

RELATIONS OF HUNGARY AND UKRAINE THROUGH THE LENS OF TRANSCARPATHIA

The common past of the Hungarian and Ukrainian people goes back more than a thousand years. The relationship was not always cloudless, but at the same time, the principles of cooperation and good neighborliness were always the guiding principles.

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The history of Hungary and Ukraine has been closely intertwined over the centuries. The common past of the Hungarian and Ukrainian people goes back more than a thousand years. The relationship was not always cloudless, but at the same time, the principles of cooperation and good neighborliness were always the guiding principles. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hungary was one of the first to recognize Ukraine, and diplomatic relations between the two neighbors began from the first minute. The westernmost region of Ukraine - Transcarpathia (Zakarpattia oblast. In this study, the more traditional version - Transcarpathia - will be used) - has always played a very important role in the relationship between independent Ukraine and Hungary. In the relationship between the two countries, this peripheral area with a mixed population is a determining factor - sometimes a bridge between the two countries and other times a source of their conflicts.

This study is intended to present the Transcarpathian context of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, its role, and the change in its significance from the declaration of Ukraine's independence to the present day. In this study, we will briefly examine the history of diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Hungary and their development depending on the policies of the leadership of the two countries.

Relations until the Revolution of Dignity 2014

Ukrainian-Hungarian relations have a long history. During the past more than thirty years, they took place

in the spirit of good neighborliness, mutual respect, and support. Hungary was one of the first to recognize the independence of Ukraine, and the delegation of the Hungarian State Assembly was the first parliamentary delegation to participate in the meeting of the Supreme Council of Ukraine. Leonid Kravchuk, the Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament at the time, made his first visit to Hungary. During the visit, the "Declaration on the Basis of Relations between Ukraine and the Republic of Hungary and the "Consular Convention, and the Declaration on the Principles of Cooperation between the Republic of Hungary and Ukraine" in the field of ensuring the rights of national minorities were approved. Hungary was the first country, which established diplomatic relations with Ukraine after the restoration of its independence. On 6 December 1991, during Prime Minister József Antal's visit to Ukraine, the "Treaty on the Basics of Good Neighbor and Cooperation" was signed between Ukraine and Hungary, which entered into force on 16 June 1993. This became the first basic document of the cooperation between the two countries.¹

During the visit of the Hungarian prime minister, the Hungarian embassy was opened in the Ukrainian capital, and on 24 March 1992, the Embassy of Ukraine in Hungary was opened in a ceremonial setting, which became the first diplomatic mission of Ukraine. In 1993, the statutes of the "Carpathian Euroregion Interregional Association" were approved. This was the first Euroregion in which the border regions of Hungary and Ukraine also participated. In the same year, President Leonid Kravchuk (2004-2005) visited Hungary and during his visit, several agreements were signed, which defined the directions of



further cooperation between the two countries. It is worth mentioning that both states also joined several international conventions related to the protection of the rights of national minorities such as the “1995 Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe,” and the “European Charter of Regional Languages and National Minority Languages of the Council of Europe in 1996.”²

Inter-parliamentary relations have also become regular. In September 1994, during the stay in Hungary of the delegation of the Parliament of Ukraine (*Verkhovna Rada*) led by Oleksandr Moroz, an agreement was signed between Rada and the National Assembly of Hungary on the cooperation between the two bodies. The relations between the two countries only strengthened with the start of Hungary’s NATO and EU integration processes. There were regular formal and informal meetings on the issue of Baltic-Black Sea cooperation. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited Ukraine in February 2000. During his visit, he held talks with Viktor Yushchenko, the then-prime minister. As a result of the negotiations, the work of the “Ukrainian-Hungarian Intergovernmental Economic Cooperation Joint Committee” was activated. It was then that the issue of national minorities began to take shape.³

The stable and positive dynamic of Ukrainian-Hungarian relations was maintained even during the time of President Yushchenko (2005-2010). Economic cooperation continued to grow and priority was given to the development and improvement of cross-border cooperation. The issue of the rights of the Hungarian community in Ukraine remained on the agenda. The

issue of diversification of the energy supply also arose, since the so-called Russian-Ukrainian gas war took place during the time of President Yushchenko. Hungary called Russia a reliable partner, which caused some displeasure in Kyiv. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian president and the Hungarian prime minister met in 2006 and 2007. During the meetings, in addition to European integration and environmental protection issues, the issue of meeting the needs of national minorities was also discussed. Despite the disagreements that arose, the relationship could be called well-functioning.⁴

