

The Past 80 years of Hungarian Minority

Struggle for Survival. The Transcarpathian Hungarians (1944–2022).

By Erzsébet Molnár D., Natália Váradi, Karolina Darcsi, Ildikó Orosz,
and István Cserniczkó. Budapest: Méry Ratio Publishing, 2022. 240 pp.

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Significant results have emerged in the past two decades in the scholarly examination of the twentieth-century history of Transcarpathia, primarily made possible by establishing the framework for scholarly exploration, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, the establishment of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Hungarian College of Higher Education in Transcarpathia, and the gradual opening of archives in Ukraine. The most significant outcome of this work is arguably the multi-authored volume entitled *Transcarpathia, 1919–2009: History, Politics, Culture*, published both in Hungarian and Ukrainian. With no more than a few partial studies up to this publication, the English-language history of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia after 1944 is particularly welcome. Therefore, it is important that the study collection titled *Struggle for Survival: The Transcarpathian Hungarians (1944–2022)*, edited by Andrea Bocskor, István Cserniczkó, and Erzsébet Molnár D., has been published, in which the instructors of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Hungarian College of Higher Education in Transcarpathia provide an overview of the events of the last eighty years. (In 2023, under the auspices of the Committee of National Remembrance, it came out in Hungarian as well.)

The volume is overtly imbued with current political implications. Andrea Bocskor, the Member of the European Parliament, clearly identifies in the Foreword that “our volume will bring our readers [...] to identifying with our aspirations!” (p. 13). In this regard, the primary aim of understanding the past of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia is to pave the way for its present endeavours: “Thus, in this volume, we focus the beginning of our narrative on Transcarpathian Hungarians in this [Soviet] period because the roots of today’s aspirations, our

fidelity to our national identity and our mother tongue, loyalty to our homeland and the Transcarpathian Hungarian community lie somewhere here. If our ancestors, surviving such a difficult period [...] were able to preserve their national identity in their homeland, it is also the moral duty of today's generation not to give up the struggle for survival." (p. 10).

This attitude also determines the discussion in the book made up of five big chapters, as the history of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia is fundamentally depicted as a history of conflict with the contemporary state centre. In the first three chapters, devoted chronologically to 1944–1953, 1953–1991, and 1991–2022, the authors examine the repression suffered by the Hungarian minority and the political aspirations of the local Hungarian community. The last two chapters assess issues of educational and language rights over the last nearly eighty years.

In the first chapter, Erzsébet Molnár D. presents the human rights violations in Transcarpathia under the communist regime between 1944 and 1953. While the author briefly outlines how the affiliation of Transcarpathia changed in the first half of the twentieth century, she concludes that among the historical turning points, joining the Soviet Union had the most severe consequences: "[...] until 1944 the territory was part of Central Europe and within that the Carpathian Basin in a social, economic and cultural sense; but with the 1944 shift of power, it became part of a dictatorial, class-based empire that was built on the deprivation of rights" (p. 15). For tens of thousands of people, the change in power meant not only deprivation of their rights but also physical annihilation through ethnic cleansing. The historian outlines the geostrategic aims of the region's Soviet annexation; methodologically, she presents simultaneously the violent process of Soviet occupation and annexation and the efforts to maintain apparent legitimacy. Alongside the chronological overview of events, Molnár D. points out that although the new social and political structure of the region was not precisely known in October 1944 when the Red Army 'liberated' it (pp. 18–20), the Soviet leadership had no intention whatsoever of surrendering Transcarpathia to others, for example to the Czechoslovak state (pp. 19–20).

Molnár D. explicates the methods applied against the population. Characteristic of Soviet dictatorship, constant fear and intimidation, uncertainty, deprivation of rights, discrimination, exclusion, as well as deportations and physical annihilation were the means that they would use as liberators of the region. In presenting the communist terror, the first chapter of the book focuses mainly on the *Malenkij robot*—ethnic cleansing based on the principle of collective guilt, as well as on violations of due process and show trials. As Molnár D. also points out, since the Soviet Union was dissolved and Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, ethnic Hungarians and Germans deported on ethnic grounds have not been rehabilitated to this day (p. 45).

