



Lemkos, a Group Whose Unity Eludes Even the Radiance of the Watra

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ABSTRACT

The Lemkos, a distinctive ethnic group with roots in the Carpathian Mountains, have forged a unique cultural identity shaped by their language, traditions, and historical experiences. This study delves into the intricate dynamics of the „Łemkowska Watra“ (Lemko Bonfire), a symbol embodying both unity and division among the Lemko community. Originating in 1983, the Watra marks a renaissance of Lemko identity, resonating with communities worldwide. However, it also serves as a poignant illustration of the divisions within the Lemko community. This research scrutinizes the contrasting perspectives of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Rusyn factions, revealing how differing national affiliations have shaped Lemko identity.

KEYWORDS

Lemkos, Rusyn, identity, Poland, watra

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the first „Łemkowska Watra“ in 1983, it has become an integral part of rituals and traditions associated with the myth of the renaissance of Lemko identity. The motto „Pójdę za twoim ciepłem“ (“I will go after your warmth”) (Murianka 1985) symbolically alludes to fire, home, and return (Duc-Fajfer 2022). Watra signified the gathering of Lemko communities from various corners of the world to their roots, not only geographically but also culturally, liberated from politically imposed dominance. Guided by this symbolic fire, Watra provided a space for Lemko generations to reconnect with their roots, sing in their native language, and dream about the future together (Vojteková 2012).

Paradoxically, while Watra stands as a symbol of unity, it has also become a symbol of division. The very essence of Watra, intended to bring together the Lemko community, has, in some respects, highlighted the underlying fractures within. This article will delve into precisely this phenomenon — the division of the Lemkos, which becomes evident in the organization of Watras. We will analyze how this schism manifests in various aspects — from political and cultural dimensions to symbolic rituals. In this manner, we will trace the impact of organizing Watras on the shaping of Lemko identity and how these events reflect deeper significance for the nation itself.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of Lemkos shows us how a group identity is formed. Lemkos, a part of the Rusyn community, became a distinct group because of various cultural influ-

ences like their unique way of speaking, traditions, beliefs, and ceremonies. There are two main ideas about where Lemkos originally came from. Some say they came from Wallachia, moving from the east to the west of the Carpathian Mountains. Others suggest their roots might be in the Balkans, with Aromanians or Albanians. But some argue that Lemkos have always been in their area, going back to the time of the White Croats in Kievan Rus (Zięba 2013). What we know for sure is that the Carpathian Mountains have played a big role in shaping Lemko culture for a very long time. The Poprad and Oslawa rivers mark the borders of this area. In the early 1900s, lots of people in Central and Eastern Europe were still figuring out which group they belonged to (Misak 2018). The same goes for the Lemkos. By the late 1800s, Lemkos were starting to feel like they were their own group, but they didn't have a clear national identity yet. They used to call themselves Ruthenians or Rusnaks. Later, they started using the name "Lemko," especially in the eastern part of their territory. This name comes from a word in their dialect, 'łem', which means 'only' in English. But the use of "Lemko" as a group name really took off in the latter half of the 1900s. This was partly because of complicated political situations caused by Lemko communities in North America and growing nationalist movements in Central Europe. Religion was a big part of how Lemkos saw themselves. They divided the world into 'ours' and 'others' based on faith (Michna 2004).

As A. Sadowski points out, religion played a big role in the borderland dynamics, especially in the Lemkivshchyna area. Lemkos' sense of who they are isn't just about religion, language, and culture. It also touches on their emerging national identities. Over time, there were strong rivalries and conflicts between people who supported Ukrainian and Russophile ideas among the Lemkos (Wilk 2019). These conflicts happened against the backdrop of big historical events like the Bar Confederation, the Spring of Nations, and both World Wars. Lemkos' sense of identity was heavily influenced by the rugged land they lived on. The rough terrain made them feel isolated as a group. Because of their unique language, culture, and religion, Lemkos felt quite different from the rest of Poland. Their connection to Ruthenia, including the faith of the Ruthenian Church, the Rus language, and the name Rusnak-Rusin, gave them a deep sense of confidence and pride. These factors together created what we call "Lemko conservatism," a way of thinking that was reinforced by their shared isolation. This connection extended to their love for the mountainous areas and their deep attachment to their homeland. These foundational elements shaped their community's history (Hann 2002).

