

**“The Magocsi Problem (“*Problema Magochoho*”): A Preliminary
Deconstruction and Contextualization”**

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1. An academic gathering—be it a symposium, a conference or a round-table—to examine the work of a fellow scholar is invariably timely; at the very least it presupposes a consensus on the basic significance of the subject being addressed and a collective decision to address it. As a launch of a new book (in Ukraine the institution of a *prezentacija*) it provides the welcome opportunity to discuss a new contribution and with that to fill in and redraw our map of the field. If more than one work or project is involved, it provides the still greater opportunity—and indeed poses the scholarly obligation—to see the larger picture, to engage in stock-taking and rethinking. By contextualizing, problematizing and where need be deconstructing we recalibrate our understanding and thus revive the field and our commitment to it. Clearly, the process of *laudatio*, of paying homage to achievements spanning a whole career, also contributes to this.

Today’s gathering, discussing Prof. Magocsi’s contributions to scholarship and the field of Ukrainian Studies at large has, an added, and indeed striking component. As a discussion in *this* specific setting, St. Vladimir’s Institute, the center of

Ukrainian cultural activity in Toronto, it is timely precisely because it is so long overdue—indeed the first here since Paul R. Magocsi began teaching at the University of Toronto twenty eight years ago. While over the years his work has been the object of concerted attention and discussion in various venues, both in North America and Europe, only now—with the welcome evolution of this institution—it has come home to this setting. This development in itself is noteworthy—and points us to the issue at hand.

2. So, is there a “problem”? Should there be a “problem”? The simplest answer, based on personal experience, is that such a paradigm, such a construction of data and interpretation, in fact reception, is altogether possible (perhaps even inevitable) and having been the recipient of such a construction—i.e., in the guise of the “problema Hrabovycha”¹—one is naturally tempted to take that precedent and tag and pass it on as it were, as a kind of mark of distinction and an intellectual “estafeta.” In fact, in the larger order of things, it is not a question of precedent, but of the nature of things: any good, let alone outstanding scholar should presumably pose problems—if not himself *be* a problem—by the very fact that he necessarily recasts, re-thinks, and in such or another fashion shakes up the field. Problematizing the discipline, or at least some of its key assumptions, is itself a value, an academic desideratum. One can easily postulate that all scholarship, all *good* scholarship, is implicitly revisionist. But the question, of course, is how tolerant of such revisionism is the academy? What in its makeup encourages and what discourages such activity? Without being unduly

¹ Cf. Hryhorij Kloček, “Problema Hryhorija Hrabovycha: moment istyny” in *Dzerkalo tyzhnja*, No. 42 (467) 1-7 lystopada 2003; <http://www.dt.ua/3000/3680/43435/>

essentialist, one can also postulate that such tolerance or openness to revisionism is the key indicator of the vitality of a discipline or a scholarly institution.

3. From the broad perspective of scholarship Prof. Magocsi's work has easily passed the test of time and quality; his presence and his importance in the field are not in question; there is no problem here. His bibliography of some eight years ago, now updated, presents an impressive catalogue of works—even if one confines it to only to the strictly academic;² in fact, to merely list and briefly annotate them all would occupy considerably more time than what is allotted to me here. To reflect on it in a more personal way, however, I would single out only a few works that have made a singular impact on both my understanding of the field and appreciation of the author. Perhaps in first place I would put his *Galicja: A Historical Survey and Bibliographic Guide* (Toronto, 1983) precisely because it opened up for me—someone who supposedly was somewhat versed in the field—new vistas on the wealth of resources available, and above all on how much I didn't know; for a scholar this is always very tonic. In a different key I was and still remain most impressed by his *Ukraine a Historical Atlas* (1987 and 1992) and, by virtue of its greater scope and comparative impact, his *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (1993 and 1995). Both are exemplary aides for as clear and highly contextualized understanding of Ukrainian history, and remain recommended background reading for a number of my courses. Yet another mode is revealed in his editing of the proceedings—and before that organizing—of the 1984, Toronto conference on “Andrei Sheptyts'kyj: His Life and

² Cf. *Paul Robert Magocsi: A Bibliography 1964-2000*, ed. Gabriele Scardello, Toronto, 2000; updated to 2008 for the occasion of this symposium.

