


ARTICLE

Small but Salient: The Securitization of Ukraine's Ethnic Hungarian Minority

Péter Balogh^{1,2}  and Katalin Kovály^{3,4}

¹ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Budapest, Hungary; ²HUN-REN CERS Institute for Regional Studies, Transdanubian Research Department, Pécs, Hungary; ³HUN-REN RCAES Geographical Institute, Budapest, Hungary and ⁴Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, Berehove, Ukraine

Corresponding author: Péter Balogh; Email: peter.balogh@ttk.elte.hu

Abstract

This article analyzes the key factors behind the securitization of Ukraine's small ethnic Hungarian minority in recent years and how they affect local interethnic as well as interstate relations. It draws on elite interviews conducted in the Ukrainian-Hungarian borderland, and other sources including speech acts. Four underlying factors were identified. The first two are Hungary's kin-state aid and dual citizenship law, which have empowered Ukraine's ethnic Hungarians, with the community appearing larger and potentially more threatening in the eyes of the majority population than its mere size justifies. The other two factors are Ukraine's language policy and Transcarpathia's future being subject of conspiracy theories in light of Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine, which have negatively affected interethnic ties, although somewhat less in the borderland than between Hungary and Ukraine at large. In Transcarpathia, our different informants had diverging perceptions of who is stirring tensions but agreed that actors from outside their region were to blame. Overall, what has emerged is a clash of Hungary's kin-state politics and Ukraine's nation-state-building efforts. The article ends with more general implications for kin- and host-state relations in times of conflict.

Keywords: minority securitization; kin-state politics; minority salience; group homogeneity; Transcarpathia

Introduction

Ukraine's small ethnic Hungarian community has received considerable attention not just in its host and kin state but even in international media ever since Russia's occupation of Crimea (Kates 2014; Mirovalev 2018; Wilson 2018), and even more since the attempted full-scale invasion (Solomon 2022; Chastand 2022; Stern and Morris 2022; The Economist 2023; France24 2023). While Hungary has been committed to support its ethnic kin, Ukraine's Hungarian minority has been accused of separatism and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has opened several criminal proceedings against its organizations. Thus, one can undoubtedly speak of the securitization of this community. However, few studies have hitherto analyzed this case in greater detail, which especially in light of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine deserves more scrutiny. Hence, this article aims to explain how and why the Hungarian minority has been securitized, and how this plays out in the borderland and beyond. More generally, the study adds to unraveling the broader questions under what conditions ethnic identities become accentuated and kin-state politics contested.

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The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces the conceptual framework; i.e., the links between minority securitization and kin-state politics on the one hand, and minority salience and group homogeneity on the other. This is followed by a section briefly presenting the study area, our fieldwork, and the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. The subsequent, long section begins by briefly reviewing the deterioration of Ukrainian-Hungarian relations in recent years, then analyzing each underlying factor in a separate subsection. The article conventionally ends with the conclusions.

Conceptual Framework

Minority Securitization and Kin-state Politics

A recent state-of-the-field article (Waterbury 2020) argued that while we already know quite a lot about the drivers and consequences of kin-state politics in the cultural and political fields, their impact on regional security and stability has much less been researched. Thus, “careful work needs to be done to more precisely establish the conditions under which kin-state politics constitute a security threat” that brings together “a more ground level perspective of how kin-state policies are perceived, utilized, and/or instrumentalized by their intended subjects with a critical understanding of how the “game” of kin-state politics is played within the home state and the kin-state” (ibid., 800). Relatedly, kin-state politics is a two-edged sword that depending on the circumstances can either alleviate or amplify conflict, although the latter is more rare (ibid., 804–805).

By investigating exactly these issues in the Ukrainian-Hungarian context, this study is a response to the above call. Yet as we deal with a case where tensions prevail over open conflict, more attention is paid to perceptions and the construction of a security threat. The latter process has famously been dubbed “securitization” by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, 25), who describe it as state actors transforming subjects from regular political issues into matters of security, thus enabling extraordinary means to be used in the name of security. Their approach aims to understand “who securitizes (securitizing actor), on what issues (threats), for whom (referent object), why, with what results, and not least, under what conditions” (ibid., 32). Issues that become securitized do not necessarily represent such that are essential to the objective survival of a state, but rather refer to topics that some actors were successful in constructing into an existential problem (Arcudi 2006). As some misconceptions surround the Hungarian community in Ukraine, we would also like to bring in the growing literature on minority salience to the study of minority securitization and kin-state politics.

Minority Salience and Group Homogeneity

The literature on minority salience has shown that the size of minorities is often overestimated by the given majority and sometimes even by the minorities themselves (Kardosh et al. 2022). A type of innumeracy, this phenomenon has been observed in relation to all kinds of small subgroups – ranging from millionaires through sexual minorities to religious communities (Orth 2022) – although the focus is often on ethnic groups. In addition to the overestimation of minorities and the concomitant underestimation of the given majority, a study found that “[p]erceptions of group size are ... unrelated to recent changes in [actual] group size” (Kunovich 2017, 479). Different explanations have been provided for minority salience. Kunovich (ibid.) concluded that “[r]ace and perceived discrimination play important roles in shaping perceptions of group size.” Similarly, but more broadly, Gallagher (2003, 381) found that “the media, residential segregation, racial stereotypes, and perception of group threat each contribute to whites’ underestimation of the size of the white population and the inflation of group size among racial minorities.”

Whatever the reasons behind it, minority salience can have considerable consequences. A number of studies have shown that those overestimating the size of minorities often have a more hostile attitude toward them (Hooghe and de Vroome 2015; Strabac 2011; Herda 2013). Similarly, “[t]he extent to which minority populations are perceived as a kind of threat is also related to perceived proportions, though the direction of causality cannot be determined” (Nadeau, Niemi,

and Levine 1993, 332). Relatedly, innumeracy has been shown to lead to decreased support for diversity-promoting policies (Kardosh et al. 2022) among majorities and minorities.

Studies on minority salience have hitherto been less specific on the conditions and periods under which innumeracy prevails. It is therefore useful to link minority salience with studies on the group homogeneity effect. These have shown that in terms of collective aspirations, the in-group (or own-group) is often conceived as more heterogeneous than the out-group by members of both group types (Shilo et al. 2019). However, this is less the case with minorities, which are typically perceived as more homogenous than the majority – again, by members of both group types (Castano and Yzerbyt 1998). For minorities in particular, perceptions of in-group homogeneity have been attributed to feelings of being threatened, for which one strategy is to conceive of their group as a closely-knit one (ibid., 222). Further, in-group homogeneity is particularly salient in times of major changes affecting the group, such as political transitions or getting new recruits (Brown and Wootton-Millward 1993). In our context, the war in Ukraine (2014–) can be seen as such a major political transformation or even shock. Moreover, the salience and perceived homogeneity of certain ethnic minorities can also be affected by kin-state politics, as we will see.

The Ukrainian-Hungarian Borderland and the Fieldwork

Our study area consists of the westernmost edge of Ukraine and the easternmost region of Hungary (Figure 1). Included in the Hungarian part of Austria-Hungary up until WWI, this territory has been divided by a state border since 1920 (except during WWII). Ukraine's westernmost county – Transcarpathia (Zakarpattia Oblast) – saw numerous changes in its state affiliation throughout the 20th century (Magocsi 2015), further adding to its already previously rich multicultural heritage that continues to leave its marks on the region. The single largest ethnic minority is that of the Hungarians, but Transcarpathia until recently also hosted sizeable Jewish and Russian populations and continues to host tens of thousands of Romanians and Roma. Yet in recent decades and especially years, the county has become more homogenous ethnically. This is related to the high levels of emigration and international commuting among all the ethnic groups present (including the majority Ukrainians), but over the past decade also to the immigration of Ukrainians to Transcarpathia from other parts of Ukraine. The latter include internally displaced persons (IDPs) from across the country who in ever growing numbers find refuge in what remains a largely peaceful region, hosting 410,000 IDPs already by August 2022 (OCHA 2022). Despite the increasing ethnic homogenization of Transcarpathia, it was a recurring point in our interviews that most natives of the region – including the majority Ukrainians – traditionally take pride in its multicultural character. In economic terms, Transcarpathia is lagging among Ukraine's oblasts: strategically important during Soviet times as a military etc. outpost toward west, following Ukraine's independence the region lost in importance (Panyi, Moroz, and Szczygiel 2018) and, consequently, investments (Iegoshyna 2021).

The Hungary side of the border has long been more homogenous ethnically, although by 2021 it had already seen a modest influx of Ukrainians. Since February 2022 a clear majority of Ukrainian refugees only transit through Hungary's northeastern parts, and many through the country at large (UNHCR 2022, 20). Nevertheless, the number of Ukrainian citizens in the borderland and in Hungary as a whole has increased in recent years (Kincses and Tóth 2020) and may now be higher than that of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine. Yet despite Hungary's ambiguous position toward Ukraine, few tensions have been reported in relation to the presence of Ukrainians on its territory. The same cannot quite be said regarding Hungarian presence in Ukraine.

