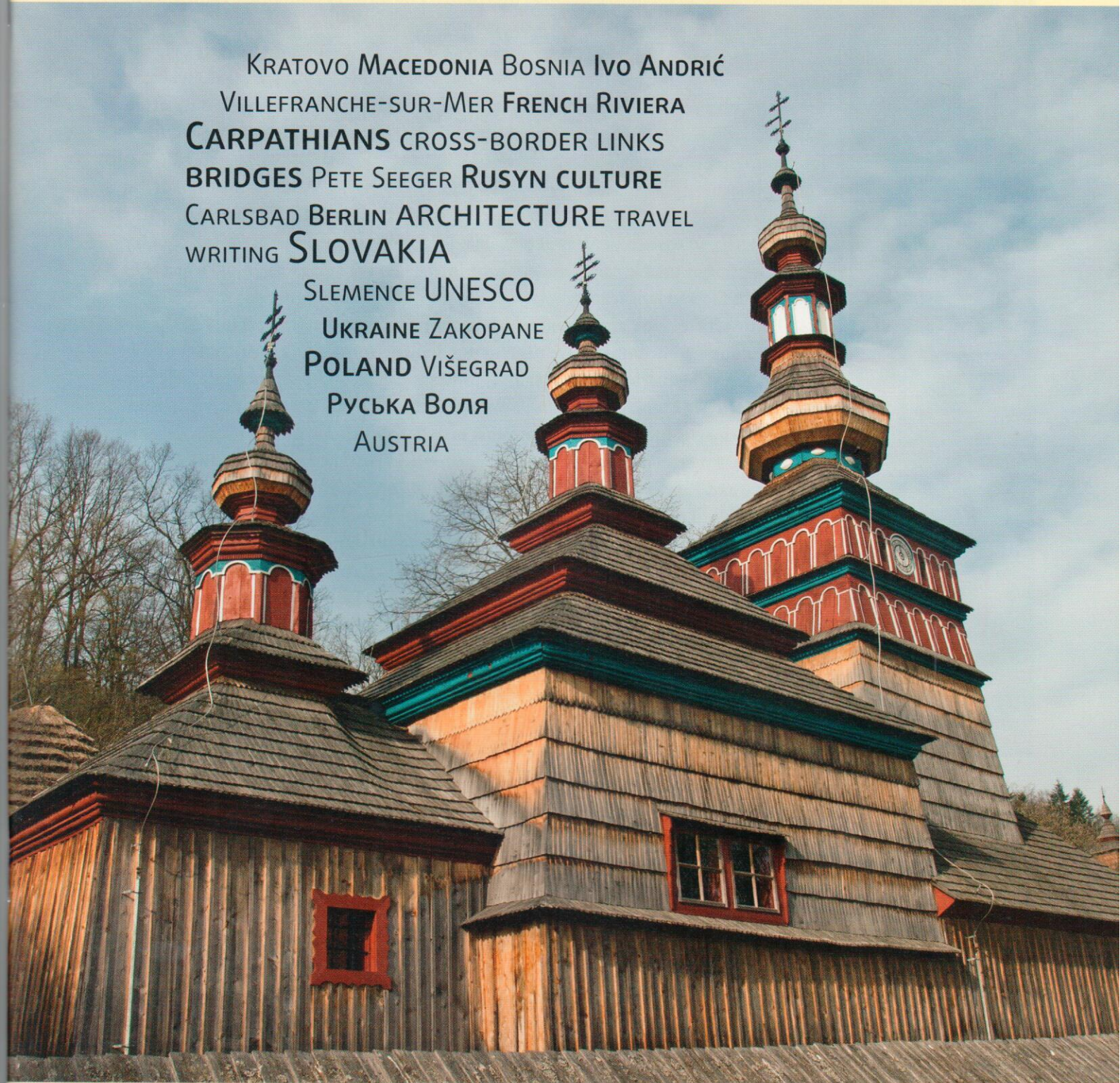


# hiddeneurope

Exploring cultures and communities across the continent

KRATOVO MACEDONIA BOSNIA IVO ANDRIĆ  
VILLEFRANCHE-SUR-MER FRENCH RIVIERA  
CARPATHIANS CROSS-BORDER LINKS  
BRIDGES PETE SEEGER RUSYN CULTURE  
CARLSBAD BERLIN ARCHITECTURE TRAVEL  
WRITING SLOVAKIA  
SLEMENCE UNESCO  
UKRAINE ZAKOPANE  
POLAND VIŠEGRAD  
Руська Воля  
AUSTRIA