Work”³; its import is that of scholarly initiative and affirmative action as it were: the ability to recognize an important scholarly issue, and in an effective way, particularly by reaching out to the recognized world authorities (and the Sheptyts’kyj volume presents this with great clarity, with the presence of such figures as Jaroslav Pelikan, Lubomyr Husar, Shimon Redlich and others), to focus scholarly attention on and indeed redefine what is central. Simple as it may sound, it is in fact a difficult task, one predicated on scholarly achievement, status and perspective, and no less so on energy and will and follow through (which do not always go hand in hand with the former).

Scholarly achievement and standing, however, is not only built on a record of research and publications—it is also, particularly in North America, based on teaching and nurturing of young scholars—and here, too, Bob Magocsi has an outstanding record, one which others at this symposium, particularly his colleagues at the University of Toronto, are more qualified to assess.

Where, or more precisely what then is the problem?

4. In one sense it is a perceptual topos in the field of Ukrainian Studies.

Characteristically, however, it is a component not of the academic perspective as such, but of a para-academic or more directly a political one. For as witnessed by the recent *prezentacija* of Prof. Magocsi’s *Istoriia Ukrainy* (Krytyka, Kyiv, 2007), an expanded and updated version of his *History of Ukraine*, which was held last year in the Institute of History of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, there was a broad

³ Cf. Paul Robert Magocsi, ed., *Morality and Reality: The Life and Times of Andrei Sheptyts’kyi*, Edmonton 1989.

public and academic discussion of this work—and implicitly its author, his methodology and approach to the subject—but as wide-ranging and lively as the discussion was, there was no hint that some problem, some fundamental reservation or qualm lurked in the background. While this, of course, is only one instance, and a fuller discussion of the broad, not merely the academic reception of Prof. Magocsi’s work is in order, this may indeed serve to locate and contextualize the issue. In short, the “problem” in question may be said to exist precisely on the interface of scholarship and not-scholarship, with the latter coinciding broadly with the realm of social and political activism. Given the fact, however, that the scholar-as-activist is certainly not a rare phenomenon, and in the 19th century was more the rule than the exception—particularly in the case of emerging nations—the problem may in fact be much more common, or paradigmatic, than at first assumed.

5. Specifically, however, the “Magocsi problem,” infers a perception that there is an inherent conflict of interest between his scholarly interest in and work on behalf of the Ukrainian Studies field, and institutionally his work as holder of the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto on the one hand, and on the other his engagement in various Rusyn or Carpathorusyn issues, both the academic, as for example his work on the Encyclopedia of Rusyn Culture, and his various publicistic, popularizing, educational and organizational efforts on behalf of the Carpathorusyn community. In turn, this is predicated on the fundamental assumption that these two communities and their “causes” (*spravy*)—the Ukrainian and the Carpathorusyn—are necessarily opposed and mutually exclusive. This notion has become inscribed into

the post-independence Ukrainian discourse under the heading of “political rusynism” (*politychne rusynstvo*)—which connotes not only political separatism, but also participation in a larger, international anti-Ukrainian conspiracy.⁴ As is often the case, the perception of this danger is itself strong enough to obviate the need for corroborating proof, thus establishing, or at least contributing to a paranoid and conspiracy-fearing mind-set. At the same (as the witticism has it) external reality does often seem to corroborate the paranoia, as attested both by the separatist tendencies in Ukrainian politics, particularly in the East and South, and even more so the ongoing and very prominent propaganda war against Ukraine being conducted in the Russian media, where the topos of the necessary and inevitable dismemberment of Ukraine is at the very heart of the argument. It is not surprising therefore that Carpathorusyn extremists would invoke this “natural alliance” with Russia—with the hope both of securing that support and even more, perhaps, of provoking the expected patriotic Ukrainian response.⁵

This separatist, or “political rusynism” argument should also be seen in the following contexts:

- a) Firstly, the right of self-identification, particularly of collectives is immanent and inalienable and thus if people feel they are different—they are; if they feel a separate identity—they have it. The manner in which ethnic, linguistic, regional

