

Leadership Conference focuses on Ukrainian Americans' expanding horizons

by Yaro Bihun

Special to *The Ukrainian Weekly*

WASHINGTON — About 200 Ukrainian American community activists from across the United States took time over the Columbus Day weekend, October 10-12, for some organizational introspection and planning for future development.

They participated in The Washington Group's annual Leadership Conference, which this year focused on the community's needs. Its theme, "We Can do Better: Expanding Horizons for Ukrainian Americans," was advanced in five panel discussions on how Ukrainian American and other ethnic groups organize their efforts, the best ways of influencing the U.S. government and society, working and building connections with Ukraine, and winning and executing government grants.

They also heard two main speakers analyze developments in Ukraine: Ukraine's Ambassador to the United States Yuri Shcherbak and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia at the National Security Council William Courtney.

During the conference's opening reception on Friday evening at the Ukrainian Embassy, Ambassador Shcherbak read a statement from Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Hennadii Udovenko, who underscored the world's growing interest in Ukraine and the importance for Ukraine to integrate itself into "existing economic, political and security structures that have already proven their effectiveness."

TWG's "Friend of Ukraine" award was presented during the banquet on Saturday evening to two prominent New York cultural figures: Lidia Krushelnytsky, director of the Ukrainian Stage Ensemble, and Roma Pryma-Bohachevsky, choreographer/artistic director of the Syzokryli dance ensemble, for "their outstanding contribution to the cause of Ukraine and the Ukrainian American community."

The working conference opened on Saturday morning with a keynote address by Ambassador Shcherbak, who discussed Ukraine's development and achievements over the past several years.

Ukraine's future in the 21st century, Dr. Shcherbak said, will be determined by its relations with the United States, with Russia and with NATO. "We hope that the United States will not agree in the future with the creation of new spheres of influence in the region," he said.

The role of the Ukrainian American community "is highly appraised in Kyiv," he said. "There is no doubt that attaining a strategic partnership in such a short period of time would have been impossible without the support of the Ukrainian diaspora in the U.S."

Dr. Shcherbak said President Kuchma would lead a large Ukrainian delegation to the launch of Ukraine's first cosmonaut aboard the U.S. space shuttle on November 19 at Cape Canaveral, Fla., and called on Ukrainian Americans to participate in that historic event.

Asked about the continued predominance of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, Ambassador Shcherbak said that one must understand the "very difficult heritage from 300 years of Russian domination." The Moscow Patriarchate has 6,000 parishes in Ukraine, and the government cannot discount possible political consequences of any action it might take in the area of religious relations.

The question of the new law on religions in Russia came up following Ambassador Courtney's address a few hours later during lunch. Mr. Courtney said Washington was not sure whether the recent seizure by Russian authorities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church — Kyiv Patriarchate in Noginsk was a result of the new law, and has sought clarification from Moscow.

The new law signed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin is no better than the law he vetoed earlier, Ambassador Courtney said, suggesting that the state may be eroding its moral authority "by passing laws that might send signals throughout society that religious discrimination can be practiced."

Mr. Courtney stressed the need for staying the course of economic reform in Ukraine and not using the coming parliamentary elections as an excuse for slowing the reform process.

The Ukrainian American community can help, he said. "Your moral support and experience in a democratic market economy can help Ukrainians define their own vision of a better future, with more freedom and more prosperity. Please stay engaged, and help Ukrainians stay the course for reform."

An ethnic perspective

The conference's first panel familiarized the participants with how some ethnic groups work in the United States.

Ewa Matuszewski, a member of the board of directors



Natalie Sluzar

Members of the panel that discussed "How are Ukrainian American Organizations Doing?" (from left): Roma Hayda, Bohdan Vitvitsky, Myron Kuropas, Bohdan Watral and the Rev. Stefan Zencuch.

of the Polish American Congress, said Polish Americans think that Ukrainian Americans are better organized than they are. The PAC's work now is centered on NATO expansion and getting the Senate to agree to it, and it is enlisting the cooperation of other Central European ethnic groups in this effort.

To be effective, however, she added, "Don't forget about the American agenda. You have to work from within to change" and to have influence in the state capitals and in Washington.

Unlike East European ethnic groups, Italian Americans have no major foreign policy problems to pursue, according to Fred Rotondaro, executive director of the Italian American Foundation. His organization was founded in 1975 primarily to counter the negative depiction of Italian Americans in the media. The problem is still there, but it's no longer a major theme, he said.

Since Italian Americans "have arrived" and are in the mainstream of American life and politics, Mr. Rotondaro said, his organization looks for themes that have a positive impact on the larger community and activities that will serve to retain the Italian heritage for their children. While Italian Americans do not speak with one voice, he said, they get back together for the greater good.

