

HUNGARIAN EDUCATION IN UKRAINE: HOW TO FIND A BALANCED APPROACH?

*The adoption of the new Law on Education in Ukraine has triggered significant attention in several capitals throughout Europe. The major criticism of the new law predictably came from Hungary, as Budapest tried to protect interests of its ethnic kin in Transcarpathia. The questions of how the new law affects ethnic Hungarians in this region of Ukraine and what the roots of the current situation are were addressed by the International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies to **Dr. Mykhaylo Zan**, assistant professor at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of the Uzhhorod National University.*

ICELDS: *According to the Ukrainian law, what is a national minority school and how does it differ from other general schools?*

Mykhaylo Zan: Since the first years of independence, Ukraine has opted for a liberal model of education for members of national minorities. This model ensured virtually the entire cycle of the educational process in the native languages of minorities, i.e. kindergarten, secondary education and even higher education. For example, since 1996, the town of Berehove is home of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education. Under the intergovernmental agreement, the Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences with the Hungarian language of teaching (currently: Ukrainian-Hungarian Educational Institute) was founded in 2008 at the Uzhhorod National University.

The liberal model of education for persons belonging to national minorities was implemented as a part of the country's ethno-politics at the highest institutional level. In particular, the Law on National Minorities in Ukraine (1992) conferred the rights of national minorities (or groups of "Ukrainian citizens, who are not of Ukrainian ethnicity" – Art. 3) to broad "national-cultural autonomy" (Art. 6). The state also undertook the obligation to take measures for "training of pedagogical and cultural-educational and other national personnel through a number of educational establishments" (Art. 7). According to the Law on General Secondary Education (1999), secondary schools should be established "taking into account socio-economic

and demographic situation, and in accordance with the cultural, educational, socio-economic, national and linguistic needs of the territorial community and / or society” (Art. 11). The controversial Law of Ukraine on the Principles of State Language Policy (2012) ensured the right to obtain education in the state language (i.e. Ukrainian) as well as in 18 regional or minority languages through a wide network of “both state and municipal pre-school, general secondary and out-of-school, vocational and higher educational institutions” (Art. 20 “Language of Education”).

Thus, the implementation of the liberal model of language policies in the educational sector has been taking place for more than 26 years of Ukraine’s independence. As a result, the overwhelming majority of representatives of national minorities (for example, the Hungarian and Romanian youth of the Transcarpathian region) has an extremely low level of knowledge of the state Ukrainian language. In the rural areas of Transcarpathia, where the Hungarians compactly reside, the level of knowledge of the state language is also rather low. For several years already, this has been confirmed by the results of external independent assessment required for the enrollment in higher educational institutions of Ukraine. As a result of the same standards for all school leavers throughout Ukraine, more than 60% of the students with Hungarian language of instruction failed to pass Ukrainian language tests. Thus, the number of youth who leaves Ukraine to study and subsequently work abroad (in particular in Hungary) is growing every year.

ICELDS: *The need for Art. 7 of the new Law on Education is justified by the fact that graduates of minority schools don’t know Ukrainian well enough. What causes the low level of teaching of the state language in the Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia — the lack of teachers, textbooks, techniques, the reduction of teaching hours in minority schools compared to other schools?*

MZ: It is known that the Hungarian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family. In contrast to the speakers of Slavic languages (Slovak, Russian or Belarusian), carriers of German, Jewish or Romani linguistic and cultural identities quite well-integrated into the regional multicultural environment, or even the Romanian population of Transcarpathia, representatives of the Hungarian minority are characterized by a rather distinctive mentality, stereotypes of ethnic

behavior, confessional identity, political culture, which objectively impede their integration into the Ukrainian society.

As a result, a significant part of the Hungarian minority forms peculiar enclaves that live in an almost native-speaking space, focus solely on the interests and values of their community, ethnic group, and the Hungarian nation as a whole. I remember the case of my own childhood in the late 1980s, when my father and me for a long time could not find the person we needed in the neighboring village of Shalanky (Vynohradiv district) because the local inhabitants did not understand us. I was twelve years old and this experience surprised me very much especially when I learned that local people were watching only Hungarian television, but not the “central” one from Moscow or the “Ukrainian” one from Kyiv as did the community in the village of Velyki Komyaty of the same Vynohradiv district. I can also recall everyday life in the student hostel in Uzhhorod in the 1990s, when it took quite much time to maintain contact with some ethnic Hungarian neighbors.

One should recall that during the Soviet period there were secondary schools with the Hungarian language of instruction in Transcarpathia. In fact, linguistic and educational policies of independent Ukraine continued this Soviet tradition to “solve the national question”. Moreover, the Transcarpathian Hungarians learned Russian during the Soviet period, whereas Ukrainian remains difficult enough to be mastered by an average representative of this minority. This is evidenced by the practice of everyday communication in the interethnic environment of Transcarpathia.

