TRANSCARPATHIA - THE CENTRE OF EUROPE

By

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‘Central Europe longed to be a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space.’

Milan Kundera

Where is Transcarpathia? It’s official - the Vienna Geographical Society in 1911 pronounced it the ‘centre of Europe’, and the precise spot is marked by a monument in the Carpathian foothills just outside Rahiv, a small town in the south-east of the province. Midway between the Algarve and the Urals, in Uzhhorod, the provincial capital, there is a boutique selling Italian fashions which proudly styles itself ‘Centre of Europe’ in cyrillic script embellished with Viennese secession-style touches. Lying today at the juncture of five European states - Ukraine (of which it is now the westernmost province), Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania - Transcarpathia has borne the full brunt of Europe’s twentieth-century travails. It has undergone no less than seventeen changes of statehood, including two brief periods as an independent republic in its own right. A favourite Transcarpathian joke tells of a visitor to the province who, encountering an elderly resident, asks what he has seen of the world in his lifetime. ‘I was born in Austria-Hungary, I went to school in Czechoslovakia, I served in the Hungarian army in World War II, then went to prison in the Soviet Union. Now here I am in independent Ukraine!’ So you’ve travelled quite a bit then? ‘Oh no - I never left this village!’ But one thing has been constant - Transcarpathia has always been the most remote, inaccessible and poorest part of whichever state it has belonged to.

This turbulent history has left its mark on each of the many ethnic groups inhabiting the province. What is remarkable, however, about Transcarpathia is the atmosphere of good-will and pragmatic mutual accommodation among them - remarkable by comparison with other borderland regions in Europe in which inter-ethnic relations have been almost indelibly scarred by the physical violence and cultural arrogance of the rival nation-states that have successively laid claim to them. I quickly succumbed to the charms of this sheltered pocket of provincial calm - provincial in some of the best senses, with its attractive market towns, old-fashioned courtesy, and excellent home cooking. Speaking several of the languages of the region, but none of them well, I took special delight in being able to speak my now rusty Russian, overlaid (I am told) with a heavy Czech accent, interspersed with a few accidental outbreaks of Hungarian and resorting to German to check I had got the numbers right - and being perfectly well understood by my interlocutor!

What explains this benign tranquillity: is it fatigue bred by a history of war, oppression and grinding socio-economic stagnation, which have stifled any tentative shoots of civil society? Or could it be that the miseries of the past, inflicted wholly by forces from outside the province itself, have nurtured among Transcarpathians a sense of common identity against all outsiders, and a determination to preserve peace among themselves by resisting the dubious appeals to their various national loyalties made by the respective neighbouring ‘mother-countries’? Transcarpathia might really be the last outpost of Milan Kundera’s nostalgic utopia of a ‘Central Europe’, relishing its rich cultural variety. But in the ‘new Europe’ of the twenty-first century, its central geographical location could actually leave it at the periphery of two worlds: left to rot by the venal politics of a distant and near-bankrupt Kiev; but also cut off from its western neighbours as they accede to the European Union, intent on erecting ever higher barriers against those left on the outside of its new eastern border.

