

The Situation in Subcarpathian Rus in 1919 as Reported By the Czech Officials

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The article focuses on various aspects of the situation in Subcarpathian Rus raised and analyzed in the reports of the Czech officials, who visited the Subcarpathian region during 1919. Most Czech officials stated the vital need for a far-sighted and responsible policy in this strategically important region. In their reports to Prague, most Czech officials divided the local Rusyn intelligentsia in Subcarpathian Rus into pro-Russian and local orientations, and recommended Czechoslovak authorities to rely on and to provide support for the representatives of the local orientation as more preferable for Prague interests in that region.

Key words: *Rusyns; Subcarpathian Rus; Czech officials; national policy; language issue*

Rusyn-populated areas south of the Carpathian Mountains, which by the end of the First World War were part of the Hungarian kingdom, became part of a newly-born Czechoslovak Republic during 1919, which was fixed by Treaty of Saint-Germain signed at the castle of St. Germain-en-Laye just outside of Paris on September 10, 1919 as part of the Paris Peace Conference. According to articles 10 and 11 of the treaty, Czechoslovakia agreed to provide this territory with “the greatest degree of autonomy compatible with the unity of the Czechoslovak state... The autonomous territory was to have its own governor and an elected diet with legislative functions in specific areas.”¹

During the very first months of Czechoslovak rule over Subcarpathian Rus, representatives of local Rusyn intelligentsia and public sent numerous petitions to central authorities in Prague demonstrating their loyalty to Czechoslovakia and a sense of belonging to the Russian culture. As one petition signed by local Rusyn peasants and sent to the Presidential Administration in Prague on March 8, 1919 put it, “we want to be a part of the Czechoslovak Republic, but to remain Russians

¹ Magocsi, P. R. (2005). Treaty of St. Germaine. In P. R. Magocsi, I. Pop (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture. Revised and Expanded Edition*, University of Toronto Press, p. 497.

in cultural terms.”² Since Subcarpathian Rus was of great geopolitical importance for the Czechoslovak Republic and at the same time was distinguished by the complexity of interethnic and interreligious relations, Czechoslovak officials were frequent visitors to that area in 1919 trying to work out optimal regional policies.

On October 7, 1919 Junior Lieutenant of 66th Czechoslovak infantry regiment Šimon Palajda filed a report to Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence, later forwarded to the Presidential Administration. In his report the Czech officer noticed that the Carpatho-Russian public in Subcarpathian Rus was divided into two major parts, which he characterized as “Russian party” and “Rusyn – Pro-Hungarian party”. In words of Junior Lieutenant Palajda, the “Russian party” represented “ordinary people, in the first place local peasants. Russian peasants in Carpathian Rus always aspired to the Russian book and Russian culture. Local peasants secretly visited Russia to meet fraternal people and learn their traditional faith... Hungarian government made its best to assimilate Carpatho-Russian people and was especially successful in assimilating large part of the local intelligentsia...”³ Opposite party of so-called “Rusyns – Magyarones” was characterized by the Czech officer as a party of Magyarized Carpatho-Russian intelligentsia and Greek-Catholic priests, most of whom were ardent supporters of Hungary. In words of Palajda, the Greek-Catholic priests preferred to communicate among themselves exclusively in Hungarian since they considered Carpatho-Russian “to be a language of primitive and uneducated common people.”⁴ In his reports to Prague Palajda expressed an idea that the Czechoslovak government had to support the “Russian party” since, in his opinion, in case of support of “Rusyn – Magyarone party” local Carpatho-Russian peasants could lose confidence in the Czechoslovak authorities.⁵

Having mentioned a number of concrete examples of successful Hungarian propaganda in the Subcarpathian region, Junior Lieutenant Palajda indicated that numerous Hungarian officials, who preserved their jobs in local administration, were involved in various anti-Czechoslovak activities and promoted irredentist pro-Hungarian movement in Subcarpathian Rus. In that connection, Palajda recommended to rely on the representatives of the “Russian party” either from Subcarpathian Rus or from neighbouring Galicia and to appoint them to the places of officials.⁶

² Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky (AKPR), f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 4, sign. PR I/4, karton 1, Županský úřad v Užhorodě, resoluce rolníka Kyrila Prokopa. Užhorod, dne 8 března 1919.

³ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 19, sign. PR I/19, karton 1, Ministerstvo národní obrany – zprávy podporučíka Palajdy.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

Dr. Otokar Růžička, Secretary of Czechoslovak Ministry of Post and Telegraph in his report sent to his Ministry in Prague on November 12, 1919, painted quite a different picture of the situation in the Subcarpathian region. At the very beginning of his report Dr. Růžička, who visited Subcarpathian Rus in early November 1919, noted the extreme complexity of the situation in the region, „rapidly growing chaos“ and a real danger for Czechoslovakia to lose this strategically important region bordering with Hungary, Poland and Romania. Unlike Junior Lieutenant Palajda, who recommended Prague authorities to rely on the representatives of the local Russophile intelligentsia, Dr. Růžička, on the contrary, pointed out that activists of the „Russian party“ were prone to a pro-Hungarian position. In the words of Dr. Růžička, „representatives of Russian orientation are not distinguished by love and devotion to Czechoslovakia. Rather, they just imitate their loyalty to the Czechoslovak Republic while their agitation among the people indicates the opposite...“⁷ In his opinion, „local orientation among Rusyn intelligentsia“, including A. Voloshyn and G. Zhatkovych, „is most appropriate to the interests of Czechoslovakia.“⁸

Dr. Růžička paid special attention to linguistic preferences of different groups among Rusyn intelligentsia stating that „Russian orientation uses Russian literary language while local orientation uses Little Russian language, that is a local dialect with the Russian spelling.“⁹ Referring to the experience of his personal contacts with the local population, the secretary of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Post and Telegraph concluded that „in practice“ local Rusyn better understands Czech than Russian literary language.

It is interesting, however, that G. Zhatkovych, recommended by Dr. Růžička as one of the best representatives of the „local orientation“ politically appropriate for Prague was rather negatively characterized by Junior Lieutenant Palajda in his report to Czechoslovak Ministry of Defense on October 7, 1919. In words of Palajda, “the personality of Dr. Zhatkovych was absolutely unknown in Carpathian Rus until the revolution... During the first meeting in Uzhgorod Zhatkovych spoke to local people in Slovak-Rusyn dialect spoken in Šariš and Zemplin regions... Already at the first meeting, numerous voices of local Rusyns were heard dissatisfied with the fact that he did not speak proper Russian.”¹⁰

Even more critical reviews of representatives of the “Russian direction” in Carpathian Rus were contained in the reports of engineer Jaromír Nečas, an

⁷ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 20, sign. PR I/20, karton 1, Ministerstvo pošt a telegrafů – úprava poměrů v Rusínsku.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 19, sign. PR I/19, karton 1, Ministerstvo národní obrany – zprávy podporučíka Palajdy.

activist of the Czech Social Democratic Party and a well-known political publicist who worked for some time in the apparatus of the first governor of Subcarpathian Rus G. Zhatkovych. In his lengthy reports to the Office of the President of the Republic in Prague, J. Nečas sharply criticized the representatives of the “Russian direction” in Carpathian Rus for what he perceived as “forcible imposing the Russian literary language on the population” and the separation from the ethnolinguistic realities of the Carpathian region. Some high-ranking Czech officials in Subcarpathian Rus were severely criticized by Nečas for what he described as “excessive Russophilia”.

