this area to be purely Slovak. MP Hlinka said<sup>44</sup>: "We publicly testify here that we will not give any land to the Poles or to our Czech brothers, because this is Slovak land and Slovak land belongs to us Slovaks. But can we tear our country apart because there are some poor Rusyns living on some mountains, on some hills, of whom it is questionable whether they are Ruthenians, right out of the Slovak body? That would mean exposing Slovakia to new shocks. But that is what the Rusyns want".

On the contrary, the Slovak deputies demanded that the Slovak border be moved further east, which was criticised by the Rusyn deputies, such as the deputy Gagatko (Stenoprotokol, Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1 July 1927): "The question of the border has not moved either. Instead of adjusting the borders on the basis of a

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<sup>43</sup> ŠVORC, Peter. Krajinská hranica medzi Slovenskom a Podkarpatskou Rusou a jej odraz v interetnických vzťahoch (1919–1939). *Res Gestae. Czasopismo historyczne.*, 2017, 4: 165-180.

<sup>44</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 21. 6. 1922

voluntary agreement between the Slovak nation and the Carpatho-Russians, the government is trying to shift even these provisional borders, which were established during the occupation, to the east. The temporary border along the Uže River is now ignored, and purely Russian villages on the left bank of the Uže, such as Domanince, Perečín, Kamenice, Berezné, etc., are to be administratively annexed to the large Košice district, without taking into account the fact that the Joint Czechoslovak State Commission decided in 1919 that the borders, the national borders, extend much further to the west and that the districts of Snina, Medzilaborisk, etc., located far to the west, are unquestionably of purely Russian nationality and should therefore be annexed to the autonomous Subcarpathian Rus.

What has this achieved? They have achieved the result that today our Russian population, which voluntarily joined the Czechoslovak Republic, is divided against its will into two separate groups, those who have the right to autonomy and are in the so-called Autonomous Subcarpathian Russia, and those who do not have the right to autonomy under the Treaty of Sainte-Germain, that is, the Subcarpathian Rusyns in Slovakia.

However, the division of the Rusyns into two groups mentioned by the MP Gagatko deepened in the following years and today they are two very different groups.

The connection between the Slovak and Subcarpathian Rusyns was not fictitious, as it existed, for example, at the level of church administration for more than a hundred years - it is interesting that none of the Rusyn representatives mentioned this argument. The Greek Catholic Church in the territory of present-day Slovakia was closely connected with Subcarpathian Russia - the first bishopric in Presov, established in 1815, was created by the exclusion of the Mukachevo eparchy in the territory of present-day Ukraine. However, the area of central and southern Zemplín (today's eastern Slovakia) remained under the administration of the Bishop of Mukachevo (de facto until 1939, but the whole matter was only legally settled with the establishment of the Exarchate of Košice in 1997).<sup>45</sup> Southern Zemplín remained part of Hungary.

As Plišková<sup>46</sup> points out, the Rusyns in Slovakia, unlike the Subcarpathian Rus, did not have the status of a 'state-forming nation'. They were considered only as a national minority with a certain constitutional right to use their mother tongue in education and public life.

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<sup>45</sup> Andrej ŠKOVIERA, *Nad slovenským prekladom božskej liturgie byzantsko-slovanského obradu*. Slavica slovac, 1999, 34.2, s. 137–148.

<sup>46</sup> Anna PLIŠKOVÁ, Jazyk karpatských Rusínov v područí mocenských ideológií, s. 71–107. In: WACHTARCZYKOVÁ, Jana; SATINSKÁ, Lucia; ONDREJOVIČ, Slavomír (ed.) *Jazyk v politických, ideologických a interkultúrnych vzťahoch*. Bratislava: Veda, 2015.