A crucial moment in Lemko identity came during the excitement of national and social movements in 1848. People from different national communities in the Habsburg monarchy, including Ruthenians in Eastern Galicia, pushed for policies that protected their national interests. Among the Ruthenians, there were three main national ideas: Old Ruthenian, Russophile, and Ukrainian. These ideas became really important in the latter half of the 1800s. Most of the rivalry and conflict in Lemko Region was between the Russophile group and Ukrainian nationalists among the Lemkos. The Russophiles had more influence in this area (Wilk 2019). This wasn't just because of geography or a supposed lack of Ukrainian ideas in Lemkos' territory. Instead, the push for Ukrainianism among the Lemkos was an external idea





that threatened their ability to define themselves. This process continued over time, showing up in different ways, like Lemkos' relationship with the OUN-UPA and the Ukrainian Social and Cultural Society (UTSK) formed in 1956. Later on, the Association of Lemkos (1989) and the Union of Lemkos (1990) showed two distinct national ideas within the community (Magocsi 2015).

3. WATRA AS A CATALYST: UNIFYING AND DIVISIVE FORCES IN LEMKO IDENTITY

In the last chapter, we explored the complex history that shaped the Lemkos' shared identity. We looked at where it started, how it evolved, and the many factors that played a role in forming it. We talked about how geography, religion, and the turbulent history of Central and Eastern Europe all contributed to making Lemko identity special. Now, let's focus on a key theme in Lemko culture and identity: the "Łemkowska Watra." It's not just an event; it's a symbol of Lemko togetherness and their strength in tough times.

"Watra," which means bonfire, has become a symbol of Lemko culture and identity. Lemkos organize festivals, or watras, to protect their cultural heritage and show who they are in Polish society. There's the main Watra Festival in the Lemko Region, and two more in Michałów in Lower Silesia and Ługi in Lubuskie, which serve Lemko communities in western Poland. These events attract Lemkos of all kinds of backgrounds, as well as Poles interested in Lemko culture and even Ukrainians in Poland celebrating a part of their own heritage. There are also smaller watras in Lemko communities in western Poland and Canada. The biggest of these happen in western Ukraine, especially at Monastyrzka in Galicia. But as we look closer at Watra, we find a paradox. Even though it's a symbol of unity and cultural preservation, it has also, in some ways, become a symbol of division in the Lemko community (Magocsi, 2015).

In discussing the Lemko Watra, it's essential to highlight its origins with the "Łemkowyna" Song and Dance Ensemble, founded in 1969 by Jarosław Trochanowski, Piotr Trochanowski, and Władysław Graban.¹ The concept of this outdoor event was not without precedent. This account draws primarily from personal sources, namely the recollections of those involved in organizing the early Lemko Watras or those who participated in them. Most of these narratives, whether spoken or written, were originally in the Lemko language. The Lemko Watras from 1983 to 1989 were overt demonstrations of the resurging national identity and independent Lemko ideology (Magocsi, 2015, Duc-Fajfer 2022). Paradoxically, it was only in the era of a free Poland that the organization of the event fell under the purview of activists from the former Ukrainian Social and Cultural Society (and eventually the Lemko Union), which contested the unique identity of the Lemko minority, thus fundamentally shifting the ideological character of the Watra.²

1 <https://www.lem.fm/historia-lemkowskiej-watry/>

2 <https://www.lem.fm/historia-lemkowskiej-watry/>



When Lemkos tried to create a strong system for protecting and promoting their culture, some Lemko activists faced opposition. Some argued that they, along with the larger Lemko community, were part of the Ukrainian nationality. In 1990, pro-Ukrainian Lemko activists, along with existing Ukrainian groups in Poland, formed the Union of Lemkos in Poland/Ob'iednannia Lemkiv v Pol'shchi, based in Gorlice near the Lemko Region. The Lemko Society (Stovaryshynia) showed its national connection by being part of the World Congress of Rusyns. The Union of Lemkos (Ob'iednannia) became a key member of the World Federation of Ukrainian Lemko Organizations in the United States. The competition between supporters of these two groups—the Rusynophile Stovaryshynia and the Ukrainophile Ob'iednannia—for the loyalty of Poland's Lemkos first became clear at the annual summer Watra Festival in the Carpathians. The festival started in 1983 with supporters of Rusyn ideas, but by 1990, the Union of Lemkos (Ob'iednannia) was in charge (Duć-Fajfer, 2022). So, the midsummer weekend gathering quickly became a noticeably Ukrainian event. People from Ukraine, including once the president of Ukraine, Viktor Iushchenko, were prominent guests.³ “The honorary patronage of the XXIXth meeting was assumed by Jerzy Buzek⁴ in 2011 (Vojteková 2012).