Fieldwork in the Borderland

To learn more about the emergence of the “Hungarian question” in Ukraine (Shtogrin 2018), we undertook fieldwork on both sides of the Ukraine-Hungary border in November 2021 that mostly consisted of conducting deep interviews with altogether 23 local and regional elites in the spheres of

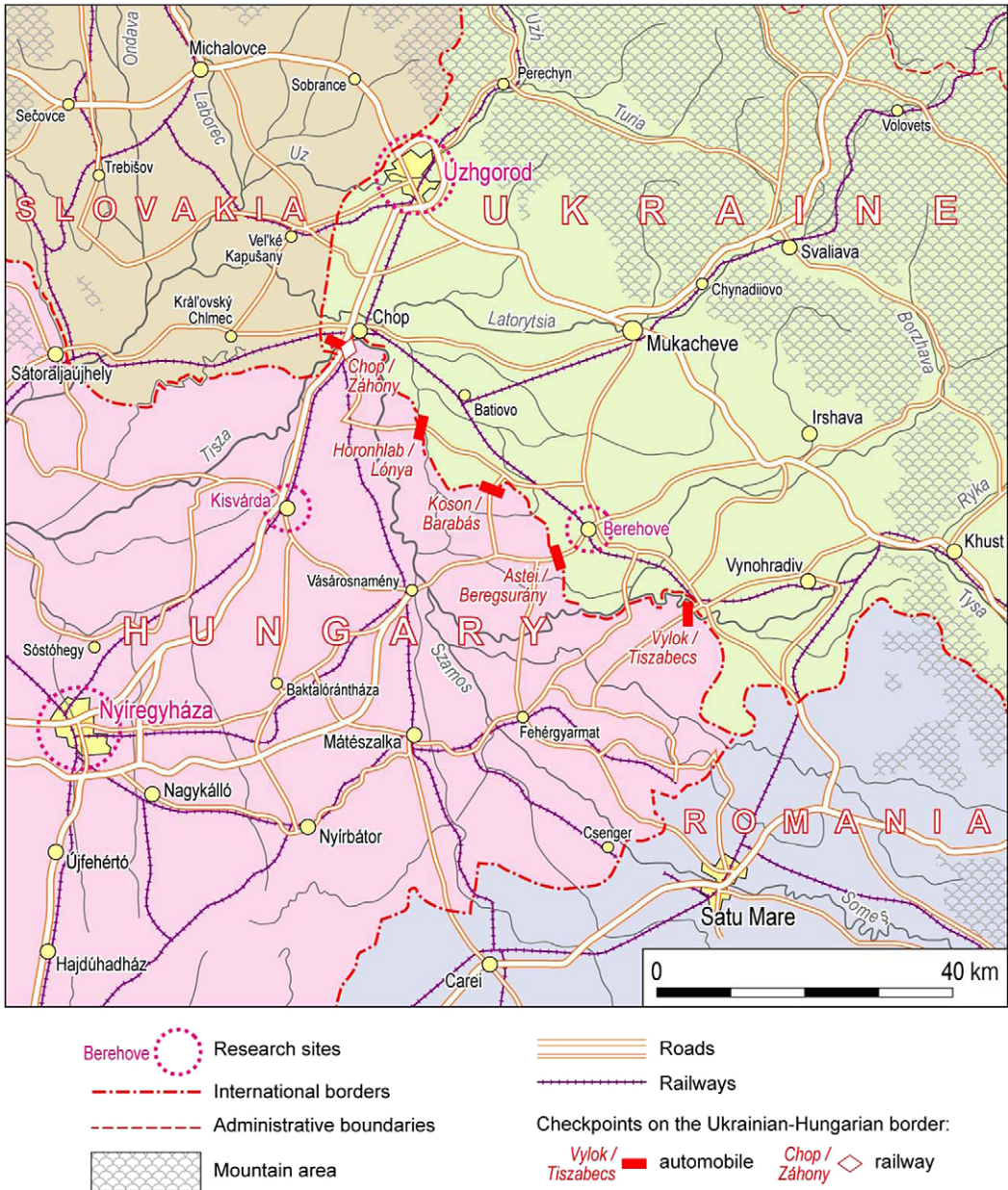


Figure 1. Map of the Ukrainian-Hungarian Borderland Indicating the Research Sites.
 Source: created by Dmytro Vortman.

public administration, politics, academia, civil society, and business. Moreover, secondary sources were consulted. Our semi-structured interviews typically lasted 60–90 minutes, covering a wide array of aspects affecting the borderland but generally aimed at eliciting attitudes on intergroup relations. The interviewees on the Ukraine side consisted of eight ethnic Hungarians and six Ukrainians (one of whom also identified with the Ruthenian culture). It should be mentioned that none of the Ukrainians worked at a Hungary-supported organization. On the Hungary side, which until 2021 hosted few ethnic Ukrainians, our respondents were eight Hungarians and a representative of the Ukrainian community in Hungary. Unfortunately, only five of our informants were

female, which somewhat reflects the gender relations prevalent in the region (at least our female respondents also held high positions). We would of course have liked a more even ethnic and gender balance among our interviewees, but a few persons we approached were reluctant to speak to us. On the brighter side, we had a good mix of age groups: while never asking our informants about their age, we estimate that they were in the range of late twenties up to early seventies (with the majority being middle-aged). Moreover, everyone we spoke with had agreed to the interviews being recorded. The conversations with Hungarians took place in Hungarian, while most of the Ukrainians were interviewed in their native language and two of them in English. Four cities served as our main loci for the interviews (Figure 1): on the Ukraine side, the regional administrative center Uzhhorod, with a one-digit percentage of ethnic Hungarian presence, and the border-town of Berehove that had an almost even balance of Ukrainians and Hungarians in 2021. On the Hungary side, our two main sites were comparable in size with those on the Ukraine side, but beyond the county seat Nyíregyháza and the city of Kiszárda two interviews were conducted in small border-towns.

The Hungarian Minority in Ukraine

According to the latest census in Ukraine that took place in 2001, the number of ethnic Hungarians was 156,600, implying a humble 0.3% share of the country's entire population (SSCU 2003a). At the same time, almost all these citizens (151,500) lived in Transcarpathia, where their proportion reached 12.1% among the region's 1,254,600 residents (SSCU 2003b). By 2021, one of our informants – an official representative of the community – estimated the size of this group to have shrunk by 25–30% (R1). Considering that Transcarpathia's population was officially rated at 1,250,129 that year (SSSU 2021, 21), the decrease implies that around 110,000 ethnic Hungarians lived in the Oblast in 2021. By March 2023, this minority was estimated to have declined by a further 20–30%, which is of course related to the ongoing war and concomitant increased emigration primarily to Hungary (Shenouda 2023). This means that no more than about 80,000 ethnic Hungarians must have lived in the region in March 2023 – an estimation backed up by another leading representative of the community (cited in *The Economist* 2023) who rated its size in the range of 75,–85,000 in the same month. It may be worth noting though that some of the recent arrivals in Hungary are known to return to their homes in Transcarpathia on a more or less regular basis (UNHCR 2022, 20).

At the same time, the numerical decrease of the Hungarian minority has been coupled with its increased spatial concentration within Ukraine and Transcarpathia, where the community is now largely reduced to the area immediately bordering Hungary (Figure 2). According to an academic we talked to, “96% of all Hungarians in Ukraine nowadays live in that border-zone” (R2). Ukraine underwent administrative-territorial reforms in 2020 through which microregions were merged and reshaped, but a number of settlements in Transcarpathia still have an ethnic Hungarian majority. Indeed, the already-mentioned large influx of IDPs to the region has further decreased the share of ethnic Hungarians; thus, even if exact numbers are unknown at the moment, their proportion cannot be higher than a single-digit number among Transcarpathia's entire population and 0.2% of Ukraine's.

