Information about interviewee:

Darsci Karolina, the Political and Communication Secretary of KMKSZ at the Uzhhorod Office. Interview conducted in Uzhhorod, Ukraine.

R= Respondent – Darsci Karolina

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

I: Today you have a court case to challenge the fine you have for using your Hungarian passport incorrectly?

R: Yes, it is the court of appeal. I have two passports. I am a citizen of Ukraine. Before that I was a citizen of the Soviet Union. When the Union broke up I automatically got Ukrainian passport. My father was born on Hungarian territory and he gave it to me. My parents have two citizenships, they live partly in Budapest, partly in Berehove. It is not prohibited in Ukraine. I broke the law, not because I have two passports but because of the unlawful trespassing of the border. Officially, at the border crossing for the pedestrian, the border guard saw I have two passports, and the fine came from that. I do not understand what was the mistake. The first time I crossed the border, I used my Hungarian passport and it was fine. Suddenly it became illegal. This is why I am upset about it. In Ukraine today, quite a few people have two citizenships. There is no prohibition in the constitution for that. There are no sanctions. There is just a law for the officials. If you are an official you cannot have two citizenships. It is not like this for the deputies. Those who work for the secret services, the army, the police. How can our minister of health, Ulana Suprun, have two citizenships, the US and Ukraine? So if this is prohibited in Ukraine, let she be the first one and me after that.

I: When did you notice the change?

R: For years it was fine. For five years they didn't say a word to me. In the last few acts, they started anti-Hungarian acts in Ukraine. In Kiev in all Ukrainian media, they started to show the message, that here in Transcarpathia that all Hungarians are separatists. Four years ago when the war started, me and others were put onto a special list, so that when I tried to cross the border, I had a letter O next to my name, which means specific personal review of me and my belongings. This is how they found the second passport. Every time since there, crossing the border, took one or two hours and one time it took six hours. Asking where I am going and why. It is not just me. More than two hundred Transcarpathian Hungarians are on this list. Quite a lot of my colleagues. We wrote a letter to the secret service of Ukraine, to ask why was that. Do they not want us in Ukraine? Do they want us out of Ukraine? Why are we on this list? We didn't get an answer. There was a reply from the SSU, saying it was a counter-separatist measure. I was invited to the office of the SSU here in Uzhhorod, and asked to sign a letter saying I will not engage in separatist activities. It was funny to me. I said, 'come on guys I am only 45 kilos, if I such a threat to Ukraine, it means things are quite hard for you.' I hope the new president will tackle these problems, and be on our side because, unofficially there are 5 million of Ukrainians who have dual citizenship, more of Romanians than Hungarians. Yesterday during his inauguration, Zelensky said, that all people of Ukrainian origin, if they come to Ukraine, they can have Ukrainian citizenship. I think that this is the first step to solve the problem in a constructive way.

I: The Hungarian state began naturalisations here in Transcarpathia in 2011. Why did the protests come so late after this?

R: All the consulates issue citizenships. If on Hungarian territory and Ukrainian baby will be born. The parents go to a consulate and issue Ukrainian citizenship. In Hungary in a Ukrainian embassy in Budapest, if a baby is born and the parents want to register, and there is evidence that ancestors come from Ukraine or nowadays Ukrainian citizenship, they can get Ukrainian citizenship. I do not know, if the passports or if you pledge allegiance there or here but nevertheless the passports are given out. When the conflict started last year, the Ukrainian authorities amended the new law about education. This was when the constitutional rights regarding language of the national minorities were violated. After adopting this law, conflicts between Hungary and Ukraine started. This video from Berehove, where the people involved pledge allegiance to Hungary in the Hungarian consulate, was at the secret service for a year before publishing. They were waiting for the right moment. I think there are many other videos like this. But this was the territory of the consulate, meaning the territory of Hungary, where we can do whatever we want, so why are they asking questions? As of now, you can go to Berehove, you can apply for the documents, but to pledge allegiance you need to go to Hungary, to avoid a scandal. In any village committee, you can pledge allegiance to Hungary.

I: What percentage of the ethnic Hungarian community have Hungarian passports?

R: 70% or something approximately. 30 percent of Ukrainians or Russians here have Hungarian passports to use it for their needs.

I: Was it this office that was bombed?

