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## Ukraine's Hungarians in spotlight as Orbán threatens to block EU accession

### *Українські угорці у центрі уваги, оскільки Орбан погрожує заблокувати вступ до ЄС*

*Кореспондент британської газети «The Guardian» Шон Вокер пише, що оскільки прем'єр-міністр Угорщини В. Орбан погрожує накладити вето на плани розпочати переговори щодо вступу України до ЄС, невелика угорська громада України перебуває у центрі уваги.*

*За його словами, в Києві є побоювання, що угорська громада на заході ризикує стати "дзеркалом" російськомовної громади на сході, а ворожа іноземна держава використовуватиме занепокоєння їхніми правами, як привід для підриву українського суверенітету. Автор статті підкресляє, що суперечка щодо мови та інших прав угорської громади на Закарпатті протягом багатьох років отруювала відносини між Києвом та Будапештом, оскільки націоналістичний уряд В. Орбана вливав гроші в регіон, пропонуючи фінансові субсидії місцевим угорцям, а також паспорти, що технічно є незаконним в Україні. Ш. Вокер наголошує, що війна лише прискорила і без того швидкий процес втечі угорців із Закарпаття, зокрема їх кількість скоротилась з 150 тис. осіб під час перепису 2001 р. до приблизно 80 тис. зараз.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/08/ukraines-hungarians-in-spotlight-as-orban-threatens-to-block-eu-accession>

In Hungarian-majority villages in Zakarpattia region, many feel little connection to the war and side with Hungarian leader

In the village of Bodalovo, the clock in almost every home is set to Budapest time. The televisions are tuned to M1, Hungary's main government-controlled news channel, which portrays the world as seen by the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán. The language spoken on the street, in the church and at the school is Hungarian.

Yet Bodalovo is in the far western corner of Ukraine. It is one of numerous villages in the Zakarpattia region populated almost entirely by ethnic Hungarians. And as Orbán threatens to veto plans to begin EU accession negotiations for Ukraine next week, Ukraine's small Hungarian community is in the spotlight.

Zakarpattia has changed hands numerous times over the years but has had a Hungarian population for centuries. Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, the local Hungarians have had an uneasy relationship with their homeland.

Unlike in almost all other parts of Ukraine, many people here feel little connection to the war raging in the east of the country. "This is not our war," agreed János and Béla, two sturdy men in their 60s, as they saw away shots of pálinka moonshine one recent evening in the house where Béla has lived his whole life. It is a phrase that comes up again and again in Zakarpattia.

One villager said he admired Orbán and Vladimir Putin, whom he considered as a "real man" standing up against the "gay and transgender lobby" in the west, a frequent claim in Hungarian and Russian state media. He said Volodymyr Zelenskiy was "a clown".

In Kyiv, there are fears that the Hungarian community in the west risks becoming a smaller-scale mirror of the Russian-speaking community in the east, with a hostile foreign power using

concerns about their rights as an excuse to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. Orbán is the European leader who has remained most friendly to Putin, banking on an eventual Russian victory in the war. He met Putin in Shanghai in October and has frequently called on the west to halt military aid to Kyiv.

For many Hungarians, resurgent Ukrainian national pride risks the forced integration of their community. “We are citizens of Ukraine but we want to be able to speak our native language. We are not tourists here,” said Zoltán Babják, the mayor of Berehove, a town of 25,000 people with a Hungarian majority.

The dispute over language and other rights for the Hungarian community in Zakarpattia has poisoned relations between Kyiv and Budapest for years, as Orbán’s nationalist government has poured money into the region, offering financial subsidies for local Hungarians, as well as passports, technically illegal in Ukraine. The newly minted Hungarian citizens then tend to vote overwhelmingly for Orbán’s Fidesz party in elections.

Hungarian state television frequently complains about the repression of Hungarians in Ukraine, often in terminology that echoes Russian propaganda about Ukraine. Ildikó Orosz, the rector of a Hungarian language institute in Berehove, has accused the Ukrainian government of exercising power in a “communist, fascist” way. “Only Hungary stands behind us,” she said in a speech in Budapest in 2018.

Despite this shrill rhetoric, the complaints about language rights are not entirely without foundation, and European bodies have repeatedly criticised Ukraine for its policies on minority languages, particularly after the passage of a 2017 law that restricted the use of languages other than Ukrainian, a move aimed at lessening the influence of the Russian language that also affected Hungarian and Romanian communities.