Real and perceived numerical presence can be two different things. Fedinec (2022, 38) notes that “the Hungarian minority is far more ‘visible’ in Ukraine than one might assume from their share in the country's population”, but does not elaborate this point in more detail. Yet indeed, as one of our ethnic Hungarian informants told us: Ukrainians “always believe there is a lot more of us than there actually is, owing to the level of organization ascribed to us” (R3). The high level of organization is manifest in the presence of numerous Hungarian-linked institutions in Ukraine. For instance, while none of the country's other minorities sustain any political party with an explicit ethnic profile, the Hungarians have been represented by two such organizations (KMKSZ and UMDSZ) ever since Ukraine's independence. Although one of the parties has recently been stronger than the other (see

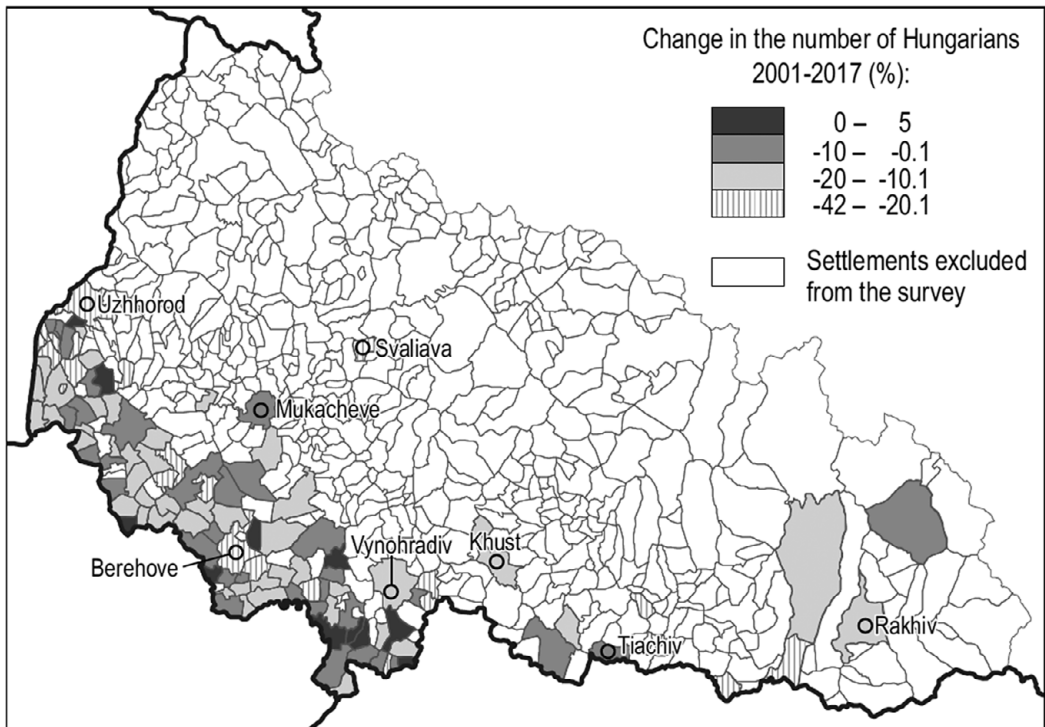


Figure 2. Map of the changes in the number of ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia, 2001–2017.
 Source: Tátrai et al. (2018, 119).

below), the fact that both still operate is a sign that the Hungarian minority may not be as homogenous as many might think. In any case, the overestimation of the minority's size is confirmed by a quantitative survey gathering 2,412 Ukrainian and Hungarian responses in Transcarpathia at two different points in time (Ferenc and Rákóczi 2020). It showed that the Ukrainian respondents thought the region would host an 18% share of ethnic Hungarians in 2016 and 22% in 2019 (*ibid.* 2020, 65). The Hungarian respondents were even more out of touch with reality as they rated their in-group's share at 23% in 2016 and at 30% in 2019. These figures should be compared to those presented above, according to which ethnic Hungarians composed about nine per cent of Transcarpathia's population in the late 2010s. Moreover, the increases in the estimated size of the minority in just three years is indicative of its growing salience in and outside the region, the reasons for which the remainder of this article will analyze.

The Deterioration of Ukrainian-Hungarian Relations

Ukrainian-Hungarian relations were on a positive track up until the mid-2010s (Hettyey 2023). As late as 2016, the meeting of the two prime ministers took place in a very friendly atmosphere (COPM 2016). Hungary's Viktor Orbán supported Ukraine's goal "to be part of the Western world, and to occupy its well-deserved place in the community of the EU," emphasizing that "Hungary regards Ukraine's sovereignty as the most important issue, that it respects it unconditionally, and that it is ready to give assistance to Ukraine in reinforcing its sovereignty" (*ibid.*). His Ukrainian counterpart said the "relations between the two countries are very positive, and there are good opportunities for enhancing cooperation," adding that "for Ukraine national minorities are an asset, and Ukrainians are proud of the fact that there is also a Hungarian national minority living in their country" (*ibid.*).

Back in 1991, Hungary was the first state to represent itself with an ambassador in Kyiv and to have established a basic treaty with Ukraine (Paládi 2021). This was preceded by months of diplomatic negotiations on several bilateral issues, one of which was the mutual provision of individual and even collective rights to national minorities (including the preservation of ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious identities). In the midst of these meetings, Ukrainian representatives did at one point object to two elements of the draft treaty, one concerning collective rights and the other the relations between the respective minorities and their kin states (*ibid.*). In the end, however, references to collective rights were included in the signed bilateral treaty. Efforts were also made to simplify the crossing of the two states' shared boundary. This initially overall positive atmosphere and its later change was nicely captured by one of our informants, a representative of the Ukrainian minority in Hungary:

The nineties were so wonderful: the relationship between Hungary and Ukraine was developing so nicely – it was a pleasure to see. Everyone was affectionate and friendly. As the years passed, it was just getting worse and worse. I don't know who or what sort of politics are behind this, but it certainly doesn't correspond to the desire of the average person. (R4)

Accordingly, the remainder of this section will analyze the main factors leading to the gradual deterioration of Ukrainian-Hungarian relations. Based on our empirical material and other sources, we argue that these revolve around the following four dimensions; namely, the Hungarian dual citizenship law, Hungary's kin-state politics toward Transcarpathia (western Ukraine), the Ukrainian language and education laws, and Transcarpathia's position amidst Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine.

Hungary's Dual Citizenship Law

Although to very different degrees, one development affecting Hungary's relations with its neighbors has been that since 2010 the former has made it much easier for its ethnic kin abroad to obtain Hungarian citizenship. This simplified naturalization procedure mostly concerns ethnic Hungarians in Hungary's neighboring countries, where their total number reaches around two million. Several neighbors have had difficulties objecting to the dual citizenship law as they follow more or less the same practice, but Slovakia (which hosts a much larger ethnic Hungarian minority than Ukraine) reacted by strongly limiting dual citizenship for its citizens (Hettyey 2023). Ukrainian regulations and practices on this have been less clear, with the country neither allowing but nor explicitly banning dual citizenship (DCR n.d.; Pushkaruk 2018). As one of our Ukrainian interview partners put it: “we have no law that allows it, but neither one that criminalizes it” (R5). Several conversations during our fieldtrip confirmed that Ukraine has many dual citizens, and not just among its Hungarian and Russian speakers. According to some, the legislation is deliberately kept vague also because many high-level elites (including MPs) hold another citizenship beyond Ukrainian.

Yet the granting of Hungarian passports to Ukrainian citizens has come to be framed as a national security threat in Ukraine. There, a video went viral in 2018 showing Hungary's consul in Berehove urging newly granted citizens to conceal the fact of their new attainment, soon resulting in his expulsion (UNIAN 2018). Ukraine's then-foreign minister Klimkin said that “[w]e are not at war with the Hungarians in the same way as we are with the Russian Federation” but “understand this situation as a threat to our national security, and we will be very tough” (*ibid.*). The passportization has also led the chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Foreign Affairs (cited in Pushkaruk 2018) as well as some Ukrainian analysts (Ryabinin 2018, 81) to fear a “Donbasization” scenario unfolding in Transcarpathia. Also, after visiting the region partly inhabited by ethnic Hungarians, Ukraine's President Zelenskiy stated at a press conference that “I want them to be Ukrainians. I want them to remember that they are a Hungarian minority ... But they should be Ukrainians. So that they would not want to accept those [Hungarian] passports” (cited in Iegoshyna 2021).

Adding to the insecurities is the fact that in recent years, Hungarian authorities have not been publicizing the exact number of newly naturalized citizens. Some commentators (Gál 2022) attribute this to the electoral system introduced by the now longstanding government coalition (FIDESZ–KDNP) that since 2014 entitles non-resident Hungarian citizens to participate in Hungary’s general elections. This has meant hundreds of thousands of new voters, the vast majority of whom are living in the neighboring states and overwhelmingly supporting the government – 96% in 2018, for instance (ibid.). Despite the recent lack of exact data on new Hungarian citizens, on the tenth anniversary of the dual citizenship law the Secretary of State for National Policy claimed that in ten years, over 1.1 million persons had obtained Hungarian citizenship (About Hungary 2020). Similarly, in March 2023 the Deputy State Secretary for National Policy spoke about 1,150,000 new citizens (Hungary Today 2023). Based on data presented below, those figures are unlikely to be exaggerations. They also need to be considered in light of the fact that Hungary itself has less than ten million residents.

