Information about interviewee:

Myroslav Horvat, Deputy City Council Uzhhorod and head of local NGO representing the issues of the Roma community. Interview conducted in Uzhhorod, Ukraine.

R= Respondent – Myroslav Horvat

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

## I: What is the main function of your NGO?

## R: First of all, thank you for your interest in the Roma minority. We have worked since 2000, working with youth to preserve language, culture and sporting traditions of the youth in Transcarpathia. A few years ago, we understood this to be a problem, but it is a global problem to protect the rights of the Roma people, so we change our priorities. We created a centre for free legal advisory and consultations and help. We started with the legal formalisation of the Roma people, as often they don't have passports, they don't have any birth certificate, so we started to provide all the documents from birth until now. When we started this, I was still studying at the university as a lawyer, my first education. On one hand I studied, and secondly, I practised with the Roma people. We do reviews of our work every year. Last year we made 173 passports applications with other lawyers who helped prepare them. We legalised several land sports were the Roma lived and around ten houses. It has only been a couple of years, since the police have stopped prosecuting the Roma, beating them for no reason. Our role became a little easier when we decided to take an active political part of life in the community, so it was another level. Four years ago I was a candidate for the City Council and the community elected me for deputy mayor. Up to half a year of our deputise, the City Council allowed me to work here, as this is a social security section where the Roma people most often need some help. Since April 2016 we have been here. We have four main priorities here for our organisation. The human rights of the Roma people. Education, health and employment. And also migration within the community, for work or for begging, or abroad. Every year we have roundtable, open discussions, with the police, not only how to live with one another, but how to cooperate. I also want you to note, that there is a possibility to learn about Roma history, Roma culture, Roma language in the university. We have a programme called Roma studies and I am a coordinator of this programme.

## I: How large is the Roma community here in Transcarpathia?

## R: We have statistics for 2017 and according to local state entities it is 73,600, but according to local NGOS and churches, we have over 100 Roma churches in this region, it is over 100,000. We can say the generation has changed, there are new youths, who are much better educated than their parents. Nearly 100, up to 200, finished the 11 grade which is a lot for the Roma community. Unofficially, according to donors and church organisations, we have nearly 50 undergraduates. In Uzhhorod there are 5 or 6 students, my daughter included, she is studying to be a social worker. She is preparing to devote herself to the Roma community.

## I: Do you have a Hungarian passport?

## R: I am not interested in a Hungarian passport. Some people can do this, some people are able to do this, some people just don't want this. I have never had a problem with visas, I have been in the United States and throughout other countries, so I didn't need another passport. But those people who wanted to get a Hungarian passport, they did this.

## I: Within the Roma community too?

## R: Sure. Now we have an opportunity to get biometric passports that open the visa-free regime for people. So that opens the door to work on the territory of EU countries.

## I: How many people in the Roma community have both Hungarian and Ukrainian passports?

## R: It is up to 20% and mostly these are more educated or active people, who wish to take them and their families abroad.

## I: Do you think this contradicts the apparently ethnic-nationalist project of Hungary with regards to the Hungarians abroad? Within Hungary, the Roma community are often excluded from political life and citizenship.

## R: It is a political question. They give passports here to have their official citizens. This is the same case within Donbas, where Russia started issuing citizenship a couple of weeks ago. In the case, that someone persecutes the local Hungarians, Viktor Orbán can say, 'come on, these are our citizens, we have to protect them'. But I am not sure, this will be the same for Roma people. For example, last year, there was a Roma person killed by a knife from this community, there was not a response from anybody at a high level. If you know the Hungarian government, they put a lot of money into Transcarpathia, but what does the Roma have? Maybe 10 percent of this goes to the Roma people. For example, there is a programme, state supported by Hungary, for people who live in ethnically Hungarian territories here in Transcarpathia, if they start a business, they get 10,000 euros from the start. It is often not for the Roma. They also have Hungarian passports, but they do not take part in this programme. Maybe 10 percent.

## I: Was it as easy for the Roma people to receive a Hungarian passport as it was the ethnic Hungarians?

## R: Yes. It was the same. There was no discrimination. They had all the needed documents. Birth certificate and proof of ancestry, photographs, old photographs. Many people have died from the Roma community, but there are still some people who lived here when it was part of Hungarian territory.

## I: Why did it take the Ukrainian state so long to protest Hungarian's actions in Transcarpathia?

## R: I think this is purely political. The Hungarian community is quite integrated into the political establishment at a capital level, as the MP of Hungarian origin is in the president’s parliamentary faction. They had some negotiations and deals within the higher level of political elite, but as Hungarians are not so supportive of the ex-president, maybe there was some conflict because of this.

## I: How will the new stricter language law affect the community here?

## R: 67% of Roma people here speak Hungarian mostly. I don't think this is a problem really. There are just several parts where the Hungarian language is dominant. In Berehove, but here nothing. But for the Roma people it is more of a problem, as the Roma language is in 5th of 6th place. Here in Uzhhorod, the Roma language is more popular and is an example for the region, so it spreads to the Transcarpathia slowly. I know I am obliged to know Hungarian, to protect the rights of my community.

