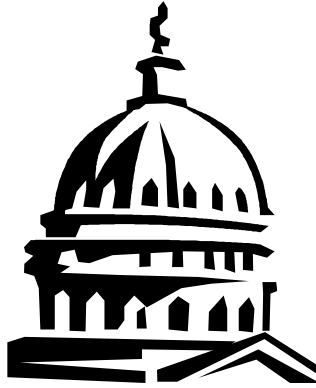


# World Congress of Rusyns News

## World Congress Chairman Meets with Foreign Diplomats

Washington, D. C. On November 14, 2005 the chairman of the World Congress of Rusyns, Professor Paul Robert Magocsi, together with a delegation of Rusyn-American community activists was received by the embassies of Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia, and by the US Department of State. Members of the Rusyn-American delegation included John Righetti, National President of the Carpatho-Rusyn Society, and other officers of that organization: Professor Elaine Rusinko, Dr. Mikuláš Popovič, Dr. Victor Haburchak, Dean Poloka, and Karen Varian. The purpose of the meeting was to inform the various embassies and US government officials about the status of Rusyns in several European countries.



in the European Union is its position on the Rusyn population living in Transcarpathia. Ukraine is the *only country* in Europe that does not recognize Rusyns as a distinct nationality. Rusyns are not a “sub-ethnos of Ukrainians,” stated Professor Magocsi. Such a position, which is still official policy in post-Orange Revolution Kiev, is a violation of basic human rights and jeopardizes Ukraine’s efforts to draw closer to the European

Union, where Rusyns clearly function as a distinct nationality.

Professor Magocsi also informed Ukraine’s embassy that for the past decade the Rusyn-American community has been active in sending medical supplies and equipment to hospitals in Transcarpathia. Rusyn-American sponsors behind the medical donations singled out Transcarpathia as the recipient precisely because it is the Rusyn homeland of their ancestors. For example, one Rusyn American from Binghamton, New York, Michael Kundrat, has arranged for the shipment of 12 containers of medical equipment worth over four million dollars. Does it not seem strange, asked Professor Magocsi, that despite his enormous philanthropic efforts, Mr. Kundrat has not been recognized by so much as a newspaper article in Ukraine, let alone a letter of commendation or some other appropriate act by local officials. Why the silence? Would this be the same reaction, say, if a Ukrainian-American from Galicia secured such donations for a hospital in L’viv?

At the Embassy of Ukraine, housed in an elegant historic residence in the fashionable Georgetown district of Washington, D. C., Professor Magocsi expressed how the Rusyn communities in North America and Europe welcomed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the birth of independent Ukraine, and the recent Orange Revolution that brought to power in January 2005 the pro-western government headed by President Viktor Yushchenko. The World Congress chairman reminded Ukraine’s embassy officials that the Rusyns of Transcarpathia, in contrast to other national groups in that region, were among the strongest supporters of President Yushchenko and that Rusyns in North America helped in the campaign to bring about the success of the Orange Revolution. He also explained how Rusyn Americans, like Rusyns in European countries, support fully the efforts of Ukraine to enter the European Union. Ukraine’s membership in the EU would remove the new “iron curtain” that separates Ukraine from the rest of Europe and that cuts right through historic Carpathian Rus’, dividing Rusyns in Transcarpathia from their brethren in neighboring EU member states of Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary.

At the Embassy of Romania, the Rusyn-American delegation praised that country for its liberal policies regarding national minorities and wished its government well in the preparations to enter the European Union scheduled for 2007. The main topic of discussion, which turned out to be of particular interest to the embassy’s representatives, was the Ninth World Congress of Rusyns, scheduled to be held in Romania in June 2007, specifically in the town of Sighet near the border of Ukraine in the historic region of

Among the problems facing Ukraine in its bid for closer relations and hoped-for future membership

Maramorosh (Maramureş).

Romania is determined to put its best face forward during the upcoming World Congress of Rusyns. The embassy spokesperson urged the Rusyn World Congress to invite to its proceedings officials from the European Union concerned with ethnic and linguistic minority issues, human rights, and cross-border cooperation.

Professor Magocsi also suggested the desirability of improving the infrastructure of Sighet, such as upgrading and constructing new hotels, large meeting halls, and the restoration of sites of historic interest to Rusyns, such as the courthouse where the anti-Orthodox treason trial was held in 1914 and the room where the Maramorosh Rusyn National Council took place in 1918.

Discussion also focussed on the recently completed bridge that spans the Tysa River from Sighet to Solotvyno on the northern, Transcarpathian side of the water body. This structure has enormous practical and symbolic value, because for the first time in over half a century it provides an opportunity for Rusyns living on both banks of the river to communicate and interact with ease. The bridge is fully functional and ready to use, but unfortunately it remains closed.

The delay in opening the bridge is linked to Romania's accession to the European Union and the need to enforce strict standards regarding controls over the EU's expanding eastern border. At the very least, proposed Professor Magocsi, the bridge should be opened to the Rusyn delegation from Ukraine, so that it can cross on foot to attend the World Congress in 2007. What better way to underscore the goal of eliminating borders than by symbolically opening the bridge to Ukraine in the very year that Romania joins the European Union!