During our recent interviews the representatives of the Hungarian minority reasonably emphasized *specific practical aspects of the low inclusion of their community into the Ukrainian-language educational and cultural space, which they linked to the indifference of state-run educational institutions*. Among the problems they specifically mentioned were the lack of professional staff capacities, educational programs and methodological recommendations that would adequately (i.e. taking account of the specific features of the Hungarian language) contribute to the learning of the Ukrainian language by Hungarian-speaking students. By this time, national minorities (including Hungarians) were provided only with the standardized textbooks for secondary schools translated into their language. In many cases this

approach was not sufficient. At the same time, except for the scientific projects of the Centre of Hungarology at the Uzhhorod State University, almost nobody has been systematically engaged in methodological issues of the Ukrainian-Hungarian bilingual education.

From the next academic year (i.e. since September 2018), the Faculty of Philology of the Uzhhorod National University starts the training of Ukrainian language and literature teachers for schools with Hungarian and Romanian languages of instruction. Taking into account the polyethnic nature of the region of Transcarpathia, this should have been done at least two decades ago, but not after the interstate scandal caused by the formulations of Art. 7 of the new Law on Education.

ICELDS: *What are the arguments in favor of the opinion that the necessary level of knowledge of Ukrainian can only be ensured by switching from teaching it as a school subject to teaching in it? Have any relevant studies or discussions been organized? Are there any examples showing that there are other solutions?*

MZ: Unfortunately, drafting bills on ethno-political issues in Ukraine is taking place without proper preliminary discussion with the public. The requests of representatives of national minorities are not taken into account. This does not lead to the elaboration of a constructive and balanced position on the possible controversial issues. The general rule is: “Whosever power, his law”. In 2012, it concerned the adoption of the scandalous Law on the Principles of State Language Policy and in 2017 – the Law On Education. In 2012, the interests of the dominant Ukrainian-speaking population of the country were neglected, while in 2017 legislative changes were adopted without proper preparatory measures and affected national minorities, especially the Hungarian community of Transcarpathia.

One should note that the long delay in approximation of the Ukrainian legislation to the European norms has led to the essentially autonomous coexistence of the state and civil society. In case of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia, this led to the creation and operation of a nearly autonomous Hungarian-language education system from kindergarten to university, Hungarian-language media, the network of more than a dozen of public organizations with regional status, two political parties of the Ukrainian Hungarians, and eventually the emergence of the

phenomenon of bipatrim among tens of thousands of Hungarian-speaking Transcarpathians.

It is obvious that Hungary actively supports its ethnic kin in Transcarpathia by implementing various socio-economic and socio-humanitarian projects. As a result, during the period of Ukraine's independence Hungarian minority has developed its own ethnic elites. Its leaders form the public opinion of the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian-speaking population in Transcarpathia. Enjoying strong support from Hungary, the ethnic Hungarian community strives to maintain a profitable *status quo* in the future, rather than to develop a *modus vivendi* with the reforms of the post-*Maidan* authorities. That is why, just before and immediately after the adoption of the new Law on Education, and even after the publication of the Venice Commission's Opinion on the provisions of the Law on Education of 5 September 2017, which concern the use of the State Language and Minority and other Languages in Education (December 11, 2017), civic organizations of the Hungarian minority claimed narrowing down of their language and educational rights.

The Hungarian community of Transcarpathia and the state institutions (with the involvement of experts who are almost unaware of the region's specifics) continue to advocate compound positions with regard to educational sector reforms. This can be illustrated by the recent (December 19, 2017) visiting meeting of the Expert Council on issues of ethnopolitics at the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture in Berehove, when the discussions shifted into accusations and offenses.

It is illogical that more than three months after the adoption of the Law on Education the Ministry of Education and Science has announced the three models of education for national minorities. The first one is a bilingual model from the first to the twelfth grades for representatives of indigenous peoples (for example, the Ukrainian-Crimean Tatar). The second one is designed for the members of the national minorities whose kin-states are the EU member states. Option A is envisaged for the Slavic-speaking minorities (teaching in their native language at kindergarten and elementary school; from grade five gradual increase in the number of subjects taught in Ukrainian is foreseen; this model applies to Bulgarians, Poles and Slovaks). Option B is designed for representatives of the non-Slavic minorities (Hungarians and

Romanians). It provides for a more gradual transition towards teaching school subjects in Ukrainian in the upper grades. The third model is designed for Russians and Belarusians (transition exclusively into Ukrainian language language of instruction from the fifth grade).

There are at least three questions concerning the aforementioned idea of the line Ministry which should be incorporated into the new Law of Ukraine on General Secondary Education: 1) Why hadn't the representatives of national minorities been informed about these models at the stage of the preliminary discussion of the draft law? 2) What is exactly meant by the gradual transition to teaching in Ukrainian in the upper grades for ethnic Hungarian and Romanian students (what is percentage of the subjects and what are these subjects precisely)? 3) How do these changes affect on the staffing of schools with minority languages of instruction? It is obvious that all the details of the differentiation of education in minority languages are only in the phase of development of the relevant methodological recommendations.

