

TO STAY IN TRANSCARPATHIA.
THE FATE OF A MULTINATIONAL REGION IN THE LIGHT
OF HISTORICAL CHANGES

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Today, Transcarpathia is a western region of Ukraine, neighbouring Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Poland, where a historically diverse ethnic community has developed. This is mostly due to the fact that for about a thousand years it was influenced by the history, traditions and culture of Hungary, then after the Treaty of Trianon, of Czechoslovakia, then again of Hungary, and from 1945 to 1991 as part of the Soviet Union. This political “variability” often tore families apart, resulting in thousands of individual tragedies in every period, leaving deep traces in the cultural, educational and religious life of the region. The situation nowadays isn’t better. The use of the mother tongue is practically allowed within the family and in the church. In other spheres of life it is possible to succeed only with the knowledge of the state language. As we can see, the Transcarpathian Hungarians might not have ever been in such a difficult situation as they are now. The struggle for surviving as a national minority goes on in Transcarpathia.

Keywords: Transcarpathia, regime changes, individual tragedies, the mother tongue.

Today, Transcarpathia is a western region of Ukraine, neighbouring Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Poland, where a historically diverse ethnic community has developed. This is mostly due to the fact that for about a thousand years it was influenced by the history, traditions and culture of Hungary, then after the Treaty of Trianon, of Czechoslovakia, then again of Hungary, and from 1945 to 1991 as part of the Soviet Union.

In the course of history, today’s Transcarpathia belonged to the following states:

- 895-1920: part of the Kingdom of Hungary;
- 1920-1938-1939: part of Czechoslovakia;
- 1938/1939-1944: part of the Kingdom of Hungary;

- 1944-1945: part of Czechoslovakia and the period of Soviet occupation;
- 1945-1991: part of the Soviet Union (USSR);
- Since 1991: part of Ukraine.

There are many nationalities living here side by side. At different times in history, some of them have been detached from their mother country (Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks) and have become national groups or minorities, while others have settled in different eras due to often changing political systems (Germans, Jews, Romani, Poles, Russians, Belarusians, Georgians, Armenians, etc.). The area comprising the four counties – Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa, Maramures – was an integral part of the historical Hungary for 1000 years. The independent political history of Transcarpathia actually has begun after the First World War.

Events that strongly influenced the fate of the peoples living here practically accelerated in the spring of 1919, when political and historical changes continued. In the 20th century alone, the population of Transcarpathia has lived through 17 different changes of sovereignty, internal arrangements, turning points, and military occupation:

- Till Nov. 15th 1918: Austro-Hungarian Monarchy;
- Nov. 16th 1918-Dec. 20th 1918: The First Hungarian Republic;
- Dec. 21st 1918-Mar. 21st 1919: Ruska Kraina;
- Nov. 9th 1918-Mar. 21. 1919: The Hutsul Republic;
- Mar. 21st 1919-Apr. 19th 1919: The Hungarian Soviet Republic;
- Apr. 10th 1919-end of June 1920: Romanian occupation;
- Jan. 12th 1919-June 4th 1920: Czechoslovakian occupation;
- June. 4th 1920-Oct. 7th 1938: Czechoslovakia;
- Oct. 26th 1938-Mar. 15th 1939: The Second Czechoslovak Republic;
- Mar. 15th 1939: A short-lived independent state Carpathian Ukraine;
- Mar. 15th 1939-Mar. 21st 1939: The Kingdom of Hungary;
- Mar. 21st 1944-Oct. 23rd 1944: The period when Hungary was occupied by the Hitlerites and the age of the Arrow Cross;
- Oct. 24th 1944-Nov. 25th 1944: Czechoslovakia;
- Nov. 26th 1944-June 29th 1945: Carpatho-Ukraine;
- June 29th 1945-Aug. 23th 1991: Soviet Union, Transcarpathian region of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine;
- Since Aug. 23rd 1991: Ukraine. (Fedinec 2002, 39-40)

This political “variability” often tore families apart, resulting in thousands of individual tragedies in every period, leaving deep traces in the cultural, educational and religious life of the region.

