

Ukraine language reform fuels identity fears among ethnic Hungarians

Реформа української мови породжує особисті страхи серед етнічних угорців
Протягом останніх місяців Закарпаття було регіоном напруженості між Україною
та Угорщиною після прийняття Києом суперечливого закону, який намагається
зобов'язати школи викладати українською мовою. Представники етнічних меншин країни
побоюються, що неоднозначно сформульований закон заважатиме тонкому соціальному
балансу регіону та обмежить їхні права. Для українців необхідність пропагувати свою
мову стала особливо гострою після того, як Росія приєднала Крим, а сепаратистські
повстання спалахнули на російськомовному сході, у конфлікті, який зафіксував понад 10
000 життів з 2014 року. Багато українців розглядають Закарпаття як ще одну
потенційну гарячу точку.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/07/world/ukraine-language-reform-fuels-identity-fears-among-ethnic-hungarians/#.WISZV6hl8dU>

BEREGOVE, UKRAINE – The central street in a small town in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains in western Ukraine is buzzing with life.

Crowds pack the sidewalks and commerce is in full swing, with vendors hawking everything from apples to old plates to knitted socks.

Nearly everyone here speaks Hungarian.

Welcome to Beregove — or Beregszasz, as it is also known by its Hungarian name — with a population of 24,000.

Located in Transcarpathia and within walking distance to the Hungarian border, this quaint town, famous for its scenic vistas, hot springs and vineyards, is the center of Ukraine's Hungarian culture.

Numbering around 100,000, ethnic Hungarians constitute the largest minority group in Transcarpathia, a western Ukrainian region behind the Carpathian Mountains that was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Over the past few months the region has been at the heart of tensions between Ukraine and Hungary following the adoption by Kiev of a controversial law that seeks to oblige schools to teach in the Ukrainian language.

Representatives of the country's ethnic minorities fear the ambiguously worded law will upset the region's delicate social balance and limit their rights.

"The Kiev establishment started doing stupid things," Fedir Shandor, a sociologist and university lecturer in Uzhgorod, the regional center of Transcarpathia, said.

The adoption of the law in September rattled nearly all of Kiev's neighbors to the west that see the legislation as a threat to their national minorities in the ex-Soviet country.

Hungary went as far as threatening to block Kiev's rapprochement with the European Union.

The Venice Commission, an independent panel of constitutional law experts who advise the Council of Europe, has recommended that Ukraine amend the disputed law, making it "more balanced and more clearly worded."

In addition to ethnic Hungarians, Ukraine has sizable communities of Russians, Romanians, Poles and other groups with roots in neighboring countries.

The language law states that starting from September 2020, pupils will be taught exclusively in Ukrainian from the fifth grade, when children are aged 10 to 11, although they can still learn their native languages as a separate subject.

Kiev says the move will help minorities better integrate into society and will give them new opportunities including access to higher education.

But critics of the law are not convinced.

Oleksandr Shpenyk, head of the Ukrainian-Hungarian Educational Institute at Uzhgorod National University, fears the new legislation could lead to the closure of all Hungarian schools in the region.

“Here in Uzhgorod you can use any language you want now, but if they continue this way,” he said, referring to the Ukrainian authorities, “this will end badly.”

Shpenyk’s institute prepares teachers for Hungarian schools so his students were also “under threat,” he said.

“Even after Transcarpathia became part of the Soviet Union, even under Stalin in 1949, Hungarian schools were open,” he added.

There are more than 280 schools in the region. Of them, over 70 schools, teaching more than 16,000 pupils, are Hungarian.

During last year’s countrywide Ukrainian language tests — whose results are key for admission to universities — pupils from Transcarpathia were the worst performers.

In some villages every pupil failed the test.

While admitting that Ukrainian language proficiency is indispensable, many ethnic Hungarians are afraid that Kiev will force them to learn the state language without consulting them or taking into account their way of life.

“We want to be sure that the transition will be done properly, with our interests taken into account,” Stella Kesler, director of a Hungarian school in Uzhgorod, said.

Most of her pupils opt to continue family businesses instead of going to universities.

Those who want to pursue higher education have to study with tutors on their own.

Many in the region are grateful to Hungary for having stepped in to help Ukraine's minorities when ethnic schools in Transcarpathia were struggling to survive, abandoned to the mercy of fate by Kiev after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

"They had to repair schools, repair classrooms, pay for energy to stay open in winter, buy new textbooks," said sociologist Shandor, who has Magyar ancestors.

"And it so happened that Hungary began sending its textbooks," he added, noting that now roughly half of all textbooks in the region's Hungarian schools come from the EU member.

For Ukrainians, the need to promote their language has become particularly acute after Russia annexed Crimea and a separatist insurgency erupted in the Russian-speaking east, in a conflict that has claimed over 10,000 lives since 2014.

Many Ukrainians view Transcarpathia as another potential hot spot and any calls by Hungary's ultranationalists in support of the region's autonomy are met with disdain in Kiev.

In November, Ukraine's far-right activists marched through the streets of Beregove and tore down a Hungarian flag from the city hall, accusing Budapest of "supporting separatism."

Uzhgorod philologist Mykhailo Markovych warns Kiev should improve the lives of its ethnic minorities and provide them with better education and health care opportunities.

“Everything where Ukraine falls short will, of course, be exploited by its neighbors,” he said.