Pursuant to the Constitution of Hungary adopted in 2011, Hungary assumes responsibility for Hungarian communities abroad, moreover, according to Hungary’s 2010 law, Hungarians living abroad could become Hungarian citizens through a simplified naturalization procedure. On the part of the Ukrainian leadership, this caused some criticism due to the possibility of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community becoming dual citizens, but Budapest also made gestures towards its own nationalities that to some extent took the edge off the problem. Pursuant to the 2011 Election Act, representatives of the Ukrainian nationalities are entitled to represent their communities at the highest level as well.⁵ Relations also developed well during Viktor Yanukovich’s presidency (2010-2014). The Hungarian side, under Hungary’s EU presidency, was ready to provide comprehensive support to Ukraine in the field of European integration and to step up efforts to meaningfully deepen relations between Ukraine and the EU. At the end of 2011, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary paid an official visit to Ukraine, during which negotiations were held on the speedy conclusion and

ratification of the EU Association Agreement and the acceleration of the liberalization of the visa system.⁶

In 2012 the “Law on State Language Policy” was adopted in Ukraine. The law, which was primarily a gesture towards Moscow, made it possible for the language of a community to become official in those settlements and regions where the proportion of a given language community reaches 10%. This also applied to the Hungarian language. The relevant provisions of the said law were repealed after the victory of the Revolution of Dignity. This measure, like the original law, was a message intended for Moscow, but just like in 2012 it also affected the Hungarian community, only now with negative consequences. This is to some extent: “Kyiv has rejected Russia’s efforts to extend the cultural space of the Russian world to Ukraine, and its move had a ricochet effect limiting the demands and expectations of other parties.”⁷ Despite that, the relationship between the two countries was positive and dynamic. President Petro Poroshenko (2014-2019) met personally with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán five times and they spoke twice on the phone. In 2014, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó met with Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin. During the negotiations, bilateral cooperation was discussed, especially in the fields of trade, transport, energy, border and cross-border cooperation, cultural and humanitarian cooperation, and visa liberalization. The Hungarian side announced that it was ready to provide assistance in the implementation of reforms in Ukraine, especially in the case of administrative reform, decentralization of power, and bringing Ukrainian legislation into line with EU standards. Hungary was ready to send competent specialists to Ukraine.⁸

Hungary stood up for the territorial integrity of Ukraine fully and condemned the annexation of Crimea at all international forums and at the highest level. In the sanctions policy, Budapest indicated the importance of energy issues and continued to actively cooperate with Kyiv. Yet, with the changes in the language and minority rights, the relations became colder.

Ukrainian Language Policy and Hungarian National Policy

Avoiding or dealing with language conflicts is often considered one of the important goals of language policy. However, the conflicts dealt with by language policy are almost never of linguistic origin. Their background is social, political, and/or economic confrontation between groups speaking the language(s). Apparently, this is also the case in Ukraine. Since independence, the political camps that have apparently been at odds with each other over the language issue have actually faced each other over the control of political, social, economic, and cultural

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resources. On the surface, sharp debates about the status of languages are about the methods of nation-building, social status, political and economic power relations, and power. The political balance tactics used for two decades around the country’s commitment to the East or the West, as well as the settlement of the language policy situation, have clearly failed, and the country’s population has become fatally divided.⁹

In the beginning, the Ukrainian national and language policy had a tolerant attitude towards minorities. Normative documents adopted in the first years of Ukrainian independence guaranteed the right to use the mother tongue in all areas of social life. The 1996 Constitution established the Ukrainian language as the official state language, but at the same time, the de facto situation was different, as Russian dominated in most of the country and in many symbolic functions, for example in the press. A significant change in state language policy was brought about by the elite who came to power through the Orange Revolution in 2004. In the post-revolution era, the most important objective of Ukrainian language policy became the practical enforcement of the state language status of the Ukrainian language in order to resolve the discrepancy between the de jure and de facto situations and to create a homogeneous nation-state. According to the Orange revolutionary elite, all those who argue in favor of two state languages, or who believe that minority languages should be granted official status, take a stand against the idea of a Ukrainian state and a unified nation.¹⁰

The language policy of the Yushchenko era caused a certain resistance in the Russian-speaking population. The next president, his former opponent, Yanukovich also opposed that policy. One of the results of Yanukovich’s pro-Russian policy was the previously mentioned Kolesnychenko-Kivalov law of 2012, which granted broad rights to the Russian language, but also to the languages of other Ukrainian communities in those

regions where their share reached 10%. The subsequent events have already been mentioned.

