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Comments on the Future of Ukrainian Studies in North America

I see the first decade of the new millennium as a time of transition in Ukrainian Studies on this continent. One important change is generational (but also necessarily ideological). The field that was once dominated by diaspora Ukrainians is becoming increasingly diversified. In the decades to come, I think Ukrainian Studies will evolve in the same direction Russian Studies have been going for a long time now. In literature and language teaching, native speakers will retain their prominent representation, but in history and political science, they will be in the minority. This is normal, even if it makes me an anomaly.

On a more general note, it seems to me that the “Age of Ideology” in Ukrainian studies is passing. (This has something to do with the collapse of communism and the emergence of an independent Ukraine). Scholars who wrote dissertations on Ukraine during the last decade are a mixed lot: there is an increase in the numbers of people with no Ukrainian background, yet there are still people with family connections to Ukraine, and there are also new immigrants--most of whom are neither nationalists, nor socialists. Very few among the younger academics see their scholarship as a part of the “Ukrainian cause” or any other large ideological project. This is not to say that they lack patriotism or political views, but these people are very often interested in new methodological approaches that deconstruct traditional grand narratives, such as socialism or nationalism.

This change in the cadre of academics is paralleled by a change in the student body—and I believe this trend will continue. Speaking about my home turf, Ukrainian history, “heritage-seekers” are becoming a minority. Students who have no family connection whatsoever are often attracted to Ukrainian history because it challenges the traditional story of the rise of nation-states, and thus opens up new conceptual avenues. These young people are interested in the puzzles of East European nation building in the same way they are fascinated by, say, the culture of the Italian Renaissance. And this is normal, too.

This discovery by non-Ukrainians of the intrinsic value of Ukrainian Studies makes me optimistic. I believe the field will be able to accomplish a transition from teaching primarily “heritage-seekers” to attracting a more diverse student audience. But at the end of the day, we should thank Ukrainian Canadians and Ukrainian Americans for having established a serious institutional base for Ukrainian Studies. These endowed chairs, institutes, foundations, and scholarships are the lasting legacy of the DP generation, a welcome insurance policy for the field in transition.