The Czech world, as the locals say, has lasted twenty years. The rather liberal nationality policy was one of the defining elements of the Czechoslovak state policy, especially considering that more than one-third of the country's population was made up of different nationalities. Elected representatives of national minorities in parliament could speak or submit an interpellation in their mother tongue.

The new regime strove for rapid and profound change destroying the old system. The judicial system was abolished and replaced by revolutionary courts, which dealt mainly with political (settling accounts with counter-revolutionaries) and public law matters.

For the implementation of the decree on land nationalizing manorial estates passed by the Revolutionary Governing Council on April 3rd 1919, special committees were established at the local level. The only cooperative formed from the publicly owned lands in the territory of Transcarpathia was in Nagyberég (Velyki Berehy). To address the issue of nationality, a special committee was established by the Revolutionary Governing Council in Budapest, which *inter alia* recognized Ruthenian as an official language in Transcarpathia. Educational institutions in the region were also nationalized.

The cities of Transcarpathia were built in the period between the Podkarpatska Rus and the two world wars. During the Czech era, districts grew in Ungvár (Uzhhorod), Munkács (Mukachevo), Beregszász (Berehovo), Nagyszőlős (Vynohradiv), Huszt (Khust), Aknaszlatina (Solotvyno). The industry was evolving; people went to the movies and listened to the radio.

However, the state change had other implications too. A wave of emigration has begun in Transcarpathia starting in 1919-1920s. Since having a passport or even a visa was the only possibility to travel to Hungary, after doing much leg-work, many Hungarian and Israeli families decide to relocate to other regions of Hungary. This process then became more and more common when, in 1923, the state language teaching was made mandatory in all educational institutions. In 1928, the notification of diplomas obtained in Hungary after October 1st, 1928 was banned by a decree. As a result, fewer and fewer people went to study in Hungary, and fewer and fewer returned from there after graduation.

In the 1919-1920 school year, nine of the forty civic schools conducted teaching in Hungarian, but soon there were Hungarian classes in Ruthenian-Hungarian civics only in Beregszász, Munkács and Ungvár. The Hungarian classes were gradually dismantled, and at the same time classes with Czech language of teaching were opened instead.

In the streets of Ungvár, people were not allowed to stop and talk to one another without being dispelled by the Czech law enforcement officer.

During this period, it was not allowed to import books, magazines and periodicals from Hungary to Czechoslovakia. Hungarian literature belonged to the category of smuggled goods. In 1930, during the nationwide revision of public library stock in Czechoslovakia, anti-state books published before 1918 were withdrawn from circulation and destroyed.

Following The First Vienna Award, the Hungarian army marched into Beregszász on November 9th, and into Munkács and Ungvár on November 10th. As early as November 10th, the main square in Ungvár was renamed from Masaryk to Horthy Square.

Thus, in mid-March of 1939, the Czechoslovak army left the territory of Transcarpathia, as well as at least 40.000 civilians, mainly representatives of the Czech and Ukrainian intelligentsia, and a significant part of the high school youth.

Teaching was resumed in mid-November 1938 and was carried out in Hungarian. In many places were parallel classes with the Ruthenian language of studies.

Retaining the linguistic and cultural rights teaching of the "Ruthenians", Germans, Romanians, the "Tóts" was carried out in their mother tongue. The government policy being openly anti-Semitic was fully enforced regarding the Jewish question.

The spatial distribution of Jewish population was uneven. In larger cities, their number was significantly higher than the average for the region. For example, 28% of the Jewish population was in Ungvár, 30% in Beregszász and 43% in Munkács. In the early 1920s, there were more Jews in Transcarpathia than in Palestine. This rate has change drastically after deportations between 1938 and 1942.

People collected from different locations of the country were locked in cattle wagons and transported to Körösmező (Yasinia). Then they were transported in groups of hundreds a day to Galicia, controlled by the Axis powers. They were forced to march to Kamianets-Podilskyi in groups of three and four hundred people. This was the place where they were massacred on August 27-28th 1941. Deportations continued until the end of August and affected a total of 18.500 people living in Hungary, and perhaps only 2.000 survived. There is no credible data on exactly how many Transcarpathians were among the victims of the Holocaust.

