

A Few Remarks on the Prospects of Ukrainian Studies in North America

It would make me and people like me, who are genuinely concerned about the future of Ukrainian studies, very happy if we could honestly and with full confidence paint a rosy picture of the future development of our field at North American universities and other institutions of learning. Unfortunately, the current reality does not support too optimistic a view of our situation. Many of us expected that Ukraine's independence and its increased role in international politics would contribute to a considerable increase in the number of students choosing Ukrainian subjects in their university curriculums, but such a trend has not (at least, not yet) materialized. This is partly because the humanities in general, and Slavic studies in particular, are in a crisis and have become increasingly marginalized at North-American universities in the past decade. We have no choice but to recognize the fact that many universities choose not to renew existing teaching positions in Ukrainian studies after the retirement of their current professors. Some new positions are being created (most often, as a result of an influx of funds from private donations), but these instances are still quite rare.

In this situation, the greatest weight of responsibility for the future of our field in North American universities rests on the current professors and their ability to attract students to their programs through promotional activities, the establishment of close contacts with high schools and Ukrainian communities, and through the modification of their courses to attract students of non-Ukrainian backgrounds. The responsibility rests also on students themselves and their readiness to devote time and effort to Ukrainian studies, as well as on Ukrainian communities in North America and their ability to establish, through fundraising and funding, new university positions.

On a more positive note, while the future prospects of teaching programs in Ukrainian studies at North American universities are rather uncertain and difficult to predict, the opportunities for scholars and research institutes in various areas of Ukrainian studies have grown exponentially in the past several years. Books devoted to topics in Ukrainian studies have been published in remarkable numbers not only by traditionally Ukraine-oriented presses, but also by mainstream publishing houses. Ukraine and various aspects of Ukrainian studies have become a recognizable part of the academic and intellectual discourse in North America and Europe. I personally hope that this trend, particularly if it is wisely supported by Ukrainian scholars and research institutes, will eventually result in an increased interest in things Ukrainian among university students and will provide the much needed boost to Ukrainian-studies programs at North American universities. And by "wisely supporting this trend" I mean, primarily, the consolidation and maximizing efficiency of the existing research resources in order to produce maximum effect.

There are certain factors influencing the future of Ukrainian studies about which we can do very little. For example, we cannot change the general trend at North American universities to move away from the study of the humanities and into sciences and applied

sciences; neither can we greatly influence the political situation in Ukraine, which determines the formation of an international image of Ukraine and Ukrainians. However, we can do much to improve the existing situation by focusing our efforts in several key areas, such as:

1. effective campaigns aimed at promoting Ukrainian studies in Ukrainian communities in North America in order to recruit new students;
2. increasing fundraising efforts aimed at gaining support for Ukrainian studies and ensuring that the existing programs continue to exist and grow while new programs are being created. (This practical and “non-academic” area of activity has too often been avoided by professors in Ukrainian studies at North American universities);
3. active support of research that would result in quality academic and non-academic publications that would further promote Ukrainian studies in North America;
4. focusing on cooperation, i.e., on joint and/or jointly funded projects involving various Ukrainian-studies programs;
5. the pooling of the existing resources and consolidation of our efforts by seeking mutually beneficial ways of including scholars and graduate students from universities with underdeveloped Ukrainian-studies programs and/or working in specialties that are on the fringe of, so to speak, “mainstream Ukrainian studies” in large academic projects (such as, for example, the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine) that can serve as forums for presenting the results of their research and showcasing their expertise;
6. an active effort at increasing the “presence” of Ukrainian studies on the Internet—an area that is still ignored and avoided by many Ukrainian-studies specialists;
7. increased efforts at bridging the gap between Ukrainian studies and other academic fields by working to incorporate Ukrainian topics into studies of a broader scope, within such disciplines as European or East European history, post-colonial studies, gender studies, etc.

I strongly believe that a considerable improvement of the current situation in our field can be achieved by simply making the existing Ukrainian-studies resources in North America more efficient, focused, and consolidated; by opening up to other disciplines and fields of study; and by accepting the importance of such practical and “non-academic” matters as fundraising, outsourcing, and active promotional efforts.