The division between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Rusyn Lemkos can be illustrated by the testimony of a former student of Lemko-Rusyn language (Warsaw, 2022):

“People gather once a year at the Vatra, and it used to be a Lemko Vatra. The history of this Vatra goes back to the 1980s. It was a Lemko national Vatra. It was established by the Lemkowyna group, where Julia Doszna used to sing, but later Ukrainians stole that Vatra. It was like, in the beginning, it was a non-profit, spontaneous meeting by the fire. Suddenly, Ukrainian participants said they would help there, and later they called a meeting. They threw out those who were for the Lemkos, fenced the area, and now there are shops, stalls. It turned commercial. That's why those who were for the Lemkos had to flee west. They founded a Vatra in Michalow, and now it is organized by the Lemko Society.”

Afterwards, the original pro-Rusyn organizers restarted their Vatra among the Lemko diaspora, moving it to the Silesian village of Michalów. It has kept its Rusyn character under the Lemko Society (Stovaryshynia) (Magocsi 2015). To this day, it is still referred to as the Lemko Vatra in Exile in Michałów.⁵

According to Olena Duć-Fajfer: “one of the reasons why the event was taken over by pro-Ukrainian activists was the fact that the Lemkos, for the first time since Operation “Vis-tula,” demonstratively asserted their presence and independence. She stated, “Those who took the Lemko Watra, I think Lemkos know, because they see who is now in charge of the Watra or how they shape it. And why did they take it? I have my own view on this. I said back then, when the matter was raised, whether we take the Watra, fight for it, or if it should be a problem of conflict and our great involvement — based on my diagnosis at the time, which

3 <https://svet.sme.sk/c/3407057/juscenko-sa-zucastnil-na-festivale-lemkovska-vatra.html>

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy_Buzek

5 <https://www.stowarzyszenielemkow.pl/web/watra/>



I still maintain to this day (and now new factors have been added to it) — I said that the Watra had to be lost. It was our first major manifestation, very overt, after a long period of Ukrainianization under the UTSK. And I remember how officials from the UTSK began to come to our Watra, wanting to officially appear on the stage with such appropriation: well, we're here, glad that our Lemkos are doing this. They were already giving their hand and their authority here. The significance of the Watra was too great at that time for them not to want to take it over. The times were not yet as clear-cut as they are now, that it is already obvious that we have our identity and no one questions it for us. Those were still the times when they had great power. I say 'they' about the UTSK as an organization. I'm talking about those members of the Lemko Section, because not all members of the Lemko Section had such thinking, but about those who wanted to ideologically transform Lemkost into Ukrainian-ness. Or in other words: to incorporate Lemko into the model of the larger Ukrainian nationality, as an ethnographic category.”⁶

3. LEMKO-RUSYN CULTURAL REVIVAL AND IDENTITY

The establishment of the Lemko-Rusyn Philology Program in 2001 at the Pedagogical University in Cracow marked a significant milestone in the cultural revival and identity preservation efforts of the Lemko-Rusyn community in post-Communist Poland. This academic program aimed to train educators who could not only teach the Lemko-Rusyn language but also foster a deeper understanding of Lemko culture and heritage. The emergence of educational initiatives and formalized language programs was accompanied by a broader cultural renaissance (Magocsi 2015).

The Lemko Society/Stowaryshńnia Lemkiv played a central role in this revival. Recognizing the need to connect with Lemkos dispersed across Poland, they organized various cultural activities that spanned different regions. One notable initiative was the Lemko Amateur Theater based in Legnica, in southwestern Poland. This theater troupe not only provided Lemkos with a platform for artistic expression but also served as a means to convey Lemko history and traditions to a wider audience. Through engaging performances, they celebrated their cultural identity and shared it with both Lemkos and non-Lemkos alike. Simultaneously, the International Biennale of Lemko-Rusyn Culture, held in the Lemko Region in Krynica, became an essential cultural event. It showcased the rich tapestry of Lemko heritage, including music, dance, folk art, and literature. The Biennale not only celebrated the artistic achievements of the Lemko community but also served as a gathering place for Lemkos from different regions to reconnect and reaffirm their shared identity. Other organizations emerged to champion Lemko-Rusyn culture and heritage in their respective regions. In the Lemko Region itself, the Museum of Lemko Culture in Zydranowa became a repository of historical artifacts and a center for cultural preservation. Similarly, the Ruska Bursa Society in Gorlice played a crucial role in promoting Lemko culture, particularly among the younger generation. In Lower Silesia, the Kychera Song and Dance Ensemble, based in Legnica, showcased the traditional music and dance of the

6 <https://www.lem.fm/historia-lemkowskiej-watry/>

Lemkos. These performances not only entertained but also educated audiences about Lemko customs and traditions. Likewise, in the Lubuskie palatinate, the Association of Lemko Culture established its Lemko Tower center in Gorzów Wielkopolski, serving as a hub for cultural activities (Urbanik 2019).