Thus, the lack of proper methodology for teaching Ukrainian as a foreign language for schools with Hungarian language of instruction is the major problem. Children (first and foremost, in the rural areas) live in nearly monolingual Hungarian language environment: they speak only Hungarian with their parents and relatives; language of kindergartens is also Hungarian. They face difficulties in learning the state language at school, but parents can't help because they are usually can better speak Russian which they learnt at school. If the bilingual techniques of mastering terminology in the native languages of minorities and in the state Ukrainian language were properly introduced since the beginning of the country's independence, the situation would have been different.

ICELDS: *Some commentators argued that the Hungarian minority schools in Transcarpathia actually became Hungarian schools with the curricula developed in Hungary. Is this situation possible bearing in mind that Ukraine has its general state education programmes?*

MZ: Hungary really finances a number of educational projects for Hungarian-speaking children and youth in Transcarpathia. In particular, social benefits are paid to the parents who send their children to schools with Hungarian language of

instruction. These schools use additional teaching materials, including textbooks from Hungary to better grasp individual school subjects (primarily native language and literature). However, these schools use general state education programs, in particular, the textbooks of the Ukrainian authors translated into Hungarian.

Meanwhile, the Hungarian-speaking community stresses the lack of textbooks for schools with Hungarian language of instruction. Following the adoption of the new Law of Ukraine on Education, the Transcarpathian Association of Hungarian Pedagogues (KMPSZ) passed the petition which emphasized that “[a]t the beginning of the 2017-2018 academic year, Hungarian-language schools lacked 28,057 textbooks, of which 3383 were textbooks of Ukrainian language and literature. In 25 years, no workbooks on the subjects taught were issued in Hungarian, no Ukrainian-Hungarian / Hungarian-Ukrainian state-funded school dictionaries were published. However, the fundamental problem is that there is a critical shortage of Alphabet books from which pupils of the first forms should learn to read. As a rule, parents need to make photocopies because the state provides new textbooks only every four years according to the number of children enrolled that particular year.”

Since 2006, one of the most problematic issues is the lack of a differentiated approach. External Independent Testing certifies the quality of knowledge of the literature in the Ukrainian language and literature among graduates of the school with Hungarian language of instruction. One should agree with the ethnic Hungarian teachers that “[a] differentiated approach at the external independent survey would be desirable for all graduates, since in 108 schools of a total of 234 schools with Ukrainian language instruction, 30% of students did not meet the requirements of independent knowledge assessment in Ukrainian language and literature in 2017, in Transcarpathia.”

For example, a number of questions about stresses in Ukrainian words don't coincide even with Transcarpathian dialects of the Ukrainian language, let alone similar difficulties for ethnic Hungarians or Romanians. Recently, I checked my knowledge of the standard Ukrainian language. It's a shame, but there were some mistakes, because the same words in the standard Ukrainian language (based on the

dialects of the regions of Kyiv and Poltava) and in its Transcarpathian dialects are stressed differently.

ICELDS: *Is there any evidence of the prevailing attitudes towards the teaching of Ukrainian by the parents who send their children to minority schools before and after the adoption of the new Law on Education? Were they satisfied with the level of teaching Ukrainian and did they demand any changes?*

MZ: As mentioned above, the attachment to the Hungarian language in Transcarpathia is primordial. Due to the difficulties in learning the Ukrainian language, the lack of bilingual techniques for its mastering, the reluctance of the Ukrainian authorities to solve these problems for many years, the support of ethnic Hungarians by their kin-state, a fundamental decision of the current authorities to adopt the new Law on Education faced negative attitudes of the ethnic Hungarians of Transcarpathia towards its Art. 7.

Already during the discussions of the draft law in spring of 2017, more than 64,000 signatures were gathered by public activists of the Hungarians of Transcarpathia against the narrowing down of the minority's educational rights. During the visit of Uzhhorod National University by the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Pavlo Klimkin, the head of the Ukrainian-Hungarian Educational Institute Oleksandr Shpenyk emphasized that "the results of the study conducted in the end of September 2017 demonstrated that after the adoption of the new Law on Education 70% of Hungarian pedagogues in Transcarpathia are ready to teach in Hungary, and about half of the parents – to send their children to schools in the neighboring state."

Thus, the reform of the Hungarian language education in Transcarpathia is a delicate, complicated multifaceted issue. In order to avoid a conflict situation, a balanced and scientifically grounded approach should be further developed. After all, as in the case of dual citizenship, in the current extremely difficult geopolitical situation of Ukraine, the language and educational issues in Transcarpathia may become an additional challenge to the country's national security.