If Transcarpathia ever had a ‘Golden Age’, it was probably the inter-war years under Czechoslovak rule, when it was known as Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, since viewed from Prague, it lay this side of, ‘under’ not ‘beyond’, the mountains. Masaryk’s Czechoslovakia is remembered by many today as a period of enlightened, democratic rule, when the diverse ethnic identities were respected and mother-tongue education was promoted for minorities. The first Roma-language primary school in Europe was opened here over 70 years ago. The name ‘Sub-Carpathia’ retains a certain subversive, western-oriented political resonance in today’s Ukraine, jittery about secessionist tendencies not only here but in Crimea and the Russian-speaking east. But precisely for that reason ‘Sub-Carpathia’ is preferred by the radical Ruthenian nationalists who claim to represent the majority ethnic group in the province. They reject the official line - enforced not only by Stalin, but also by Ukrainian nationalists today - that ‘Ruthenians’ are really Ukrainians with a sadly underdeveloped national consciousness due to the centuries of separation from their kinsfolk east of the Carpathians by the impenetrable natural barrier of the mountains and by oppressive foreign rule. It was a Ruthenian nationalist who explained to me that under Czechoslovakia, the province made ‘truly European’ strides forward: a ‘high moral culture’ pervaded public life, order and cleanliness became established as norms of everyday life, still apparent today in the neat and well-cultivated gardens that, for him, exemplify Transcarpathia’s essential ‘Europeanness’, by contrast with the ‘Asiatic’ slovenliness to be found the other side of the mountains. And it was a Ruthenian intellectual who described to me the enduring impact of the Czechoslovak episode: ‘We think in Central European terms, whether we like it or not. We are not against the Ukrainians, but we are not Ukrainians.’

The sense of kinship is still reciprocated in Prague, where elderly professors are said to look kindly on students from Transcarpathia as ‘fellow countrymen’, and take them under their wing, out of a lingering sense of pan-Slavic brotherhood and wistfulness for the lost Czechoslovakia, tinged with not a little guilt at the Realpolitik of their wartime Prime Minister, Benes, who traded Transcarpathia with Stalin to win Soviet support for the post-war reunification of the Czech and Slovak lands, torn apart by Nazi occupation and sponsorship of the Slovak puppet state. This feeling is well expressed by the Czech poet Miroslav Holub:

‘In Czechoslovak nostalgia, Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia is something like a pearl resting at the bottom of the ocean, something barely found before again being lost, a sixth finger amputated before we had learnt to use it. And we are still feeling the phantom pain. By our standards it is a wild country, “beautiful
in its poverty’” as a poet put it, a land that could have been closer to us than to any of its rulers.’

But Czechoslovakia is no more. Nor is Transcarpathia’s Jewish community, delivered up to the Holocaust by Horthy’s Hungary which had overrun the short-lived independent ‘Carpatho-Ukrainian Republic’ within a few hours of its declaring itself upon the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1939, and occupied the province until the final defeat in 1945. Most of the Jews lived in remote and impoverished rural shtetl communities, deeply traditional in their Yiddish culture and Hasidic faith (their now-vanished way of life was depicted with fascinated sympathy in the novel *The Sorrowful Eyes of Hannah Karajich* by the inter-war Czech writer, Ivan Olbracht). But the urban Jews, many having freely adopted Hungarian as their mother-tongue, had wider cultural horizons. To judge by the architecture of the synagogue in Uzhhorod, they also possessed the economic resources and social self-confidence necessary to express them. This splendid building was commissioned in 1910 for a site right in the middle of town from Foerster and Feszl, leading Austro-Hungarian architects of their day, who also built the central synagogue in Budapest and one in Vienna in the same flamboyant Romantic style, boldly intermingling Byzantine and Moorish elements. Since World War Two, the building has served as Uzhhorod’s concert hall, prized for its wonderful acoustics, as explained to me by Mr Lutsker, the leader of the tiny Jewish cultural organisation, whose father moved to Transcarpathia in the 1950s from Ukraine to take up the post of manager of Uzhhorod’s cultural facilities. The change of use at least ensured some care for the building, but also saw the addition of a crass Soviet-modernist entrance porch which is now decaying even faster than the long-neglected and leaking roof. Like his father, Mr Lutsker is a prominent local figure, now the genuinely respected chairman of the Centre for National Minorities, which brings together 34 minority cultural organisations in premises supplied by the provincial administration, providing a common forum for mutual support and joint approaches to the provincial and national authorities, foreign countries and international donors.