On Friday, Ukraine’s parliament will discuss a law that answers many of Budapest’s concerns about language rights, part of a deal to smooth the way towards EU accession. It will allow schools in Hungarian areas to teach all classes in Hungarian, except Ukrainian language, literature and history.

But just as Ukraine acts to do what Budapest for years has been asking for, Orbán appears to have moved the goalposts, threatening to block Ukraine’s accession anyway. One diplomatic source said: “It shows that the language concerns have been bogus all along. This is not about language rights, this is about a dislike of Ukraine and a desire to curry favour with Putin.”

David Pressman, the US ambassador in Budapest, said he had repeatedly offered various Hungarian officials “at the seniormost level” help with engaging with the Ukrainian government on the minorities issue. “For an issue that is of such prominence in the government of Hungary’s political communications, it is noteworthy that not a single official has taken the United States up on our offer to help them actually address it,” he said.

Zakarpattia is one of the poorest regions of Ukraine, despite being on the EU’s doorstep. “This town has existed for 970 years and imagine, we haven’t managed to build a proper sewage system,” said Babják, blaming the central government for a lack of funds. He said only 60% of households in Berehove had access to a centralised sewage system, and none of the surrounding villages.

Soviet-made Ladas, decaying blocks of flats and the battered shells of former industrial complexes dot the landscape in Zakarpattia. Some of the only smart buildings are those that have been renovated with Budapest's money.

While the occasional soldier in the street is a reminder of the fact that this is a country at war, the conflict can feel very far away. Zakarpattia is the only Ukrainian region not to have been hit by Russian missile strikes since the war began, and Berehove is closer to Vienna, Venice and Berlin than to the frontlines in eastern Ukraine.

In several majority Hungarian villages, people said nobody had been mobilised to fight in the war. "They have tried, but people find ways to avoid it: either they pay on the spot or they simply sneak over the border to Hungary and flee," said one villager in Bodalovo.

The war has only accelerated an already rapid process of Hungarian flight from Zakarpattia, down from 150,000 people at the time of the 2001 census to an estimated 80,000 now. Three decades ago there were 30 children in each year at the Hungarian-language school in the village of Borzhava, said the deputy headteacher, Hanna Hál. Now there are nine in the first grade and three each in the second and third. She said she did not mention the war in her classes because "a school should be a place of peace".

László Zubánics, a history professor and the head of the Hungarian Democratic Federation in Ukraine, said that despite the stereotype that Hungarians were not willing to fight, there were actually about 300-400 ethnic Hungarians currently fighting on the frontlines. One, Fedir Shandor, has been appointed as Ukraine's next ambassador to Budapest. About 30 Hungarians have died, Zubánics said.

"In the villages, people get the majority of their information from Hungarian television, so they get all of the Orbán talking points," he said. "In mixed villages or bigger towns it's a different story."

One mixed town is Vynohradiv, which is majority Ukrainian but has a sizeable Hungarian minority. Once a district capital in the Austro-Hungarian empire, Vynohradiv was home to the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók for several years in the early 20th century. Its crumbling but handsome central streets reflect the town's multicultural past, with churches of five different denominations and a synagogue.

Borys Vashkeba, 50, a lawyer and the head of a Hungarian community organisation based in the town, was at pains to say not all Hungarians were Orbán fans. "Back when Orbán said after he was elected [...] that he had closed the door to communism and opened the door to Europe, I was really for him, but now I don't share his views," he said.

He has written a letter to the European Commission to assure it that not all of Ukraine's Hungarians support Orbán's "anti-Ukrainian, anti-European" policies. Most local Hungarians support EU accession for Ukraine, he said.

Nevertheless, tensions remain. A 22-year-old waiter in Berehove, from a mixed Ukrainian-Hungarian family, said he had got into shouting matches with other young Hungarians during the first weeks of the war. "There was one woman I worked with who said Ukraine won't exist soon and everything here will be Hungary. I wanted to call the security services on her," he said.

Even Zubánics, who in the summer visited the frontline in east Ukraine and is considered to be on the pro-Ukrainian end of the spectrum of Hungarian political figures, has a photo of Orbán in his office, and was evasive when asked whether he had a Hungarian passport. “I will not answer that question. Nobody will answer that question,” he said.

Zubánics said many in Budapest thought he had betrayed the Hungarian people, while many in Ukraine were wary of all Hungarians and their loyalties. For the local community, it can be hard to navigate the competing demands of Kyiv and Budapest. “It’s like trying to dance along a tightrope,” he said with a sigh.