

Contemporary Carpatho-Rusyn Music in Ethnic and Linguistic Revitalization Movement

Súčasná hudba Rusínov vo vzťahu k procesu etnickej a jazykovej
revitalizácie

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Abstract

Drawing on the concepts of linguistic and musical anthropology, this article explores the role of contemporary music production in the ethnolinguistic revitalization of the Carpatho-Rusyn minority in Slovakia. The study aims to clarify and analyse how modern musical genres and emerging hybrid genres contribute to the strengthening of the Carpatho-Rusyn language and ethnic identity in the context of ongoing language shift and assimilation. The research employs a qualitative methodology, combining ethnographic fieldwork in northeastern Slovakia with in-depth interviews of musicians, cultural organizers, and members of the Carpatho-Rusyn community, as well as textual and audiovisual analysis of music-related content. The findings suggest that modern musical forms play a significant role in shaping the linguistic and cultural-musical world of Carpatho-Rusyns. Artists operating in this sphere often intentionally use the Carpatho-Rusyn language as a marker of ethnic belonging, creative authorship, and resistance to dominant cultural norms. Music production targeting younger audiences situates the language within socially attractive, contemporary frameworks, thereby enhancing its symbolic and communicative prestige and legitimizing its use beyond traditional domains. Ultimately, music emerges not only as a cultural symbol, but as an active agent in processes of identity negotiation and ethnolinguistic revitalization. It becomes a dynamic space where belonging is performed, and where tradition and innovation coexist through hybrid expression.

Keywords

identity, concept of belonging, contemporary music, ethno-linguistic revitalization, Carpatho-Rusyns, Slovakia

Klíčové slová

identita, koncept súdržnosti, súčasná hudba, etno-jazyková revitalizácia, Rusíni, Slovensko

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Introduction

What happens when a language begins to disappear – not with a dramatic ban or forced erasure, but quietly, through everyday choices, generational gaps, and shifts in social prestige? What if such a process is the result of external intervention or a deeply traumatic experience? What happens to the culture, the music, and the memory carried within it?

Across the world, numerous minority and regional languages are undergoing processes of language shift and erosion, often at the expense of more dominant languages. In such contexts, linguistic revitalization becomes not only a technical or educational task but a profoundly cultural and emotional one. As Šatava (2009) points out, efforts to preserve and revitalize endangered languages are tightly linked to the preservation of cultural identity and memory. Fishman (1991), in his foundational work on reversing language shift (RLS), emphasizes that successful revitalization efforts must address intergenerational transmission and must integrate the minority language into the everyday lives of its speakers across multiple domains. In recent decades, one such revitalization domain has been music. However, music is not only a cultural representation but a powerful tool for language maintenance, presenting endangered languages in a modern and socially relevant format. Music does not simply reflect language – it carries it, performs it, and gives it life (Grant, 2014).

Within this framework, music plays a critical role in shaping, expressing, and negotiating identity. As Yuval-Davis (2011) and Anthias (2018) argue, identity is not a passive fixed symbol, but a dynamic, performative process shaped by emotional connection, belonging, and social location. According to Šatava (2013), music occupies multiple symbolic levels within ethnic cultures: from anthems that instill collective memory, through local songs that articulate regional identity, to musicians who become bearers of collective symbols. For marginalized or minoritized communities, music can affirm a sense of belonging that extends beyond language into the realm of cultural resilience.

The Carpatho-Rusyn minority in Slovakia presents a compelling case of such intertwined processes of language and cultural revitalization. Despite official recognition and granted minority rights, the Carpatho-Rusyn language remains vulnerable, with relatively low intergenerational transmission and declining fluency, especially among the younger generation (Magocsi, 2004; Tomková, 2022). Often burdened by a history of contested identity and limited institutional support, the language struggles with visibility, prestige, and everyday use.

Yet, recent developments in Carpatho-Rusyn music production suggest a growing interest in exploring new forms of expression that link ethnic identity and linguistic activism with contemporary cultural production. While traditional music continues to be central in public representations of Carpatho-Rusyn culture, a younger generation of musicians is experimenting with genre hybridity and incorporating the Carpatho-Rusyn language in new ways. These artists now consciously position their musical practice within a broader discourse of Carpatho-Rusyn identity and resistance to cultural assimilation.

This article examines how such music production contributes to the ethnolinguistic revitalization of the Carpatho-Rusyn community in Slovakia. Drawing on fieldwork, interviews, and media analysis, it explores how music functions not only as a symbolic declaration of belonging but also as an active, performative agent in negotiating identity and language use. The point is to clarify whether the production of contemporary music, personal and online communication with the audience, and the expression of one's own (ethnic) identity through art, all consciously using the Carpatho-Rusyn language, reach beyond the limits of a particular musician's influence in the interest of ethnic and linguistic revitalization.