Hungarians, who constitute the province’s largest minority, take special pride in the fact that Transcarpathia was the first point of entry of the Magyar tribes into ‘Europe’ in the legendary year 896, when they crossed the mountains at the Verecke Pass and made their first resting place at the castle of Mukachevo, before spreading out into the plains and establishing their 1,000-year rule in the Carpathian basin. The collapse of this kingdom in 1918 saw the emigration of the Hungarian gentry elite which had hitherto dominated the provincial administration, and the implementation by the new Czechoslovak government of a land reform which deprived them of their economic base and social status. For Hungarians, defeat in World War II dashed any remaining hope of reuniting their ‘historic kingdom’. Instead there came Soviet rule, which began for the Hungarians (as for the smaller German ‘Schwab’ minority) with ‘proletarian vengeance’ meted against these people, branded collectively as ‘fascists’. The invading Red Army rounded up all their menfolk between the ages of 15 and 50 - some 30,000 men - and deported them for forced labour in the USSR. Only half the Hungarians came back. Many died, but scattered remnants survive today in the cities of the Donbas in eastern Ukraine. Those left in the province were treated by Stalin as ‘enemy elements’. All contact with Hungary was cut off and the border sealed for fifteen years, despite the fact that Hungary itself by this time had become a ‘fraternal’

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People’s Republic. Only in the 1960s was anything published in Hungarian in the province, and education in Hungarian was drastically curtailed. But things got better in the Gorbachev period, and a cultural revival took place. Today, independent activity among the Hungarians is perhaps the liveliest and certainly the most effective: their largest organisation, the Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association, claims 27,000 members and returns one of the province’s six deputies to the Ukrainian parliament. New Hungarian schools have opened, including three run by the Evangelical Church to which the majority belong, and a Hungarian Teachers’ Training College has been set up in Beregove (Beregszasz for Hungarians) with assistance from the university of Nyiregyhaza in eastern Hungary.

What do Transcarpathians today want for their province? When the Soviet Union collapsed, they voted overwhelmingly for an independent Ukraine in the referendum of December 1991. But at the same time, another referendum was held locally on ‘autonomy’ for Transcarpathia within the emerging Ukrainian state, which also won resounding approval in the province. The latter initiative (as elsewhere in the disintegrating Soviet Union) was launched by the local nomenklatura elite, who for some years had been toying with the idea of a ‘special economic zone’ as a means of insulating themselves from the effects of Moscow’s erratic and disastrous economic policies, and opening up to trade across the western border. The notion of autonomy also had a rather wider cultural appeal for Transcarpathians, not least for the emergent Ruthenian nationalist movement, for whom the prospect of a Ukrainian nationalist state represented a new kind of threat. The Hungarians too seized the moment to press for the establishment of a Hungarian autonomous national district around Beregszasz. This too won enthusiastic backing from the local, mainly Hungarian, voters.

Neither of these autonomy projects has made any headway. Transcarpathian autonomy was firmly squelched by the Ukrainian parliament. The province wholly lacked the political clout of Crimea, which wrested autonomy from Kiev with the backing of Russia. Then disastrous floods in 1998 conclusively demonstrated to the local elite their economic dependence on Kiev for emergency aid, which flowed in freely in that year of Presidential and parliamentary elections. A new party, the Social Democrats, founded by Kiev political ‘oligarchs’ with Transcarpathian family connections, chose Transcarpathia as their launching pad, bought the local football team, promised a steady inflow of financial transfers from Kiev, and now dominate provincial political life. Elections are conducted with a mixture of classic Soviet manipulative techniques and the vacuous razzamatazz of post-modern populist campaigning. Like Kundera’s ‘Central Europeans’, Transcarpathians may insist that they are ‘spiritually in the West’, but politically they remain very much ‘in the East’.