R: Yes. She has a documentary in English about this. When the anti-Hungarian campaign four years ago, it escalated, on the 2nd February last year, the KMDSZ had another office on the orthodox river bank street, in the city centre. On 2nd February, they tried to throw a Molotov cocktail. On the 27th February, a bomb was installed and the first floor was completely under fire. Now there is a television office there. Hungarian service television. According to the law, national minorities here in Transcarpathia, particularly the Hungarian minority, have 6 hours a day for news, cultural programmes, we provide it, on internet, tv, radio. 100% of the funding comes from Hungary. First time, with the Molotov cocktail, was done by Polish extremists, it is now known that the guy who ordered this is a journalist from Germany. This Germany guy allegedly has some ties with the Russian political establishment. Near Uzhhorod they entered via the Slovakian border, put the cocktail and went out. Now they are in court. The office on river bank street, across the water, the alarm went off because the blast was so strong. It was good that there were no humans present. The second attack was organised by Ukrainians, by a Ukrainian citizenship. Ex fighter from the east. Not from Uzhhorod. They are also in court for one year, no decision yet. But the organiser has been caught already, but nobody knows when the court case is. During the case, they told that they were doing it for money, and that someone from Russia ordered it. These guys were fighting for Ukraine in Donbas, but why did they receive Russian orders, meaning whose orders did they receive in the war. We are waiting for the verdict. I think it will take another year.

I: We saw a lot of nationalist graffiti in Uzhhorod. How long has this been here?

R: There were marches against Hungarians in Uzhhorod and Berehove. Two years ago there were marches in the central square. Where 300 or so guys were shouting "knife for Hungarians".

I: Why is the Hungarian state interested in naturalising the Hungarians abroad?

R: It was the first time in my life that my first and last name were written without a mistake. I am Hungarian. It is symbolic. I have Hungarian citizenship. It also gives me a lot of opportunities.

I: Do you feel more Hungarian or Ukrainian?

R: I am citizen of Ukraine and of Hungarian as well. National issues, I am pure Hungarian. But actually I am Transcarpathia, it is a specific identity. The Székely Land in Romanian territory, it is similar. They don’t' feel themselves Romanian. I don’t' feel myself Ukrainian. I like this country, specifically like Transcarpathia. Everyone thinks like this. It is a multinational territory. It used to be like this for a long time. We consider ourselves to be Transcarpathian. Here we have Hutsus, Romanians, Hungarians, Russons, Polish, but primarily we are Transcarpathian.

I: Some people have said dual citizenship is threat to national security. Do you think this is fair?

R: There are many many countries in the world, where this is officially allowed. As there are so many people in Ukraine with dual citizenship, it has to be legalised. When the war started, many young men had to go to the army, many people didn’t want this. Another passport gave them the opportunity to leave the country. This has been going on for four years.

I: Has the situation with Russia, negatively affected the situation for Hungarians in Ukraine?

R: I think this is an artificial conflict. After the Euromaidan, the language law, which allowed the use of different languages, were cancelled. After that, there were clashes in Donbas. Ukraine is a multinational country. If Ukraine wants to become part of the EU, it has to become a state with a rule of law, and act accordingly to European standards, which allow multinational and multilinguistic. For example there are 3 official languages and no problems with this. One of the reasons, this war, has to be stopped somehow. Why not let the Russian speaking population use their language? There are 6 million of them, you cannot ignore them. Scientists say that there are Ukrainians speaking Russian, and Russians speaking. Let everybody live. This new language law, was aimed primarily against Russians. Not to let Russian language dominate society. The thing is, Russian and Ukrainian are similar, they can understand each other. For Hungarians and Romanians it is quite hard to for them to switch to Ukrainian and to understand Ukrainian. Since this war, Hungarians and Romanians feel this law much worse than Russian speakers do.

I: Does the Hungarian state subsidise some salaries in Transcarpathia?

R: When the war started, the economic situation was bad, and people began to leave the country. Some stayed, Hungarians particularly. The Hungarian state helps them. There is an official programme. It is called social help. This is a grant programme, so you have to write a tender to get the money. You are eligible if you are in a Hungarian school, in Hungarian language, teach Hungarian people. Medical people also get this. There are 3 types of grants. The first is cultural. Teachers, medical workers, those who work at the libraries and so on. The second one, is up to 15,000 dollars for those with their own business. The third one is for tourism. All of this is official. Through Ukrainian banks. People get them in Hryvnias. When you get this money, you have to pay taxes, despite it being social help, you have to pay taxes accordingly to Ukrainian law. This help is just to stop the teacher from moving out to Czech Republic to get more money. The same for doctors. As of now in Berehove central hospital there is a lack of 15 doctors and 36 medical janitors. There is no specialist on throat, for example, so if you have a problem you have to come here to Uzhhorod. The Ukrainian state still think this is an example of separatism. They opened a criminal case against the Egan fund. There is this information in the film as well. I don’t think this is separatism. I think this is beneficiary for Ukraine. For example, if someone buys a tractor here in Ukraine with this money, they will make new contracts in Ukraine. It is not only for Hungarians these grants. Everybody who can write Hungarian can get this grant.

I: It is not conditional on Hungarian citizenship?

R: No. You don't have to. Ukrainian passport and registration on the territory of Transcarpathia. Many Romanians and Ukrainians have had this help.

I: Does this organisation receive funding from Budapest?