## National and linguistic conflicts

The political activity of the Rusyns from the very beginning of their annexation to Czechoslovakia was largely weakened by the disunity of their political representation. In October 1919, even the Central Russian National Council in Uzhhorod split into two. The Russophile faction, led by Dr Antoni Beskid and Andrei Gagatko, formed the Central Russian National Council on 9 October 1919. It immediately took an oppositional stance to the government policy of the time, which it accused of allegedly supporting the Ukrainophile movement. In this sense, it sharply criticised the activities of Dr. G. Žatkovič. The second part (under the strong influence of A. Voloshin and Dr. Y. Brashchaik) was clearly Ukrainophile.<sup>47</sup>

At this point it is very appropriate to at least outline the ambiguity of the ethnonym Rusyn itself. Although the Rusyn national revival has been underway since the second half of the 19th century, the Rusyns, unlike other Slavic and non-Slavic peoples, have not clearly resolved the question of their name in this process.<sup>48</sup>

The term Rusyn has been used in the Czech press since the first half of the 19th century. In most cases, the non-Polish inhabitants of Halych were referred to as Rusyns, who were then called Ukrainians in the Czech press at the end of the 19th century. In the 1850s, the term "Moscowophiles" or, as a synonym, "Russophiles" began to appear for various political tendencies in the Ruthenian movement. The essence of the efforts of the "Russophiles" was for the Halych Rusyns to form a united political and cultural nation with the Russians and to seek moral, material and political support against the Poles in the Russian Empire. These tendencies were countered by the Austrian monarchy's support of the Ukrainian movement ("Ukrainophiles") at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as it created opposition to Russia (against the Rusophiles). However, the attempts to create a new Ukrainian nation did not meet with the understanding of all Slavs who still called themselves Rusyns. While the Czech press at the beginning of the First World War wrote about the division of the population in Halych into two hostile groups - the Ukrainophiles and the

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<sup>47</sup> Stanislav KONEČNÝ, Rusíni v prelomoch dvoch tisícročí. In: PLIŠKOVÁ, Anna (ed.) *Rusínska kultúra a školstvo po roku 1989*. Prešov: Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Anna PLIŠKOVÁ, *Rusínský jazyk na Slovensku: náčrt vývoja a súčasné problémy*. Prešov: Metodicko-pedagogické centrum, 2007.

Moscowophiles - the group that recognised the Rusyns as a separate nation was not mentioned at all.<sup>49</sup>

The split of the Ruthenian movement was transferred after the end of World War I. Although the Rusyn and Ukrainophile currents remained, these terms took on very different meanings over time - while some Ukrainophiles considered Rusyns to be part of the Ukrainian nation but were politically strongly opposed to their incorporation into Soviet Ukraine, other Ukrainophiles supported the Soviet policy of Ukrainisation and the integration of all "Ukrainians" into the Soviet Ukrainian Republic (here more or less only Communists). A similar political ambiguity prevailed in the Russophile current. In addition, during the inter-war period, the Ruthenian current (often supported by the Czechoslovak government) increasingly asserted itself, emphasising the specificity of an independent Ruthenian nation, but again its members were not politically united.

The Czechoslovak MP Husnay, a Rusyn from Subcarpathia, proved the Ukrainian origin of the Rusyns in his speech<sup>50</sup>: "Of the Rusyn groups, the Ukrainian group, which relies on the living folk speech and on the protection of the ethnographic whole, as recognized by the learned world and by the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences and the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, is the true one. They all had to recognize that our nation is part of the Ukrainian nation that lives in Halych, Bukovina and Greater Ukraine."

In 1925, the Czechoslovak minister Kľofac demanded support for Russian education for Rusyns to protect them from Ukrainian influence: "Brothers! We must not introduce the Ukrainian language into the Ruthenian schools. We must teach Russian in these schools, simply because Lvov is near and Moscow is far away, and our Rusyns will never get to Moscow."<sup>51</sup>

Support for one side or the other was mainly an expression of political attitudes and a link to various foreign allies. Support for the Ukrainian language was explained on the one hand by an interest in weakening Russia by creating a greater Ukraine, but on the other hand Ukrainianisation efforts were interpreted as an attempt by the Russian Bolsheviks to build a bridge to the domination of Czechoslovakia. Deputy Kurt'ak<sup>52</sup>: "The Ukrainian question is a

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<sup>49</sup> Petr KOKAISL a Veronika ŠTASTNÁ, Русины на страницах чешских газет и журналов от революционного 1848 г. до начала Первой мировой войны. (Rusyns on the pages of Czech newspapers and magazines from revolutionary 1848 to the outbreak of World War I). *Rusin*, 2021, 65, s. 115-135.