At the Embassy of Hungary the Rusyn-American delegation expressed its satisfaction regarding the creation in Hungary of autonomous self-

governing communities for national minorities. Rusyns are recognized as a distinct nationality and have 32 such self-governing communities as well as a national coordinating office in Budapest. The delegation and embassy officials exchanged views on the problems faced by Hungary in determining the criteria whereby an individual can qualify as belonging to a specific national group.

Of particular importance was the suggestion that Hungary's Embassy in Washington, in cooperation with Rusyn-American organizations, would be interested in hosting on its premises exhibits and cultural programs that highlight the achievements of Rusyns in present-day Hungary. That idea needs certainly to be supported in cooperation with the national office of the Rusyn Minority Self-Government based in Budapest. Cultural programs in Washington, D. C. that would highlight Rusyn culture were also suggested by officials at the Embassy of Slovakia. Even more important, however, were the concerns expressed by the Rusyn-American delegation about recent developments among Rusyns in Slovakia itself. On the one hand, the delegation noted with appreciation the enormous achievements of Rusyns in Slovakia, such as their recognition as a distinct nationality, government support of the professional Aleksander Dukhnovych Theater, the codification of the Rusyn language, the numerous publications in the Rusyn language, the Department of Rusyn Language and Culture at Prešov University, and the establishment of classes in Rusyn language and culture in several elementary schools and a few *gymnasia* (middle schools).

More intense discussion turned on certain on-going problems. The chairman of the World Congress, Professor Magocsi, pointed out how serious problems result from Slovakia's budgetary process, whereby funds are approved for cultural activity among national minorities, such as the Rusyns, in January of a given fiscal year, but that the actual receipt of those funds does not come until June at the earliest, if not more likely July, August, or even September. Since such practice has occurred repeatedly over

the past ten years, it has given rise to fears that such bureaucratic practices constitute indirect discrimination, but discrimination nonetheless, against the country's national minorities. Slovakia's ambassador to the United States, Rastislav Kačer, who spent nearly an hour-and-a-half with the Rusyn-American delegation, provided a poignant response. He admitted that Slovakia's funding practices were indeed very problematic, but by no means are they limited to national minorities. The very same practices apply across the board, including funding the Slovakia's military, and with similar negative results.

On the other hand, noted Ambassador Kačer, government officials should recognize that groups such as Rusyns are in a particularly "fragile situation." This is because unlike most other national minorities Rusyns have no state to turn to, whether for moral or financial assistance. Therefore, Rusyns should be afforded special attention and care by Slovak policy makers.

Professor Magocsi also raised the concrete manner in which funding is allotted to specific national minorities. Not wanting to assume direct responsibility, Slovakia's Ministry of Culture has established an advisory council made of Rusyn representatives and one ministry official who determine specifically which projects or organizations receive funding. But how representative is this advisory council? Why, for instance, are two of the four Rusyn council members from Bratislava, when in fact the vast majority of the group itself lives in far eastern Slovakia?

Several members of the Rusyn-American delegation were particularly disturbed that the oldest Rusyn-language newspaper that has come into being since the Revolution of 1989, and the one with authority and renown both within and beyond the borders of Slovakia, *Narodný novynký*, was in 2005 given no funding at all. Instead, all the funding intended for newspapers was given to the recently established *Info-Rusyn*, some of whose issues have up to 40 percent of their material in Slovak! One of the Rusyn-

American delegates pointed out how the state budget given to the excellent publication of Hungary's Rusyns, *Rusyns'kyi svit*, is proportionally reduced if the articles are in a language other than Rusyn. Clearly, the policies of Slovakia's Ministry of Culture and its "Rusyn" advisory council raise serious questions about the degree of Slovakia's sensitivity to the "fragile" status of its Rusyn inhabitants.

Finally, Professor Magocsi and other Rusyn-American delegates expressed deep concern that Slovakia's Ministry of Education funds a mere eight elementary classes in Rusyn language and culture, while four other classes have to be funded from elsewhere. In short, the Rusyn-American community is being asked to pay for the salaries of teachers in four existing Rusyn-language classes, for the salaries of teachers in six new proposed classes, and for the salaries of 12 new proposed kindergartens to be established in places where Rusyn elementary-level classes already exist. How is it possible that a European Union member country like Slovakia, with a growing economy that all of us hear about in the news, has to depend on Rusyns in the United States and Canada to fund such a relatively small number of elementary-level classes and kindergartens? Slovakia's ambassador sympathized with the legitimacy of our delegation's concerns and promised to raise the various issues we discussed with the appropriate bodies in Bratislava.

The November 14 meetings in Washington were the first to be held by a chairman of the World Congress of Rusyns with officials representing the central governments of specific countries where Rusyns live. Local organizers had also requested a meeting with the Embassy of Poland; unfortunately, it was the only country that did not respond to our request. All parties agreed that further close cooperation on the part of the World Congress of Rusyns and Rusyn-American organizations must continue with the representatives of Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia. We certainly intend to do our part in working with those countries and intend to add Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia and Montenegro as part of our future sphere of interest.