In the second chapter, Natália Váradi discusses the struggles of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia from 1953 to 1989. She uncovers the Hungarian community's fight for legal equality against the backdrop of social, economic, and administrative changes following Stalin's death. Somewhat in parallel with the first chapter, Váradi also outlines the ideological work of the era, particularly its impact on local historical churches—Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Reformed. The author takes note of the martyrdom of Reformed pastor Endre Gecse, who died because of torture in KGB investigative custody in 1959.

The chapter places particular emphasis on cross-border relations and outlines the relevance of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution for Transcarpathia. From the perspective of revolutionary events, Transcarpathia indeed played a pivotal role, as “it becomes the scene for deportations, interrogations, control of military and political operations” (p. 65). Soviet tanks passed through the oblast on their way to Budapest, and the Soviet political leadership settled in Ungvár (Uzhhorod, UA), where, among others, deportees from Hungary were imprisoned. Váradi briefly lists three groups of young people—from Mezókaszony (Koson, UA), Nagyszőlős (Vynohradiv, UA), and Gállocs (Haloch, UA)—who, according to KGB documents, operated in the oblast during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the following months, reputedly as “anti-Soviet politicising groups spreading leaflets” (p. 68). The author connects the presentation of the Hungarian minority's fight for legal equality with the description of the content requirements of the so-called Petitions of 1963, 1971, and 1972. She concludes: “The message of the 1963, 1971 and 1972 Petitions to the minority living today in Transcarpathia is that there is a chance to fight for minority rights only if there are individuals who speak up and take up the legal fight.” (p. 95). In this regard, the Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association, established in 1989, holds a prominent position.

The third chapter, unlike the previous two, focuses specifically on the political history of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia in the sovereign Ukrainian state between 1991 and 2022, established after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Karolina Darcsi aptly describes the conditions of the early 1990s: “The struggle of local and central leadership groups and power elites for the redistribution of political and economic power began, and the regime change started.” (p. 99). In a segmented analysis, the author describes the most important milestones of political changes in Ukraine from its independence to gaining EU candidate status in June 2022, alongside modifications to minority legislation starting from 1990. Concurrently, the opportunities of local Hungarian minority advocacy groups and their endeavours to assert political, primarily collective rights, are also presented, focusing mainly on various autonomy attempts—from territorial to cultural autonomy. Based on the interpretation of relevant laws from the period, Darcsi concludes that the rights of Ukrainian minorities have continuously operated at an individual, rather than a

collective, level. Whenever there was a chance for positive change at the legislative level, the authorities and their representatives found ways to render the initiatives unworkable—whether it was about the delineation of electoral districts, fulfilling promises of the ruling power, or weakening anti-Hungarian sentiments. Nonetheless, the author is hopeful about Ukraine’s full membership in the EU, “where it is hoped that the minority rights will also be treated in a European manner” (p. 141).

In the fourth chapter, Ildikó Orosz discusses Hungarian-language education in Transcarpathia from 1946 to 2021. She starts with the assertion that “[e]very single segment of ethnic minority is influenced by politics” (p. 143). In this spirit, Orosz highlights that the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia was under the authority of various states throughout the twentieth century without having any say or influence on this matter. Consequently, local minority education policies have always been dictated by the prevailing power. The chapter addresses separately the development of Hungarian-language education and its challenges in 1945–1966, then in the 1970s and 1980s, and finally in independent Ukraine—with the latter receiving most emphasis.

