

**THE 2019 UKRAINIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION:
WHY DID ETHNIC HUNGARIAN CANDIDATES
FAIL IN TRANSCARPATHIA?**

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Preconditions

The historical representation of ethnic Hungarians at the Verkhovna Rada was linked to the permanent changes to Ukraine's electoral legislation. In the second convocation (1994-1998) of the parliament, Hungarians were represented by Mihály Tóth (Ukrainian: *Mykhaylo Tovt*) from the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Ukraine, who was supported by the absolute majority of voters at the single-member Berehove (Hungarian: *Beregszász*) electoral district No. 169. Miklós Kovács (Ukrainian: *Mykola Kovach*) from the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Transcarpathia (Hungarian: *Kárpátaljai Magyar Kulturális Szövetség, KMKSZ*) was an MP in 1998-2002. He was elected in the single-member electoral district No. 72 with the center in Berehove (so-called "Hungarian" electoral district). In 2002-2006, Hungarians were represented by István Gajdos (Ukrainian: *Ishtvan Haidosh*) from the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Ukraine. He was elected in the same single-member electoral district No. 72 which was altered because of the removal of some Hungarian-speaking settlements. In 2012-2014, Gajdos was again an MP elected by the proportional system (74th place in the list of the Party of Regions). In 2014-2019, Transcarpathian Hungarians were represented by László Brenzovics (Ukrainian: *Vasyl Brenzovych*) elected on the list of Petro Poroshenko Bloc (62nd place).

Hungarian context at the 2019 parliamentary election in Ukraine

The problem of the parliamentary representation of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine becomes especially relevant taking into account the positive experience of political representation of the Hungarian communities in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Romania, Slovak Republic, Serbia (Vojvodina), Croatia and Slovenia) and the precarious practices of ethnopolitical management in Ukraine. Currently, this issue is exacerbated by the unprecedented failure of all three candidates from the political forces representing Ukraine's Hungarian community in

the single-member electoral districts of Transcarpathia at the parliamentary election on 21 July 2019.

László Brenzovics, an MP and Chairman of the KMKSZ – Hungarian Party in Ukraine (KMKSZ-UMP), had the biggest chances to win in the single-member electoral district No. 73 with a center in Vynohradiv (Hungarian: *Nagyszőlős*). As a result of the election, Brenzovics received 16,644 votes (26.21 percent) and came second after Vladislav Polyak, a member of the Transcarpathian Regional Council representing the Revival (Ukrainian: *Vidrodzhennya*) Party. József Barta (Ukrainian: *Yosyp Borto*) collected 8,939 votes (12.37 percent) and finished fourth at the electoral district No. 68 with the center in Uzhhorod (Hungarian: *Ungvár*). Miklós Tóth (Ukrainian: *Miklovsh Tovt*), a member of the Transcarpathian Regional Council from KMKSZ-UMP and member of the board of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Ukraine, received 6,949 votes (11.70 percent) and came third at the electoral district No. 69 with the center in Mukachevo (Hungarian: *Munkács*).

The electoral failures of the ethnic Hungarian candidates at the 2019 Ukraine's parliamentary election in Transcarpathia could be explained by several objective and subjective factors. The former factors are related to the institutional and organizational maintenance of the electoral process and the realities of the socio-demographic situation in the region. In turn, the latter factors address the characteristics of the 2019 election campaign and the subsequent voting.

Objective factors

The main factor is *the absence of the so-called "Hungarian electoral district"*, which existed at the 1998 and 2002 parliamentary elections and covered the areas compactly resided by the Hungarian minority. In general, lack of this district is a violation by the Central Electoral Commission of para 3 of Article 18 of the Law of 21 November 2013 on the amendments to specific legislative acts of Ukraine on improving electoral legislation. The law provides for the harmonization of the boundaries of the single-member electoral districts with the interests of the members of territorial communities, including national minorities. As the KMKSZ leader, László Brenzovics addressed these issues before the Central Electoral

Commission both in 2014 and 2019. However, even the appeal to the court did not bring any favorable changes to the Hungarian community.

The second factor that objectively contributed to the failure of the ethnic Hungarian representatives to get MP seats is *the lack of an agreement between the ethnic Hungarian politicians from Transcarpathia and the Servant of the People* (Ukrainian: *Sluha narodu*) Party affiliated with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. In 2012 and 2014, the relevant arrangements were made and the representatives of the Hungarian community were placed on the party lists on the positions sufficient to get elected. However, the current aggravation of the Ukrainian-Hungarian diplomatic relations triggered by the reforms of the language policy in Ukraine makes any agreements and arrangements between the Hungarian community of Transcarpathia and the official Kyiv impossible.

