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UKRAINE'S FORGOTTEN CORNER: TRANSCARPATHIA'S HUNGARIAN MINORITY FACES THE WAR

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Unlike the majority of refugees, Transcarpathian Hungarians are at least familiar with Hungary thanks to family ties or working relationships. They do not come as strangers.

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“Those who can are leaving the country. There is a very long queue of cars and people on foot, too, coming to Hungary,” Anita, a woman from Transcarpathia, commented on the Hungarian internet portal, *Mandiner*. When the war started, most Ukrainian refugees headed to Poland and Slovakia, where Slavic languages are spoken—with the exception of a small district in the westernmost corner of Ukraine, on the western slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, wedged between Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania.

Transcarpathia is different: Anita is one of the 100 to 130,000 ethnic Hungarians who live in this region of Ukraine, together with the Ruthenian—officially, Ukrainian—majority.

A frontier for a thousand years

Hungarians have not appeared in the area just out of the blue. The formerly uninhabited region was gradually populated following the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century. At the current county line, roughly, they met the rising Kievan Rus, putting the boundary of this region on the line of the Carpathian Mountains, a border which remained essentially unchanged for a thousand years, with Transcarpathia being a part of the Kingdom of Hungary, or, from time to time, the Hungarian-dominated Principality of Transylvania.

Due to wars, settlement campaigns, and other movements of people, a number of ethnic groups in addition to Hungarians also took root in this rocky piece of mountainous country. While Hungarians preferred the lowlands, moving into the Great Hungarian Plain framed by the Carpathian Mountains, the Slavic Ruthenians (speaking a language which is quite similar to Ukrainian) settled on higher ground, together with Romanians arriving from the Máramaros region, as well as Slovaks, Poles, Germans, Armenians, and Jews, coming from the north and the west.

Transcarpathia has remained a frontier region for a thousand years. For much of this time, regardless of who ruled here, it failed to attract much attention. It was left rather underdeveloped compared with other parts of Hungary, until the world wars in Europe disrupted this narrative. The Trianon peace treaty of 1920 concluding the First World War, which found Hungary on the losing side, tore this region away from the country, making it a part of Czechoslovakia. They too treated the region poorly, trying to break up the Hungarian ethnic block, then representing 31% of the population, and striving to assimilate Ruthenians. During the Second World War, the Hungarian speaking Jewry in the area suffered painful losses inflicted by the Holocaust, followed by the deportation of Hungarian men to the Gulag in the course of the Soviet occupation, commencing at the end of 1944, which re-shuffled the ethnic mix of the region for good. Transcarpathia was annexed to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as ‘Zakarpattia’, thus it became part of the Soviet Union, which also attempted to wipe out the independent identity of Ruthenians who were in the majority at that time.

All in all, the ethnic groups in this thirteen-thousand-square-kilometre region lived in peace most of the time and developed a unique regional identity under the rule of various empires. Proof of this regional identity is that at the referendum deciding on the independence of Ukraine on 1 December 1991, an additional issue was also to be deliberated in Transcarpathia, namely, whether its people wanted autonomy within an independent Ukraine. Nine out of ten local residents attended the referendum, and 78% of them voted for autonomy. The results of this referendum were never taken into consideration by Kyiv.

PHOTO: BY ПИВОВАР ПАВЛО – OWN WORK, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Hungarian–Ukrainian relations: a good start

Intergovernmental relations between Ukraine and Hungary had a good start: Hungary was one of the first countries to recognize sovereign Ukraine, and the two countries signed a number of conventions on respecting each other's borders and ensuring the broadest possible rights for their minorities. The new Hungarian Constitution (the Fundamental Law of 2012), also mentions Ruthenians as a constituent nationality. In contrast, on the Ukrainian side, local people in Transcarpathia have had no autonomy *de jure*, but did enjoy a degree of cultural autonomy. The multicultural idyll was shattered only occasionally by Ukrainian extremists coming from the interior. Their favourite target was the monument of the Hungarian conquest, in the Verecke pass.