## The three pillars of Rusyn life



The twentieth century was often difficult for the Carpathian Rusyns — at least until 1990 when political changes in central and eastern Europe paved the way for new-found freedoms for the Rusyn people. The various governments which between 1920 and 1990 presided over the territory where Rusyns and their Lemko cultural cousins have their heartland generally ignored and often even actively undermined Rusyn life and culture.

During the second half of the nineteenth century there was a flowering of Rusyn national consciousness. This period of cultural revival was led in the main by poets, pedagogues and priests — three vocations which were often combined. Rusyn leader Alexander Vasilyevich Dukhnovych

(1803–1865) most certainly worked in all three capacities. He came from the village of Topol'a — in Dukhnovych's day part of the Habsburg Empire and now in the north-east corner of Slovakia (you'll find a useful map on page 9). Insofar as the Rusyns have an anthem, and surely even stateless nations deserve an anthem, it is Dukhnovych's 1851 poem *Dedication* (*Vruchanie* in Rusyn) with its bold declaration "I was, am and will be a Rusyn."

In the final decades of the Habsburg Empire, the Rusyns of the Carpathian region very

ABOVE: The Greek-Catholic church in Ruská Bystrá lies in a deep valley in the Carpathian region regarded by Rusyns as their cultural heartland. The church, which lies close to the Ukrainian border, is one of three Greek-Catholic churches in Slovakia on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

successfully asserted their national identity — an identity which was rooted in the rural landscapes of the region where Dukhnovych and other Rusyn leaders lived and worked. Rusyn life was interpreted as an essentially rural endeavour. It was intimately linked to the Greek-Catholic faith that found a great following among Rusyns, although this religion, which deftly bridges two branches of Christianity in Europe (namely, the Orthodox and Roman traditions), is not peculiar to the Rusyns. At a day-to-day level, it was this deeply-textured religion, a distinctive East Slavic language — seen by many linguists as a recension of Church Slavonic — and the valued status of wooden architecture which emerged as the trinity of virtues which underpinned Rusyn and Lemko self-awareness.

An iconography of rural suffering was embedded in the Rusyn mind, even though a dash of poetry helped alleviate the burden and that

That the fragile flame of Rusyn consciousness survived at all had much to do with the efforts of Rusyns in exile.

remained even more true in the post-Habsburg period. “We are shepherds, we sing our own liturgy,” wrote Rusyn poet Petr Prodan in 1941, alluding to the distinctive tradition of unaccompanied singing in Greek-Catholic churches.

Being Rusyn was surely never easy. From 1920 to 1938, Czechoslovakia governed much of the Rusyn heartland, but Prague was very far distant from the mountain valleys occupied by Rusyns. This was a troubled period for the Rusyn people who failed to secure the autonomy they coveted. For one day, just a single day, there was an independent Carpathian republic. It was declared on 15 March 1939 with a Greek-Catholic priest, Avgustyn Voloshyn, as its president. The following afternoon Hungarian forces marched in (with the backing of Hitler) and the short-lived republic was quashed.

The redrawing of borders after World War II left the Rusyns divided. The Lemko group in the Bieszczady Mountains of south-east Poland was systematically purged in Operation Vistula in 1947 — which also targeted ethnic Ukrainians. Thousands were deported. Churches were burnt to the ground, leaving an eerily empty landscape. Over-

## THE RUSYN LANGUAGE

If you turn to *Google Translate* you’ll be faced with a heady mix of foreign tongues. If you need a primitive translation of a text from Hmong to Hebrew or from Swedish to Swahili, then it’s a useful tool — just as long as you recognise the limitations of any automated translation service. But the list of languages available on *Google Translate* is far from comprehensive — and Rusyn is not on the list. This is a language which is very difficult to access for outsiders — so much so that as we planned our journey through the Carpathians in spring this year we could not find *any* Rusyn-English dictionary.

