

# The impact of Ukraine's crisis on migratory flows and Hungary's kin-state politics

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# THE IMPACT OF UKRAINE'S CRISIS ON MIGRATORY FLOWS AND HUNGARY'S KIN-STATE POLITICS

Ágnes Erőss, Katalin Kovály and Patrik Tátrai

## INTRODUCTION

The Ukrainian crisis that emerged in 2014 filled the editorials of leading newspapers worldwide. The pro-European Euro-maidan protest heightened the tension dividing Ukraine to its breaking point (Karácsonyi et al. 2014). Following deadly clashes in Kiev, the Russian-friendly president Viktor Yanukovich escaped the country. The newly appointed Ukrainian government not only had to deal with a devastating economic situation, but soon also had to tackle the loss of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Since the eruption of armed conflict two non-recognized puppet states have been established in Eastern Ukraine with Luhansk and Donetsk as their centres. The main goals of the Euromaidan, namely getting rid of corruption and putting the country's economy on a fast track, seemed to fall behind, while the devaluation of Hryvna, the unleashed inflation, or the sevenfold increase in gas prices laid extreme burdens on the population.

This paper focuses on Transcarpathia, the westernmost district of Ukraine sharing borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. Transcarpathia was part of the Hungarian Kingdom before 1919 and between 1939 and 1944; furthermore, ca. 12 per cent of its population is ethnic Hungarian, which explains its close connections with Hungary as well as

Hungary's political interest in the region. Although located more than 1000 km from the Donbas, the Euromaidan, and the armed conflict in the Donbas region, hit Transcarpathia heavily as well. Either to avoid military conscription and/or to secure their families' subsistence, thousands of Transcarpathians have migrated to the neighbouring countries or to the European Union (Józwiak and Piechowska 2016, Drbohlav and Seidlová 2016).

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it briefly reveals how recent political events (Euromaidan, Russian takeover in Crimea, Donbas conflict) have affected Transcarpathia, its ethnic Hungarian population and the emigration from Transcarpathia to Hungary. Second, it presents in what ways the Ukraine crisis have affected the Hungarian kin-state politics. We argue that the current situation posed a serious challenge to the Hungarian kin-state politics that was rearticulated in 2010. By presenting some of the policy measures launched by the Hungarian government, we intend to shed light on the complex, sometimes contradictory, nature of Hungary's kin-state politics which simultaneously aims to foster well-being of transborder Hungarian communities in their homelands, and to encourage ethnic Hungarians' resettlement to Hungary.

### **HUNGARY'S KIN-STATE AND DIASPORA POLITICS AFTER 2010**

Soon after right-wing Fidesz came into power in Hungary in 2010, it initiated a comprehensive shift in kin-state politics and diaspora politics, which was summarized in a novel policy document, titled Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad (MPAJ 2011). While the document states that a major goal of post-2010 kin-state politics is to enhance prosperity of Hungarian communities in their homeland (both in economic and cultural terms), it also argues that Hungary

*cannot and does not intend to resist international trends of increasing mobility (...) Hungary and the neighbouring*

*countries have to strive to achieve positive economic developments in the region, which will motivate both younger and older generations to stay and work in their homelands (MPAJ 2011, p. 13).*

That sentence echoes the long-standing dilemma of Hungarian kin-state politics: whether to help transboundary Hungarian communities to stay in their homeland or encourage their migration to Hungary to satisfy the country's demographic and labour needs. Since the democratic transition all political forces in Hungary have explicitly supported the first goal; however, some of the measures implemented implicitly contributed instead to the resettlement of transborder Hungarians to Hungary.