The third objective factor is the *absence of a significant part of the ethnic Hungarian electorate in the territory of Ukraine*. This situation significantly predetermined the failure of ethnic Hungarian candidates. Some estimates suggest that about 20,000 Transcarpathian Hungarians stay abroad for more than three months and more than 10,000 people stay beyond Transcarpathia and come home only for holidays. The overall low voter turnout during the election is directly related to the said factor of labor migration. Only 41.16 percent of the voters in Transcarpathia came to the polling stations and this region demonstrated the lowest turnout in Ukraine. In the three electoral districts mentioned above, the figures are the following: electoral district No. 68 with the center in Uzhhorod – 49.18 percent, electoral district No. 69 with the center in Mukachevo – 39.22 percent, and the electoral district No. 73 with the center in Vynohradiv – 44.89 percent. In some areas, with the ethnic Hungarian majority, these figures were extremely low. Among the localities of the electoral district No. 68, the turnout figures are the following: Esen' (Hungarian: *Eszeny*) – 27.18 percent, Mala Dobron' (Hungarian: *Kisdobrony*) – 35.26 percent, Velyka Dobron' (Hungarian: *Nagydobrony*) – 35.24 percent. In the electoral district No. 69, the following turnout was recorded: Chomonyn (Hungarian: *Csongor*) – 18.59 percent, Koson' (Hungarian: *Mezőkaszony*) – 24.99 percent, Popovo (Hungarian: *Csonkapapi*) – 25.47 percent. As for the electoral district No. 73, the

figures are the following: Yanoshi (Hungarian: *Makkosjánosi*) – 35.67 percent, Vary (Hungarian: *Vári*) – 35.44 percent, Dyida (Hungarian: *Beregdéda*) – 36.34 percent.

Subjective factors

As in the previous elections, the ethnic Hungarian candidates conducted their electoral campaign predominantly among the Hungarian-speaking population. Therefore, one of the main subjective factors was the *weak electoral focus on the Ukrainian-speaking electorate and the Roma population of Vynohradiv, Berehove, Mukachevo, and Uzhhorod*. The MP candidates, in particular, József Barta, made attempts to attract the Ukrainian-speaking segment of the electorate. This could be confirmed by the campaign flyers in the Ukrainian language delivered *en masse* to the mailboxes of the residents of the electoral district. The campaign materials addressed to the Ukrainian-speaking voters appeared on the pages of the regional newspapers, including *Karpatskyi obiektyv*, *RIO*, *Novyny Zakarpattya*. Similar materials were disseminated by the Ukrainian version of the *Kárpáti Igázz Szó* website, as well as by the bilingual 21 Uzhhorod TV channel.

The nomination of the clone candidates is one of the typical and well-known techniques used against a potential winner in the single-member electoral districts in Ukraine. In 2002, this method of electoral engineering was used against Miklós Kovács and helped István Gajdos to win an MP seat. This time this tool was used against László Brenzovics. His full namesake with the same name, surname and patronymic (Ukrainian: *Vasyl Ivanovych Brenzovych*), an unemployed from a mountain village of Liuta (Hungarian: *Havasköz*) of the Velykyi Bereznyi (Hungarian: *Nagyberezna*) district. The only identifiable difference was the birth year (László Brenzovics was born in 1964 while his clone candidate was born in 1977). As a result, Brenzovics' clone received 666 (1.04 percent).

Just before the election, on 15 July 2019, the Transcarpathian media disseminated the information about the searches executed at the persons allegedly engaged in voter bribery. In particular, they reported about the futile searches in the village of Dyula (Hungarian: *Szőlősgyula*) of the Vynohradiv district in the house of Károly Rezes (Ukrainian: *Karlo Rezesh*), a member of the Transcarpathian Regional Council representing the KMKSZ-UMP. A week before the election, issue 964 of the

Kárpátalja newspaper was withdrawn from sale by the Security Service of Ukraine. Its front page depicted the three said electoral districts (Nos. 68, 69 and 73) in the colors of the Hungarian flag and the inscription *Talpra, magyar!* (Arise Magyar!). As a result, criminal proceedings were opened under para 2 of Article 110 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine (“Trespass against territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine”). In light of this, the Transcarpathian Hungarians could perceive these activities as *intimidation of the Hungarian-speaking voters*, which is another important subjective factor of the 2019 election campaign.

Furthermore, one of the main reasons for the failure of the ethnic Hungarian candidates, including László Brenzovics, were numerous electoral violations, predominantly through the bribery of voters by the competing candidates. Social media, including Facebook, were full of compromising information that directly indicates voter bribery. There is a lot of information about organized transportation to the polling stations of the members of the Roma ethnic community, who live compactly in the neighborhoods in Vynohradiv, Berehove, Mukachevo, and Uzhhorod.

Thus, the parliamentary election on 21 July 2019 inaugurated a new crisis of the parliamentary representation of Ukraine’s Hungarian community. A similar situation was observed only during the electoral campaigns in 2006 and 2007, which took place under the proportional system in a single nationwide multi-mandate electoral district. There is a combination of the said objective and subjective factors that resulted in this *status quo*. The representatives of the Hungarian community and the regional political parties of Transcarpathia will learn the lessons of this electoral campaign and take them into account during the upcoming local elections.

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