*Information about interviewee:*

*Laszlo Zubanych is the head of the Democratic Union of Hungarians of Ukraine (UDMSZ). Interview conducted in Berehove, Ukraine.*

*R= Respondent – Laszlo Zubanych*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: Can you please describe the objections and functions of the party?

R: In 1989 the cultural association of the Transcarpathian Hungarians was established, after two years we understood that there was a need for a nationwide entity for all Hungarians in Ukraine. In 1991, the old Ukrainian NGO was created which covered the cultural and linguistic needs of the Hungarians in Ukraine. Not only in Ukraine though, we have nearly 5000 people in Hungary, local Hungarians who moved there, our diaspora who moved there, we cover their needs. We have 19 divisions in 19 Ukrainian regions, the largest ones are in L’viv and Kiev because they have universities and Hungarian students go there. During Soviet times most of the local Hungarians went to Kiev to study but also Tartu in Estonia and also in Moscow. There was a moment when a student from my village nearly became a Soviet astronaut! Right now, the vectors are different, 60% of those who finished school want to study, they do this in Hungary, which is bad, because they won't come back, they won't return, so local Hungarian intellectuals lose 60% of their possible future, they could stay here and study, but they don’t. Even though they have all the chances to do this. Hungary is generous in financing local institutions, this is a higher education establishment, it is universal with humanities and technical programmes and if we include college, we have 1000 students a year and the financing from the Hungarian state is so significant, the budget of this institution is greater than some major Ukrainian universities.

I: Has emigration to Hungary increased since the Ukrainian Hungarians were able to get Hungarian citizenship?

R: There was an interesting switch in 2011, before that there was emigration, but it was mostly the elderly and it was limited to 300 or 400 persons a year. In the 60s there was an inter-state agreement meaning that if you migrated to Hungary and could prove that you have severed ties with Ukraine, you could receive a standard Hungarian pension. For example, if you are a director here in Zakarpattia, and moved to Hungary, you could receive the same salary as an equivalent company in Hungary, so a higher salary. Now it is different, it is much easier to get citizenship and long-term visas for 5 years, you don't have to bring a stack of documents, just an invitation from someone in Hungary and you get in. Now it is much younger people migrating and for the last 4 or 5 years it is labour migration, which has intensified, but the goal is not Hungary, it is Czech Republic, Germany, United Kingdom and so on. In 2014 when the war started, the Ukrainian war commission started conscription to the army on mass, young Hungarian men from this region went to Hungary, and have stayed. Last Sunday i was at church, the major religion here is Protestantism or Calvinism, and it was half full, which is not normal, and it was mainly elderly, young, and woman, almost no men between 17 to 50. They can still keep their houses here, 2 or 3 places, but mostly they leave for good. Another evidence of this, is the turnout of voters at the last presidential election, it was 50% lower than in 2015.

I: Is the conscription order still standing?

R: Those who are not on the contract, but under state obligation to serve, yes, they still serve. I even got 5 of them, even though I have already served and am disqualified. I also work at the university, which means I am not obliged to serve as I teach students. Nevertheless, I received all these conscription orders. Now there are no conscriptions, but if you look in the city centre there is a monument to those who died in the war. The first person from Zakarpattia who died in the war was a Hungarian man from Berehove. There is now a contract army now, and if a person was conscribed to the army or he signed a contract, then this is his or her fate. Hungarian people don't stand aside.

I: How has the relationship between the Hungarian people and the Hungarian state developed over the years?

R: We can easily divide these periods of relations with the Hungarian state. Before 2010 and after, before there was a social government and then Fidesz. Now there is definitely more help, financially and economically, but also it influences the international relations of Ukraine, Hungary and the EU as a third party. The situation of the local Hungarian minority. In some cases, Hungary threatens to not say yes to Ukrainian accession to the EU and NATO. This is sometimes a hot question. In regards to the local minority, there was a new wave of coldness in bilateral relations after the Malta submit when Poroshenko and Viktor Orbán had some agreements, probably on dual citizenship and education and language law. They had some agreements. On that summit, there were some agreements on the liberalisation of the dual citizenship regime. It is possible for a local person to say ok, i have to passports and they are fine with this. It still means in Ukraine, even if you have 3, 4 or 5 passports, if you commit a crime, you are responsible under Ukrainian law as a Ukrainian citizen and nothing helps, and you can't avoid this. This was the principle agreement, regarding the education as well. After the summit ended, the two parties communicated a completely different view. Orbán said Pereshenko is irresponsible and not worth his trust, and after this all contacts stopped.