Music as Part of an Identity

Music can be understood differently in identity concepts. Within constructivist conceptions, music is fundamentally an important element in the shaping of identity as such. As Turino states (2008), music plays a role in self-identification and strengthens both individual and collective identity. In most of these cases, it is about collective self-understanding, which is represented by various characteristics, principles, and customs, including music. Thus, the cultural patterns determine what is considered music and its appropriateness for a given social context. This connection, therefore, implies that ethnic identity also influences individual musical preferences.

According to Šatava (2013), music and its products are manifested as a cultural symbol of ethnic identity on several levels. The first level is the irreplaceable role and function of the national anthem, both for state entities and for most small ethnic groups. The anthem

provides the clearest expression of national identity. Its main purpose is to promote a specific form of nationalism and subconsciously instill a sense of national identity. National anthems participate in the connection between official and unofficial culture on the one hand and the real and imaginary network of power and identity on the other. The second level is represented by specific songs and musical compositions, in addition to the anthem. These can be of older or newer production, usually regardless of genre. Musical folklore has a prominent position in this case. Depending on the social and geographical context, it can strengthen not only the consciousness of national, but also regional identity with its text and melody. In connection with folklore, there are often also specific musical instruments that have acquired a distinctive character of ethnic symbols. National musical symbols can also be original musical works, such as symphonies or compositions, which resonated so much in society at the time of their creation that they became popularized and hymn songs (Šatava, 2013). The third level is, in a metaphorical sense, personalities – singers and musicians. They are the bearers of the above-mentioned forms of ethnic musical symbolism. They are the ones who give texts and melodies a real form. The result of their activities, public appearances, and social status may be the very elevation of their person to the level of an ethnic symbol, which is simultaneously used in other forms, e.g., artistic and literary (Šatava, 2013).

From the perspective of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011), music emerges as both an affective and performative medium through which individuals articulate, affirm, or contest their place in society. Musical preferences and practice could operate as mechanisms of situating oneself within complex maps of belonging, where identity is not anchored in fixed categories but enacted through specific performances – such as the choice of genre, its appropriation, or the act of musical creation itself. For people living in transcultural settings or in an ethnically minority community, especially for the young generation, music becomes a “site of identity” where local, global, and ethnic meanings are hybridized, giving rise to new, fluid modalities of belonging.

In the context of the musical culture of ethnic minorities, saturation with dominant genres can often act as a catalyst for seeking alternative musical productions. This tendency does not merely reflect a shift in taste but indicates a deeper process of cultural transformation, one that can be conceptualized as a thematizable musical evolution. Rather than a linear progression, this evolution unfolds through the continuous reconfiguration of symbolic meanings within shifting social contexts. In this process, music functions not only as an aesthetic object and passive cultural symbol, but as a dynamic space in which new forms of belonging and identity are negotiated.

Ethno-linguistic Revitalization

There are languages, which inevitably heading for extinction despite the wishes of the greatest optimists, but there are also cases where a language can be saved and kept “alive”. Many ethnic groups around the world support various activities just to prevent such a scenario. Over the past decades, phrases such as language revival, language revitalization, or reversing language shift (RLS) have been added to dictionaries (Fishman, 1991; Šatava, 2009). These concepts are rooted in the idea that language is not only a medium of communication but also a key carrier of cultural memory and group identity. More recent approaches also emphasize community agency, symbolic value, and the emotional at-

tachment that speakers have to their heritage language, rather than purely functional use. RLS aims to return declining languages back to everyday use and to strengthen their position among targeted users. It covers various methods and approaches, including formal and informal teaching & learning, usage in media, community-based efforts, or rather unconventional methods, like learning through and with music (Echeverria, Sparling, 2024).

Language revitalization is a long-term process requiring initiative across the entire social hierarchy. Institutional support in the form of supportive laws and favorable minority policies is a significantly positive factor. However, the initial stimulus must come from the actors themselves, that is, from within the language group. Otherwise, the activities have little chance of success (Šatava, 2009). Despite frequent skepticism, successful revitalization is possible and feasible. A textbook example is Hebrew, which has so far been the only language that has reached the level of a state language (Wiltshire, Bird, Hardwick, 2022). Another well-known example is the Maori in New Zealand, which started an educational program in the 1980s and continues it to this day (Lucas, 2021). In Europe, many successful revitalization processes are worth mentioning, such as the Sami language in Scandinavia (Šatava, 2009).