In practical terms at least, the adoption of a Hungarian passport was throughout the past decade always going to be most attractive to citizens of especially Ukraine but also Serbia, for three reasons. Firstly, among Hungary’s seven neighbors those two have been the only ones to remain outside the European Union (EU). Secondly, Ukraine as well as Serbia have been considerably worse off economically than Hungary, which cannot be said about the latter’s other neighbors. Thirdly, the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea and easternmost Ukraine, although geographically distant from the Hungarian-inhabited parts of the country, may have further triggered ethnic Hungarians and others to strengthen their ties westward. These aspects are reflected in the statistics on naturalizations by Hungary, where the number of (former) citizens of Ukraine stands out when taking into account the small size of the Hungarian minority there. The latest public and official data in this regard are provided in a detailed report of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office titled “New Hungarian citizens” (KSH 2017). Accordingly, Hungary naturalized altogether 843,000 individuals between 1993–2015, among whom 708,000 during 2011–2015 (ibid., 3) which represents the peak period. The vast majority of them are native Hungarian speakers mostly living in the neighboring countries.

During 2011–2015 alone 94,431 (former) Ukrainian citizens obtained Hungarian citizenship, among whom only 6,092 lived in Hungary at the time (KSH 2017, 32). The remaining 88,339 persons were living abroad – in the vast majority of the cases most probably (still) in Ukraine. Within the five-year period each year recorded an increase, although the growth from 2013 to 2014 (when Russia invaded parts of Ukraine) and then to 2015 was not drastic. Since 89% of all naturalized (former) Ukrainian citizens spoke Hungarian as their mother tongue (ibid., 10), it is safe to presume that the lion’s share of those remaining in Ukraine lived in Transcarpathia, where – as seen above – the vast majority of the country’s ethnic Hungarians is concentrated. Based on the figures presented in the previous section, the Hungarian community there must have counted about 120,000 members around 2015 (the latest year for which we have official data on naturalizations). This means that up to three fourths of all ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine may have obtained a Hungarian passport by the end of 2015 – a higher proportion than in any other country outside Hungary. And the vast majority of these dual citizens live in a 30-kilometre-wide zone along the border to Hungary.

At the same time, not only ethnic Hungarians have adopted Hungarian citizenship in Ukraine. In fact, the criteria are loose enough so that persons with vague ties to the Hungarian nation fit them. This includes not just relatives (such as spouses or children) of a Hungarian citizen, but also individuals being able to present any official document of an ancestor who used to be Hungarian citizen. There is also a requirement to be able to speak a basic level of Hungarian. During the fieldwork in Transcarpathia we came across several language schools teaching Hungarian, attracting people looking for a job in Hungary or applying for Hungarian citizenship. Successful applicants need to have at least some skills in the language so they can take the Oath of Allegiance to Hungary (that is, not to the Hungarian nation). The latter is understandably controversial in Ukraine, where

some described not just that practice but the granting of Hungarian citizenship in general as a “systematic violation of Ukrainian law” (Pushkaruk 2018). At the same time, as referred to above, Ukrainian legislation does not enforce a ban on dual citizenship. As a Ukrainian political scientist suggested, “Hungary issues its passports to citizens of Ukraine despite the prohibition of dual citizenship and uses gaps in Ukrainian legislation” (Ryabinin 2018, 81). In any case, those are gaps that many different people in Transcarpathia have apparently taken advantage of. In the description of an ethnic Hungarian academic:

To the Hungarians it [the Hungarian passport] is a matter of national identity; thus, many have awaited it and taken advantage of it. To Ukrainians, it’s a survival tool with which they can more easily get a job in the EU. I think there are many with Hungarian ancestors who don’t really speak the language anymore, but for whom it [the passport] is important to be able to work abroad. Hence, many non-native Hungarians have obtained it. (R2)

As neither Ukraine nor – since 2016 – Hungary publicize the number of naturalizations or dual citizens in Ukraine, the figure has recently been subject to speculation and manipulation also in Russia. The topic of Russian influence in Transcarpathia is one that will be returned to, but regarding citizenship the following is of interest. About ten weeks into Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an article was circulating in Russian media (Lenta.ru 2022; Smirnova 2022) in which a Moscow-based political scientist speculated about a scenario of Hungary taking over Transcarpathia on the grounds of coming to protect its 300,000 citizens in the region. In reality, Hungary has not made any territorial claim on any state since 1946, nor has it shown any signs of planning to do that more recently. When it comes to the number of its citizens in Transcarpathia, the just-cited figure is very likely a deliberate overestimation. Even if every single ethnic Hungarian there held a Hungarian passport (which obviously cannot be the case), the entire community cannot – as described above – count more than a hundred thousand members. Moreover, even if that passport is also attractive to non-Hungarians in Transcarpathia, it is unlikely that over 200,000 of them have obtained it – especially people remaining in the region. As a Ukrainian interviewee explained, “I know people who got the [Hungarian] passport, but none of them is living in Hungary but in Great Britain and so on” (R5). Relatedly, Transcarpathian labor as well as students have been actively and – rather unfortunately for Transcarpathia – successfully recruited by the Visegrád countries over the past decade (Tátraí, Erőss, and Kovály 2017).

In sum, to many Transcarpathians the Hungarian passport has been and surely remains a springboard to Central and Western Europe. At the same time, its granting has been framed as a national security threat in Ukraine. Beyond passportization, similar fears have been fed by Hungary’s additional engagements in Transcarpathia.

Hungary’s Kin-state Aid to Transcarpathia

Again, to varying degrees, but another trend affecting Hungary’s relations with its neighbors is the former’s provision of financial aid to various actors beyond its borders. This is targeted at ethnic Hungarian diaspora across the world, but the lion’s share is devoted to communities in regions adjacent to Hungary. The declared goal of this is to let those communities thrive in their native regions (DNH 2015), thereby avoiding their members relocating to Hungary. The latter was a common phenomenon during the 1990s, when life in Hungary was overall better than in most of its neighboring countries – particularly for ethnic Hungarians who were subjected to discrimination in Slovakia and Romania, although much less in Ukraine. Since the mid-2000s, however, immigration to Hungary by diaspora Hungarians has generally diminished in parallel with its neighbors democratizing and catching up with (and in some cases surpassing) living standards in Hungary. Accordingly, the share of ethnic Hungarians in most of the neighboring countries has only modestly decreased over the past two decades. The two exceptions here are Ukraine and Serbia (Bárdi 2020, 346), but – as seen

above – Ukraine’s Hungarian minority represents a tiny fraction of all ethnic Hungarians in the neighboring countries of Hungary.

Despite Hungary’s waning attractiveness and weakened relative economic position in the region, since 2010 the national-conservative government has turned kin-state support into one of its ideological cornerstones and key priorities (Lesińska and Héjj 2021; Waterbury 2017). While kin states across the world increasingly rely on their diaspora to promote cultural and business ties with the respective host states, two things stand out in the Hungarian case. One is the concomitant narrative element, as the provision of kin-state support has been coupled with a discourse of “reuniting the nation” across the borders (Pogonyi 2017). This project is indeed envisioned not through some interwar-style territorial revisionism but along respecting the current borders (Bán 2015), yet it is understandable if the discourse raises eyebrows among Hungary’s neighbors. The other component standing out is that a large part of the financial investments consists of public money. The exact sum of the total aid is difficult to measure as it is distributed through different programs, but one of them – the Bethlen Gábor Fund – stands out. According to a piece of investigative journalism (Iegoshyna 2021), from that fund alone the equivalent of 1.1 bn Euros was allocated during 2011–2019. With special-purpose funds included, the total support amounted to 1.35 bn Euros (*ibid.*) – which largely corresponds to the calculations of Csizmadia (2020, 61). The latter also show that during 2010–2018, the absolute expenditure increased sevenfold while its share in the total budget spending grew fivefold. Although the latter only equaled about half percent of the total budget in 2018 (*ibid.*), additional sums may have been spent on transborder Hungarians from various grants or party budgets (which are not really transparent). The two regions proportionally receiving the most aid have been Vojvodina (northern Serbia) and Transcarpathia as these constitute the poorest regions adjacent to Hungary (Bárdi 2020, 351).