⁴ The literature on this is substantial. Among the internet writings cf. e.g., Oles’ Donij, “Politychne rusynstvo nebezpechne,” *Narodna samooborona*, 10.10.2008, <http://www.nso.org.ua/ua/news/2891>

⁵ Cf. the “Open Letter,” signed by Paul R. Magocsi and Steven Chepa, disassociating the World Congress of Rusyns from extremist positions, particularly attempts to establish a Russian “protectorate” over the Transcarpathian oblast’, as well as Prof. Magocsi’s note arguing that Ukrainian government inaction provokes such extremism, *Krytyka*, July-August, No. 7-8 (129-130), 2008, p. 21.

- identity and difference are given political status is regulated by law and democratic societies have various traditions and mechanisms for applying them. Blanket denial is not part of these mechanisms—particularly not in the new Europe with its focus on and tolerance for regional and ethnic groups/minorities.
- b) In the Ukrainian case such blanket denial (to wit “There never was and never can be a Rusyn/Carpathorusyn nation because they are all simply Ukrainians”) is not only politically incorrect, but should also remind Ukrainians that this is precisely the argument that for so long was used—and indeed is still used—by the Russian side when dealing with Ukrainians and their identity and aspirations. For Ukrainians to now repeat it, to pass on this *estafeta*, as it were, is not only unseemly, but politically unwise, especially in light of Ukraine’s avowed intent to join the European community. And one must assume that it is precisely this concern that has recently led Ukraine, on the level of the Zakarpats’ka oblast to formally declare the Rusyn/Carpathorusyns a separate nationality.
- c) In the broadest of contexts, in light of the catastrophic disappearance in the course of the last century of small groups and particularly their languages and cultures work on researching and preserving any of them—and Prof. Magocsi’s interests are particularly focused on such micro-nations and cultures—would seem to be of the highest, humanist priority.⁶ In light of that to argue that publishing grammars

⁶ The literature on language death is voluminous, especially on the internet; cf. e.g. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_subject.asp?code=LGD for one such bibliography. The rates of language death in various regions of the world are difficult to assess, especially because of the range of criteria and statistical evidence employed, but as noted in 1992 by one leading authority, Michael Krauss, “I consider it a plausible calculation that—at the rate things are going—the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages”; cf. “The World’s Languages in Crisis,”

or primers of Carpathorusyn is somehow unnecessary or indeed harmful is simply indecent (or more correctly perhaps a kind of indecent rechauffe imperialism picked up from such neighbors as Russia and Poland). It is all the more so untenable in that the close proximity of the Carpathorusyn and Ukrainian cultures is obvious and the value of studying the two should be equally obvious.

- d) In our context the scholarly moments trumps the political or geopolitical: regardless of whether in time the relationship of the Carpathorusyns to the Ukrainians will be more like that of the Bavarians to the Germans or the Tyroleans to the Austrians, the merits of studying the issues this relationship subtends is beyond dispute—and the record of Prof. Magocsi’s ongoing work in both areas, but particularly in the area of Ukrainian Studies is ample evidence of this.

6. The preceding introduces a new context for our discussion of the Magocsi problem—the issue of nationalism, and its role in scholarship, specifically in the humanities. More concretely still, it is the fact that some disciplines or clusters of disciplines, whole fields, as it were, are all but “genetically” animated by and imprinted to articulate a national or nationalist mindset. A neatly paradigmatic formulation of this, one that highlights the essential (and problematic) circularity in question, is of “nationalism in a nationalist science”—which is the very title of a review by Olli Alho of William Wilson’s important

Language 68 (1), 4-10; cited in David Crystal, *Language Death*, Cambridge, England, 2000, p. 18. For a study of the Ukrainian language under the pressures of Soviet linguistic see Larysa Masenko, ed., *Ukrains'ka mova u XX storichchi: istoria linhvocydu: dokumenty i materialy*, Kyiv, 2005.