The Aspect of Music in Ethno-linguistic Revitalization

Generally known, culturally based reviving activities are strongly preferred by small ethnic groups, due to the frequent absence or minimal level of political life. The key is balancing glorification of local pride with full-fledged works that impact audiences beyond the region while remaining unmistakably ethnic (Šatava, 2013).

Music in ethno-linguistic revitalization activities can play the role of a mediator. Through songs, language is presented in both traditional and contemporary forms. With the primary intention of reaching younger generations, music can also present history in a modern, often unconventional way (Šatava, 2013; Lucas, 2021). Such steps are often positively received by the older generation. Another way of using music is by enriching music lessons with local traditional music. This is not new in ethno-revitalization activities around the world. The form of teaching language and ways in which the musical genres are taught vary depending on the cultural context. In many cases, such activities are met with a positive response and encourage the creation of new songs in a particular endangered language, not just the learning of older songs (Grant, 2014).

Musical hybridization does not imply the abandonment of traditional forms (Golemo, 2020). On the contrary, within the processes of cultural reflexivity and the search for belonging, traditional and new forms of music can coexist and remain vital simultaneously. This coexistence is not a static balance but a dynamic field in which tradition is continually reinterpreted and redefined in response to current cultural, aesthetic, and social stimuli. Traditional music can thus acquire new meanings through reinterpretation or performative placement in novel contexts. Music becomes a space where continuity and change are negotiated, allowing individuals to articulate their belonging to the past without sacrificing their contemporary subjectivity. This dialogue between the "old" and the "new" enables the young generation to shape their identities not only through rejection or acceptance, but through creative recombination and reinterpretation of cultural symbols (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

So why does raising awareness about the threat of language and music matter? In the name of humanity, diversity, culture, or society? First, the protection of language and music as living traditions is not just an academic prerequisite but a cultural and political necessity. The disappearance of these aspects of culture probably also represents the loss of evidence of human intellect and creativity. Losing the diversity of cultural practices and musical genres leads to a loss of chances that new combinations and permutations will enable cultures to successfully adapt to changing conditions in the future (Grant, 2014). Also, maintaining the musical practices of minority ethnic groups can strengthen their sense of identity for future generations. Finally, vibrant and viable music production can strengthen social cohesion by providing a field for negotiation of identity and belonging to the community (Anthias, 2018).

Methods Along the Way

The core ethnographic fieldwork was carried out between 2021 and 2022, originally with the aim of collecting empirical material for my master's thesis (Tomková, 2022). Field research consisted of several repeated stays in northeastern Slovakia, particularly in Svidník and the surrounding area, each lasting between two to four weeks. These fieldworks focused on participant observation in local cultural events to gain direct access to the regional contemporary Carpatho-Rusyn music scene. The main factors in selecting respondents were their conscious relationship to the Carpatho-Rusyn ethnic group and their proficiency in the Carpatho-Rusyn dialect or language. Age, gender, or education level were not my primary selection criteria, and I primarily used the snowball sampling method to establish a network of contacts among musicians and audience members.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected respondents, focusing on their understanding and articulation of Carpatho-Rusyn identity, the role of language in their personal and public lives, and the broader significance they attach to musical production. In cases where face-to-face interviews were not possible, often due to pandemic-related restrictions or scheduling conflicts, respondents were asked to complete a written questionnaire (Tomková, 2022). This questionnaire mirrored the interview structure, ensuring continuity in the gained material.

However, the focus of this article is not the audience, but the musicians who produce songs in the Rusyn language. One of the goals of my thesis research was to describe and show examples of musicians across musical genres. The hypothesis that people would most often refer to folk music was confirmed during the research. Most of the previous research was focused more on Carpatho-Rusyn traditional music, too (Mušinka, 2005). So, I began to ask myself and them – is there anything or anyone else? Thus, my selection of musicians for this article was guided by an interest in those artists who emphasize original songwriting over the reproduction of traditional and folk music, while still maintaining a connection to Carpatho-Rusyn musical heritage. At the same time, I wondered why they are doing it. Is it based on their need for artistic expression, or was it just an attempt to "fill a gap in the market" and please the audience? Usually, these artists do not reject fusion or genre hybridity, but their work is often situated within a framework of self-authored expression that engages with elements of Carpatho-Rusyn tradition reflexively and creatively. Their music becomes a medium through which they navigate questions of cultural continuity and self-identification. I focused on musicians currently active in Slovakia whom I could observe and contact during fieldwork.

