



## UKRAINE'S PROCRASTINATION PROVOKES EXTREMISM

Ukraine has been an independent state for seventeen years. It has welcomed and implemented many democratic changes that were ushered into central and eastern Europe by the revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In one area Ukraine is sorely wanting, however. In stark contrast to all of its neighbors—Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, as well as Czech Republic and Serbia—Ukraine refuses to recognize Rusyns/Carpatho-Rusyns as a distinct nationality. Such a policy constitutes a basic violation of universal human rights.

For seventeen years the government of Ukraine has rejected all demands to recognize Rusyns/Carpatho-Rusyns. These demands have taken different forms: (1) numerous petitions from Rusyn civic and cultural organizations in Transcarpathia addressed for more than a decade to the Verkhovna Rada and the Government of Ukraine; (2) several requests from the democratically elected Regional Council (Oblasna Rada) of Transcarpathia, including the adoption following a vote on March 7, 2007 of its members (71 for, 2 against) of a motion to recognize Rusyns as a nationality on the territory of Transcarpathia; and (3) a request from the Ombudsman of Ukraine, N. Karpachova (dated January 17, 2008) to restore Rusyns as a nationality category. The Government of Ukraine and the Verkhovna Rada have disregarded all these legitimate requests. Instead, the government has allowed Ukraine's Ministry of Justice to provide "legal" justification for its actions.

The most recent statement of the Ministry of Justice is a letter to the Office of President Yushchenko, dated March 6, 2008, which is marked by several internal contradictions. The letter states that according to Ukraine's Constitution, every citizen has the right to his or her own nationality self-identification. It also states that the existence of a nation (the ministry letter confuses the terms *nation*, *nationality*, and *national minority*) cannot be decided by any governmental body, whether national or local.

Then begins a series of contradictions. The Justice Ministry proclaims that the Ukrainian state has never denied the existence of an ethnic group called Rusyns, carefully avoiding mention of Rusyns as a distinct nationality. Although no governmental body is to decide on what is a nationality, the Justice Ministry justifies its policy by citing a letter from the state-supported Academy of Sciences of Ukraine's Institute of Political and Ethnonational Research (dated February 29, 2008), which argues that "Rusyns are an organic component of the Ukrainian nation," and therefore only a "sub-ethnos," or "ethnographic group".

The Justice Ministry also states that there is no "official list of nationalities in Ukraine." But then it goes on to admit the existence of a list of nationalities for the 2001 census. Since Rusyns are classified by a government body (the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine) as an ethnographic group, they do not appear on the list of 130 nationalities and peoples published by the Ukraine's State Committee for Statistics. Therefore, in violation of the right of each citizen to determine his or her national identification, the Government of Ukraine has classified Rusyns in such a way so that they do not exist.

What has been the result of Ukraine's refusal to recognize Rusyns on the basis of contradictory "legal" argumentation? One result is frustration on the part of some local Rusyn

organizations in Transcarpathia which recently have renewed demands not only for autonomy, but even for “state sovereignty.”

We support the territorial integrity of Ukraine and welcome its continuing efforts toward democratization and drawing closer to Europe. But how can Ukraine expect to become a member of the European Union if its government, whether through ideological obstinacy or simple procrastination, refuses to recognize Carpatho-Rusyns as a distinct nationality? Back in the nineteenth century, tsarist Russia classified Ukrainians (whom they called Little Russians) not as a nationality but rather as an ethnographic group of Russians. It makes no sense in the twenty-first century for Ukraine and ethnic Ukrainians to use the same argument against Carpatho-Rusyns that Russians had used against Ukrainians in the past.

Present-day Ukraine should act as a future state of the European Union and not as former tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union. Recognizing Carpatho-Rusyns as a distinct nationality would fulfill the basic human rights of Carpatho-Rusyns and be the right step for Ukraine to take on its on-going path toward integration with the rest of Europe.

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