The situation is getting worse over time. Humiliation and intimidation are becoming more widespread. The German soldiers invading in 1944 started to openly pillage. The Gestapo is "cleaning" and imposes a collective "fine" on local Jewry. They are sent to ghettos and then taken to death camps.

Three-quarters of the Jews living in Transcarpathia were taken away. In 1944, many of them moved abroad before being abducted. However, most of

those who avoided deportation were on labor service. After the fall of the Arrow Cross system, they were the first who could return to their homeland, especially those who, after being taken prisoners, joined the ranks of the Red Army.

After the network of social institutions had been constructed, it became possible to make the list of survivors, those coming from labor and concentration camps. According to this list, eight hundred people were registered in Ungvár and in its neighbourhood. 1.200 survivors returned to Munkács. A year after the deportation, about 700 Jews lived in Nagyszőlős and its neighbourhood.

During the turmoil of the war, the power structure in Transcarpathia has changed several times. The Arrow Cross period between March 1944 till and the end of the year, was replaced by the Czechoslovak Republic for one month, and then, by Carpatho-Ukraine until the summer of the following year. And then a long period begins: on June 29th, 1945, our county becomes part of the young Soviet Union.

Having heard the news about the new government, the deportees, some Holocaust survivors, labour servicemen and women, prisoners of war would never return to their homeland. Many of the locals also leave. The border crossing to Czechoslovakia was passable until September 30th 1945. The former Czechoslovak citizens were still allowed to submit resettlement applications until the summer of 1946. In many cases, settlements were cut in half by the border line, and after the Iron Curtain had been lowered, close family members were separated for decades. Going to the agricultural lands near the border, they weaved the news into the lyrics of folk songs and “sang” to each other while working...

Sovietization of Transcarpathia occurred between 1944 and 1950 through complete collectivization, destruction of “the enemies of people”, liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church, and full empowerment of the Communist Party. The persecuted ecclesiastes, those who were called kulaks, and those whose names sounded bad because of their nationality, religion, or aristocratic origin – they all experienced different forms of persecution.

Since November 1944, the Hungarian and the German minorities have suffered very serious political, ideological and ethnic terror. The Transcarpathian Hungarians and Germans became victims of retaliatory measures on the basis of ethnical origin. This process lasted for a decade, until 1955. About 25.000 Transcarpathian Hungarian men, who were aged between 18 and 50, were imprisoned in Soviet war camps.

It was enough to accuse a person of “thinking differently” or to suggest that someone was a supposed member of anti-Soviet or nationalist groups. School graduates taken from behind the school-desk as well as ten students from Ungvár State University were among those who were sent to the gulag in 1947.

The principle of "collective guilt and punishment" was assigned to Hungarian people. At the end of November 1944, at the first large station in the concentration camp in Solyva (Svaliava), the deportees were given a possibility to make their last choice. Those who declared themselves non-Hungarian and decided to join the Czechoslovak Legion were released. However, applicants were required to have a minimum knowledge of Czech / Slovak. It was enough to recite the Czech national anthem or pray in Czech for being enrolled.

On November 1st, workers were recruited for the construction of the airport in Munkács. Many people applied and the volunteers were actually taken to the airport to work. But on November 18th the Hungarians were separated and taken to the Rákóczy castle. Many men received a subpoena that day, others were taken away at night. Those who professed to be Slovak or Ruthenian were allowed to go home from the castle which was used as a collecting place. The Hungarians were collected in the concentration camp in Solyva and forced to march to Sambir. Immediately after the invasion of Soviet troops, people of Nagyszőlős were assigned to rebuild the demolished bridge over the Tisza river. In mid-November, when the order to conscript men was passed, construction of the bridge was stopped, the people were collected in the Nagyszőlős county hall and sent in groups of hundreds at first to Tiszaújlak (Vylok) and then to Solyva. In most settlements inhabited by Hungarians, deportations began in mid-November. On November 13th, wall stickers called on the conscripts to sign up, and on November 15th and during the following two days, the district military headquarters announced by drumrolls that all men between the ages of 18 and 50 must sign up in the villages. Those collected were first sent home and come back on November 18th with food and clothing enough for three days. They were told that they would be taken for a three-day work, hence the term "málenkij robot" (little work). After people had appeared for the second time on November 19th, they were forced to march to Szolyva, where they spent about 2 months in the concentration camp. On January 21st 1945, some of those still able to work were transported in cargo wagons to Sambir. The other part was taken to Turka and Strij camps beyond the Carpathians and from there to the inner part of the Soviet Union.