<sup>50</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 26. 11. 1931

<sup>51</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 26. 11. 1931

<sup>52</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 3. 2. 1930

political question, it is a question of separatism, which wants to break off its south-western parts from Russia, wants to unite them with the Russian parts of Poland and the Subcarpathian Rus in order to create a great Ukraine. This idea was born and nurtured in Austria and Germany, and was part of the German policy of "Drang nach Osten".

In Communist Russia, the Ukrainian question became a means of bolshevizing the West. They created the Soviet Ukraine in order to bring the Russian parts of Galicia, Bukovina and Czechoslovakia into the Soviet idea. This Ukrainian separatism is served by efforts to create a Ukrainian language, a Ukrainian vernacular, a Ukrainian culture. In this respect, the Ukrainian question in Czechoslovakia is an irredentist phenomenon, since its ultimate aim is to separate Subcarpathian Rus from the Czechoslovak Republic. The Social Democrats, the Communists and Voloshin's Christian People's Party advocated the Ukrainian order. Under the influence of these parties, the school administration has, since 1920, promoted the Ukrainisation of the Russian language and supported Halych emigrants of Ukrainian origin who entered state service in our country. Recently, these Ukrainian circles have switched to the full Ukrainian language according to the Kharkiv recipe, adopting Ukrainian grammar and spelling, and have declared a struggle against those who uphold the centuries-old Russian traditions of the Carpatho-Russian people, who adhere to the rules of Russian grammar".

Rather, the Czechoslovak government supported a position that would draw the population neither to the side of Ukraine nor to the side of Russia - it would be the Rusyns as a separate nation, but under strong Czechoslovak protection. This approach was criticised by both Russian (Greater Russian) and Ukrainian deputies, who did not recognise the Ruthenian nation. MP Dr Gagatko<sup>53</sup>: "Already in the autumn of 1919 the Czechoslovak government changed its position. Although it had not previously denied the national ethnographic affiliation of the Carpatho-Russian population, it now took the position that the population of Subcarpathian Rus' was not of Russian origin, but a separate, newly invented "Rusyn" nation of about half a million people. As a result of the provision in the General Statute that the "Rusyn" mother tongue must be the language of the schools and the official language. Thus, the government began to decide on issues that, according to the Peace Treaty and the constitutional laws of the Republic, were the responsibility of the local autonomous parliament, and thus, for the first time, the autonomous rights of the Subcarpathian Rus' were violated.

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<sup>53</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 19. 11. 1924

Political orientation thus became a very important part of the Rusyns' identity - it determined their preference in the use of the national language, their religious preference (Catholicism versus Orthodoxy) and their ethnic preference (Rusyns as a separate nation, as part of the Ukrainian nation, as Slavs led by Russia).

## Education

The development of education in Subcarpathian Rus was complicated by linguistic ambiguity. While there was a strong Hungarianisation of the area before 1918, pro-Hungarian deputies opposed the emerging Czechisation within Czechoslovakia. Deputy Kurt'ak<sup>54</sup>: "It is a sad picture that there are 50 Czech schools in Russian villages in Subcarpathian Rus'. What is the purpose of these Czech schools? Forfeit our interests in these budgets, do not recognise that we exist, that we voluntarily joined you on the basis that we would have autonomous rights given to us by the world, oppress us further - we know one thing, that we have not received brotherhood in your brotherhood, but a great enemy...".