I: What explains the delay in Ukrainian protestations at the extraterritorial naturalisations?

R: They just started to count the people immediately. The migration issue was the first one, but it is not only about Hungary. If we count the Polish card that Polish issues, we have nearly half a million in Ukraine issued by Poland. More than that, we have Romanian passports, you can get it but it is not heard about, they started to do this in 2006. Now they have given nearly 300,000 passports, which is way more than Hungary did. These passports are stronger than Hungarian passports, because you can buy cars and real estate in Romanian, but in Hungary you need to registration. I think that Ukraine was worried about this, and started with the weakest link, the smallest state. They did not expect the Hungarian reaction to this to be so fierce. Hungary is a small dog, but with a big bite! We have new data on the quantity of the Hungarian passports here. At the end of last year the Hungarian government released the data and it is 135,000 people who have Hungarian passports, but I think it could be less. About 120,000. These are not just ethnic Hungarians. All you need as a document saying your ancestors lived on the territory of the former Kingdom of Hungary and you know basic Hungarian language. Now, in Uzhhorod, we can see many different Hungarian language courses offering courses to get people to this level. The exact official data is classified, so we cannot get the official numbers, but this is approximately correct. The opposition parties wanted this data, but they couldn’t get it. It made things more unstable, as people have the freedom to choose. They have a more liberal approach to what they do. In terms of the intentions of the Hungarian state, for example, to change the borders, to have their agents here in Transcarpathia, I am in an NGO and political activities since 1989, and I have never heard this officially or unofficially from any Hungarian representatives. Many local people now want to leave the country, leave Ukraine, 50% for Hungary and 50% for EU as they think life will be easier there. As we say in Hungary, we don't make fences out of salami. You also need to work to have a decent life there. Hungary now invests a lot in order for people to stay here, which is not very logical from the Hungarian point of view, as their population is diminishing rapidly as people move abroad. But they want people to stay here. This is partly because they want to have political influence on the local situation. Partly yes. I would not see this as a threat, let's say you need to go deeper into every situation. They don't pursue their political aims, they pursue their personal needs. I read many Transcarpathian websites, and the most hostile comments about the Hungarian community, come from people who have barely met any Hungarians, from the mountain regions, which are far from here, the communication between people here is quite weak. They don't know the situation. That is why they think it is a threat to national security. Yes, it is not 100% safe, but it is not a threat to destroy the country. From here it is 5 kilometres to the border, which is quite close, but the system on the other side is pretty different. The EU and NATO standards are quite alien to locals, who are used to move around, are used to benefit from the law, to do something faster if it is possible to negotiate it, at the EU it is different, they don't feel at home there.

I: Sometimes Viktor Orbán's rhetoric about the border revisions post Treaty of Trianon have caused some tensions with inter-state relations, what are your thoughts on this?