In the spring of 2025, I also carried out a focused digital ethnography. This included analysis of online content published by selected performers as well as interviews they have given on various web portals. This analytical extension aimed to observe how Carpatho-Rusyn identity is constructed and performed not only through musical output but also through online self-presentation and mediated interaction with audiences.

Particular attention was paid to the ways in which artists frame their relationship to the Carpatho-Rusyn language and heritage, as well as how they address the young generation of listeners. Their primary audience is young adults, often extending into the middle generation. These themes are crucial for understanding how belonging is not only claimed but also narrated and negotiated across generational, linguistic, and technological boundaries. As Anthias (2018) and Yuval-Davis (2011) argue, belonging is not a static category but a dynamic process, which includes emotional attachment, political negotiation, and cultural performance. Thus, music serves as both a site of belonging and a tool of its performative articulation, enabling artists to position themselves within multiple overlapping discourses of identity, community, and politics.

Realized research combines ethnographic immersion with media analysis, grounded in the assumption that identity – particularly in ethnic and language minority contexts – is not merely inherited but actively (re)constructed through practices such as music-making. These practices are situated, relational, and reflexive, shaped by the everyday experiences of navigating both local cultural frameworks and wider societal narratives. In this way, the case of contemporary Carpatho-Rusyn music becomes a valuable lens through which to explore broader questions of ethnic identity, cultural transmission, and the politics of recognition in post-socialist Central Europe.

Carpatho-Rusyn Language and Its Status

The Carpatho-Rusyn language, or shortly Rusyn, and its dialects belong to the Indo-European language family, specifically to the branch of East Slavic languages. Written form is in Cyrillic, but nowadays it is also possible to read texts transcribed into Latin. According to the international standard ISO 639-3, it has the code RUE. It is estimated to be spoken by 623,500 speakers, but according to official census results, the total number of speakers is only about 76,000. The Carpatho-Rusyn language is protected by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, and Romania (Magocsi, 2004). In Slovakia, based on the last census, 38,679 inhabitants consider it their mother tongue (Tomková, 2022).

One of the key international documents aimed at supporting linguistic diversity is the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. The Charter offers member states a set of mechanisms for the protection and development of historical, regional, or minority languages (Šatava, 2009). However, while the Charter presents a strong normative framework, its implementation depends on political will and institutional capacity, which can vary significantly across countries. In practice, support for Carpatho-Rusyns remains inconsistent, and legal recognition often fails to translate into structural support for education, media, or cultural production in the language. These tensions underscore the gap between formal minority rights and lived linguistic realities.

The Carpatho-Rusyn language is classified as Vulnerable by the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley, 2010). This categorization reflects the decreasing number of active speakers and the complex sociopolitical position of the language, often contested between linguistic recognition and national frameworks. The issue is further complicated by historical and political disputes regarding the codification and status of the Carpatho-Rusyn language, particularly in relation to Slovak, Ukrainian, and other Slavic languages (Magocsi, 2004). As a result, the language still suffers from a lack of prestige, burdened with stereotypes, feelings of shame, or even ostracization. These dynamics reveal how language becomes not just a tool of communication but a symbolic marker of identity, heavily influenced by power relations and dominant cultural narratives.

The Case of Carpatho-Rusyn Language: Revitalization or Preservation?

Most attempts to codify the literal Carpatho-Rusyn language during the national revivals in the past were unsuccessful. After the first wave of revival in the 19th century, this issue remained unresolved. During the second wave, at the time of interwar Czechoslovakia and after the Second World War, the "jazyčie"¹ was codified to some extent, but it did not become widespread. During the second half of the 20th century, Carpatho-Rusyn was pushed out of the public sphere in exchange for the socially and politically preferred Ukrainian. In this case, it was a targeted assimilation process as part of the Communist government's official nationality policy. The assimilation of the Rusyns was based on two fundamental pillars: the Ukrainization, which was intended to resolve the language issue administratively, and de-catholicization, i.e., the ban of the activities of the Greek Catholic Church and the "voluntary return" to Orthodoxy (Magocsi, 2015).

At the International Congress of the Ruthenian Language in 1992, it was decided that writing norms would be created for the individual states with a Carpatho-Rusyn minority, and only at the next stage would a unified linguistic norm be created for all Rusyns, ergo koine². In this case, direct reference is made to the Romansh language model. Thus, the act of official codification of the Carpatho-Rusyn language on 27 January 1995 in Bratislava, at the time of the third wave of the Carpatho-Rusyn national awakening, was relatively the most successful progress so far. The language was established based on the dialect of "Labyrčšyna", the dialect from the territory between the Cirocha and Vírava rivers. Linguistically, it is a transitional area between the eastern and western groups of dialects. The codifiers were the university professors Juraj Paňko and Vasil Jabur (Magocsi, 2004). However, many ordinary people have not identified with the codified form of the language to this day and continue to use its dialectal form in their home environment or have shifted to the Slovak language (Král'ová, 2021).