On January 15th 1946, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union ordered the mass deportation of the German population from Transcarpathia. Those who «had compromised themselves during the German-Hungarian occupation the most» faced forced evictions. According to the decree, two thousand Transcarpathian Germans were deported to Siberia during 1946. The majority went to Tyumen County, Siberia, where they were involved in logging. For the displaced people, it was forbidden by a decree to return to their homeland. It was

not until the end of 1955 that they were allowed to return to their homeland, but at the same time, they could not get back their confiscated property.

It was not until 1974 that the Germans in the Soviet Union were free to choose their place of residence.

As a result of constant persecution, there were only 4.230 Germans (0.4% of the county's population) registered in Zkarpattia in 1974, one-third of the amount in the pre-Soviet period.

Their number continued to decline in the following decades. Families emigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, as well as to Austria. Nowadays, characteristic feature of the Swabian villages around Munkács is that residents spend their holidays at home cultivating their gardens, harvesting crops and return to work in Europe for the rest of the year.

Another form of deportation was involvement in Trotsky's "labor army", which had been proclaimed a voluntary mass movement. The idea was that the young Soviet manpower will build the country of the future voluntarily and with songs. The works were focused on the industrial area of Donbász in the Donetsk Basin. In fact, it became a form of sentence execution the aim of which was to re-educate the perpetrators of minor crimes and, in many cases, the young people who had opposed the system. In 1947-1949, over three years, twelve thousand Transcarpathian young people were sent / forced to participate in the program under cruel working and living conditions. Not everyone has survived the "volunteer work".

It was also part of the Soviet practice that recent graduates, including those from Transcarpathia, had to work far away from their homeland for the first few years.

Population transfer was also common practice. By the mid-1950s, a whole forced migration network had been developed in Transcarpathia: at regular intervals, families had to be moved to the inner regions of the country according to the established quota. If they were interned and deported ten years earlier, in the fifties they would be asked to move voluntarily for all kinds of financial benefits. In the first decade after the war, one in ten people were affected by these population transfers in Transcarpathia. About seventy thousand people speaking different languages and belonging to different social strata were convinced or forced to leave Transcarpathia, and the same number of Russian-speaking residents (including the military) were relocated to Transcarpathia from other parts of the Soviet Union.

Thanks to the idea of a united Soviet people, nationality issues were pushed back. Nobody cared much the about nationalities which hadn't even been recognized before. Thus, the Ruthenian question no longer existed at all, everyone became Ukrainian and Russian.

The right of other Transcarpathian nationalities to use their mother tongue was not especially restricted. Certain compulsory elements were included in the curriculum: figures of Russian culture and literature, stories about Lenin and other leaders, excellent workers had already appeared in primary school textbooks. Math assignments were about the success of production. In schools, political information was held for children before classes on Thursdays. Russian was the language of communication between nations, so a significant number of hours was devoted to teaching Russian in all minority language schools, but the opportunity to study in their mother tongue was given at all levels up to university education.

The following periods were marked by contradictory economic, social, ideological, cultural and ethnic changes: 1953-1964, a decade of "The Khrushchev Thaw" (оттепель) and Khrushchev reforms (distalization and liberalization); 1965-1985 were two decades of "stagnation" (застой) characterized by relative stability (invariability); 1986-1991 were five years of "perestroika" (transformation) (перестройка).