## I: So you are not worried about further exclusion with regards to this language legislation?

## R: No. It feel it is a political game. This is a political game of different parts. Hungarians play their part, Ukrainians play their part. Regarding the language, there are some regions that are more natively Ukrainian, and some that are not. This is because for 30 or 40 years, there was nothing done in order to assimilate these people, to get together as a community. Regarding migration, the whole Hungarian youth want to emigrate from here massively. For the Roma people it is 5 to 7 percent, those who want to leave the country.

## I: What are the biggest challenges?

## R: We were with the poorest. We do not divide people based on their nationality. Nearly a third of the Roma who come here cannot read or write. It is highly important for us to be able to community with them. Here they can have a primary consultation that they can get nowhere else.

## I: Are you optimistic about the future level of support?

## R: No I am not. Today it is often a struggle for money for Roma people. You can always prove this by coming to any Roma community. I was on Saturday at a Roma community just south of Uzhhorod. There is no electricity for a house where 13 people live. They have problems with the water. They use a well for 40 houses. This water was installed by church people, not by the state or municipality. When the Roma move to other regions, Lvov etc. they often live in the forest in tents. The whole situation is very hard. We have had 6 presidents, and none have been involved with the Roma question deeply. Maybe this time will be better. But I have no proof as no one in the campaign address the problems with the Roma people directly. This is not the case in our neighbouring countries, in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania. Every political campaign has some section in their programme about the Roma people.

## I: Is the chance of receiving help from Hungary?

## R: Pretty low. They mostly support schools, kindergartens, these kinds of social projects. But not the kind of help to support housing that is possible to live in, lights on the street, water. I barely know of any these such projects. These are what they need.

## I: I have heard that the Hungarian government subsidies the salaries of some of the Hungarian workers here in Transcarpathia?

## R: Yes, yes yes. They do.

## I: Which sectors?

## R: This is mostly for teachers and kindergartens and is reserved for some humanitarian, historical, cultural goals which Hungary has about their culture. If, for example, a school child cannot afford to go to the 1st grade, the Hungarian state will pay for their school uniform, for their bag and so on.

## I: For just ethnic Hungarians?

## R: The financing is about the so-called Hungarian schools, the have a plaque to state that this is where it is possible to learn more about Hungary, or the Hungarian language. Anybody can go there. The help can often go up to the restoration of the building, to the salaries definitely, so that Hungarian people see this. After evidence of such help, they don't separate themselves from the Hungarian state. They mostly think in Hungarian terms, and think of themselves of Hungarian and connect themselves more to Hungary than to Ukraine.

## I: Do you think that the Roma people are part of Orbán’s plan for the Hungary national project?

## R: I wouldn't say this en masse, for the large part of Roma society. But there are definitely people who see themselves as part of the Hungarian state and nation and so on. The fight is for territory, by this policy that Hungary shows to Europe that some part of Transcarpathia belongs to Hungary, some part of Slovakia is Hungarian, south of Kosice. I have been there and many people speak Hungarian, the same in Romania. This is a major policy, that transfers to Ukraine and to the Roma people.

## I: Do you believe dual citizenship can be a threat to social cohesion or to national security?

## R: I think this is one of the chances to change your life. If it would be possible, with a Ukrainian passport, to get to Britain to United States, to live and work there, no one would take Hungarian passports. This is just another step to change your life for many local people. That's all. I Think 70-80% of people who have Hungarian passport, they use them to move to work and so on. But they don't associate with Hungary, they don't see themselves as Hungarian. They just use this. Hungary is not the place you would like to be. It is not cheap there. I have been working for 3 years in Budapest, and it was pretty hard to make ends meet. The Hungarian Roma have their own problems and what do they have to do with Transcarpathian Roma, it just won't fit. Many of my friends, for the 5th year in a row, work in Great Britain. One of these friends, an Uzhhorod Hungarian, used their Hungarian passports to do this. In order to change his life in material terms, and he did this, he built a house here in Uzhhorod and he invested his money here, and his children are in the best schools in the city. This is how he uses the Hungarian passport. Since we have had a visa-free regime for two years, people don't need a Hungarian passport anymore, from the Roma community. They go to Slovakia, Czechia, to Germany, to Poland and work there using their Hungarian passports. Many people with Hungarian passports moved to the US from Transcarpathia. Some of the Roma community moved out, but we have a higher birth rate here, so you can't quantify this as something serious. The biggest problem here is the low pay here. 60 to 70% of the Roma community do low paid work, street cleaners and so on and they get up to 200 euros maximum per month, this is pretty low and hard to survive on this. There is a Roma church in Hungary that supports Roma churches here because of origin and language and so on. For example, the pastor has a church in the region here, mainly Roma people, and every day they feed up to 120 people and so on.