So, the question is whether current movements and activities of Carpatho-Rusyn activists are acts of preservation or attempts to reverse language shift. Since the codification, the Carpatho-Rusyn language has been implemented into the majority of the main functional

¹ A generally used mixture of Church Slavonic, Russian and local Rusyn dialect.

² *Koine* refers to a linguistic variant that serves as a standard language between speakers of close dialects in larger area and that gradually blurs dialectal differences.

domains of language use (Plišková, 2007). Though Carpatho-Rusyn activist and scholars are celebrating 30 years since the act of codification, as mentioned above, and the Round Table of Rusyn in Slovakia declared 2025 to be “Year of the Rusyn Language”³, there is an undeniable decline of native Carpatho-Rusyn speakers. Certainly, there are more factors behind this development than just the low social prestige of the language. Jan Lipinsky, the president of the *Association of Rusyn Intellectuals*⁴, commented for Radio Prague International (Dragu, 2008) as follows:

We are trying to help people cultivate their Rusyn identity via a newspaper but discovered that many young people do not know how to use Cyrillic letters, which are used in our written language, or many speak Rusyn but can't write or read it. Fortunately, the University in Prešov has courses of the Rusyn language and culture.

Also, the census results over the past 35 years also speak for themselves.

Tab. 1
Overview of the census results after 1989.

	RUSYN NATIONALITY	RUSYN NATIVE LANGUAGE
1991*	17 197	49 099
2001	24 201	54 907
2011	33 482	55 469
2021**	63 556 (23 746+39 810)	38 679

* Census at the time of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic

** This year there was an option to declare major and minor nationality

As my ongoing research also shows, many young Carpatho-Rusyns indeed do not know the Cyrillic alphabet. Even if they apply to study Carpatho-Rusyn studies at the University of Prešov, they have to learn the Cyrillic script as a new writing system for them. At the same time, several participants reflected that, as a young generation of Carpatho-Rusyns in the 1990s at the time of codification, they felt ignored by scholars and codifiers. This generation transitioned smoothly from the use of Cyrillic to the transcribed form of Latin. Due to the decision to take inspiration from the Romansh language model in the codification process, the codifiers decided to use Cyrillic script also because the related Pannonian Ruthenian language in Serbia, which was already codified, was also using Cyrillic (Magocsi 2004, 2015).

Contemporary Carpatho-Rusyn Musical Artists in Slovakia

Among the better-known representatives of Carpatho-Rusyn contemporary music are the performers who started as bands playing at weddings or at dance parties in the coun-

³ Slovak: Okrúhly Stôl Rusínov Slovenska.

⁴ Slovak: Združenie Inteligencie Rusínov Slovenska.

tryside. They are usually bands with a regional scope, which have in their repertoire folk and modern songs, sometimes also original songs. The repertoire consists of songs in Rusyn, Šariš, Zemplín, and Slovak dialects, mainly playing dance songs and melodies. They differ from groups performing purely traditional music by using non-traditional musical instruments, such as acoustic or electric guitars, drums, or modern synthesizers, and by incorporating elements of pop, rock, or even punk into their performances. Lyrics of their songs and usually also video clips thematically depict contemporary rural lifestyle, local countryside, or occasionally regional historical events. Out of many, I can mention the band *Teraborsuk* (earlier known as *Dynamix*) from Prešov, *Piňazi De?* from Svidník, or *RoL-Landáci3jo* from Čirč, near the Slovak-Polish borders, which gained considerable popularity in the whole East-Slovak region.

However, the bands mentioned above are closer to folk music, so I will not discuss them in detail. Considering the selection criteria mentioned in the methodology section, I have chosen two less well-known performers from my "thesis list" (Tomková, 2022).

A relatively recent addition to the Rusyn music scene is the rap and hip-hop group *Calibri Gang* from the village Radvaň nad Laborcom, near Humenné. They started as a duo, consisting of Ivan Hudák, alias "Hektor," and Kristián Hnát, alias "Trap Boy Donatelliss," back in 2020. It started as a side project for their everyday jobs, when they got positive feedback from their friends during open-mic jamming. A new member and producer, Erik Gašpar, alias "Tchallabatz," joined them in the spring of 2024. Over the past five years, they have been working on solo projects, too. In the beginning, they created their music more or less in Slovak. Production in the Carpatho-Rusyn language started as a sort of experiment. Their first album, "Beefeater Vol. 1," was released in 2021 and included one Rusyn song called "Čerez blok". This song had rather positive feedback from young Carpatho-Rusyns to the surprise of the musicians. The response encouraged them to continue doing so since there was no such production among Slovak Carpatho-Rusyns (Körtvélyesiová, 2025). Their ambition to reach the younger generation and support them in their own work, and in the use of their native language, got stronger.