The budding Ruthenian national identity has withered as the people retreated back into their long-established patterns of ‘Schweikian’ evasion of authority - but without Schweik’s mischievous subversiveness. The leading Ruthenian nationalist, Professor Turianitsa, has been discredited among his people by a scandal which bears all the marks of a political stitch-up - now that ‘autonomy’ is no longer on the agenda, the local ex-nomenklatura have disposed an erratic but colourful and doggedly independent local character. One of the rising generation of Transcarpathian political fixers summed up the state of the Ruthenian ‘revival’ today with a characteristic local saying: ‘The dog barks, but the cow does not move.’ Nevertheless, the inhabitants of the province quietly persist in using Central European time, notwithstanding Kiev’s insistence on a single, eastern time zone for all official purposes.
The demand for a self-governing Hungarian national district, still promoted by the Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association, is dismissed airily by the provincial council’s top official in charge of liaison with the minorities as `interesting, but not serious’. But it is not high on the list of concerns for most local Hungarians either. Even Mr Kovacs, the Hungarian MP, seems to promote it less as a matter of personal conviction than as a bargaining chip in a political game he is playing between Kiev and Budapest. Budapest is the main source of financial support for the Hungarian minority’s cultural organisations, and Budapest actively promotes ‘autonomy’ for all the Hungarian minorities beyond its borders. Kiev, however, will not grant ‘autonomy’ to the Hungarian minority because of the precedent this would set for the much larger and more troublesome Russian minority in Ukraine’s east. But Kiev may be persuaded to grant Mr Kovacs some extra resources to keep his Hungarian constituents - and Budapest, a helpful international ally - happy.

What preoccupies Transcarpathians of all the manifold ethnic communities today are not their cultural identities, but their dire economic predicament as the poorest people in the whole of the crisis-ridden Ukrainian economy. People seek ways out by any means they can, but collective political action is not first among them. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, about one third of the working-age population left the province to seek work in Ukraine or Russia. Today, those opportunities have dried up, and now the most obvious and effective means to securing an adequate income has become crossing the border to the west. Very many, and possibly most people cross daily or several times a week into Hungary or Slovakia to work, or take a carton or two of cigarettes or a tank full of petrol to sell. The price and income differentials are now very wide: a Transcarpathian teacher can double her meagre salary of $20 by crossing the border twice a month with a full tank of petrol to empty into the can of a waiting Hungarian motorist. This type of activity keeps people far too busy for politics. What is ominous from the point of view of those who are concerned with longer term cultural survival of Transcarpathia’s ethnic mosaic is the likelihood that more and more people will abandon the province for good. The young and the educated are already leaving.

The case of Transcarpathia’s Slovaks is an interesting one for the purposes of illustrating the way that national identity works in the Transcarpathian context, responding to wider developments beyond the borders of the province while preserving a characteristic openness to mutual accommodation within it. Slovaks living outside Slovakia are typically quite flexible about their identity (not only here but in Hungary and Serbia too, where small minorities also live). A key marker of Slovak identity is Roman Catholicism, and they readily associate and intermarrry with local German Schwabs and Hungarians who share their faith. But they also mix freely with Ruthenes, whose dialect (or language, depending on your point of view) is close to their own Slavonic tongue. The number of Slovaks in Transcarpathia today is rather small, according to the last official census, and one might expect further attrition by a natural tendency to assimilate. However, local Slovak leaders told me they expect numbers to rise dramatically in next year’s census, from the 7,329 recorded in 1989 to 80,000! How can this be? A sudden surge of enthusiastic national identification with independent Slovakia? But why only now?

In typical Transcarpathian style, it has much more to do with profoundly pragmatic calculation. Slovakia decided to impose visas on vistiors from Ukraine from 28 June this year. Hitherto, travel has been visa-free. Slovakia argues that it is forced to do this in order to satisfy the EU, as accession negotiations are now under way and
the EU is worried about the spread of organised crime from the `Wild East'. But both Hungary and Poland are avoiding this step for as long as possible. In fact, Slovakia has been prompted to take early action by the Czechs, who have already introduced visas for Ukrainians to protect their labour markets from the inflow of cheap labour (so much for the common heritage). If Slovakia is to preserve free movement across the Czech-Slovak border, it must follow suit with visas for Ukrainians. It might also have occurred to the government in Bratislava that this would be a convenient opportunity to protect their own labour markets in a period of rising unemployment, with elections looming in 2001.