While important, fluency in the ethnic language should not be a prerequisite to working for the good of

one's ethnic community or the country of one's origin, said Ms. Matuszewski. What one feels is much more important, she said. Mr. Rotondaro pointed out that while the majority of Italian Americans say they speak Italian and want their children to know it too, most of the board members of the foundation do not.

As for their ethnic press, both the Polish and Italian American press are on the decline. But, as Mr. Rotondaro pointed out, it's an American problem in general — people are not reading as much as they once did.

A look inward

The second panel looked at Ukrainian American organizations and institutions.

As Roma Hayda of the Ukrainian Catholic Laity Council pointed out, in order to preserve itself in the past the Ukrainian American community had taken the isolationist approach, which resulted in a siege mentality in the face of changing times. "Today we have to evaluate this approach and rethink our short-term and long-term objectives," she said.

"It is time to recognize that we are not an immigrant community any more ... we have integrated into the surrounding civic, economic and cultural environment. But

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TWG Vice-President Marta Zielyk (center) announces the recipients of the 1997 "Friend of Ukraine" award, choreographer Roma Pryma-Bohachevsky (right) and theater director Lidia Krushelnytsky.

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we have not yet resolved the means and structures that will continue the link with our Ukrainian heritage. To make this possible, we have to understand that each institution ... has to function in accordance with its objectives," she explained.

While optimistic about the Ukrainian Catholic Church's future, Ms. Hayda presented some sobering statistics, which show Church membership dropping from 320,000 members in 1960 to 123,000 in 1997.

The figures were compiled by Myron B. Kuropas, author and expert on the Ukrainian American experience in the United States and a longtime leader in the Ukrainian National Association, another panel participant. His analysis of the UNA was sobering as well.

Of the four original Ukrainian fraternal organizations, only the UNA seems viable, and it is downsizing, he said. It shut its Washington office, stopped the Svoboda index project, cut cultural courses, suspended paying dividends and sold its headquarters building in Jersey City, N.J. Its newspapers, Svoboda and The Ukrainian Weekly, are losing circulation.

"We have eaten our young," Dr. Kuropas said, admitting that the UNA failed to engage in strategic planning, "managed by denial" and was unable to restructure in time. Hopefully, he added, the problem will bottom out within the next few years.

The most upbeat presentation was by Bohdan Watral, president and CEO of the Selfreliance Ukrainian Federal Credit Union in Chicago. The Ukrainian credit unions in the United States are in their "golden age," he said. Their assets have grown to \$1.1 billion; membership increased to 61,000; and their net income is at \$15 million.

Many credit unions, like the one he heads in Chicago, have turned into seven-days-a-week, full-service financial institutions, with everything from savings accounts and VISA cards to ATM machines. But in order to remain successful, he stressed, they have to continuously "scan the horizon" and change.

Bohdan Vitvitsky, vice-president of the Ukrainian American Professionals and Businesspersons Association of New York and New Jersey, pointed out that, while "our parents were involuntary ethnics — they couldn't be anything else — we have a choice: we can assimilate; we are voluntary ethnics."

"So why continue? he asked." "We as a community have not yet begun to address that." The next Leadership Conference, he said, should have as its theme "Will There be a Ukrainian American community by 2020, and Does It Matter?"

On the positive side, Dr. Vitvitsky added that the Ukrainian American community probably will survive somehow even without a remedy. And both he and Dr. Kuropas said they believe that the Church and fraternal organizations were critical to this survival.

Introducing the third panel, which dealt with exercising influence within American society, Orest Deychakiwsky, staff associate of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, noted that the situation has changed in recent years with respect to the community's relations with the government.

"Generally speaking, U.S. government policies toward Ukraine are now favorable. There's no question about it. There's been a tremendous evolution in the last three-four-five years," he said. But support for Ukraine cannot be taken for granted, he added, especially now, when Ukraine is not completing its promised economic reforms. "And this is causing



Natalie Sluzar

Ambassador William Courtney, special assistant to the president and senior director for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasian Affairs at the National Security Council, addresses the Leadership Conference luncheon.

some frustration even among some traditional supporters of Ukraine," he added.

Laryssa Lapychak Chopivsky, director of the TWG Cultural Fund, which was established three years ago to promote Ukrainian culture in Washington, said that a good way to promote Ukrainian culture in a community is by getting the local arts organizations involved. One does that by becoming a member of these groups, supporting them financially, and helping them fill the seats when they sponsor Ukrainian artists, she said.

Andrew Fedynsky, a Cleveland-based government and business consultant, noted that over the past half-century Ukrainian Americans have been "incredibly successful," if one measures success by achieving objectives. He said the most important among these objectives was independence for Ukraine, in which the diaspora played its important role.