The assertion that the ultimate goal of the Czechoslovak government was the complete Czechisation of the population of Subcarpathian Rus' appeared not only among Russophile or Ukrainophile deputies, but also in the literature of the Soviet period. In reality, however, this was not possible - the Czech schools served more to support the rapid training of new cadres for the state administration, as there was a shortage of qualified local teachers.<sup>55</sup> The original intention of establishing Czech schools in Subcarpathian Rus was to educate the children of the Czechs who came here in their mother tongue. Gradually, however, the Jews of Subcarpathia also became interested in the Czech schools, seeing them as a good stepping stone for their children's careers. This led to the establishment of more Czech schools.

In this context, Deputy Voloshin, in his assessment of the development of education, emphasised the increase in the total number of schools and the general increase in the literacy of the population<sup>56</sup>:

"If we compare, for example, the present educational system of Subcarpathian Rus' with the conditions in which it was before the coup, we must admit that the positive side definitely outweighs the opposite.

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<sup>54</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 24. 11. 1926

<sup>55</sup> RYCHLÍK, Jan; RYCHLÍKOVÁ, Magdalena. *Podkarpatská Rus v dějinách Československa 1918–1946*. Praha: Vyšehrad, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic , 4. 3. 1926

Before the war, Russian was taught only in church Greek-Catholic schools. However, especially since 1907, as a result of Law XXVII. of the same year, the so-called "lex Apponyi", the number of Russian church schools rapidly decreased and the use of Hungarian became more and more widespread in the so-called Russian schools, since by this law the teaching of Hungarian was ordered to begin in the first class of the general schools, and among the so-called patriotic subjects taught were not only Hungarian, history, geography and the study of the constitution, but also arithmetic. At the end of the fourth year of schooling, pupils in non-Hungarian schools were to be able to express themselves in Hungarian so that in the upper grades they could also answer the inspector's questions in Hungarian.

All state municipal schools, all continuation schools, all civic and secondary schools in Subcarpathian Rus were only Hungarian. The Russian language was only an optional subject in the secondary schools in Uzhhorod, Prešov, Mukačevo and Sihota.

In contrast, on 1 January 1926 we had 501 Russian general schools, 15 Russian civic schools, 4 Russian real gymnasia, 3 Russian institutes for teacher training, 1 Russian-Hungarian commercial academy and 2 trade schools. At the same time, the non-Russian minorities of Subcarpathian Rus also have their schools, since at the beginning of this year 122 Hungarian, 40 Czech, 14 German, 8 Romanian and 10 Hebrew national schools were reported. There are Hungarian branches of the civic schools in the towns, and also of the gymnasium in Berehova."

The policies of the Czechoslovak governments were often based on an anti-religious ideological foundation, which, especially in the Czech lands, often manifested itself in violent anti-Catholicism. This idea was also based on T. G. Masaryk's strongly anti-Catholic conception of the meaning of Czech history. After the First World War, the anticlerical movement also manifested itself in the other successor states, but nowhere did it reach such intensity as in Czechoslovakia.<sup>57</sup> The Czechoslovak government sought to create a national church and limit the influence of the Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church, which was favoured by the government, was suitable for this policy. Some Czech MPs described Greek Catholic leaders as sympathisers with the monarchy and Hungary and referred to the alleged hatred of the people against Greek Catholics. MP Dr. Patejdl<sup>58</sup>: "The diplomacy of the Vatican does not understand that Bishop Papp, this monarchist, should have been removed

<sup>57</sup> TRAPL, Miloš. „Kulturní boj“ v nástupnických státech Rakousko-Uherska po roce 1918 s hlavním zřetelem k českým zemím. In Ivantyšinová, Tatiana (ed). *Národ – církev – stát*. Bratislava 2007, s. 91-99.

<sup>58</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 21. 11. 1921



long ago ... The consequence is the understandable hatred of the people against the Uniate clergy..."

However, this policy, which included the closure of church schools, did not go down well with the majority of the population of Subcarpathian Rus. It was precisely this that was criticised by deputies who, in other respects, recognised the contribution of the Czechoslovak Republic to the development of the region<sup>59</sup>:

"I can also point out that a great deal has been done in the field of education, but there are still great deficiencies, especially in the Church schools, the number of which has fallen from 346 to 90 as a result of party politics. I am not going to talk here about the errors of Church policy, which has also given rise to a great deal of discontent, which is being exploited by demagogues against the Republic".