Allegedly, the Slovak Foreign Ministry proposed to Kiev that a special arrangement could be made for Transcarpathian residents, given the historic ties and the bustling cross-border economic activity. But Kiev rejected this, as it has consistently rejected all appeals of whatever provenance for a `special status' for Transcarpathia: Ukraine is and will remain a unitary state. Instead it seems that the Slovak government will allow ethnic Slovaks to get their visas free of charge, an informal, discretionary practice quite widely employed by Slovak embassies all over Europe to the benefit of ethnic kinsfolk. But how do they determine who counts as an ethnic Slovak? In the Transcarpathian case, this is likely to prove especially difficult to manage for the new Slovak consul who has just set up shop in Uzhhorod. The pressure of applications from self-proclaimed Slovaks will be peculiarly intense where the standard visa fee of $20 or possibly even more is equal to an average monthly salary, and free, regular access to Slovakia for work and petty trade is a matter of economic survival for so many. And there is a very large pool of potential `Slovaks', whether defined ethnically, on the basis of ancestry or marital links, or in `civic' terms, by reference to parents' previous status as citizens of the inter-war Czechoslovakia, of which Slovakia is a successor state. Very few Transcarpathians are `ethnically pure', and many are polyglot. Many of those who have always stuck by their Slovak identity will nevertheless speak Ukrainian/Ruthenian even at home, if not Hungarian. Moreover, Transcarpathians have a time-honoured practice of changing their official identities to suit circumstances thrust upon them by armies and bureaucrats from the states which have successively bullied them into ill-fitting categories. For example, the near-doubling in numbers of `Slovaks’in the 1959 census no doubt includes a good few people of mainly Hungarian or German ancestry who could bring forward enough proof of Slovak identity to have themselves officially recognised as such, thus escaping the opprobrium attached to them as members of allegedly `fascist nations’ at the end of the war. The steady fall in numbers of Slovaks from 1970 may be due in at least part to the reclamation of Hungarian or German identity by some of these people as the balance of disadvantages changed. And so on.

The 2001 Ukrainian census in Transcarpathia will cause more than one headache for the national government in Kiev. The preponderance of `Ukrainians’ in the province - always implicitly assumed to prove the right of a state to territory in this region - could be eaten away. Some will re-identify as Slovak, others will find the courage and the incentives to proclaim their Roma identity, now that international minority rights watchdogs are interested in their plight and `Uncle Soros' stands ready to pump in the cash for the schools, youth football teams, newspapers and the 8 or 9 Roma cultural and socio-political organisations which have sprung to life in the province. Yet more disconcerting for Kiev is the campaign among the Ruthenians - heavily bolstered by emigres in north America and by European minority rights groups - to get Ukraine to implement the `minority right to self-identification’. This means that
Kiev should give official recognition to Ruthenians as a distinct ethnic group for the purposes of the forthcoming census. So far, the authorities are tiptoeing round the issue, vaguely alluding to the option of the Ruthenians being accorded, if not full ‘national’ status, well, maybe, the status of a ‘sub-ethnos’, a ‘branch’ of the Ukrainian nation.

Nevertheless it is by no means clear that the Ruthenians are ready to stick their heads above the parapet and declare themselves in their masses. It is no doubt the case that a substantial proportion, and maybe the majority of the population officially known as ‘Ukrainian’ in Transcarpathia feels Ruthenian in private, among family, friends and neighbours. ‘Outsiders,’ including the small community of Russians who entered the province after 1945, report a deep clannishness, and difficulty in being accepted as ‘one of us’ by locals who seem to be Ruthenians (but who do not usually declare their Ruthenianness in public). But what would follow for people who feel Ruthenian in private from ‘coming out’ in the public sphere? In Central and Eastern Europe, this is usually expected to lead on to the political demand for a state of ‘our own’. In the case of Ruthenians, what state would this be? Ruthenians may be the majority of Transcarpathia, but they are not the only ethnic community insistant on their historic roots in the province. Perhaps the key to Transcarpathian inter-ethnic solidarity so far has been precisely the reluctance of the majority population to play the the murderous game of nationalist politics, staking a claim to political supremacy in a given territory. This is due not only to their unresolved ambivalence about their identity, and to their lack of social and political, to say nothing of economic, capital. For a Ruthenian ‘nation’ could not be imagined without also embracing the large numbers of Ruthenians who exist outside Transcarpathia, especially in Slovakia and Poland, and also, although fewer, in Hungary and Romania.