The much-discussed education law was adopted in 2017 and provoked fierce protests from Hungary and several countries neighboring Ukraine, which over time took their criticism back. Hungary stuck to its position in this regard. Article 7 of the new Ukrainian education framework law adopted in 2017¹¹, which regulates the language of education, determines the extent of learning in the mother tongue. According to the law, starting from the 5th grade, a part of the subjects (in an increasing proportion every year) must be taught in the state language (i.e. Ukrainian). This significantly reduces the rights to learn in the mother tongue and to choose the language of education. All of this goes against the Treaty concluded between Ukraine and Hungary on the foundations of good neighborliness and cooperation between the Republic of Hungary and Ukraine¹², which, according to Article 15, both Ukraine and Hungary “each provides its citizens with broad access to the culture, artistic and literary works and mass media of the other Party wide access and support state, social and individual initiatives aimed at this. They promote the expansion of exchanges between each other’s creative communities, artists, professionals, cultural and educational institutions at interstate, regional and local levels, and encourage the learning of the other Party’s language.”

From then on, Ukrainian-Hungarian relations became stratified in certain respects: on the one hand, economic relations remained, and the more they continued to develop, Hungary stands up for Ukraine’s territorial integrity, supports the EU’s accession efforts, and provided countless humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but

on the other hand, loudly and fiercely criticizes Kyiv’s minority policy and measures against the Hungarian community. To validate Budapest’s position, in 2017 it announced that it would block Ukraine’s political cooperation with the EU and NATO at the highest level, as well as Ukrainian initiatives at the level of other international, universal, and regional organizations. However, it did not limit the technical cooperation between Ukraine and NATO in any way. During the 2019 presidential election campaign, Budapest openly expressed its hope that the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president would bring a solution to the language issues. The first presidential meeting took place in May 2019, during the inauguration of President Zelensky. Although relations revived somewhat, they did not bring a breakthrough. Some of the interstate commissions met again and managed to establish a certain dialogue regarding the application of the education law, but the issue remained open.¹³

Despite the hopes under the presidency of Zelenskyi, who otherwise championed the unification of society, the law on “Ensuring the Functioning of Ukrainian as a State Language” came into force, according to which the use of the state language is mandatory in all areas except private and religious life. The law also stipulated that the bilingual education model should be introduced in Russian-language schools from 2020 and in Hungarian-language schools from 2023.¹⁴ This measure was postponed in the case of the Hungarian schools to September 1, 2024¹⁵ and later eliminated in the new law adopted in December 2023.

György Kerényi summarizes the situation of language policy in the columns of Free Europe as “According to representatives of the Kyiv government and experts with



Ukrainian national sentiments, the ‘7. Article’ (as well as Article 21 of the Language Act and Article 5 of the legislation on general secondary education passed in 2020) complies with international and domestic standards. Moreover, it serves the interests of Ukrainian minorities because it helps non-Ukrainian speakers to master the state language at a high level. Learning the mother tongue is indeed still guaranteed (if only because of the language used at home) because the mother tongue of minorities can appear as a subject at all levels of public education. But inclusion as a subject is not the same as the language of education. The Venice Commission seriously criticized both laws.”¹⁶

With the emergence of the possibility to start the joining negotiations between the EU and Ukraine, Kyiv had to take active measures in order to be compliant with the requirements. On 8 December, the Verkhovna Rada adopted as a basis the general draft law 10288-1 on amendments to some laws of Ukraine taking into account the expert assessment of the Council of Europe and its bodies regarding the rights of national minorities (communities) in certain areas. For example,

- Privately owned higher education institutions have the right to freely choose the language of instruction, which is an official language of the EU (teaching one, several, or all disciplines, performing individual tasks, and conducting control measures), while ensuring that persons studying in such institutions study, state languages as a separate academic discipline;
- In classes (groups) taught in the languages of national minorities (communities), which are official languages of the European Union, the right to use the language of the relevant national minority in the educational process alongside the state language is guaranteed;
- Persons who belong to national minorities of Ukraine, whose languages are official languages of the European Union, and who started general secondary education before September 1, 2018, in the language of the respective national minority until the completion of full general secondary education, have the right to continue obtaining such education in accordance with the rules that existed before entry into force of the Law of Ukraine “On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as a State Language.”¹⁷

The Ukrainian language policy is therefore primarily a political issue, which, as a result of the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, has also received a security policy charge. And in the patriotic wing of Ukrainian society, it is the only and most important criterion of nationhood. Giving it up, or easing it was considered treason of the nation’s interest. Yet the

perspective of joining the EU persuaded the lawmakers to reconsider the position since the stakes were high. Even with this, however, the changes in the language policies generated vast criticism from the patriotic groups.