R: Transcarpathia as a region was established as a region in 1920, so it doesn’t' have a long history, it was previously a region in Czech Republic. Before that and after that in 1938 some part of territory was part of Hungary, in 1939, some parts of the territory were annexed, which Hungarians don't like to admit, but it happened, according to Saint-Germain peace agreement, there were some agreements were changed, and every new country who was in charge of the region, were changing and violating these agreements, so you never feel safe here. This is not a centuries long entity. The current history of Zakarpattia as part of the Ukrainian state, began on December 1st 1991, when we had a nationwide referendum of the independence of Ukraine. Here we had three questions for the referendum. The first is whether you want the independence of Ukraine from the Soviet Union. In the second question they wanted to put the word autonomy in the question, but the president at the time, Leonid Kravchuk from Kiev came to here, to try to convince local activists to change the questions, to change the question to special self-governing territory. It is definitely not autonomy. The third question, only for the Berehove autonomy, about the special territorial autonomy of Hungarians, to be still included within Zakarpattia and to be included within Ukraine. All the three questions in the referendum were answered yes. They got support. In order for them to be accepted, they needed to be voting on in the Ukrainian parliament, which only approved the first question, the other two they just ignored. The question on Crimea autonomy, was also in the process of establishment. They had the tools, but they were not used. There have been attempts to restore cultural autonomy here, but nobody says here about the formula for territorial autonomy. The term wasn’t used, it was only about cultural initiatives. All the times when this issued was raised, it was rejected. The Ukrainian parliament in the committees and on different levels, they always said no. There was even an attempt from a local MP, who was elected in this region, with the help of local Hungarian cultural activists, he is Ukrainian, ethnic Ukrainian, and he proposed an amendment to the constitution which banned, any cultural autonomies on Ukrainian territories, he is dead already. Since 2016, in Ukraine we had administrative reform, we had the old Soviet system of districts, rayon, now it is reformed so that locals can self-organise and unite villages and small towns, to form united territorial communities, which have the right to spend their budget, for some cities to classify themselves as touristic, industrial, recreational and so on and so forth. Naturally, Hungarian villages want to unite, because we know each other and we are close. Some people here see some separatism danger or separatism intent. The same case was in the Slovakia, but they had another wave of administrative reforms, dividing the country into squares. All the national context was mixed. There is only one community now were they have 40% or less Hungarians living there. All the other regions, specially Kosice are mixed. Take a look, Hungarian villages are on this line, on the border, 10km wide along the border with Hungary. All these united territorial communities, are united, not in rayon, not in regions, but in a higher level. There is a plan, for these new entities and Hungarian people wanted to make a small, but singular district, which would unite all the villages and Berehove specially, Chop. But on the 17th December last year, the Prime Minister of Ukraine, presented a preliminary plan of these entities, and the proposition of the Hungarians was ignored. They separated all these communities between 4 different districts, so we won't have a majority, so this is how it is. We have this reform, so when they united into communities, but some regions it went fast and some went slower. Here it went slower. As our former governor, now we have a deputy governor, but before we had a governor who was an experience politician, who admitted that he put on the brakes of these reforms here in order to not to provoke any separatist entities. When these united territorial communities will be established, they need to be managed. Under Ukrainian law, it is mandatory that the managers know Ukrainian to a decent level, which is proved by a certificate. This law will be implemented gradually and will be active by 2020. As of now, the salary of these communities is not high. They need to do a lot of work, and this demand will be another reason for a crisis for these entities, because they cannot speak in Ukrainian.

I: What is the intent or objective of Viktor Orbán with regards to Zakarpattia?

R: I want you to know that 20% of the money from Hungary is taxed, so the Ukrainian budget gets 20% of all the money from Hungary. Maybe partly ironically, this 20% is divided into 18.5% this is the tax on revenue, which every person has to pay and 1.5% is a war tax. This additional money a person, for example a teacher or librarian or kindergarten teacher, they get formally goes as additionally money for knowledge and the teaching of Hungarian language. The deeper reason is that we had large scale emigration when the war started out of here. We had one case when a school here, when on 1st September, when the year was to begin, out of 16 teachers, 12 had left the country. The principal of the school left to wash plates somewhere in France for more money. So the Hungarian government allocated 2.5 billion forints, to help Transcarpathia in order to slow labour migration. The second part of the question is also about the reason for this help, as it goes into communal or even state property. In order for more people, specially, Hungarian people, to stay here, the money goes into medical centres and schools which have not had any renovation in ten to fifteen years. Now they are doing better, and they provide better services, which allows people to stay and to have their service locally and to not get them in Hungary, which would be the case otherwise. This makes the life of Hungarians easier. If Hungary wanted people to move into the country the policy would be quite different. The third aspect is economical support, that also goes legally through the banks, with taxes to Ukrainian budget as well, and they get this money for treatment and new businesses and so on. If you want to buy a tractor for example, you put 20% of your money and 80% goes from a fund, for several reasons. First, you are interested in this as it is your money, and the tractor won't be in the garage for years, and the second one, the tractor ties you to this land, because if you invested your money and you have the tractor or the greenhouse where you grow your vegetables, it means you will stay here. If the goal formally or unofficially is not to tie you here, it makes people stay and specially it affects the youth. Because morally, they are not so attached to this land, and this programme gives them more reasons to stay here and not to go to the Netherlands to pick strawberries.