Despite these cultural revival efforts, the Lemko-Rusyn community in Poland faced persistent challenges in their pursuit of recognition and support. The government's initial reluctance to provide funding for Rusyn-oriented Lemko organizations underscored the complex political dynamics at play. Poland's foreign policy objectives, particularly in its relations with Ukraine, influenced the government's stance on the Lemko identity. Ukraine's position, as articulated in 1999, portrayed Lemkos as an integral part of Ukrainian nationality (Magocsi 2015). This stance posed a challenge to Lemko activists who sought recognition as a distinct ethnic group. The struggle for acknowledgment persisted, and Lemko-Rusyn organizations lobbied relentlessly for support. Finally, in 1995, Poland began to allocate funding to these organizations, albeit in modest amounts. By 2006, Lemko-Rusyn organizations ranked eighth in terms of funding among Poland's 14 recognized national minorities. This financial support marked a turning point, allowing Lemko cultural organizations to expand their programs and reach a broader audience. In the midst of this changing landscape, the Lemko Society/Stovaryshhynia Lemkiv took a significant step by establishing a Committee on National Education. Their goal was to promote a standardized variant of the Rusyn language specific to the Lemko community. This initiative culminated in the publication of textbooks and, most notably, a standardized grammar in 2000. This grammar represented a formal codification of the Lemko-Rusyn language, a critical achievement in preserving the linguistic aspect of their heritage. The efforts to revive the Lemko-Rusyn language extended to the education system (Urbanik 2019).

In the 1991/1992 academic year, Lemko Rusyn classes were introduced in a few schools within the Lemko Region. However, these classes initially lacked government funding. It was not until 1999 that Poland's Ministry of Education approved a curriculum for Lemko Rusyn, which allowed for its inclusion in both elementary and high school education, with the state covering the expenses. While the number of schools offering Lemko-Rusyn classes increased over the years, the student enrollment remained relatively small. By the 2004/2005 academic year, there were 20 elementary-level and 13 high school-level classes distributed across the Lemko Region, Lower Silesia, and Lubuskie. The limited number of students reflected the ongoing challenges of preserving a distinct Lemko-Rusyn identity within the larger Polish context. Despite these challenges, the establishment of the Lemko-Rusyn Philology Program in 2001 at the Pedagogical University in Cracow marked a pivotal moment in ensuring the continuity of Lemko culture and language (Magocsi 2015).

IN CONCLUSION

The Lemko community's journey is one marked by both unity and division, resilience, and adaptation. The Łemkowska Watra, as a symbol, encapsulates these dualities, serving as a powerful reminder of the intricate interplay between identity,





history, and politics. The Lemkos continue to navigate these complexities, striving to preserve their cultural heritage while confronting the challenges posed by external forces. In the realm of cultural revival and identity preservation, the Lemko-Rusyn community has made significant strides. The establishment of the Lemko-Rusyn Philology Program in 2001 marked a turning point, allowing for the formal codification of the Lemko-Rusyn language. The educational initiatives, language programs, and cultural activities initiated by organizations like the Lemko Society/Stovaryshhnia Lemkiv have played a pivotal role in fostering Lemko cultural heritage. The Lemko Amateur Theater, International Biennale of Lemko-Rusyn Culture, Museum of Lemko Culture, Kychera Song and Dance Ensemble, and the Association of Lemko Culture have collectively contributed to the preservation and celebration of Lemko traditions.

This article has examined the contrasting perspectives of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Rusyn factions, demonstrating how differing national affiliations have played a pivotal role in shaping Lemko identity. Historical factors, rooted in complex events and rivalries among Lemkos, Ukrainians, and Russophiles, have contributed to these divisions. The historical backdrop, including the emergence of rival national ideas, conflicts, and external influences, has deeply impacted the Lemko community's sense of self. The Watra, intended to bring Lemkos together, has paradoxically highlighted the schisms within. As exemplified by the competing narratives and experiences shared in this article, the organization of Watras has underscored the dichotomy of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Rusyn Lemkos. The shift of the Watra from a Lemko-focused event to one with a more pronounced Ukrainian character exemplifies the complexities surrounding Lemko identity. While it has brought visibility to the Lemkos' resurgence, it has also marked a contestation of their identity.

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