MP A. Voloshin<sup>60</sup> also points to a completely different situation in Subcarpathian Rus' in relation to Catholicism: "Immediately after the annexation of Subcarpathian Rus' to the Czechoslovak Republic, agitation against the Greek Catholic Church began, and this cultural struggle is the main cause of dissatisfaction and disorientation of broad strata of the population in Subcarpathian Rus'. The originators of this struggle did not take into account the fact that Catholicism is deeply rooted in our country, but acted as if Catholicism was only an imposed form of religion in our country, and this was a completely wrong position".

The situation in education in the territory of Subcarpathian Rus was still quite chaotic for a long time after the declaration of the Czechoslovak Republic. The Czechoslovak Minister of Education acknowledged as late as 1932 that the Ministry did not know the internal regulations under which the schools were taught. Minister of Education and National Enlightenment Dr. Déer<sup>61</sup>: "In Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus there was no central school authority before the coup, nor was there a complete collection of regulations on school administration. After the coup, the only known regulations were mostly those that had already been translated into Slovak, Russian or German under the former Hungarian government. As such translations were rare, there were cases in all branches of the state administration where many internal regulations were not sufficiently accessible and known to our authorities. As a result, in Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus, the regulations in force in Western countries were often followed. In order to eliminate this situation in the approval of textbooks, I issued a

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<sup>59</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 4. 3. 1926

<sup>60</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 29. 3. 1926

<sup>61</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 26. 11. 1931

decree regulating the approval procedure uniformly for the entire territory of the Czechoslovak Republic. With this decree, all Hungarian regulations previously in force in this matter ceased to be valid".

In fact, the chaotic situation of language use in education has not been resolved at all. As early as 1937, in his speech, the deputy Klíma mentioned<sup>62</sup>: "Linguistic chaos is artificially introduced into Subcarpathia; Czech schools are established and Russian textbooks, incomprehensible to the native population, are introduced into the native schools, thus artificially hindering the cultural development of Subcarpathia".

An important problem of Ruthenian education was the unclear boundary of its expansion. The Ruthenians living in eastern Slovakia were subject to considerable Slovakisation, with Slovak officials referring to Hungarian laws from the Austro-Hungarian period and prohibiting education in the Ruthenian language on the basis of these laws. This was pointed out by the MP Dr Pješčák<sup>63</sup>: "In many Russian villages the language of instruction is Slovak. For 19 years the Russian people in eastern Slovakia have been forcibly denationalised. For 19 years the people have been demanding that Russian be introduced as the language of instruction in their schools. There are many memoranda with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of National Education, but nothing has happened. Dozens of municipalities are waiting for the language of instruction to be changed; their applications were submitted long ago, but no decision has yet been made. It is downright absurd that the Russian people in this republic, which they joined voluntarily, should be further denationalised.

After the World War, after the coup d'état, Russian began to be taught in all our schools. The Department of the Ministry of Education in Bratislava simply took note of this in its decree of 27 January 1921 and ordered that, in addition to the language of instruction, children should be taught the Czechoslovak language for three hours a week. This lasted only a few days, however, because the same education department stipulated that 'In schools where the Russian language was not allowed as a language of instruction according to the law XXVII of 1907, it cannot be introduced as such now'.

The bad situation in Rusyn education cannot, of course, be blamed on the Czechoslovak Republic alone. The problems of education in the Rusyn areas are mentioned,

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<sup>62</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 17. 6. 1937

<sup>63</sup> Stenoprotocol of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czechoslovak Republic, 30. 11. 1937

for example, in a magazine from 1908, and the huge number of illiterates is mentioned. At the same time, however, it is pointed out that the blame for this situation does not always lie solely with the 'oppression of the ruling peoples', but that the members of the minority peoples themselves bear a considerable share of the blame.<sup>64</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Subcarpathian Rus became part of the Czechoslovak Republic only after an agreement between Czechoslovak politicians and representatives of the American Rusyns. For the Czechoslovak state, the acquisition of this territory was of some strategic importance, as it formed a border with friendly Romania. Economically, however, it was a very backward area that needed to be developed in every respect.