In his extensive report filed to the Office of the President of the Republic on November 2, 1919, J. Nečas indicated that “the current regional government in Uzhgorod introduces a foreign, incomprehensible Great Russian language throughout the entire territory of Rusinia. This complicates the already confusing language issue and stimulates the negative reaction of the Carpathian Rusyns. Local people do not understand government newspapers “Russkya zemlya” and “Russkoe slovo”. Only officials from Galicia and Bukovina employed by our government can understand and speak the Great Russian language.”¹¹

In his next report sent to the Office of the President of the Republic on November 20, 1919, J. Nečas voiced sharp criticism over Head of Czechoslovak civil administration in Subcarpathian Rus Dr. Brejcha, who, in words of J. Nečas, “surrounded himself with a camarilla of old Russians from Galicia and Bukovina and acted against the representatives of the local orientation.”¹² Having accused local Carpatho-Russian politicians of the Russian orientation that their political program was “reactionary, chauvinistic and intolerant of others,” Nečas called on official Prague to fully support “the local direction, which corresponds to the thinking and mentality of the intelligentsia.” Also, J. Nečas recommended Prague authorities to pursue the policy of “benevolent neutrality” in relation to the Ukrainians and “to refrain from introducing literary Russian language into the schools and administrative bodies in Subcarpathian Rus.”¹³

It is worth of noting that those above-mentioned reports filed by J. Nečas a personal letter of similar content directly to President Masaryk was sent on October 9, 1919 by A. Voloshyn, one of the leading politicians of Subcarpathian Rus of the Ukrainian orientation. In his letter to President Masaryk, A. Voloshyn criticized local supporters of “Moscow orientation” for what he perceived as “the imposition of the Russian literary language on the local population” and voiced

¹¹ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 25, sign. PR I/25, karton 1, Ing. J. Nečas – školská otázka.

¹² AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 26, sign. PR I/26, karton 1, Zpráva ing. J. Nečase o poměrech na Podkarpatské Rusi.

¹³ Ibidem.

criticism of the activities of the Head of local civil administration Dr. Brejcha, who, in his opinion, provided extensive support to local Russophiles.¹⁴ In addition, Voloshyn made a far-reaching conclusion about the danger of “Moscow propaganda” not only “for our people, but also for the whole republic.”¹⁵

The consistency in time and the similarity of the arguments used in the reports of J. Nečas and in Voloshyn’s letter suggest that there was a coordinated action by J. Nečas, A. Voloshyn, and their supporters and like-minded people with the aim of influencing Czechoslovak policy in the Carpathian region. As further development of events showed, this action proved to be successful. In one of his reports to the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defense in November 1919, Junior Lieutenant Palajda mentioned J. Nečas’s relations with A. Voloshyn and with leaders of the Ukrainian movement, in particular, with K. Levitsky.¹⁶

In future, the policy of Prague regarding Subcarpathian Rus was more oriented on the recommendations of J. Nečas. It should be noticed that J. Nečas made a successful political career in Prague. During the 1920s he worked in the Office of the President of the Republic, overseeing issues related to Subcarpathian Rus and having a serious impact on the practical policies of the Czechoslovak authorities in this region. This circumstance largely explains the official Prague’s policy of “soft Ukrainization” of the Rusyns in the Subcarpathian region in the 1920s, which was most clearly manifested in the field of culture and education.

While Czech officials carefully studied the extremely difficult situation in Carpathian Rus, trying to determine the vector of optimal politics for Prague in the region, Rusyn politicians and the public quickly became disappointed in the realities of Czechoslovak politics. Contrary to the initially high expectations of the Rusyn leaders from the entry of Carpathian Rus into Czechoslovakia after the Great War, their dissatisfaction with the policies of the Czechoslovak authorities began to appear already in the spring of 1919. Thus, Dr. A. Beskid, Chairman of the Carpatho-Russian People’s Council in Prešov, in his address to the Prime Minister of the Czechoslovak Republic K. Kramář, was already indignant on April 14, 1919 over what he described as “suppression of the natural rights of the Russian people on their own land.”¹⁷ Dr. A. Beskid criticised local Czechoslovak officials for what he perceived as “chauvinism”, “lack of knowledge of the local population” and “discrimination of the Rusyn people.”¹⁸

¹⁴ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 18, sign. PR I/18, karton 1, Augustin Vološin – zpráva o zasedání Rusínské Národní Rady.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv. č. 19, sign. PR I/19, karton 1, Ministerstvo národní obrany – zprávy podporučíka Palajdy.