We chose Ruthenian rap. Because nobody has ever done it anywhere. That's why we decided to kind of put our community on the map a little bit, because we're (Carpatho-)Rusyns.

... Our goal is to raise awareness of our Rusyn culture in the best possible light. We want to make music for people, referring to how we grew up and what we live, not just because it's trendy. (Hektor)

Their work has so far been exclusively rapping, inspired by Slovak and East Slavic hip-hop sub-genres. Since the start of collaboration with "Challa", as they familiarly call the third member, Erik, they have been focusing more on what listeners were asking for – fusion with folklore music. Being aware of the strong status of this genre, they produced new albums merging folk and rap – called "Folkrap" (2024) and "Folkrap 2" (2025). Also, the language of production changed – currently it is predominantly the Carpatho-Rusyn language, and Slovak is used significantly less, primarily in solo projects (Körtvélyesiová, 2025).

I've never heard such a folkrap as we've done now, really, anywhere. But there are definitely common elements because the music is mixed. It's a fusion of people, folk, and rap. (Hektor)

Since we realized that people appreciated the folklore genre combined with rap, I would like to organize the concert with a folklore ensemble. So that we could do something different for the people. To show the fusion of folk music and (our) band together into the genre that we do. (Kristián)

The turning point in their production was two singles, "Husočky" and "KarpaTY a JA", which was a collaboration with Carpatho-Rusyn singer Štefan Štec⁵. Thanks to these singles, they became widely known not only among Carpatho-Rusyn but also to the Slovak listeners. The following aim is to continue in folkrap production and collaborate with folklore ensembles or other musicians from the Carpatho-Rusyn region. (Körtvélyesiová, 2025; Tomková, 2022).

The *Obšar* music group from Svidník and its surroundings is truly unconventional in Carpatho-Rusyn terms. The *Obšar* plays mainly melodic folk and black metal with a strong emphasis on melody, atmosphere, and the use of progressive and multi-genre elements. Lyrics are influenced by the Rusyn countryside, culture, and demonology (Obšar, 2022). It was formed in 2016 after the collaboration of two musicians, a bass guitarist and a guitarist, later a singer, and then a drummer joined. They have released three albums so far, the last of which, "Propastnyk", was released last year, 2024. The Carpatho-Rusyn language plays a key role in their work. As one of the band members expressed in the interview, one of the main goals of their work is to spread awareness of the Carpatho-Rusyn language and ethnicity beyond the borders of Slovakia and to make the language accessible to those Carpatho-Rusyns who are not folklore-oriented (Blutkrieg, 2024; Tomková, 2022).

...because part of the Rusyn identity is primarily folk music, but we have had a positive response, especially from the younger generation of Rusyns. The generation that is already so saturated with folklore from home that we were an interesting cultural enlivening for them. (Guitarist Δ)

However, their work also contains motifs based on folklore. Even though they are not touring, nor are their songs played on known Carpatho-Rusyn radio stations, they have gained more attention over the years. They resonate more in the diasporic than in the domestic Carpatho-Rusyn community (Blutkrieg, 2024; Obšar, 2022).

We have had positive feedback from individuals living in different parts of the world who claim Rusyn nationality or have Rusyn ancestors, and they were very surprised by the existence of our band or Rusyn black metal. (Guitarist Δ)

⁵ Štefan Štec, with roots in Rusyn village Habura, is well known folklore singer in Slovakia. He got popular as winner of folklore show "Zem spieva". Later, he got a nickname a "Rusyn Karel Gott" after famous Czech singer Karel Gott. He is working in Radio and Television of Slovakia as regional reporter and is still singing with music group FAJTA.

They have cooperated on several anthropological and musicological research projects on Carpatho-Rusyn music. They participated in the production of the musical documentary “Alternativa Ruthenica”⁶, which shows that contemporary music is not a completely new element in the Carpatho-Rusyn context. Even though their music is solely the outcome of their music production and lyrics writing, they collaborate with Carpatho-Rusyn scholars on grammatical revision of their lyrics (Blutkrieg 2024).