As the director of the Ukrainian Museum-Archives in Cleveland, Mr. Fedynsky described how, through networking and cooperation with other local non-Ukrainian institutions, the Museum-Archives developed. "We're using the assets of the state, the city, the foundations to promote Ukrainian culture, but we're doing it as Americans," he said.

Michael Sawkiw, director of the Ukrainian National Information Service in Washington, pointed out that the dissemination of information, which is what UNIS does, is one way of exercising influence on Congress or the government. Another, very important method is through e-mails, faxes, phone calls and letters — preferably personal and handwritten — from constituents. Members of Congress should be reminded that they have Ukrainian Americans constituents who take positions on issues, Mr. Sawkiw said, and called on conference participants to get their representatives to join the newly formed Congressional Ukrainian Caucus.

Robert McConnell of the law firm Gibson, Dunn and Crutcher cited the importance of grass-roots action by using the example of what many consider the almighty pro-Israel lobbying group AIPAC. When AIPAC lost the vote in Congress on the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia in 1981, its own analysis found that much of the balance of power in the Congress had shifted to the South and West, where they traditionally had not exercised grass-roots influence, Mr.

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McConnell said. AIPAC concentrated on organizing the grass-roots in those districts and bounced back to defeat another Saudi arms sale four years later.

"My point: grass-roots are critical to influence in today's political process," Mr. McConnell said. "And grass-roots is more than mailing lists."

"Democracy is not a spectator sport. It is a hands-on sport. And, if you intend to make a difference, you have to be committed to major effort and smart enough to evolve with the changes of Washington's power structure," Mr. McConnell said.

Andrew Bihun, the senior commercial officer at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, opened the fourth panel by calling on Ukrainian Americans and Ukrainian Canadians to play a more active role in what he called "private sector, corporate diplomacy" to increase investments in Ukraine, which will be very important in the next stage of Ukraine's development. Increased activity in Ukraine by large, medium and small U.S. and Canadian firms in Ukraine will not only increase the needed capital investment in Ukraine, but it will also help the government's "Clean Hands" campaign by spreading Western ethical business behavior practices.

Peace Corps Ukraine Country Director Jaroslav Dutkewych noted that the Peace Corps presence of 190 volunteers in Ukraine is the largest in Europe and Asia and two short of being the largest in the world. The program started in 1992 with 60 business volunteers. Now it includes programs in English-language teaching and ecology.

These volunteers work in all of Ukraine's large cities, in all oblasts. The volunteers come not only to teach, he said, but to get involved in the community.

Marta Zielyk, who interprets for President Bill Clinton and other senior U.S. officials in their trips to or dealings with Ukraine, described how she and other Ukrainian Americans found themselves in a unique position when a whole new world of opportunities opened up on the eve of Ukraine's independence, and related some personal stories and observations from her life as America's top Ukrainian-language interpreter.

Andrij Masiuk, who has been with the International Management Institute in Ukraine since 1989 and its director general from 1992 to 1997, said that one of the difficult things to pass on to the students there was the concept of authority of law, as opposed to the authority of position or affiliation to which they were accustomed.

And because of the prevalence of the law of position, which leads to corruption, clans, mafia-type activities and a lack of trust outside of family and friends, 55 percent of Ukraine's economy is thought by officials to be "shadow" (unreported), 25 percent is barter and only 20 percent is reported. In such an environment, Mr. Masiuk said, "the usefulness of laws is not fully understood."

The last panel, organized by the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, featured its president, Nadia Komarnycky McConnell; financial and grants administrator John Kun and Deputy Project Director Joyce Warner.

The panel described how the foundation won and is implementing a three-year, \$6.9 million U.S. Agency for International Development grant for establishing 18 U.S.-Ukraine community partnerships for the purpose of training and education.

Following Sunday brunch, conference participants heard a performance by America's leading mandolinist and fiddler Peter Ostroushko and guitarist Dean Magraw, playing songs from their award-



Natalie Sluzar

Ambassador Yuri Shcherbak shows off the plaque indicating he has been named an honorary member of The Washington Group as TWG President George Masiuk looks on.

winning recordings, as well as a few by Mr. Ostroushko with Ukrainian themes.

The Washington Group is the largest association of Ukrainian American professionals in the United States. This year's conference was co-sponsored by the Embassy of Ukraine, the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation and the Ukrainian Medical Association of North America, with gener-

ous financial support from the Heritage Foundation of the Chicago-based 1st Federal Savings Bank and seven Ukrainian credit union organizations: of New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Rochester, Chicago, the Ukrainian Orthodox Federal Credit Union of New York/Sound Bound Brook and the Ukrainian National Credit Union Association.

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