The interrelatedness and conflicting interests of Hungary's foreign policy, migration policy, kin-state and diaspora politics has been studied exhaustively (Brubaker 1996, Csörgő and Goldgeier 2004, Kántor 2006, Fox 2007, Çağlar and Gereöffy 2008, Fesichmidt and Zakariás 2010, Bárdi 2011). With kin-state politics lacking a clear, one-way road, policies serving both directions instead exist in parallel. As Çağlar and Gereöffy rightly noted:

*it is the controversies in Hungarian diaspora politics which impeded the development and the implementation of a comprehensive migration policy in Hungary (Çağlar and Gereöffy 2008, p. 333).*

Hungarian kin-state policies have been subject to ongoing academic and political debates, especially since the amendment to the Act on Electoral Procedure (adopted in 2012), which allows Hungarian citizens living abroad to participate in Hungarian parliamentary elections. As studies (in keeping with our recent field experiences) have pointed out, this might be seen as a mere export of home affairs to the transborder Hungarian communities (Pogonyi 2013, Waterbury 2014, Nagy 2014).

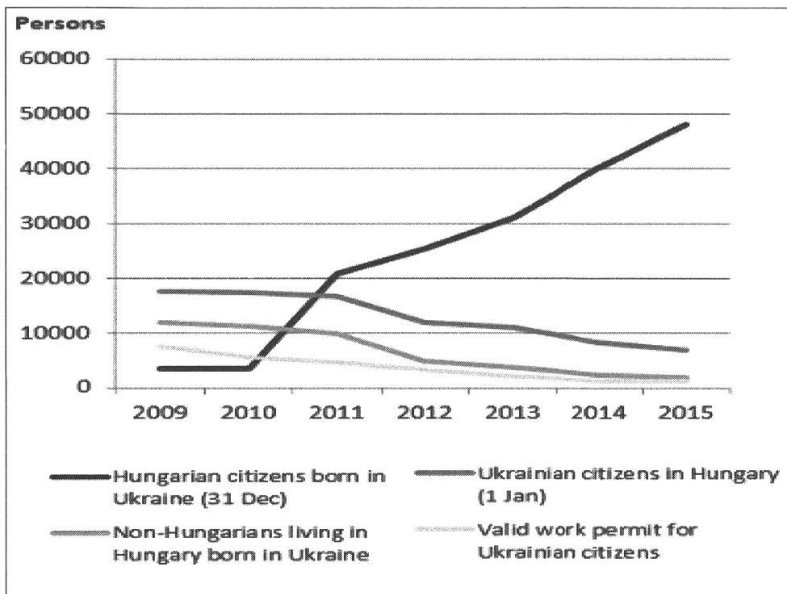


Figure 1: Migration from Ukraine to Hungary, 2009–2015

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

The amendment of the Hungarian Citizenship Law, which came into force in January 2011, is one of the most important policy measures following 2010. The amendment made it possible for people residing in the former territory of the Kingdom of Hungary to acquire Hungarian citizenship without residing in Hungary. Anybody is eligible for preferential (re)naturalisation who, or whose ancestors, held Hungarian citizenship once, and who proves his/her knowledge of the Hungarian language – thus the Law does not exclude individuals with non-Hungarian ethnic background from the benefits if they are able to speak Hungarian. Also in Ukraine, this new law has had its effect, even though Ukraine does not recognize dual citizenship.

In fact, obtaining Hungarian citizenship and holding a Hungarian passport has become a common strategy not only for Hungarians, but Ukrainians as well, owing special importance to the novel regulation. However, the possession of Hungarian citizenship and passport catalysed large-scale emigration of ethnic Hungarians after the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, which seriously challenged Hungary's envisioned plan and enforced instant actions. In the following, before describing the newly installed policy measures, we will outline how the current Ukrainian geopolitical events

and Hungary's kin-state politics influenced the migratory flows from Ukraine/Transcarpathia to Hungary.

### **MIGRATION FROM UKRAINE TO HUNGARY**

Migration from Ukraine to Hungary is geographically concentrated: 90% of the migrants come from Transcarpathia (Kincses and Karácsonyi 2010). Since 70% have an ethnic Hungarian background and 97% are able to speak Hungarian, ethnic migration is an essential characteristic of human mobility between Ukraine and Hungary (Feischmidt and Zakariás 2010). Furthermore, since Hungary is the only non-Slavic speaking country among the Western neighbours of Ukraine, it attracts less Ukrainians than the other Visegrad Four countries, especially the Czech Republic and Poland.