According to one source (Iegoshyna 2021), Transcarpathia alone received the equivalent of 115m Euros during 2011–2020 that corresponds to 1.5 times the annual budget of the region. According to another source, “by 2020 Hungary had provided more than €250m (\$264) in aid to support local Hungarians, and Transcarpathia as a whole” (The Economist 2023). At the same time, there is a strong concentration of allocations in the second half of the 2010s. In the case of Transcarpathia, namely, Hungary’s support schemes were launched in 2014 and peaked in 2017, when its total annual aid (€65.86m) equaled 30.8% of the amount that the Ukrainian state allocated to its westernmost Oblast (Bárdi 2020, 353). In 2017, over two fifths of Hungary’s aid was spent on infrastructure development as well as property purchases, nearly two fifths on economic development schemes, and one fifth on Hungarian cultural and community-development programs. Overall, the money was invested in the construction and maintenance of public and semi-public infrastructure and services, as well as extra payments on top of the low Ukrainian public salaries. For instance, 30 kindergartens were built and 130 were renovated (*ibid.*). Three new Hungarian cultural houses were built and are maintained. Extra salaries were paid to 20,–25,000 Transcarpathians, including pedagogues, healthcare employees, and church representatives. During 2016–2018, Hungary contributed to the Transcarpathian branch of the Ukrainian state healthcare system with approximately 4.5m Euros (*ibid.*). However, the largest program specifically targeting the region was the Egán Ede Economic Development Program which primarily supported agriculture and rural tourism: during 2016–2019, around 40m Euros were paid out to 4,500 applicants, generating 3,500 new enterprises (*ibid.*, 354–355) as SMEs were the main focus.

A key question here is what impacts all this Hungarian economic aid has had on interethnic relations in Transcarpathia and beyond. Part of the answer to that question is provided by getting a better picture of who the beneficiaries have been. This is a sensitive issue as on the one hand, it may to some extent be understandable if any kin state providing aid privileges its own diaspora. On the other hand, Hungary’s largest support schemes nominally target certain territories (Vojvodina Economic Development Program, Transcarpathia Program, etc.) rather than any specific ethnic community. In the case of the Vojvodina program, a correlation has already been identified between

the allocation of aid investments and the location of ethnic Hungarian-dominated districts within the region (Juhász 2020, 19; Juhász and Pleschinger 2021, 19).

For Transcarpathia, the correlation between resource allocation and ethnicity is slightly more difficult to establish, partly due to the scatteredness of data which may in part result from the region having been the target of several different programs. Sass and Berghauer (2020, 578) have mapped the spatial distribution of successful grant applications for the above-mentioned Egán Ede Program – although only for tourism development and the year 2016 – and it shows a concentration in the Hungarian-inhabited parts of Transcarpathia. Additionally, Kolozsvári-Kovály (2022) conducted interviews in 2020 where some Ukrainian entrepreneurs lamented the ethnic bias in the granting of applications in the same program. As Kovály (2021, 145) explains, “[t]he program does not explicitly exclude ethnic Ukrainians, but applications must be prepared in Hungarian”. In addition, applicants must prove an at least intermediate proficiency in that language (EEKGK n.d.).

Our interviews and observations confirm that members of the ethnic Hungarian community have taken most advantage of Hungary’s support schemes, but also that they have not been the sole direct and indirect beneficiaries. We were informed that “Ukraine taxes all Hungarian aid 18% plus 1.5% military contribution” (R1). It was a recurring point in the interviews that non-Hungarians also benefit from Hungary’s support. On the one hand, a growing number of them work in public or semi-public institutions (such as kindergartens and schools) where the Hungarian language partly or fully prevails and where extra salaries are paid. A growing number of non-Hungarians reportedly even send their children to such institutions, partly because they are better funded and partly so that they learn Hungarian and can then live or work in Hungary or elsewhere in the EU (also by obtaining a Hungarian passport). During our visit to the Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in Berehove (fully funded by Hungary), we were briefly introduced to two Ukrainian lecturers and were told that there are more (R6). In addition, the College hosts a growing number of Ukrainian students and is thus becoming more bilingual not just in its student body but also in its languages of instruction. In 2021, the small College had 26 students from parts of Ukraine other than Transcarpathia (R2), thus lacking any skills in Hungarian at the time of applying. At the same time, Hungary’s aid investments into Transcarpathia’s infrastructure also serve locals who are not establishing any relation with any sort of Hungarian institution.

Nevertheless, the fact that Hungary’s aid has been unequally distributed spatially and socially has led to certain tensions at different levels. Much of the Egán Ede subsidies for tourism development was allocated to Berehove and its surroundings (Sass and Berghauer 2020, 578). Berehove itself received the equivalent of about 3.5m Euros for infrastructure development alone, including canalization and the cleaning of the Vérke River (R7). Berehove is a poor town even by Ukrainian standards, with the above-mentioned College constituting its single largest taxpayer (R7; Iegoshyna 2021). Unlike other major cities in Transcarpathia, Berehove still lacks a bypass. Hungary had offered a loan to build one, but “given local conditions only if a subcontractor from Hungary was commissioned, to which the Ukrainian party has not agreed” (R2). Regarding Hungary’s aid more generally, an ethnic Hungarian respondent said that “it triggers envy among the majority population, which to some extent is understandable, yet this support should serve the prosperity of [ethnic] Hungarian communities” (R7). The person also told us about a local event at which the mayor vehemently complained about the repeated rejection of a Ukrainian entrepreneur’s application for such subsidies. Relatedly, the informant pointed out the lack of reflection in critical voices over Ukrainians also benefitting from Hungary’s aid at least indirectly, for instance when “Pista [a common Hungarian name] gets a tractor and ploughs their land” (R7).

It should be mentioned though that not all Ukrainians have issues with Hungary’s aid to Transcarpathia. For instance, a local academic assessed the Egán Ede Program thus:

That’s a good program, helping people in the region to develop the local economy. I met many people from the Hungarian community who benefitted from it – vintners, for example. They are working locally, paying taxes and living here, and producing good wine. And about 90% of

their customers are Ukrainians from other regions [than Transcarpathia]... The beneficiaries are offering accommodation and sharing the multiculturalism of the region with people from other parts of Ukraine. (R5)

At the same time, other Ukrainian informants had more mixed views on the program. A high-level representative of Transcarpathia, while thankful for the aid, stressed that “it would have been much better if Hungarian large firms came here, creating jobs and paying taxes” rather than “handing out the money here and there” (R8). Yet another respondent, although overall positive to the program, pointed to a certain political bias in the distribution of grants:

This is one of the best programs that was ever implemented in Zakarpattia. Right now, it’s a little bit blocked by SBU and all these separatism issues, which I think is unfair – I definitely think that’s wrong. But the problem with Egán Ede and similar programs is that they have become a political instrument. For instance, money is provided to persons because they are loyal to KMKSZ, and it isn’t in the case of persons loyal to UMDSZ. So, the question is what the real reason for Egán Ede is... I think we should return to the roots of Egán’s idea and focus on cohesion, infrastructure etc. and erase these political issues. And then it’s a very nice project, and Ukraine should be thankful for such help. It doesn’t even matter if it just focuses on the Hungarian community – there’s no problem with that. But no political motivation and corruption, and a little bit more transparency and coordination would be good. Because look, this is Ukraine, and not just your private turf! (R9)

Among the two parties mentioned above KMKSZ has clearly been the stronger force over the past decade, holding three seats in the Zakarpattia Oblast Council prior to 2015 but eight (out of 64) since then. UMDSZ had four seats until 2015 but has ever since only been represented on the microregional and municipal levels. One reason behind the success of KMKSZ is its close relation with Hungary’s now longstanding government coalition – leading a Verkhovna Rada member to frame the party as “a direct threat to the national security of Ukraine that must be banned” (Zakarpattia Online 2023). A KMKSZ high-level representative described the party dynamics thus:

UMDSZ used to be strong but has been weakened by now... We [KMKSZ] had a very difficult period when Hungary did not have a nationally-oriented government, since we fully depend on that... Transcarpathians have never before received this much material, institutional, and moral support. The sort of commitment that Hungary’s foreign ministry is showing toward us brings a lot of added value here... We can provide a lot of aid... As the strategic partner of FIDESZ–KDNP, our role is just to prepare and manage this [money]. Due to the kin state – thank God Hungary has a nationally-oriented government – our voice can be stronger. (R1)

Some other ethnic Hungarian informants – even outside the narrowly defined political realm – were similarly open about their support for Hungary’s governing coalition. As an NGO head put it, “one identifies with the Hungarian government here” (R10). Several other respondents stressed the importance of Hungary’s support, which beyond the already-mentioned fields benefits a wide array of organizations ranging from a football academy in Mukachevo to the Hungarian theater in Berehove (R3). When asked about foreign resources – such as from the EU – more generally, a local academic assessed that “the more visible results are realized thanks to agreements with the Hungarian government as well as Hungarian municipalities” (R2). It is of course true that EU funds have been more limited to non-member Ukraine, although a few projects have been realized from such grants. But the broader point being made is that in Transcarpathia, Hungary is running a wide network of institutions through its extensive aid that sometimes intersects with Ukrainian structures, but more often operates in parallel to them. A crucial effect of this was well-captured in

our interview with an academic on the Hungary side of the border who has long been visiting Transcarpathia:

I knew the time when the Hungarians and the Ukrainians were equally poor... So, why now this strong distinction between them? The only reason I see for this is that today, the Hungarians are living much better than the Ukrainians. Respectively, those Ukrainians who've managed to develop some kind of a relationship to the Hungarian state are also living better. (R11)

To help Ukraine more generally, and to boost its image as a destination country among Ukrainian jobseekers, Hungary has undertaken a number of symbolical investments which however several scholars (Bárdi 2020, 353; Tátrai, Eröss, and Kovály 2017, 212) interpret as gesture politics. In the years 2015–2018, over 3,000 Ukrainian children – partly war orphans – spent holidays in Hungary. During 2016–2018, around 13,000 Ukrainians participated in Hungarian language courses supported by Hungary. A Ukrainian department was set up at the University of Nyíregyháza, and the erection of a statue of Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko was supported in Berehove (*ibid.*). More importantly, though also more naturally, Hungary has since February 2022 taken care of over a million Ukrainian refugees arriving to, or more often just passing through, its territory. But as is well known, the country's overall position toward Ukraine has since 2017 been ambiguous. In order to shed light on some of the reasons behind the worsening of bilateral ties, the next subsection will analyze a set of laws that Hungarians have been most concerned about.