It is underlined that before the 1996 Ukrainian constitution, the first educational policy laws allowed space for the establishment of institutional networks for minorities—it was during this time that the Transcarpathian Hungarian Pedagogical Association (KMPSZ) was formed, followed by the establishment of the Foundation for the Transcarpathian Hungarian College initiated by the Pedagogical Association KMPSZ and the Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association (KMKSZ). The Foundation has since continued to maintain the educational institution, then known as the Transcarpathian Hungarian Teacher Training College (currently under the name of Ferenc Rákóczi II Hungarian College of Higher Education). However, following the adoption of the 1996 Ukrainian constitution, Orosz speaks of intensifying anti-minority sentiments. She states that the 1996 constitution defined Ukraine as a monolithic nation-state from the outset, and subsequent legislation increasingly relied on this framework, both during the introduction of a unified admission system (2007) and the adoption of the Education Framework Law in 2017. Following the events of 2014, “intolerance regarding the use of the language of minorities increased among Ukrainian politicians” (p. 161). The author also addresses the programs and projects aimed at supporting Transcarpathian education over the past thirty years, which have indeed enabled significant developments throughout the oblast. However, simultaneously, Orosz laments that these initiatives have often provided grounds for harassment by Ukrainian authorities.

Finally, the book concludes with István Csernicskó’s chapter, in which the topics of language rights, violations, and restrictions in Transcarpathia between 1944 and 2023 are addressed. The linguist begins his discussion by elaborating on the definition of language rights. This is followed by a brief summary of the language rights

held by the Transcarpathian Hungarian minority in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic during the Soviet era, and how these rights were transgressed by the violation of language (human) rights from the deportations of 1944 to changes in birth registrations and the change of place and personal names. While Cserniczkó clearly sees the political aim of Russification during the Soviet era, he also draws attention to the fact that the dominance of Russian over other languages was achieved without any constitutional or legal codification.

Furthermore, Cserniczkó briefly presents the linguistic legislative regulations in independent Ukraine, mainly showing how the language rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia have been restricted in recent years. He highlights the fundamental conflict that after 1991, but especially since 2014, “the Ukrainian state language policy insisted that Ukrainian should take over all the functions previously fulfilled by the Russian language, while national minorities wanted to use their mother tongue in as many language use areas as possible” (p. 195). According to the linguist, the legislative steps taken since 2014 indicate a language policy direction that strengthens the position of Ukrainian at the expense of other languages used in the country. He gives several concrete examples of how these regulations restrict the language rights of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia and how most of these legislative changes are incompatible with Ukraine’s international commitments, thus constituting a withdrawal of existing rights.

While the descriptions and discussions in the five chapters are clear and consistent, addressing an essential conceptual inconsistency is necessary. On pages 99–100, the author refers to both the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine of 16 July 1990, which pronounced the sovereign rights of the Ukrainian SSR within the Soviet Union, and the Declaration of Independence of Ukraine of 24 August 1991, which declared the separation from the Soviet Union, using the same term (“Declaration of Independence”). Furthermore, it may have been more useful to incorporate the results of Ukrainian historical scholarship, for example, considering studies such as Vasil Mishchanin’s 2019 doctoral dissertation dealing with the Sovietization of Transcarpathia (1944–1950), which was also published as a monograph, and Mishchanin’s other extensive volume entitled *Political History of Transcarpathia through the Prism of Ukrainian Statehood* published in 2022 and covering the period from 1918 to 1950. In addition, there are numerous valuable archival source editions published in Uzhhorod in the 2010s and 2020s.

The tables, contemporary photographs, and colour maps add to the understanding of the analyses in the book. For foreign readers, the bibliography containing recommended literature on the topic and the chronology of the history of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia from 1944 to 2022 concluding the book may be of great assistance.

Overall, it is a positive development that we now have an English summary of the history of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. Nevertheless, while the authors of the five chapters have provided concise summaries of their topics, there are still unfulfilled expectations. Understanding the situation of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia also requires insight into their everyday life in the Zakarpattia Oblast, from labour migration to mixed marriages, as some aspects of daily life are only covered in Natália Váradi's study. Supplementing the political and violent history of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia with social history, that is, an interdisciplinary approach to the topic, would be an important gap-filler both from a historical perspective and in terms of representing the Hungarian community in Europe. Hopefully, in the future, a volume of this kind will also enrich the range of publications aimed at gaining familiarity with the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia.