Official statistics show that migration of Ukrainian citizens to Hungary has decreased since the global economic crisis in 2009 (Figure 1). This contradicts the fact that thousands of men have escaped to Hungary to avoid conscription since 2014<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, according to the statistics on birth place the number of people born in Ukraine doubled in the last years from around 20,000 in 2011 to 48,000 in 2015. This statistical contradiction for the post-2011 period can be traced back to effects of preferential (re)naturalization.

Due to this regulation, approximately 70,000 new Hungarian citizenships were granted to Ukrainian citizens between January 2011 and April 2014 (Soltész and Zimmerer 2014, p. 125), another 79,000 applications were submitted by June 2016. This means that applications for Hungarian citizenship from Ukraine have reached 149,000 (Kántor 2016), which corresponds approximately to the number of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine according to the 2001 census. This implies two conclusions: (1) since according to the last estimates the number of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine fell to 140,000 by 2011 due to the high rate of emigration, Hungarian citizenship must have been applied for by tens of thousands of non-Hungarians;

and (2) more applications were submitted within two years between April 2014 and June 2016 than in the previous three years. This indicates that gaining Hungarian citizenship became a general strategy (mostly in Transcarpathia) to avoid the military draft and escape economic difficulties triggered by the unrest in Eastern Ukraine. All in all, the armed conflict in Donbas region had a severe impact on migration trends reflected by statistics on birth place (Figure 1).

### **HUNGARIAN KIN-STATE POLICY MEASURES IN TRANSCARPATHIA**

Due to the devastating economic breakdown and the ongoing war in Donbas, everyday living circumstances deteriorated rapidly in Transcarpathia, affecting the Hungarian community as well as non-Hungarians equally. Since one of the key elements of Hungary's kin-state politics is to foster the well-being and safety of the transborder Hungarian communities (MPAJ 2011), the Hungarian government intensified its activity in Ukraine, which can be divided into two categories: aid and policy measures.

In harmony with other V4 and EU countries, the Hungarian state, different Hungarian churches and NGOs arranged humanitarian aid and rehabilitation programmes for victims and survivors from the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis. The aid was not dedicated only to the Transcarpathian Hungarian community, it reached beyond the boundaries of Transcarpathia: for instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade offered 100 million HUF to Donbas refugees who resettled in different regions in Ukraine (Józwiak and Lugosi 2016, p. 128). Furthermore, numerous Hungarian municipalities organized charity balls collecting food, detergents, medication, clothes etc. and shipped it to their Transcarpathian twin town.

The second category contains a great variety of policy instruments. Interestingly enough, while the Donbas conflict and

its consequences (most of all the rapidly decreasing Hungarian population) seriously threatened the envisaged goal of a prosperous Hungarian community in the homeland, it also meant an opportunity for Hungary to strengthen its power position in Transcarpathia. Even though it is quite difficult to separate, we try to structure the applied policy tools according to their proposed target groups.

One part of the policy measures is designed for individuals, including scholarships for higher education in Hungary and in the homeland, trainee programmes and student exchanges. The majority of such measures already existed, but – according to interview data – since 2014 applicants from Transcarpathia have been favoured. One of the novel elements worth mentioning is a salary supplement. This procedure was introduced in the 2015/2016 school year and at first it was granted to those teachers and other administrative staff that work with Hungarian classes in Transcarpathia. Individual applications for this grant are collected in the offices of one of the Hungarian ethnic party's foundations. The aim of the salary supplement is to offer better living circumstances for those who work in Hungarian schools and to reduce the emigration of teachers, which is by now a common problem in Transcarpathian schools<sup>2</sup>. Later on, a series of government declarations was accepted to offer similar individual financial aid for doctors, nurses, and art teachers, who offer patient care, courses etc. in Hungarian. Given that neither Hungarian citizenship nor any statement of belonging to the Hungarian community is a precondition, the subsidy cannot be considered as ethnically exclusionary. Rather it mirrors the double endeavour to look after the co-ethnic community in need, while at the same time, next to the rather easily accessible Hungarian citizenship, offers a tempting additional reason for non-Hungarians to set up links with the local Hungarian community.