Ukraine's Language and Education Laws

Since 2017, one of the most hotly contested issues in Ukrainian-Hungarian ties has been related to Ukraine's language policies as well as Hungarian reactions thereto. The country's 2017 education law (VRU 2017) made Ukrainian the mandatory language of study in state schools from fifth grade on. Accordingly, at secondary level students can only learn their native languages as a separate subject. In addition, two or more subjects can be taught in any of the languages of the EU, which include minority languages such as Hungarian, Polish and Romanian but not Russian, Belorussian and Yiddish.

On the one hand, the law has been criticized by a number of international organizations concerned with minority rights (Kulyk 2019). For instance, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a resolution stating that the law constituted "a major impediment to the teaching of national minorities" (PACE 2017). However, Ukraine went further and in 2019 passed a specific language law (VRU 2019) obliging the use of Ukrainian in many public and even some private spheres. In a report on this, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that "the legal framework does not provide sufficient guarantees for the protection and use of minority languages," and found it "concerning that the legislator continues to distinguish between minorities speaking an official language of the EU and other national minorities" (OHCHR 2019, 20). In another report, the Venice Commission (2019, 29) concluded that the language law "fails to strike a fair balance between the legitimate aim of strengthening and promoting the Ukrainian language and sufficiently safeguarding minorities' linguistic rights." Back in 2019, Ukraine's President said his country had implemented six out of the seven Venice Commission recommendations on the education law (Zubkova 2019). However, a Human Rights Watch analyst noted that a more recent amendment to the law – which entered into force in mid-January 2022 – is putting further pressure on minority languages, this time on print media (Denber 2022).

On the other hand, these laws also immediately became a source of tension between Ukraine and several of its neighbors and even beyond (Sasse 2017; Kulyk 2019). The four countries that

expressed most criticism – Russia, Hungary, Romania, and Poland – are the ones whose ethnic kin had the highest number of schools in which the respective minority language was the primary one in 2017 (Wesolowsky 2017). According to Sasse (2017), while Russia’s criticism was no surprise Ukraine did not anticipate the harsh statements from other states, with both Romania and Hungary pointing out that Ukraine’s education law could hinder the country’s EU integration (Kulyk 2019, 1040).

Here again, we were most interested in how these laws affected different people in the borderland, especially on the Ukraine side. On the Hungary side, one of our interviewees – a highly-positioned county representative – turned out to have been part of the Hungarian lobby supporting Ukraine in becoming a visa waiver to the EU, a status it gained in 2017. This is what the person recalled from that time:

I experienced a great disappointment after we, together with our Ukrainian partners, presented ourselves in Brussels. We just learnt that following the consent of the Dutch, Ukraine has received the visa waiver status. Hungarian diplomacy had supported this everywhere, and so have I. The day after our return from Brussels, the anti-Hungarian policy has kicked off – the curbing of linguistic rights, etc. I pointed out to our Transcarpathian partners that we experience this as treason. Hungarian diplomacy had always been supporting Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration. (R12)

Unsurprisingly, most if not all ethnic Hungarians on the Ukraine side had a negative view of Ukraine’s education and language laws. As a community representative pointed out, “nothing good can be expected from this” (R1). A local academic noted that “the [Ukrainian] constitution guarantees our rights, and so the language law and the constitution are in many points contradictory” (R2). And, as a church representative reported:

I’m in regular contact with parents and most of them are convinced that if the laws drafted will be implemented, they will simply take their children to Hungary. It isn’t seen as an option that they be taught Ukrainian on a level so that they will study here. Hence, should further steps be taken toward this direction, another wave of mass exodus will follow. (R13)

At the same time, at least a few Hungarian informants had a somewhat more mixed view on this, as did an NGO head:

As a father I support having more Ukrainian lessons. But obviously not what they [Ukrainians] want, which is having half of the subjects in Ukrainian in fifth grade and even more upward. Overall, us in Transcarpathia support that our children get to learn Ukrainian; yet we’ve been saying for 20–30 years that the method applied is inadequate. They’ve been trying to adjust it with more or less success, but there are huge problems with the implementation. Very few are the pedagogues able to teach children Ukrainian through methods used by English or German teachers. A basic issue is whether it’s taught as a native or foreign language. To us Hungarians it is a foreign language, so it needs to be taught accordingly. (R10)

Among our Ukrainians interviewees, several have admitted flaws with the laws. According to a regional analyst, “there are fears around and issues with both their basic principles and their implementation... Hence, Kyiv as well as Budapest would need to grasp that this community should develop by the way of free choice rather than by chauvinistically enforcing something on it” (R14). Moreover, according to a local academic:

The process of adapting the educational system to the needs of the Hungarian community should be more specific, longer, and more complex than for other minorities... There are

stories about some officials from the Ministry of Education who came here asking local teachers: “What is the problem? Hungarian is so similar to Slovak.” So, we need to adapt textbooks and other books for children in the Hungarian community by making them more bilingual. This problem is caused by issues that we haven’t dealt with in the nineties – adapting the educational system should have started thirty years ago. Now, we have a problem whereby young Hungarians in Transcarpathia sometimes cannot communicate in any language except Hungarian. (R5)

Our impressions and work by others (Ferenc and Rákóczi 2020, 69–74; Chastand 2022) confirm that there are issues with the Ukrainian language skills among the ethnic Hungarian community. This is of course problematic and needs to be addressed, but ideally in ways that do not create tensions between Ukraine and its neighbors as well as international human rights organizations. Yet despite being critical about certain aspects of the given laws, our Ukrainian interviewees tended to be more concerned with how rather than if something along those lines should be implemented. “The law hasn’t been properly implemented” (R5); “these laws just need to be precisely and correctly implemented” (R14); and “there is no problem if we erase politics from this topic, and on the professional level it’s easy to manage” (R9) were the recurring attitudes. One respondent pointed out that in Ukraine’s “admission tests to colleges and universities (ZNO), Transcarpathia consecutively performed worst during 2017–2021” (R14). This is of course difficult when already in 2009, 43% of all Transcarpathian Hungarian students were enrolled in Hungary, with their proportional number also being highest in 2018 (Bárdi 2020, 360).

Finally, another aspect of Ukraine’s language policy was mentioned by a regional analyst:

Kyiv’s goal is also that Ukrainians in Transcarpathia should know Ukrainian... Because it’s not what they speak: let’s be frank, they speak dialect... I’m from Kyiv, and once I moved here I’ve had to learn understanding the Transcarpathian dialect. There is a minor community here – tied mainly to the Ruthenian movement – that considers this as a separate language, but the majority believes this is a dialect. (R15)

In sum, this subsection testifies to language being a particularly sensitive and contested issue in Ukraine, a nationalizing state (Brubaker 2011; Kulyk 2019) undergoing similar processes of homogenization as many others in Eastern Europe were or still are. In addition, of course, external threat or invasion worldwide “leads governing elites to have stronger incentives to pursue nation-building strategies to generate national cohesion, often leading to the cultivation of a common national language through mass schooling” (Darden and Mylonas 2016, 1446). In the case of Ukraine, however, such efforts clash with (non-aggressor) Hungary’s kin-state politics, in which some would like to discover parallels with Russia’s as we will see next.