Transcarpathia simply does not fit in to a Europe of nation-states - each of its various national or ethnic communities seems to recognise well the futility and the enormous costs this would incur, as it has done in the past. Perhaps its best hope might lie in the project of constructing a ‘Carpathian Euroregion’, launched with the support of the American Institute for East-West Studies in 1993. It modelled itself on the most advanced ‘European’ efforts at rendering borders ‘transparent’ and promoting cross-border local initiative, and looked like a promising means of overcoming the political and cultural isolation and economic backwardness of the eastern peripheries of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania and the western periphery of the new Ukraine. It was peculiarly attractive for Transcarpathia, which found itself finally right at the centre of the new regional grouping. But the Carpathian Euroregion has yet to live up to its rather grandiose, over-ambitious objectives. In Transcarpathia, the local elites’ initial enthusiasm fizzled out along with the plan for provincial autonomy. Kiev persuaded other provinces in Galicia and Bukovina to join in, no doubt to keep an eye on what the Transcarpathians were up to. Galicia, the historic heartland of Ukrainian nationalism, could be relied on to block any sign of Transcarpathian - especially Ruthenian - separatism. Then the whole thing proved too big to manage for the participant provinces, administratively challenged backwaters of their respective countries. The necessary transport and communications infrastructure was lacking - as one Euroregion official ruefully pointed out, it is almost certainly quicker to get from Baia Mare to New York than to Presov or Przemysl. At first promoted energetically by the national governments in Hungary and Poland, their interest in the Euroregion’s possibilities waned as political energies were diverted westwards onto the priority of EU accession. Ukraine’s increasing economic divergence from its rapidly transforming
western neighbours, and the resultant deep and long-lasting economic crisis, further undermined the chances of success. When in late 1999, the river Tisza, which runs through the centre of the Euroregion, was deluged with cyanide from a gold-mine near Baia Mare in northern Romania, affecting not only Transcarpathia but several eastern Hungarian counties, not even a squeak was heard from the Euroregion’s offices, which should have been the focus of common efforts to make good the damage. Instead of cooperation among all the participants, divergent interests came to the fore, recriminations flew in all directions and national governments were left to sort the whole mess out.

But the terminal blow is about to be delivered by the `Europe’itself in the form of the European Union. As accession negotiations with the Central European applicants proceed, the increasingly touchy issue of `free movement of persons’ within the future European `Area of Freedom, Security and Justice’ has moved up the agenda. Translated into everyday language this means that if the new member-states want their citizens to have the same unconstrained right to move about and work in the EU that citizens of existing member-states already enjoy, they will have to implement tighter controls on movement across the external border at their east, and fall in with the EU’s common visa regime, which includes Ukraine (as well as Romania). The EU’s new rampart runs right through the heart of the Euroregion. It remains to be explained how this is to be made compatible with the EU’s exhortations to prospective members to nurturing their relations with all their neighbours in the interests of regional stability; let alone how this complies with the Council of Europe’s Framework Agreement on minority rights, according to which signatory-states have committed themselves to preserving free contacts across borders for national and ethnic communities divided among states. For the peoples of Transcarpathia, it is little short of an impending disaster. All those I spoke to - whether Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Jews, Hungarians, Slovaks, or Roma - told me, indeed, accused me: `How can Europe do this to us? We are at the centre of Europe, but Europe is betraying us.’

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