To a certain extent, the situation is alleviated by the new law amendment adopted in December 2023, which provides broader rights for language communities to use their language. In order to discuss the issue, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, visited Transcarpathia in January 2024, where he held talks with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, and the head of the presidential office, Andriy Jeremak.¹⁸ Regarding the issue, the Hungarian side handed over a list of comments consisting of 11 points to the Ukrainian side. Work on this is still ongoing at the time of writing. The Transcarpathian context of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations thus becomes truly relevant from the estrangement of 2017, precisely because of the layered nature of the previously mentioned Hungarian-Ukrainian relationship.

The Issue of Transcarpathia in Hungarian-Ukrainian Relations

The situation that developed in 2017 was complicated by the fact that the measure was primarily directed against the Russian language and, according to Kyiv, is also a matter of national security, since this way they are able to prevent the rise of the ‘Russian world’ (Russkii Mir), which has also shown its harmful effects in Crimea and Donbas. In this reading, the countries that condemned Kyiv’s measures in the first round revised their position and the normative aspect, according to which Ukraine really violated the rights of minorities, subordinated it to the geopolitical aspect, which clearly resulted in identification with Kyiv’s position or at least tacit acceptance.

The legal and geopolitical level can also be seen in the Hungarian-Ukrainian relationship. Take the strategic documents of the two countries as an example. Considering the areas of critical importance for Ukraine,

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the Central and Eastern European countries are indicated as the example of economic and social development to be followed. Above all, Ukraine's "National Security Strategy (2020)" emphasizes that for the sake of economic security, it is necessary to get closer to the social norms of the Central and Eastern European states. This includes the provision of the rule of law, including the language rights of nationalities, but this is at the same time contrary to another priority of Ukraine - nation-building. One of the elements of nation-building in Ukraine is language, as mentioned before, and a marked distance from Russian influence, both culturally and politically.

According to Hungary's "National Security Strategy," Hungary is interested in a strong, democratic, stable, economically developing Ukraine and in balanced bilateral relations, but at the same time, legitimate efforts to strengthen Ukrainian national consciousness must not lead to the impairment of the acquired rights of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community.¹⁹ A similar duality can be observed: Hungary supports Ukrainian nation-building, but at the same time sees it as necessary to ensure the linguistic rights of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community.