We were also in contact with Dr. Kráľová, director of the Museum of Rusyn Culture in Prešov, who proofread our texts and promoted us on all Rusyn-themed websites within her reach. (Guitarist [A](#))

However, compared to practices in other countries, like Serbia and Poland, the Slovak Carpatho-Rusyn music scene is at the beginning of a hybridization phase. Although these statements may appear to describe merely aesthetic or stylistic choices, they in fact reveal a deeper process of negotiating identity. By framing their use of the Rusyn language and the blending of folk with contemporary genres as a response to audience expectations, the musicians are positioning themselves within broader debates on what counts as “authentic” Carpatho-Rusyn culture. In this sense, the choice of language or genre is not only an artistic strategy but also a way of making claims to belonging and recognition within the Rusyn community. At the same time, through collaborations with folklore ensembles, individual performers, and cultural activists, these musicians actively insert themselves into existing cultural networks. Their work thus illustrates how contemporary musical production becomes a site where boundaries between tradition and innovation, as well as between individual creativity and collective identity, are constantly renegotiated (Anthias, 2018; Golemo, 2020).

Effect of contemporary Carpatho-Rusyn music on shaping self-identity

The current situation could be called a turning point. The young generation of Carpatho-Rusyns is looking for new symbols and aspects of their own identity, as well as for new role models in their community. Therefore, the question is what and who can be the bridge that will create a sense of belonging between young Carpatho-Rusyns and the existing Carpatho-Rusyn culture? Although musicians do not clearly define the age of their target audience, their typical listeners are adolescents and young adults (Körtvélyesiová 2025). This is an age that is crucial not only for the shaping of individual identity and full integration into society and culture, but in this case also for the continuation of the process of language revitalization (Šatava 2013). While folklore music production maintains a stable position, young people are looking for new role models amongst music artists and, at the same time, creating new ways and processes to express their Carpatho-Rusynness and to fulfill the meaning of the word “Carpatho-Rusyn” in a meaningful and fulfilling way for them.

⁶ Project of Serbian Rusyns, which focuses on contemporary and alternative types of Rusyn arts – music, literature, fine arts. See more <https://kulturanova.org/en/an-overview-of-alternative-ruthenian-art-has-been-published/>.

There is no doubt that music as such is influential and fundamental in the life of Carpatho-Rusyns. For example, no one dared to sit down if the official anthem of the Carpatho-Rusyns was played at a formal event, although the spirit to sing it is noticeably declining with each younger age group. Beyond official occasions, I can confirm from my own experience that community singing continues to be a vital practice, and Carpatho-Rusyns are able and willing to sing for hours at a stretch. This can happen even under adverse circumstances and conditions, regardless of the startled looks of outsiders. On several moments during my research, all it took was pulling out a harmonica, playing a few opening notes to encourage people, who then joined in collective singing one by one. However, these occasions consistently revolved around folk repertoire. Performers with a contemporary background appear rarely in conversations, even outside of my guided interviews, nor were their songs spontaneously sung during such gatherings. This indicates that while contemporary Rusyn music is emerging in digital spaces and through staged performances, attracting selective audiences, it has not yet become internalized as part of everyday participatory singing. My findings from ethnographic observation and from the analysis of internet content at first appear contradictory, but together they highlight the fragile and still uneven process by which new musical forms attempt to enter the lived repertoire of the community, where folklore music is persisting in its dominant position.

The type of musicianship probably couldn't be further apart between the 2 bands mentioned above, and yet they are similar in several points. Obšar is already a well-known band in metal circles, while Calibri Gang is still establishing itself in hip-hop ones. In both cases, however, it is a reflective work and inspiration from their home, the Carpatho-Rusynness, region, motifs based on folklore, and targeting primarily the young generation. These steps can be described as a hybridisation of Rusyn music production, a conscious and reflective work with elements of identity, although the mentioned musicians themselves do not directly place themselves in such an explicitly progressive position (Körtvélyesiová, 2025; Blutkrieg, 2024).

The question of hybrid identity manifests vividly in musical taste – especially in the tension between public critique and lived experience. I've heard many ironic or dismissive remarks about pop-folk groups such as mentioned Teraborsuk, yet at rural festivities, their songs often emerge as the highlight of the night. Such paradoxes are not necessarily contradictions, but rather concrete instances of everyday hybridization, where tradition, irony, collective memory, and present affective needs converge. Oversaturation with certain musical genres provokes a reflexive shift in musical preferences and opens space for new genre explorations and aesthetic experiments. This process shows that exposure and repetition can actively reconfigure taste, making parody or ridicule part of the same mechanism that sustains cultural attachment. Musical taste becomes a performative field through which identities are negotiated, and belonging is enacted (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Turino, 2008). Cultural symbols that are publicly ridiculed simultaneously function as emotionally charged anchors of shared identity.