I: Not only Hungarians are benefitting from this money, so what is in it for the Hungarian state?

R: We have nearly a hundred of villages and towns here which are Hungarian and were Hungarian for thousands of years and Hungarians have lived here continuously. Yes this is money from the Hungarian taxpayer, but most of this money is going to Hungarian households to Hungarian families here. if you buy a tractor and you do this from a Ukrainian distributor here, but the Ukrainian security service and now checking all the bank transactions to prove there is no separatism involved. The Hungarian government had other plans to invest in the local economy, not to physical persons, to individual entrepreneurs but to companies, for bigger investments, such as 1 or 2 billion forints, and it wouldn’t be necessary for a Hungarian person to be running the company, the money doesn't have to go to Hungarians, but to Ukrainian enterprise with ethnic Ukrainian at the top. If this plan had been implemented, there would be less reason to talk about separatism of any kind, as the Hungarian state would be supporting Ukrainian companies, but it is on hold now. This project is on hold because of Ukrainian law, which for example ban credits of less than 13. % interest and the Hungarian government wanted to give credit at 10 or 11%. To realise this project, you would have to form a joint venture with a Hungarian company, and this way you can get this money. We also have some geographical constraints or problems here. If I want to get to Budapest right now, and the situation on the border is good, it will take 3 to 3 and half hours by car, because of the highway. But to get to Kiev it takes up to 10 hours by car, 14 hours by train. We have now launched flights, which take 1.5 hours to Uzhhorod. 8 capitals of European states are closer than Kiev to Berehove. Specifically, if you go by car and it is winter, there are Carpathian Mountains, it is just impossible. Our roads are quite specific.

I: Is the funding from Hungary linked to citizenship?

R: There are two ways to get the money. First, you need to have a passport of a Hungarian citizen. Second, you need to have a document which proves you are a foreign Hungarian. In order to get this document, you need to know Hungarian language on some level, or some organisation, like the church for example, or this organisation, has to say that this person has some ties to the Hungarian community. So not just ethnically Hungarian for example. Also you can get the money if you live with someone who is a foreign Hungarian.

I: On the whole has increased involvement in the region been beneficial for the Hungarian community?

R: It is fifty/fifty with regards to positive and negatives. The positive is that it opened the world to the people, they got more experience. The negative is that the local community becomes less and less populated. Last year we had a severe winter. Our stairs our ten years old and last year I ordered a specialist who would do the work. The specialist put me in the workbook and the wait is 4 months. We had an incident with a car hitting the gate, and we need to get a specialist from another region to fix this. Even in Uzhhorod if you want to renovate a school, you have to wait to get the work done by specialist, even if you pay them the European salary, because of the migration and the passportization as well. It is not only about Hungarians This is a region wide problem. They have the money and the will to do the work, but there is no body to do it. As a person who gives lectures at the state university of Uzhhorod, the main university of Zakarpattia, after taxes I get up to 8,000 hryvnias, while here, a person who works at the local institute funded by Hungary, gets 30, 35,000 and in Slovakia for example, you would get even more, and this pushed some local entrepreneurs to raise the salaries. For example, we have some plants, funded by the Americans, and you get 15, 16,000 which is equal to what you get in Czech republic, but local people get fed up by insecurity or instability, so even if the salaries are equal, people choose to go abroad, migration is unstoppable. I think that migration will increase as more and more people know about the benefits. On the main street there are 18 houses, and on this street, only 18 people live here. 6 houses are empty. You can check the population by going to church on Sunday. Some years ago it was full. Now it is much less. It is not only my village, but it is everywhere. Even though it is a beautiful place to live. Now we will see, with the new president, the new course Ukraine has taken, we will see people come back, but many people have lost hope. There is a black swan factor. Hungary feels a shortage of labour, of people who work with their hands and of population as well. In London there are 400,000 of Hungarians living there specifically. The government launched a new programme, if you are a family, and you have a second child you get 10 million forints, if you are going to have a third child, another 10 million, if you are a student in higher education and you promise that you will give birth to a child, half of your tuition fees are covered by the state. But the programmes that provide financial incentives for increasing childbirth are only applicable to those that live in Hungary and have their registration in Hungary. So when this starts, with the help to buy houses, the migration from here will be even more intensified