Transcarpathia in Light of Russia’s War against Ukraine

Last but certainly not least, Ukrainian-Hungarian ties have been affected by Ukraine’s worries about Transcarpathia in light of Russia’s ongoing war against the country. Since Ukraine’s independence no foreign troops have set foot in the Oblast, but – as already referred to above – there is clear evidence that Russian actors have been stirring tensions within Transcarpathia by trying to pit different ethno-linguistic groups against each other in order to destabilize the wider region. Moreover, the rather friendly Hungarian-Russian governmental ties of recent years have made Ukraine nervous, which is understandable to a certain degree. In light of the processes so far described, around 2017 a separatist discourse emerged in Ukraine claiming that Transcarpathian Hungarians are trying to secede from the country and potentially join Hungary (Euromaidan Press 2017; Ryabinin 2018; Shtogrin 2018). In addition, not only the Hungarians but also the Romanians

(Ryabinin 2020) and the Ruthenians (Zan 2017) have been accused of secessionist intentions. As one of our Ukrainian interviewees explained:

Budapest maintains certain economic and political ties with Russia, which is engaged in aggression on Ukraine's territory. This is exactly the issue of Kyiv, and this is what leads to misunderstandings and fears – that not just in Transcarpathia, but in any region of Ukraine where people are fully loyal to the neighboring state, the scenario of Crimea, Donetsk or Luhansk could occur. (R15)

While Ukraine's anxieties about its minority-inhabited regions are understandable given the circumstances, it is also true that neither any of its minor ethno-linguistic groups nor their kin states have since WWII shown any sign of trying to change the country's borders. But it is of course the impacts of the separatist narrative that are of primary interest. Above-mentioned KMKSZ documented "182 cases of Ukrainian anti-Hungarian actions" between 2014 and 2018 (Pallagi 2018). Although a clear majority of the reported incidents indeed involved Ukrainian perpetrators, labelling these actions as "Ukrainian" is not a fully accurate way to describe them. Accordingly, in the next paragraph we will analyze in more detail two related incidents that occurred in 2018 and coincided with the peak of the separatist discourse.

In February 2018, the headquarter of KMKSZ was attacked twice: the building was first set on fire, with a bomb exploding in it three weeks later. Regarding the first attack, the SBU "quickly came to the conclusion that the arsonists were Polish" (Panyi, Moroz, and Szczygieł 2018). It is true that the perpetrators turned out to be three Poles connected to the far-right pro-Russian organization Falanga and were quickly detained by Polish authorities. And yet, upon condemning the incident the head of KMKSZ "solely blamed Ukrainians for the anti-Hungarian attacks" and made "no mention of the Polish perpetrators, neither their alleged pro-Kremlin ties" (ibid.). Yet one of the accused Poles testified in a Polish court that the arson was ordered by Manuel Ochsenreiter, at that time a Bundestag employee of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party with links to pro-Russia separatists (Knight 2019). Polish authorities stated that "the attack was to be attributed to Ukrainian neo-Nazis in order to sour relations between Ukraine and Hungary" (ibid.). Interestingly, while being prosecuted in Berlin Ochsenreiter spent most of his time in Moscow, where he reportedly died of a heart attack in 2021 (Rebrina 2021). When it comes to the second attack on the KMKSZ headquarter, the perpetrators were "two Ukrainians, led by a Ukrainian citizen with a passport from Transnistria" (Panyi, Moroz, and Szczygieł 2018). The SBU classified the incident as a terrorist act and two Ukrainians were arrested, but the third one with a Transnistrian passport managed to escape (ibid.). Based on the above, it is clear that at least some Russian ties were involved in the two incidents.

At the same time, (pro-)Russian forces have obviously not been the only actors affecting interethnic relations in Transcarpathia. In 2018, the chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Foreign Affairs urged that "we need to put an end to the subversion being spread by Hungarian and Russian emissaries. The foreign provocateurs should be sent home, and their local assistants brought to justice," and that "Ukraine must strengthen its security presence in Zakarpattia, including through re-garrisoning Berehove and other cities with military units and deploying units of the National Guard there" (cited in Pushkaruk 2018). Thus, in March 2018 Ukraine's government announced a plan to restore a military base and permanently station 800 troops in Berehove, located just ten kilometers from the border to Hungary (Urcosta 2018). The latter's foreign minister reacted that Ukraine's explanation for why it needs to base soldiers there – that is, to protect the country's security and defend its territorial integrity – is particularly disturbing, as it implies that the Ukrainian government considers the Hungarian community a threat to Kyiv, and that is outrageous (ibid.). The plans for the base were then temporarily abandoned, but in May 2020 officials re-announced them including the permanent stationing of Ukrainian troops there (Mukachevo.

net 2020). In 2021, an ethnic Hungarian interviewee who also worked at Berehove's city council described the situation thus:

Such news occasionally pop up. Also, the deputy of the Western Commandership has visited an assembly of the city council, confirming that officers and their families would be placed here. We said "okay, but they haven't come so far." It is by the way indicative that the deputy was accompanied by the president of the Berehove division of Svoboda, a Ukrainian ultra-nationalist party, who also guided him through the city. But nothing happened so far. Any investment would require money – although there is always money for the military in this country, but not for pointless investments such as expanding the base here. I think on the highest level they realize that this one wouldn't make much sense. It can still happen though... (R2)

Concerning Ukrainian allegations of secessionism in Transcarpathia more generally, the same respondent shared with us the following experiences:

People have been listed and threatened with getting banned from filling certain positions, and rumors have been spread about separatism. It was claimed that local Hungarians want another passport for the same reason as people in Donbas – that is, for secession... Such rumors have been circulating here, even though they are completely unfounded. The secret services have also been dealing with this: I myself was summoned, as were others. They interrogated me whether I knew any separatists and how I'm thinking about this issue. Being quizzed by the SBU is not a pleasant thing. (R2)

At the same time, the informant showed an understanding for Ukrainian anxieties due to the ongoing war, but implicitly pointed to that these were exaggerated regarding Transcarpathia:

Due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, domestic control obviously had to be strengthened and so the security services have been expanded. They also came to Transcarpathia, expecting to find separatists. Even though there weren't any, the need was still felt to do something. As a sort of maintenance work, they occasionally summon somebody for inquiry to show that they have been working. Thirsty for sensation, Ukrainian media have also come here to film separatists, jumping from town to town and asking around where the separatists were. (R2)

Despite the lack of separatists identified, the allegations of the SBU against local Hungarian organizations are serious, such as the one that their resources "were used to finance actions committed to forcibly changing the state borders of Ukraine" (Iegoshyna 2021). Accordingly, criminal proceedings have been opened under two articles of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, namely "treason" and "funding actions committed to forcibly changing or overthrowing the constitutional order or seizing state power in Ukraine" (ibid.). The SBU has been "conducting further investigations", although it remains unclear what they have found. As the head of the Zakarpattia Regional Council admitted, this investigation is "an element of prevention" (cited in Iegoshyna 2021). But not all Ukrainians approve of this method of scaring the Hungarian minority. For instance, according to a journalist, "Kyiv at some point became disappointed in Hungary's willingness to seek a compromise and began to act improperly. Because it is improper to involve the security service" (ibid.), which can indeed be seen as an extraordinary measure (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 24).

Still, as we saw above, not only Ukrainian actors have been involved in anti-Hungarian campaigns. Yet there were clear differences between our informants in Transcarpathia in the extent to which they saw external forces such as Russia behind the stirring of ethnic tensions in their region. For instance, a local Ukrainian political analyst assessed the situation thus:

It is true [that Russia is involved], and I could provide you with proofs. There is for instance the decision of the Polish court: the first burning of the KMKSZ office was carried out by a

Polish guy recruited by Ochsenreiter, who lived in Moscow and was a friend of Dugin... So, it is important to understand that if Russia disappears [from Transcarpathia], the political tension [between Hungarians and Ukrainians] will also disappear. (R9)

According to another Ukrainian respondent, local ethnic tensions “exist only in media – in some Russian media. And I read that those news are spreading into Hungarian media” (R5). But when asked whether any negative portrayal of ethnic Hungarians appeared in Ukrainian media, the answer was:

Well, the recent sharing of disinformation came from Russian media. Sometimes in Ukrainian media, too, they want to highlight this question, and some experts – they think they are experts – try to share some opinions that are not really corresponding to what is happening here. And this provokes comments, especially in social media, among people who are not aware of the real situation here: they start commenting, and even spreading some hate speech against the Hungarian community. I would say it's terrible that such unverified information is being shared, because it can become like a snowball. It is a problem. (R5)

When it comes to our ethnic Hungarian informants, their assessment of the extent to which Russia could be involved in inciting local ethnic tensions was rather different. This was particularly evident in the following answer:

I think this has no basis whatsoever. Why would it? Ukrainian media also blame the Russians for Ukraine's poor-quality roads or high bread prices. I always wonder what interest would tie big Russia to small Transcarpathia, or why it would instigate tensions here. My conviction is that this [narrative] simply serves to deflect attention, with their own [Ukrainians'] rancor laid at someone's door who has nothing to do with this. (R13)

The other Hungarian interviewees were less certain about fully denying Russian interference in Transcarpathia, but were not aware of its evidence and tended to downplay it, as the following two quotes testify.