The question that runs between the lines throughout the article is whether the authors of contemporary Rusyn music are worthy representatives of their culture. Referring to Šatava (2009), do they have the potential to become a representative national symbol? On the one hand, there is dominant folk and pop-folk music, and on the other hand, there is pop, rock, or, in this case, metal music, which is not very well established. Even though

Rusyn pop music is not a new phenomenon and dates to the 2000s (Rundesová, 2008), it remains marginal today. However, I would not presume to say that this is currently the becoming-a-symbol situation. As I mentioned above, they were rarely, if ever, mentioned in interviews and questions about contemporary Rusyn musicians. I learned about the metal band from a fellow anthropologist and not from the respondents. This lack of recognition suggests that without broader circulation or institutional support, even innovative artistic projects cannot easily be transformed into markers of collective identity.

I have repeatedly encountered criticism of Rusyn musicians who produce modern music. The most common arguments were that they either work with "traditional" Rusyn music in an inappropriate way, or that they use the Carpatho-Rusyn language, or "Rusynism", only for their own benefit, so they have no right to call themselves representatives of Rusyn musical culture. This criticism most often comes from conservative circles, where the characteristics that classify music into the correct traditional categories are considered important (Tomková 2022). On the other hand, there are voices from the younger generation of Rusyn activists who call for the creation of a pop culture that would be unique to the Rusyns. As Chris Potter (2008) quotes American-Rusyn activist Maria Silvestri in his article:

...Creating a pop culture is crucial if Rusyns want to ensure that their young ... do not fall victim to the threat of assimilation.

By fostering a more inclusive musical environment that recognizes aesthetic diversity and cultural plurality, it is possible to strengthen young people's sense of belonging. This, in turn, enables the creation of new identity frameworks that manifest themselves through music, language, and traditional and newly emerging cultural symbols. In such an inclusive environment, traditional musical forms coexist with new ones, as Golemo (2020) points out. In such a dynamically forming environment, where cultural elements such as music, language, or visual arts represent an active medium of the process (Yuval-Davis, 2011), labelling music and its producers as "only" a national symbol seems rather passive. Because music functions simultaneously as art, social practice, and symbolic resource, it can operate as a generative force in the construction of collective consciousness, not merely as its reflection. At the same time, musical elements are an almost indispensable building block in the construction of collective, i.e., ethnic or national, consciousness (Šatava, 2013).

Last, but not least, by performing in Rusyn, presenting themselves online in Rusyn, musicians make the language audible in public spaces and re-frame Carpatho-Rusyn identity as cool and nothing to be ashamed of. This transforms what is often stigmatized in private into a shared cultural resource, thereby strengthening collective belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). For an ethnic group such as the Rusyns, which has undergone such a complicated historical development, this progress is a signal to release their fear of possible persecution for publicly expressing their own collective identity.

Conclusion

The Carpatho-Rusyn community in Slovakia is still in the early phase of exploring contemporary music as a field of cultural representation. Given the community's relatively recent consolidation as an ethnic minority with official recognition, it is not surprising

that the primary focus has long remained on foundational questions such as language codification, identity articulation, and cultural heritage preservation. Within this context, musical experimentation beyond musical folklore is a relatively new phenomenon – one that has not yet had the time or space to fully integrate into the cultural mainstream of Carpatho-Rusyn society.

As this study shows, contemporary Carpatho-Rusyn musicians, especially those working with hybrid genres, have received only limited response from institutions or mass media. Their work is still met with ambivalence, and sometimes scepticism, both from cultural elites and the older general audience, particularly when it challenges conventional notions of authenticity. Yet, these artists represent an emerging cultural current, one that seeks to engage younger audiences and expand the symbolic reach of the Carpatho-Rusyn language and identity. They are no longer at the very beginning of this process, but their position remains marked by uncertainty: after more than two decades, they are still searching for a clear cultural role and recognition. Musicians in 2008 walked, so musicians in 2025 could run.

There is evident potential in future collaborations between contemporary musicians and traditional folk performers, which could bridge generational and stylistic divides. For now, the number of such musicians can be counted on one hand. Their future depends on the artists themselves and on the willingness of both institutions and the Carpatho-Rusyn society to support such cultural experimentation. What is at stake is not only the survival of a musical current but the question of whether contemporary popular music can become a meaningful vehicle of belonging and identity for future generations of Rusyns.

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