

World Federation of Ukrainian Lemko Unions holds 7th International Congress in Serbia

by Diana Howansky Reilly

NOVI SAD, Serbia – The World Federation of Ukrainian Lemko Unions (known by the acronym SFULO) held its 7th International Congress from August 20 to 22 in Serbia during which time the organization elected a new president and presidium and further acquainted delegates with the Ukrainian community in the country.

SFULO is an international non-governmental umbrella organization which unites

Ukrainian Lemko associations from Canada, Croatia, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and the United States.

On March 25, 2021, SFULO's President Yaroslava Halyk, author of "Memory Book of Lemkivshchyna," which documents deportees from the Lemko region in southeastern Poland to the Ukrainian SSR from 1944-1946, passed away from COVID-19 in her home in Ukraine.

SFULO was then temporarily led by its vice president from the American continent,



Delegates to the 7th International Congress of the World Federation of Ukrainian Lemko Unions placed flowers at the Shevchenko monument in Novi Sad, Serbia.



Courtesy of Diana Howansky Reilly

Delegates to the 7th International Congress of the World Federation of Ukrainian Lemko Unions gathered in Serbia on August 20-22.

Mark Howansky, and vice president from the European continent, Stefan Klapyk.

At the SFULO 7th International Congress in Serbia, delegates officially voted for Mark Howansky to take over the role of SFULO president and they elected a new presidium.

"The Congress was very productive and allowed us to review our work from the last five years, pay our respects to former president Yaroslava Halyk, and elect a new presidium to lead SFULO for the next five years. While other organizations have cancelled or postponed their meetings due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, we Lemkos showed

our resiliency and resourcefulness by executing a successful, innovative Congress held via a hybrid format – with people participating in person and virtually," Mr. Howansky said about his time in Serbia.

"And, of course, being elected president of SFULO is a great honor and a huge responsibility. It is more important than ever to preserve our Lemko-Ukrainian culture. I have much respect for all of the delegates who took part in the SFULO Congress and look forward to working with them over these next five years," Mr. Howansky said.

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Other members of the delegation from the U.S.-based Organization for the Defense of Lemkivshchyna (OOL) who attended the SFULO Congress in person were Petro Kosciolok and Andriy Khomyk.

OOL members who participated in the SFULO 7th International Congress virtually via Zoom were Mykhaylo Chomyk, Bohdan Kykta and Diana Howansky Reilly.

Messrs. Kosciolok, Khomyk and Chomyk were elected to SFULO's new presidium, along with the following representatives from SFULO's national member associations: Bohdan Duda, Roman Kolos and Andriy Rotko from the Canadian Lemko Association; Slavko Burda from the Cultural and Educational Society Kobzar in Croatia; Nataliya Hladyk, Mykhailo Markovych and Hryhoriy Trokhanovsky from the Union of Lemkos in Poland; Velimir Papalaczko and Bohdan Vyslavsky from the Union of Ruthenians-Ukrainians of Serbia; Viktor Bandurchyn and Bohdan

Pavlo from the Union of Ruthenians-Ukrainians of the Slovak Republic; and Oksana Danilov, Sofiya Fedyna, Oleksandr Vengrynovych, Volodymyr Shurkalo and Bohdan Syvanych from the All-Ukrainian Society Lemkivshchyna in Ukraine.

Mr. Kosciolok noted the difference between the history of his Lemko family in the United States, who were forcibly removed from the Lemko region during Operation Vistula (Akcja Wisła) in 1947, and the history of Lemkos in Serbia, who first left the Lemko region around 1751 as part of the Austrian Empire's agreement to resettle 200 Ruthenian Greek-Catholic families to Ruski Krstur.

On January 17, 1751, Franz Joseph de Redl, advisor to Empress Maria Theresa and administrator of the Bačka District, signed an agreement regarding the so-called "Bačka Ruthenians" in order to colonize the Austrian Empire's arable land.

"They were known by the name Ruthenian, Rusnak, or some other variant," Mr. Kosciolok said about Lemkos in Serbia. "And these names are used more than 250 years later by our people in Serbia. They

have many different cultural, educational and artistic organizations. [They] hold on to their church, have representatives in the government sphere and are proud of their heritage. Although most of them continue to call themselves Ruthenians, there are some who use the terms Ukrainian and Ruthenian interchangeably. They have societies named after the great Taras Shevchenko, their priests study in Ukrainian seminaries and there is Ukrainian patriotism and love."

During the SFULO 7th International Congress, Mr. Howansky also had the unique experience of meeting relatives for the first time who descended from the Bačka Ruthenians who emigrated from the Lemko region. He was introduced to Stefan Hovanjski and his daughter, Jelena, who Mr. Howansky was able to identify as a fifth cousin from mutual great-great-great-great grandparents in the Lemko village of Klimkówka.

Ms. Hovanjski's branch of the family migrated to the banks of the Danube River in current-day Serbia in the late 1800s, while Mr. Howansky's side of the family

was forced to leave Lemkivshchyna during Operation Vistula and eventually immigrated to the United States in the 1960s.

The SFULO 7th International Congress allowed delegates to hear about the issues and concerns of Lemkos from other countries, particularly Serbia, stated OOL member Andriy Khomyk. He expressed appreciation that the hosts of the Congress took the SFULO delegates to visit a cultural center in Ruski Krstur, to a publishing house, a monument of Taras Shevchenko in Novi Sad, and to a concert of Ruthenian songs from antiquity in Durdevo. Mr. Khomyk noted that these visits helped delegates better understand who Ruthenians are in Serbia.

"We knew little about the peculiar trials that affected their fate – their ways of cohabitating in multinational Serbia and their special methods of dealing with assimilation," Mr. Khomyk said. "But Ruthenians in Serbia are true Ukrainian patriots. The fact that the ancestors of those who left our homeland continue to call themselves Ruthenians does not change their 'Ukrainian-ness.'"