In 1991, Transcarpathia became part of the independent Ukraine. The effects of this change of regime we feel the most today. The problems began after the Soviet reserves had run out and the economic crisis, which has continued up to now, escalated and, for example, sharpened the disputes concerning nationalities. These disputes were artificially provoked, since the Ukrainian patriot does not care about the devaluation of the national currency until he/she can criticize another fellow citizen.

I would add that there is still no inter-ethnic hostility in Transcarpathia. At a larger family event people speak at least two or three languages around the festive table if they want to communicate with every in-law.

People already stumble over the words, especially in the territories with mixed-population.

In Transcarpathia, however, according to the last authentic census (2001), the Hungarians still live in block groups in larger or smaller areas.

These proportions have changed in the past 20 years, since Transcarpathian people are looking for work in the West because of economic difficulties. They come home to the family only on big holidays. This is also the main reason why a census cannot be held in Ukraine and Transcarpathia: precisely because millions of citizens are not at home.

Since the 1990s of the last century, according to careful estimates, nearly 12.000 Hungarians from Transcarpathia have moved permanently to the mother country. Other sources estimate the number of resettled people for 25-30.000.

The trigger for voluntary migration is clearly the country's declining socio-economic situation and unstable political situation.

The most important issue of any national minority is to be able to organize and represent their interests by being engaged in decision-making. And the Transcarpathian Hungarians are no exception. Following the change of regime, several county-level social and non-governmental organizations representing the interests of the Hungarians were established in Transcarpathia. Most of them are funded by Hungarian tender sources. Now, the advocacy activities of dozens of social, political, professional, youth, student, intellectual and economic non-governmental organizations are mainly aimed at the Hungarian identity and culture preservation, development of mother tongue education system and maintenance of the Hungarian language education system.

There are 63 county-level social and non-governmental organizations representing 63 nationalities in our county: 12 Hungarian, 18 Roma, 5 Slovak, 3 Russian, 11 Ruthenian, 4 Romanian, 3 Jewish, 2 German and one Polish, Czech, Armenian, Belarusian, Azerbaijani.

The first efforts to diminish our linguistic rights were made in 2014, when the former president fled the country. One of the first decisions of the newly formed parliamentary majority was to cancel the law on the use of languages claiming that the procedure for its consideration and adoption established by the Constitution was violated. The international public reacted immediately to the events, first of all, governments of the countries with a significant number of national communities living on the territory of Ukraine.

The adopted law kicked up huge dust both domestically and internationally. Hungary was the strongest in its opposition to restricting the education of Transcarpathian Hungarians in their mother tongue. One of the most important countermeasures of the Hungarian government is the declaration not to support Ukrainian proposals and the issues important for Ukraine in international organizations until the situation concerning education in mother tongue acceptable for the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia is established. For many years, Article 7 of the Ukrainian Law on Education has been the main topic of ministerial visits, intergovernmental consultations, debates in the European Parliament, decision of the Venice Commission, international conferences, round tables.

As we have seen, after the adoption of the Law on Education, the leadership in Kyiv has continued its policy of restricting minority rights. In December 2017, another bill was published categorizing the population of Ukraine on the basis of ethnicity.

Those nations that do not have a state or a mother country in the world are considered to be indigenous peoples, for example, the Crimean Tatars. According to this classification, the Hungarians are not indigenous inhabitants of Transcarpathia, only a settled nation, since they have a mother country (!).

While the Ukrainian state provides tuition in the mother tongue for those belonging to the first group, representatives of the settled nationalities can study in their mother tongue only in the initial stage of education. From 2023, the language of education in national minority schools will only be in the native language at primary school, and the annual amount of study time in the state language will be increased every year. By the end of high school, only the language and literature subject would remain in Hungarian. The language of higher education will be exclusively the state language.

Rights of the media are restricted to the extent that all printed and electronic press products are also translated into Ukrainian.

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As we can see, the Transcarpathian Hungarians might not have ever been in such a difficult situation as they are now. The struggle for surviving as a national minority goes on in Transcarpathia.

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