R: Unfortunately the Ukrainian state does not finance national organisations. Unfortunately the Ukrainian state does not finance national organisations. So there are some programmes from Hungary, that provide grants and finance programmes. So not only is the KMKSZ eligible, the Transcarpathians, it is for people all around the world. It is specifically for Romania and Slovakia but not only. They can apply for the help and they get it. There was another fund to help local Hungarians in Transcarpathia. It was designed for Transcarpathia, for Kindergartens, renovating and building new ones, ninety entities. It is not only for Hungarians, but for everybody. Hungary will not take these buildings away to Hungary, it was and is for locals. Still some Ukrainian officials think this is separatism. Who is coordinating these programmes? The Istvan Dresege, who organises this programme, he was not allowed to enter Ukraine, on the grounds that he was the person responsible for humanitarian projects in Transcarpathia and the region bordering Hungary. For the Ukrainian officials, this was separatism, as it was two regions that were united under one title, but I do not see this. The conflict was solved after his title was changed.

I: Sometimes Orbán refers to Greater Hungary, to encompass a territory that coincides with the former territory of the Kingdom of Hungary. What does he mean?

R: Every country protects its citizens. Not only its citizens, but their people also. For example, Ukraine also has a programme for worldwide Ukrainians. You can have an ethnic Ukrainian card which gives you some benefits. Every country has this. Hungary is not an exception. Orbán does not say he wants to return the borders of Greater Hungary, no this is what Jobbik says. Orbán says to locals, to those who live outside Hungary, who are still Hungarians, he says, you don’t have to move back to Hungary. You can continue to live in your native places, but you can and have to preserve you culture, language, traditions and we can help you with these with grants and funding.

I: But why then are the Hungarian diaspora and those living in the territories of the former Kingdom of Hungary treated differently?

R: No you don’t have to prove ancestry to a specific territory. It is not like that. You have to show a document that you were once a citizen or connected to the Kingdom of Hungary. My grandfather did not have to find any documents from the archive or photos, he just had to show his birth certificate to the officials.

I: Is it the same for voting in Hungarian elections?

R: No because the Hungarians who don't live in Hungary who have Hungarian citizenship are one million. Out of this million, not everyone is eligible to vote, some of them are not of age. Some of them live in Argentina and do not care. So out of this million there are only 400,000 who are eligible and take part in the voting. But in Hungary the electoral system, you have to get a lot of votes to get one mandate. These 400,000 votes do not decide the vote of any mandate. The electoral border is 5% for the Hungarian parties, that is a lot. If you live abroad, you can only vote for only for the parties not for the majoritarian candidates.

I: Are the reports true that Fidesz have hired buses to take Transcarpathian Hungarians to Hungary to vote.

R: It is fake news. It was organised by the secret service of Ukraine. It started on Ukrainian news websites, which is proof it did not happen. If you really wanted to vote, you didn't need to take a bus, you can just walk. Last year, I was an official observer, for the parliamentary elections. The doors were open. Everybody who wanted to vote, could vote. It was under 50% who voted. Quite small. 80% of those who got Hungarian citizenship here in Transcarpathia, don't vote. They are not interested. Sometimes if there are ethnic Hungarians, they can be interested in Hungarian politics, but if they are Romanian or Ukrainian, they just got the passport for opportunities. Hungarian oppositional parties often claim that the Hungarian nationals abroad who decide the fate of the elections, but this is not true. If you see the numbers, you see that a small fraction of Hungarians who vote. Yes, they vote for the government, but this is because the oppositional governments are against the Hungarians abroad. This is the reason for claiming, but it is not the reality.

I: How do your objectives differ from other Hungarian parties in other countries?

R: This is the oldest civic organisation in Ukraine. In 1989 it was registered. During this time, Perestroika, under Gorbachev, there was a splash of creativity, here in Transcarpathia, there were organisations of Romanians, of Slovaks, of Germans, of Russons, and so on. Only the Hungary one is the most active and still exists today. The activity and density of the Hungarian community, is the other proof that it is the only community with its own party. The cooperate with other ethnic organisations, but they are so weak, they don't get any help from their other countries, so they not equal. When there was a law on language, they gathered signatures for Pereshenko not to sign this law, they gathered 67,000 but these were not only Hungarians, but Romanians and Bulgarians from the Odessa regions. There are many organisations here that only exist on paper, but are showed only when they are needed for show with no activities. For example, last year, when Yuma Zerenshenko, I learned that there were 5 Roma organisations. Probably the problems are different. Here we have war, demographic problems, economic problems, that they might not have in Serbia and Slovakia. Probably the best policy and the best case is in Serbia, where they have autonomy, cultural autonomy and lots of help from the budget. I had to learn Ukrainian in school. I learned Hungarian as a child, but because Russian was the lingua franca of the Soviet Union, for 27 years, there were no dictionaries from Hungarian to Ukrainian and vice versa, or Ukrainian Slovak.