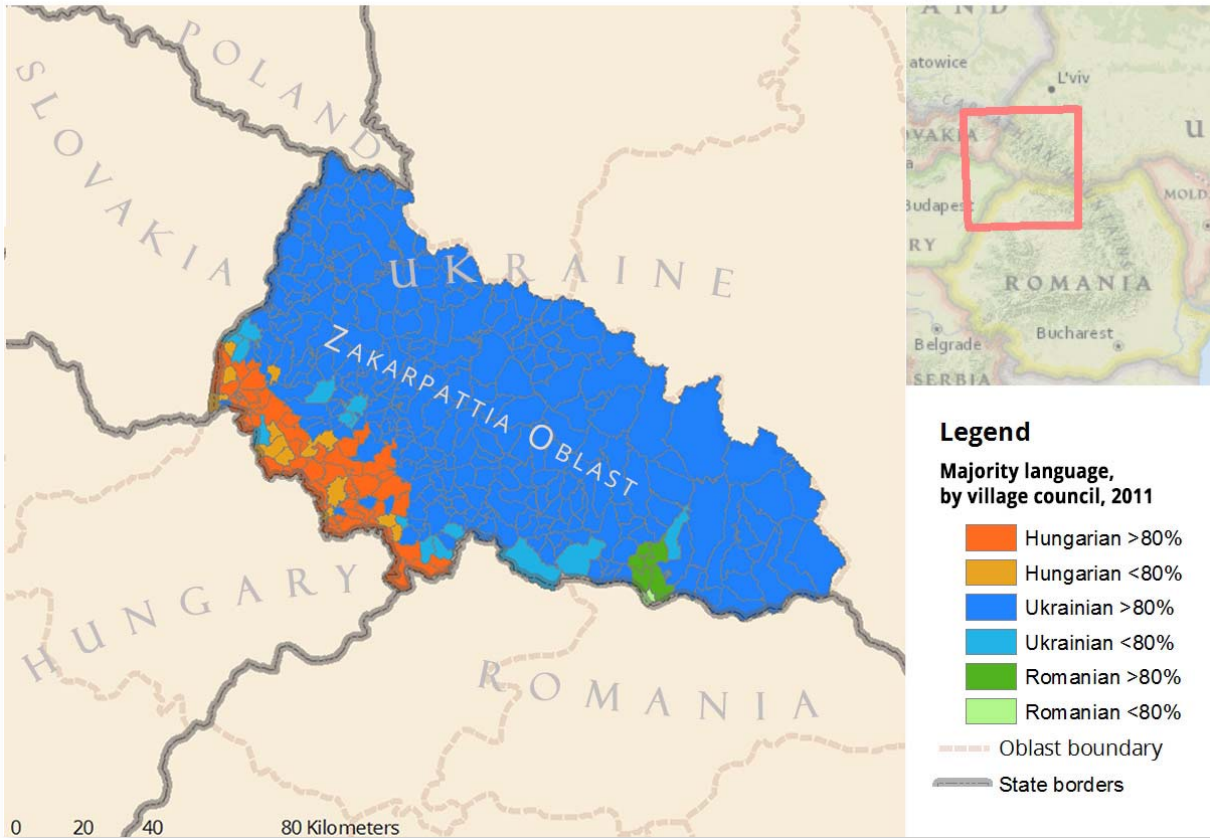
The context of Ukrainian-Hungarian relations is therefore framed by two opposing trajectories in terms of the geopolitical location of the two countries: European integration and Russian relations. It is worth emphasizing here that the support and protection of Hungarian minorities living in neighboring states, regardless of governments and political affiliations, has been a cornerstone of Hungarian foreign policy for decades. Speaking of the national security strategy, it is worth emphasizing that Hungary is committed to the Euro-Atlantic alliance. The Hungarian government stood up for all joint decisions and policies. This is also confirmed by relevant resolutions and votes. According to the National Security Strategy, Hungary strives for a balanced economic relationship with Russia within the framework of EU and NATO standards.²⁰

Due to its commitment to NATO and the EU, Hungary supports Ukraine in all EU integration processes, high-level economic cooperation and does not deviate from the guidelines of the EU and NATO in strategic/geopolitical issues of great importance, and due to its constitutional obligation, it is obliged to stand up for the rights of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community, leading to conflict with Kyiv. Ukraine is a committed supporter of European values, but due to its situation with Russia, it finds it unacceptable to change the language issue, while it is definitely interested in maintaining good relations with Hungary. Thus, interactions between the two countries are often unpleasant. Kyiv's response to Budapest's sharp actions was press campaigns and official actions against Hungarian economic stimulus and other subsidies coming to Ukraine, as well as against the Transcarpathian Hungarian minority. As a result of the increase in press campaigns and reports increasingly highlighting the 'separatism of Transcarpathian Hungarians, who are dual citizens,' 'rural residents who do not speak a word of Ukrainian,' and 'Greater Hungary,' the patriotic active wing of Ukrainian society also joined the process. In 2017, according to the data of the Monitoring of Minorities, there were 89 anti-Hungarian incidents, of which 26 escalated into acts of violence. The most serious atrocity befell Transcarpathian Hungarians in February 2018, when the central office of the KMKSZ (Party of Hungarians of Ukraine) in Uzhhorod was blown up. Examining the period 2014-2018, the research recorded 182 anti-Hungarian expressions, most of which occurred in 2017. According to the official Ukrainian position, the Russian organization is behind the worst case. Although the number of atrocities fortunately decreased, the tension between the two countries remained. In 2020, the Ukrainian authorities declared two government actors undesirable because they encouraged the locals to support Hungarian candidates in the 2020 local elections.²¹

Kyiv considers Transcarpathian Hungarians as primarily Ukrainian citizens, so it finds it outrageous that Budapest elevates them to an exceptional group within Ukraine and assumes an intermediary role between them and the Ukrainian state. What Kyiv regards as promoting the integration of Hungarians, Budapest regards as a limitation of language rights, and what Budapest treats as support for the foreign community, Kyiv regards as interference in its own internal affairs, and the provocative press and marginalized patriotic activists as support for separatism. It is worth noting that Kyiv officially refrains from any statements that refer to the separatism of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community.