The codification of Rusyn, including the development of a standardised orthography and systematic grammar, has lagged behind that of the other Slavic languages to which it is related. Throughout most of the Rusyn heartland, Greek-Catholic congregations relied on bibles in Church Slavonic until the publication in 2011 of a Rusyn-language bible, which includes sections in both the Cyrillic and Roman alphabets — in itself perhaps a mark of the ambiguous position of the

Rusyn language, though some might say a reasonable accommodation to a younger generation of the faithful who, despite their Rusyn roots, may no longer find it easy to read the Cyrillic script.

The Rusyn bible was very much the initiative of Greek-Catholic priest Father František Krajňák, who at the time the project was conceived was a leading figure in the Rusyn movement in Medzilaborce. The Greek-Catholic Church authorities in Prešov, seat of the local bishop, rewarded Father Krajňák for his efforts by moving him to a new parish well to the west of the main Rusyn-speaking region, prompting many in Medzilaborce to comment on the growing Slovakisation of the Greek-Catholic Church. Many Rusyns are inclined to perceive the Church as a peculiarly Rusyn enterprise and judge the metropolitan bishop in Prešov to be geographically and culturally distant from the Rusyn heartland. That may be true, but Greek-Catholic congregations are in fact found over a wide region in central, eastern and south-east Europe — from Belarus to Macedonia.

grown orchards in beautiful locations in the valleys are silent reminders of the location of Lemko-Rusyn villages that were mercilessly purged.

In post-war Czechoslovakia, the substantial Rusyn community in the north-east of the country was bluntly told that there was no such thing as a Rusyn language or identity. The authorities in Prague insisted that the Rusyns were in fact Ukrainians labouring under a misconception. Schools substituted literary Ukrainian for Rusyn in the curriculum. The Greek-Catholic Church was banned. Only with the belated de-Stalinisation of Czechoslovakia in the mid 1960s — belated because the Khrushchev Thaw had somehow by-passed Czechoslovakia — was there any officially sanctioned renaissance of Rusyn life. During the 1968 Prague Spring, a collection of Dukhnovych's work was made available — the first such edition to be officially published in Czechoslovakia since the 1920s.

In the post-war Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the suppression of Rusyn identity was relentless. The historian Norman Davies — in his book *Vanished Kingdoms* — succinctly describes the plight of the Rusyns under Moscow domination as “fifty years of Soviet silence.”

That the fragile flame of Rusyn consciousness survived at all had much to do with the efforts of Rusyns in exile. Some of the exiles were in the eastern United States where the descendants of late-19th century Rusyn migrants to Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York still profess elements of Rusyn identity — though America's most famous Rusyn son, Andy Warhol, was curiously silent about his origins. “I come from nowhere,” was Warhol's standard retort to journalists enquiring about his origins. But Warhol did attend a Greek-Catholic church in Pittsburgh (where he lived as a child) and he is buried in a Greek-Catholic cemetery.

Very significantly for the survival of the language, there has been throughout the last century a small but coherent Rusyn community in northern Serbia where the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina has Rusyn as one of its



The iconography of faith and belief is ubiquitous in the Carpathian region.

official languages. This ensured the codification of the written language and the perpetuation of a tradition of Rusyn publishing during the decades when Rusyn was effectively banned in the Carpathian homeland. It is a tribute to the linguistic tolerance of Tito's Yugoslavia that Rusyn traditions flourished in the Vojvodina while they were being suppressed elsewhere in central and eastern Europe. A vibrant Rusyn community is still to be found in Ruski Krstur in the north-west corner of Serbia. We have, on our travels, also come across villages in eastern Croatia where Rusyn is still spoken.

In *Vanished Kingdoms*, Norman Davies writes about the half-forgotten peoples of Europe. The Rusyns were almost entirely forgotten. But now they are biting back. There is renewed interest in Rusyn art and literature. In eastern Slovakia, an entire segment of the population which was wrongly labelled as Ukrainian is now rediscovering its Rusyn roots. The three pillars of Rusyn life and culture — the Rusyn language, the Greek-Catholic faith and the simple wooden architecture — now have renewed currency. Whether the new government of Ukraine will follow the example of its EU neighbours and acknowledge the terrible ills that were inflicted on the Rusyns of Carpathia remains an open question. ■