The very fact that they [Ukrainians] link the explosion of the KMKSZ headquarter to Russian interests, and come up with other similar things... Sometimes one struggles to find the logic behind how it's all causally interrelated, but somehow they are able to make up such stories. Whether there's any evidence behind this [Russian involvement]? Well, we're waiting for that [court decision], but I can't really see through this. Yet the notion that us Hungarians would want to change the language law and regain our old rights because the Russians are prompting us to do this – well, we find this absurd. We simply want to protect our own interests, thereby not representing those of a third country but solely our own ones. (R6)

Our information is restricted to media sources alluding to this [Russian interference], but whenever anti-Hungarian actions are carried out the SBU would always claim to discover Russian ties. There's no evidence for these, but I can prophecy that if something happens next week they will assume Russian ties. Yet when [anti-Hungarian] protests were held in Berehove and Uzhhorod, it sufficed to reach out to Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk for bloody-mouthed people who came here chanting nationalist slogans. One does not have to go far to find people provoking us. Still, they aren't Transcarpathians but are brought in here – we've got imported provocateurs. (R1)

In fact, it was a recurring theme in the interviews that external forces are inciting tensions within Transcarpathia, but – as we saw above – our Ukrainian and ethnic Hungarian elites did have different understandings of where these originate from. At the same time, most if not all our

informants felt that the deterioration of bilateral ties had created less tensions within the region than between the two countries at large. This is backed up by the above-cited survey on non-elites, in which the respondents assessed local Hungarian-Ukrainian relations much more positively than on the national level (Ferenc and Rákóczi 2020, 68). According to a high-level representative of Transcarpathia, this is because “we have come to understand that if we don’t coexist here peacefully, we will surely end up in trouble” (R8). Nevertheless, the survey respondents also deemed interethnic relations to have worsened between 2016 and 2019 (Ferenc and Rákóczi 2020, 68). On the nationwide level, Ukrainian people’s lack of trust in Hungary is evident. Recently surveyed on the likelihood of their western neighbors claiming Ukrainian territory on the grounds of protecting their ethnic kin, 41.4% feared Hungary could do this as opposed to the 8–16% attributed to Poland, Romania, and Slovakia (cited in László 2023). Accordingly, the Hungarian question has successfully been securitized.

Conclusions

This article is a response to a recent call for more security-related aspects in the kin-state literature (Waterbury 2020) as well as a contribution to studies on minority salience, where the geopolitical dimension has been even more absent. Our study aimed to explain how and why Ukraine’s small Hungarian minority has been securitized in recent years, and how this plays out in Transcarpathia and beyond. We identified four key elements: Hungary’s dual citizenship law, Hungary’s kin-state aid, Ukraine’s education and language laws, and Transcarpathia’s (allegedly) volatile position in light of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Our research indicates that Hungary’s expanding kin-state policies have empowered Ukraine’s Hungarian minority but also contributed to genuine overestimations of that community’s size, capabilities and intentions, ultimately leading to its securitization. The minority’s unusual salience is the outcome of several internal and external dynamics. We saw previous research (Castano and Yzerbyt 1998; Brown and Wootton-Millward 1993; Shilo et al. 2019) showing that group (trans) formation, status change, and perceptions of threat can strengthen social identification and group homogeneity, particularly among minorities. These insights are in line with our findings. Many among Transcarpathia’s ethnic Hungarians now have better opportunities than the majority population, at the same time as they feel threatened by the conditions in Ukraine. This has made the community appear increasingly homogenous, here evidenced by the semblance of their narratives and the growing monopolization of their political representation. At the same time, the minority is not as powerful and large as we have seen many believe. Our data support Bárdi’s (2020, 355) observations that the benefits provided by Hungary have been unequally distributed and essentially unable to create enough new opportunities and jobs to halt emigration and the community’s shrinkage.

Concerning reactions to Hungary’s kin-state policies, we have shown that it could evoke diverging attitudes among local Ukrainians, ranging between envy and support. But on a higher level Ukraine is concerned, for at least two reasons. One is that its Hungarian minority is strongly concentrated in a narrow strip of land along the country’s border to Hungary. More crucially, Hungary’s engagement with that community has picked up since the mid-2010s, which coincides with the tragic events unfolding in eastern Ukraine. Although geographically distant from Transcarpathia, several key actors in Ukraine and Russia have forecast a Donbasization scenario in that region that however was rejected by all our ethnic Hungarian and the vast majority of our Ukrainian informants – and not least by Hungary (Racz 2022). Thus, similarly to Waterbury (2020, 805) we find that Hungary’s kin-state politics cannot be treated as the actions of an aggressive kin state, as the country remains reluctant “to risk domestic stability in order to engage in aggressive and revisionist transborder conflicts.” Indeed, Hungarian “state actors are driven by more than ethnic affiliation” (ibid.), but not by revanchism but by ideological and political motives (including vote maximization, or encouraging Ukraine to treat the minority better). We therefore share

Waterbury's (2020, 800) plea to take security and (geo)politics seriously but without "overly securitizing kin-state politics."

As one of the key non-military responses to its threats, Ukraine has since 2017 adopted a more repressive language policy at the cost of minority tongues. While similar strategies are not uncommon in countries under threat (Darden and Mylonas 2016), Ukraine's policy has angered the Hungarians, although a few that we interviewed have admitted issues with the Ukrainian-language skills among their ethnic kin. Our Ukrainian respondents had more mixed views on this, but several have admitted flaws with their country's education and language laws as well as failures to have tackled this issue more professionally in time.

Around 2017 a discourse emerged in Ukraine that some of Transcarpathia's ethnic minorities – most notably the Hungarians – want to secede from the country, even though it remains unclear on what evidence this notion is based. Ukrainian concerns regarding Transcarpathia are fed by parallels drawn to the invasion by Russia, with which Hungary keeps maintaining relations, though not of a military nature. But while there are no signs of either Hungary or Transcarpathian Hungarians trying to change any borders, we have seen that also (pro-)Russian actors have been behind the spreading of the discourse and some of the related incidents. Above all, the separatist narrative has served to drive a wedge between Ukrainians and Hungarians – although even more between the two countries than within Transcarpathia. But even in the region, our respondents had different assessments of who is to blame for its spreading. The Ukrainians largely pointed to Russian interference, something most of the ethnic Hungarians did not exclude as an option but they put the stress on Ukrainian actors and media. What the two set of answers shared was an understanding that the separatist discourse and concomitant provocations are fed by actors from outside Transcarpathia. This should give some hope for the "Hungarian question" to be de-securitized in the future and for interethnic relations to remain peaceful within the region. When it will be de-securitized on the bilateral level is another matter.

In sum, in our case the minority has been securitized based on the host state's assumptions about its attempts at secession, the intentions of its kin state, and the relation between the kin state and the host state's prime enemy. Although Ukraine's heightened sense of insecurity is very understandable due to Russia's aggression, and despite Hungary's active kin-state policy having made Ukraine's Hungarian minority more salient, treating that small and shrinking community as a national security threat appears unfounded. What we are witnessing is not the emergence of an open conflict but tensions between two political projects, namely transborder nationalism and nation-state building (Brubaker 2011). This can be accentuated when two parties are facing or risking an open conflict, but under peaceful conditions ethnic minorities are more often seen as a resource or bridge.

Our results have important implications for kin- and host-state relations. In a situation where a host state is surrounded by several kin states and is attacked by one of them, leading to the curbing of minority rights and economic challenges in the host state, the remaining, peaceful kin states face the choice whether to engage in more or less (or different) kin-state aid and politics. Hungary chose the former – to the satisfaction of its ethnic kin but at the cost of getting into trouble with Ukraine. Theoretically at least, the host state also faces the choice whether to maintain, broaden or limit minority rights, and whether this should encompass all minorities. The first two options can make minorities feel more at home in their host states, but these considerations are admittedly very difficult when a host state neighbors a much larger state that is prone to aggression.

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Interviews

All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

- R1: representative of Ukraine's Hungarian minority, Uzhhorod
- R2: academic (ethnic Hungarian), Berehove
- R3: representative of a cultural organization (ethnic Hungarian), Berehove
- R4: representative of Hungary's Ukrainian minority, Nyíregyháza
- R5: academic (Ukrainian), Uzhhorod
- R6: academic and NGO representative (ethnic Hungarian), Berehove
- R7: representative of a cross-border trade promotion agency (ethnic Hungarian), Berehove
- R8: representative of Zakarpattia Oblast (Ukrainian), Uzhhorod
- R9: political analyst (Ukrainian), Uzhhorod
- R10: representative of two NGOs (ethnic Hungarian), Berehove
- R11: academic (Hungarian), Nyíregyháza
- R12: county representative (Hungarian), Nyíregyháza
- R13: church representative (ethnic Hungarian), Berehove
- R14: senior expert in regional analysis (Ukrainian), Uzhhorod
- R15: expert in regional analysis and academic (Ukrainian), Uzhhorod