The second group of policy actions is of material nature and serves the needs of the community as a whole. Since 2014,



but especially from 2015, on numerous renovation projects have been launched that were exclusively financed by the Hungarian state. To offer one example: in 2015, the dormitory of the Uzhhorod National University (UNU) in which mainly students enrolled to the Hungarian faculty reside, was renovated completely with financial support from Hungary. Since the renovation (cost appr. 1 million EUR), the dormitory hosts students from Ukrainian-language faculties as well. Furthermore, students pursuing studies in the Hungarian faculty have many more possibilities to travel all over Europe or to participate in student exchange programmes than peers in Ukrainian-language faculties. According to Sándor Spenik, the director of Ukrainian-Hungarian Education and Cultural Institute at UNU, the Hungarian language programme at UNU might attract students from Eastern Hungary in the future, because tuition fees and the living costs in Uzhhorod are lower and more affordable for many families in less wealthy regions of Hungary. Independently of a future realization of such a plan, the idea points towards the notion of the Carpathian basin as a more integrated space envisioned in the new Hungarian kin-state policy document (MPAJ 2011)<sup>3</sup>.

Apart from the development of the Hungarian Department of Uzhhorod National University, the Transcarpathian Hungarian College in Berehove, numerous schools, kindergartens or small health care units were refurbished in the last couple of years. Because Ukraine's economy is in critical condition and regional funds or other support are very limited, especially since the Euromaidan events, such assistance is highly appreciated by most of the local inhabitants, regardless of ethnicity.

Furthermore, the Hungarian Government has implemented what is known as *gesture politics*. The term – used by István Grezsa, government commissioner for cross-border relations between Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county and the region of Transcarpathia – refers to initiatives and projects financed by Hungary aiming at – inter alia – fostering the Ukrainian national culture. Generally launching such projects would be

the responsibility of the Ukrainian central or regional government and/or administration. A telling example is the erection of the statue of Taras Shevchenko, a Ukrainian national poet, in Berehove. According to István Grezsa's evaluation, the financial subsidies from Hungary have contributed to the fact that «today Hungarians in Transcarpathia are an unavoidable political factor».



Figure 2: Poster advertising a Hungarian language course in Mukacheve (May 2016), Photo by Pál Popovics

Hungary's influence has not only been emerging in the political field: as we have already mentioned, Hungarian citizenship has become a golden card to avoid military draft and find an easier way to emigrate. Yet another factor is the situation on the labour market in Hungary. Similarly to other V4 countries, Hungary, due to large-scale emigration, is also facing shortage in its labour force. The missing labour force could be substituted with migrants and refugees who have been arriving in the EU in the last couple of years, but the government consequently refuses to accept non-European immigrants<sup>4</sup>.

Under such circumstances, Transcarpathian Ukrainians, geographically and culturally closer to Hungarians, have become

valuable assets. The Hungarian Government already implemented the necessary legal amendments to be prepared to the reception of tens of thousands of guest workers from non-EU-member states (preferentially from Ukraine) (Élő 2016). While in the case of ethnic Hungarians, acquiring Hungarian citizenship has become pure formality, for non-Hungarian-speaking Transcarpathians the proof of language proficiency means the only impediment<sup>5</sup>. In order to meet this deficiency, the Hungarian state/government organized free-of-charge language courses in 105 places throughout the region of Transcarpathia with 30 participants in each class in 2015-2016. The increasing interest in the Hungarian language has triggered business interest as well: Hungarian language courses are mushrooming in private language schools all around Transcarpathia (Figure 2).