¹⁷ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv.č. 6, sign. PR I/6, karton 1, Dr. A. Beskid, předseda Národní rady v Prešově, poměr k obyvatelstvu.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

The government of the Czechoslovak Republic took seriously the complaints of A. Beskid and during its meeting on May 5, 1919 noting the need “to treat the Carpatho-Russian people with extreme caution and protect them,” instructed the Minister of the Interior to address the Minister for Slovak Affairs V. Šrobar with a proposal to thoroughly investigate A. Beskyd's complaints.¹⁹ In addition, V. Šrobar was invited to entrust subordinate local officials with „maximum attention to the nationality, customs and language of the population under their control.“²⁰

Growing dissatisfaction with the situation of Rusyns in Czechoslovakia was expressed by the newspaper “Amerikansky Russky Viestnik”, the leading organ of American Rusyn Diaspora in the USA. While in February 1919, “Amerikansky Russky Viestnik” welcomed the plan to include the Subcarpathian region in Czechoslovakia and spoke positively about plans for the broad autonomy of Rusyns in the Czechoslovak state,²¹ in October 1919, “Amerikansky Russky Viestnik” criticized the inclusion of the Western parts of Rusyn-populated areas into Slovakia and abuses of local Czechoslovak officials. Later this leading newspaper of American Rusyns was especially negative about educational policy of Prague in Subcarpathian Rus, which was criticized by “Amerikansky Russky Viestnik” for what it perceived as “soft Ukrainization” of Rusyns in local school system.²² Leading newspaper of American Rusyns was particularly negative not only about the educational policy of the Czechoslovak administration in Subcarpathian Rus, but also about Prague personnel policy, which provided preferences to Ukrainians from Galicia.²³

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Despite some negative aspects, being part of interwar Czechoslovakia had generally positive consequences for the Carpathian Rusyns. Professor P.R. Magocsi rightly believes that the progress in Subcarpathian Rus during its incorporation into Czechoslovakia was achieved, first of all, in the field of education and culture, because unlike the Hungarian government, which sought to magyarize Rusyns, Prague inclined to raise the cultural level of the Slavic population in the easternmost province of the Czechoslovak Republic.²⁴ While in 1900, as part of

¹⁹ AKPR, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, inv.č. 10, sign. PR I/10, karton 1, Presidium Ministerské rady – poměry v Příkarpatí.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ *Amerikansky Russky Viestnik* (1919), Homestead, PA, 6 februara, № 5, p. 1.

²² *Amerikansky Russky Viestnik* (1919), Homestead, PA, 16 oktobra, № 40, p. 1.

²³ *Amerikansky Russky Viestnik* (1922), Homestead, PA, 31 marta, № 14, p. 1–2.

²⁴ Magocsi, P. R. (2015). *With Their Backs to the Mountains. A History of Carpathian Rus' and Carpatho-Rusyns*. Budapest – New York: CEU Press, p. 205.

Hungary, the illiteracy of the population in the Hungarian Rus was about 70%, then by 1930 the illiteracy rate dropped down to 42%.²⁵ A number of experts on the history and culture of the Carpathian Rusyns reasonably connect the stay of Subcarpathian Rus as part of interwar Czechoslovakia with the “second Rusyn national revival”. It will not be an exaggeration to state that Subcarpathian Rus in the Czechoslovak period of its history became the object of a rather successful and at the same time moderate modernization project, which demonstrated its greatest successes in the cultural and educational spheres.

²⁵ Ibidem.