The main problem of the region used to be economic, marked by infrastructural backwardness and general poverty, even in comparison with other regions of generally poor Ukraine, whose people migrated because of destitution. Slavic Ruthenians and Ukrainians preferred going to work or even settling permanently in the Czech Republic or Poland, while Hungarians went to Hungary or further west.

The ratio of Hungarians within the population has sunk from 13.5% around 1991, to 10% in 2022. Wages have remained extremely low to this day: the current Ukrainian monthly minimum wage is the equivalent of €200, and the monthly subsistence level is set, after recent increases, at €83 per month. Extensive price rises—due to the war, most recently—have forced many people to do their shopping, especially for meat products, in Hungary.

Over the last decades, particularly after the Orbán government took over in 2010, major resources were provided by the Hungarian government for Transcarpathia, and not exclusively for the benefit of local Hungarians there. These included water purification

installations, hospital equipment, pay supplements for teachers, and the reconstruction of kindergartens and schools.

Deprivation of rights of minorities by the Ukrainian government

Hungary and Hungarians have benefited from a good reputation in the area. The same cannot be said of the Ukrainians. Their government chose to adopt an intense policy of assimilation, in an effort to create an ethnically homogeneous Ukraine.

The primary target of this policy was not Hungarians or other minorities—Poles, Romanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Crimean Tatars can also be found on the colourful ethnic map of Ukraine—but, rather, the Russian-speaking segment of the country's population. Their 8-15 million block in the south-eastern third of the country is in quite close proximity to Russia. Ukrainian Russians, in terms of their identity, do not really belong to either 'deep Ukraine' or to Russia, but in contrast with the centralization drive of Kyiv, they have had a strong preference for autonomy within Ukraine since the early 2000s. The move to homogenise this region of Ukraine was perceived by Kyiv as a threat, and in 2012, the government started, quietly, to prepare the legal package by which it intended to accelerate their forced Ukrainianization en masse.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict erupting in 2014 gave more impetus to Ukrainian acculturation, resulting in a series of legislation passed in an ongoing attempt to create a homogeneous Ukraine, putting national minorities in an increasingly difficult position. In the framework of the education reform of 2017, the gradual prohibition of education in native languages of the minorities was stipulated, dual citizenship was banned by the citizenship act, and a language policy law was proposed to penalise incorrect Ukrainian spelling, lest the orthographic transgression prove to make 'a mockery of the Ukrainian language.' The governments of Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania protested in vain. Hungarians, most of all, perceived Kyiv's efforts as a stab in the back, since up to that

point Budapest had been one of the most vocal proponents of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Meanwhile, the volume of anti-Hungarian voices was amplified on the periphery of Ukrainian politics, and in the media. First, they were flogging the pragmatic Hungarian government for not severing economic ties with Russia. Second, they accused Transcarpathian Hungarians of separatism, even though Hungary had repeatedly stated that a stable and territorially integral Ukraine was in its interest, in spite of the fact that quite a few Transcarpathians, including Hungarians, perished on the front in defence of Ukraine.

At the end of February 2022, when the Russian assault commenced against Ukraine in earnest, the Hungarian government, similar to other European governments, stood up resolutely and unequivocally for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, condemning the Russian aggression. Ukrainians, for their part, including the majority of the people of Transcarpathia, headed to the west in clamouring lines, in the direction of the Hungarian border. Meanwhile, news arrived that Ukrainians picked men, here and there, from the line, away from their families, to take them to the front.

Unlike the majority of refugees, Transcarpathian Hungarians are at least familiar with Hungary thanks to family ties or working relationships, implicit in Anita's sentiment mentioned above, so they do not come as strangers.

But it is not like coming home either. War, it seems, has provided to the region a reminder of its liminal character as a portal to somewhere, not as a resting place.