In the Ukrainian public opinion, a parallel can easily be drawn with the events of 2014 regarding the Hungarian question. There is a community that, referring to its language rights and the importance of preserving its community, hangs the flag of another country on the

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walls of its schools and public buildings, sings its national anthem, has a complete parallel education system from kindergarten to university, and has its own political structure that works closely with the leadership of the country (Hungary), which, with reference to the protection of this community, raised barriers in the way of cooperation with the EU and NATO.

At a higher political level, the evaluation of Hungary's activities in the Transcarpathians is more complex. Transcarpathia is a peripheral region, and many Ukrainian political analysts admit that Kyiv is further from Transcarpathia than Budapest. And it's not just about physical distance. The Ukrainian leadership took a few measures to ensure that the Hungarian community felt the protection and support of the state. This void is filled by Budapest instead of Kyiv.²² Hungary provides health workers, pastors, and teachers with salary supplements, and supplies vaccines to Transcarpathia, but it happened that chlorine was also transported to Transcarpathia so that there would be no shortage of drinking water in the water pipes due to the lack of the chemicals. Huge sums of money flow into the region as part of economic stimulus programs. According to some estimates, support corresponding to 30% of

Transcarpathia's central budget support comes from Hungary. Simplified naturalization builds on all of this. In some ways, Kyiv sees this as a threat to its own prestige.²³

From then on, the Transcarpathian context of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations becomes more of a domestic political issue and increasingly intractable. The Hungarian side can regularly report to its own internal political consumers about the support and protection of

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one of the most vulnerable foreign communities, and maintain pressure on the EU due to the neglected minority rights in Ukraine, while the Ukrainian side fights against the continuous Hungarian threat and support for separatism, which does not officially exist as per the statements of the government, and stands up for the state language. This is further aggravated by the lack of proper communication. Be it expert, civilian, or media level. If there is an information gap between two countries, societies, or communities, someone will definitely fill it. The opinion that the interests of the Kremlin lie behind the Ukrainian-Hungarian conflicts is gaining more and more ground in Ukrainian expert circles. Even behind significant anti-Hungarian manifestations, Russian organization is seen in serious

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cases such as the attack on the KMKSz headquarters, all the way to cases of such insignificant importance as the pasting of stickers with anti-Hungarian content in Berehove.²⁴ Even if we cannot completely prove the Russian organization behind the conflict between the Ukrainian and Hungarian communities, it is an obvious fact that the Kremlin can take full advantage of this.

The position of Kyiv and Budapest regarding language laws has almost reached the level of principle and was a serious point of debate between the two otherwise cooperating countries until the Russian invasion that started on 24 February 2022 and seems to get to a more moderate phase due to the adoption of the new law in December 2023. Hungary condemned the Russian aggression, took a stand for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and consistently supported the measures of NATO and the EU. After the invasion, the Hungarian criticism regarding language rights was put aside, and a major humanitarian campaign started in order to help Ukraine and Ukrainians. According to the available data, every third Hungarian citizen participated directly and indirectly in helping Ukrainian refugees. Despite this, it is difficult to call the relationship between the two countries good, or at least simple. It is characterized by a strange duality, supportive and

neighborly on the one hand, and tense and hostile in certain areas on the other. The tensions then arose due to the position of Budapest regarding the delivery of lethal weapons to Ukraine and the transport of military equipment through the Ukrainian-Hungarian border in order to avoid the attacks on Transcarpathia thus protecting the Hungarian community. Hungary also supports immediate peace talks, diplomatic solution to the war, and a pragmatic national interest-based approach to the sanctions and the financial support of Ukraine. These in many cases generate criticism in Kyiv.

Conclusions

The history of relations between Hungary and Ukraine has a rich history, and this history is mostly

positive. The connective link of the two, Transcarpathia (Zakarpattia oblast) became one of the key elements of their relations, sometimes the source of the conflicts. Both Kyiv and Budapest are following their national and state interest but with time the issues became rather political than technical. These issues were being addressed but still, there is plenty of room for improvement. The relations of Kyiv and Budapest however have a certain duality in them. Despite the tensions that were described the economic relations are good and Hungary is very active in the humanitarian issues. The cross-border cooperation in the border regions is still active and demonstrates positive dynamics, and the question of the language issues gives hope for positive changes. One cannot choose his neighbors, so it is not only wise but practical and necessary to get along with them.

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