The Ruthenians were promised extensive autonomy, but this was never realised - it was proclaimed at the very end of the existence of the first Czechoslovak Republic. The largely contradictory views of Subcarpathian Rus deputies on the autonomy arrangement and its necessity were the subject of many speeches by deputies from the very beginning of the Czechoslovak parliament until 1938. Even the first governor of Subcarpathian Rus, the American Grigory Zatkovich, who was the main proponent of the annexation of Subcarpathian Rus to Czechoslovakia and had autonomy as one of his main goals, soon resigned from his post. His tenure was judged by members of the Czechoslovak parliament as poor and unsuccessful, often because he did not advocate a policy of preferential treatment for the Slavic peoples. Žatkovič understood the autonomy of Subcarpathian Rus primarily in geographical terms - that is, not as autonomy for Rusyns alone, but for the entire population of Subcarpathian Rus. He therefore tried to negotiate with Hungarian representatives, but this approach discredited him among many Czechoslovak politicians.

Among the main positive effects of the Czechoslovak government in Subcarpathian Rus' can be described as a certain economic upliftment of a very backward region, together with the elimination of illiteracy for a large part of the population. Many Ruthenian members of the Czechoslovak parliament also welcomed this and expressed their gratitude to the Czechoslovak Republic.

However, the policies of the Czechoslovak Republic in the interwar period had a number of elements that could not be described as positive. The main problem was strong nationalism - the republic was not meant to be an equal home for all its inhabitants.

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<sup>64</sup> Hipolyt BOCZKOWSKI, *Slovanská vzájemnost a studentský sjezd*. Naše doba, Svazek 15, 1908, s. 778.

According to many government declarations, the Slavic element was to be promoted above all. This was to be the Czechoslovak nation, hastily created by merging the Czech and Slovak peoples to make it numerically the strongest and thus an opposition to the Germans and Hungarians. The preferred "Slavic element" included the Ruthenians. In reality, however, the brotherhood of the Slavic peoples did not work - Czechoslovakia had major foreign policy disputes with neighbouring Poland, and the Slovak leaders were certainly not going to make the slightest concession to the territorial demands of the Ruthenians. On the contrary, they criticised the Slovak approach, which sought to bring part of Subcarpathian Rus under Slovak administration.

Another feature of the Czechoslovak Republic was its strong anti-Catholic policy, which was to some extent also implemented in Subcarpathian Rus. Historically, the Greek Catholic churches and the local clergy were the main carriers of the Rusyns' specific culture and opportunities for education. For this reason, the Czechoslovak government's fight against church schools was met with considerable resistance and the government's entire policy was judged negatively.

Czechoslovakia was quite active in the field of education in Subcarpathian Rus, but again this activity was not well received by all groups of the population. Czech schools were widely established, while Ruthenian education received much less support (in proportion to the population) and traditional church schools were closed. The Hungarian population felt even more neglected in terms of educational support. The deputies from Subcarpathian Ruthenia, who demanded the establishment of an autonomous organisation as the most important thing, saw the Czechisation of the region in a certain analogy to the Hungarianisation before and during the First World War. On the other hand, the deputies who did not see autonomy as a priority saw the increase in the literacy rate of the population as clearly positive.

Overall, the 20-year rule of the Czechoslovak government in Subcarpathian Rus cannot be regarded as a demonstration of political skill and the ability to meet, at least in part, the needs and demands of all national groups. The Czechoslovak government failed to do so in the interwar period, either in Bohemia or in Slovakia. Nevertheless, with the benefit of hindsight, the interwar period is generally viewed positively by contemporary Rusyn organisations and Czech historiography.

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