We assume that the motivation of Hungary is quite clear: to attract the minimally necessary labour force. Before the preferential naturalization, Hungary was more of a blind spot on the map of Ukrainians seeking for a job abroad due to the serious linguistic barrier (Hungarian is not a Slavic language, while Polish, Czech or Slovak is not that difficult to comprehend for a Ukrainian speaker). In the quest for Ukrainian labour force by the Visegrad countries, Hungary, with the easily accessible citizenship, might be able to counterbalance its previous disadvantageous position.

The above mentioned examples might illustrate that the financial and political support invested by Hungary directly buys the country influence and effectively contributes to the implementation of certain parts of the country's kin-state policies. Moreover, via diversified gesture politics, the country is not merely nurturing good neighbourly and interethnic relations but – after the weakening of Ukraine owing to the post-Maidan events – taking actions to recruit an active labour force among Transcarpathians.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the complex social-economical-political situation in the Ukrainian-Hungarian context that emerged as a consequence of the recent geopolitical events in Ukraine. Triggered by the unrest in Eastern Ukraine, the military mobilization, and the deep economic recession, the intensification of – already high – emigration from Transcarpathia is a most spectacular process regardless of ethnic belonging of the region's residents. The dynamics of migration is also fuelled by Hungary's kin-state politics, especially the preferential (re)naturalization simplifying the acquisition of Hungarian citizenship. The latter calls attention to the role of policies implemented by Hungary that fundamentally influence regional geopolitics and social processes thereby affecting individual and family livelihood strategies and migration patterns.

The amendment of the Hungarian citizenship law radically changed the possibilities of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community. The availability of a Hungarian passport increased their emigration towards Hungary and opened the floor for free employment in Western Europe. Therefore, the traditional dilemma of Hungarian kin-state politics came to the surface again: Whereas its main goal is to foster transborder Hungarian communities' well-being in their homeland, their migration to Hungary would easily satisfy the country's serious demographic and labour needs. The Hungarian government elaborated several economic and cultural programs and projects for the Transcarpathian Hungarians, mostly in the past three years. Nevertheless, since the migration is the new norm due to the changing social and economic conditions, the above projects that aim at supporting people to stay in their homeland, are not appropriate anymore to fulfill their goal; moreover, the preferential naturalization generated an extensive emigration from Transcarpathia.

The numerous projects and measures, occasionally the takeover of some of the Ukrainian state functions – favouring not

only the Hungarians but the whole population of Transcarpathia – simultaneously serve the Hungarian kin-state politics, the expansion of Hungary's power positions in Ukraine and the enticement of Ukrainian workforce to Hungary. However, apart from Hungary also Poland and the Czech Republic introduced administrative and legal preferences (e.g. Karta Polaka in Poland) to intensively recruit labour force and attract students. Hence we argue that, despite the rotund political statements (mainly by Poland) supporting Ukraine, the western neighbours of the weakened Ukraine have unobtrusively made attempts to take advantage of the changing geopolitical circumstances in order to expand their influence to the western periphery of Ukraine and drain human resources.

#### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>The outbreak of the Yugoslav war triggered the same effect: Vojvodina Hungarian men escaped to Hungary in the early 1990s (Váradí et al. 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Average salary in Transcarpathia was 3419 Hryvna (about 130 euro) as of 01. 01. 2016.

<sup>3</sup>Partnership and cooperation with the neighbouring countries is essential, because neither the problems nor opportunities of the Carpathian Basin stop at the state borders. The sustainable development and competitiveness of the Carpathian Basin contribute to the prosperity of all communities living in the region, including Hungarian communities abroad (MPAJ 2011, p. 13).

<sup>4</sup><http://www.euronews.com/2016/07/19/hungary-resists-foreign-workers-amid-labour-shortages>

<sup>5</sup>However, the number of Ukrainian and Russian citizens who paid for fake language proficiency and fake Hungarian ancestors to gain Hungarian citizenship is estimated to tens of thousands ([http://index.hu/gazdasag/2016/09/22/kettos\\_allampolgarsag-biznisz\\_200\\_vadlott\\_kisvardan/](http://index.hu/gazdasag/2016/09/22/kettos_allampolgarsag-biznisz_200_vadlott_kisvardan/)).

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