work *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*.⁷ Alho agrees with Wilson's contention that "from the very beginning of the discipline Finnish scholars have placed their folkloristic problems within the larger frame of nationalism; this has not only led to the application of the results of research to the cultural and political practice but also—in few but notable cases—to the influence of this nationalistic context on the research itself."⁸ But he also goes on to argue that this interpenetration of scholarship and identity-making ideology, and beyond that "an effort "to strengthen the self-consciousness of a society in relation to others by means of a hypothetically constructed past" apply to various times and cultures, particularly in moments of stress or transition.⁹

The larger issue of how some disciplines or sciences are imbedded in a "nationalist" i.e., a national-identity-constructing discourse clearly deserves separate attention. In our context, however, it helps us to focus on a distinctive feature of Prof. Magocsi's scholarship, i.e., the fact that precisely in contrast to the above paradigm it is animated by transnational, comparative and inclusive values and criteria. As has so often been noted in reference to his *History of Ukraine*, his approach programmatically focuses on the ethnic diversity and multicultural fabric of Ukrainian history and in so doing makes it more complex and attractive—and unfettered by the teleology (or primordialism) that often obtains in the discipline. In effect, rather than constituting a "problem," the scholar problematizes, i.e., revitalizes the discipline.

⁷ Cf. Olli Alho, "On Nationalism in a National Science," *Acta Sociologica*, 1977, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 293-299.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 298-299.

7. Two more interconnected moments need to be addressed here—each of them constituting the outer reaches of the Magocsi problem, which at this point, of course, no longer refers to the scholar himself, not his work and not even its reception, but to his ability to function in his field; for in the broadest sense the “problema Magochoho” devolves upon the problem of the scholarly environment and the prospects of the field broadly put, i.e., of Ukrainian Studies as such. In a word, it is a collective, general problem, and we all share in it.

We may begin with the North American context. The narrower issue here is that the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto is not endowed to the degree that it can confidently pursue its work into the near future; further efforts are needed to ensure an adequate level of funding. This, alas, is also true of most if not all the chairs of Ukrainian Studies that were endowed in the last forty years or so, beginning with the Chairs of Ukrainian Studies at Harvard. In virtually all of these cases, once the Chair or program was endowed the fundraising declined or, more likely, ceased altogether. The goal, after all, was met. But this, as we know, is not at all the approach that obtains in the real world. A given university, be it the University of Toronto or Harvard, does not launch a fund drive “once and for all” and then once it is completed desists from any future fundraising; on the contrary, it periodically renews its efforts, recommits itself to its fundamental and ongoing task. Building a program of study is not like building a cathedral (and even cathedrals require upkeep). The fact that such an ongoing commitment was not planned for, and was not built into the work of the chairs is a major flaw, the workings of which will become more apparent with time.

To be sure, some chair endowments—Harvard’s are the obvious example—are configured in such a way, i.e., embedded in such successful financial investments that an income for the foreseeable future seems altogether assured. This does not remove the problem, however. For an even more fundamental issue is that the “perpetuity” that these chairs were endowed for is, alas, not all that perpetual. The reality of academic life in North America is that when after a tenure of three or four decades a chair holder needs to be replaced it is the departments in which these chairs are located and the deans that administer them who will decide what exactly will be the profile of the new chair holder—and the degree of adherence to or departure from the initial conception of the chair will be negotiated in the reality of the academic setting and the time when the issue is addressed. If the support system for this chair at the given institutions—and in the field at large—is strong then the outcome, in all likelihood, will be positive; and if not, then not—of this one can be sure.

8. In a globalized setting the frame for Ukrainian Studies is determined by its international dimension, but most of all by the state of the discipline in Ukraine itself, for it is there that the sources and archives and above all the human resources are located. It is now more obvious than ever that without access to such resources Ukrainian Studies in the West, and particularly in North America will not develop, let alone flourish; one need only look at where our graduate students come from and whom we have recently been appointing to our professorial positions. In light of that the present bleak state of the humanities in Ukraine, and the absence of any policy there to remedy this state of affairs should be of utmost concern. This is where the ultimate problem lies. As we celebrate

the achievements of our colleague and his evident commitment to our discipline we should also focus our attention on this overarching context.