Situational Analysis Case Study

Zakarpattia region

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Acknowledgements

Contents

Abbreviations

NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SBU	*Служба Безпеки України* (Security Services of Ukraine)
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise

Festivities during the Hungarian holiday "Bread of Hungarians - 15 Million Grains», village of Gatcha, Berehovo district, Zakarpattya oblast, Ukraine © Serhiy Hudak

1. Introduction

Five years on after the conflict in the east and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine continues to face a number of geopolitical and domestic challenges. Against this backdrop, concerns for Ukraine's integrity feature highly in the national discourse and are echoed by some international observers.

This case study presents a conflict analysis of Berehove, a town in Transcarpathia oblast (hereafter Zakarpattia), the centre of Berehiv *rayon* (district). According to the 2001 census,[1] Berehove's population was 26,554 people, of which Hungarians (48.1%) and Ukrainians (38.9%) constituted the majority ethnic groups.

The region was selected for the following reasons: its proximity to the international border with Hungary and strong links between Hungary and ethnic Hungarians in the region; Hungarian majority-minority in Berehove; geographical remoteness from Kyiv; agricultural economy; and a long history of patriarchal traditions.

This case study forms part of an analysis of three regions in Ukraine: Kherson, Odesa and Zakarpattia. The common findings from each region are summarised in a synthesis report, which also proposes peacebuilding recommendations.

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1   http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/rus/results/general/nationality/zakarpatia/

2. Methodology

In October and November 2018, a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in Berehove city of the Zakarpattia region. The qualitative study draws on views and experiences of 21 respondents, of which 10 people (9 men and 1 women) were interviewed individually and 11 (6 women and 5 men) participated in focus group discussions. Depending on their preference, the respondents were interviewed in Ukrainian or Hungarian.

The respondents were sampled from a wide range of professional and social backgrounds, and included: local government officials and local deputies, representatives of education services, researchers, businesspeople, journalists and civic activists. They identified with diverse (majority and minority) ethnic and religious groups present in the region and represented different age categories (25–60 years).

Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the pre-election political environment, all participants have been anonymised.

Based on a relational (referring to the social construction of masculinities and femininities) and intersectional (as systems of power shaped by other identities)[2] approach, the methodology included questions on gender dynamics to ensure gender was mainstreamed through the research. This allowed for the most prominent gender issues to be highlighted. However, a more focused methodology is required to uncover deep-rooted gendered drivers and effects and find ways to help to overcome a lack of interest in gender issues among local stakeholders (a fact brought to light during this project).

The study also included desk research and a review of literature, including media reports (including social media); and documents of national and local authorities and statistical bodies.

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2   H. Myrttinen, N. Popovic and L. Khattab, 'Measuring gender' in peacebuilding: Evaluating peacebuilding efforts from a gender-relational perspective, London: International Alert, 2016, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender_MeasuringGenderPeacebuilding_EN_2016.pdf; S. Tielemans, Gender & conflict analysis toolkit for peacebuilders, London: Conciliation Resources, 2015, https://www.c-r.org/downloads/CR%20Gender%20Toolkit%20WEB.pdf

3. Context Analysis

Proximity to the **border** with Hungary has a large impact on community development in terms of (in)security and the establishment of family and clan relations. It contributes to community perceptions of being at a double 'dead end' of a 'big country' (on the edges of both Ukraine and Hungary). The border is also a means of livelihood for many, including family and clan networks that operate illegal and semi-legal cross-border trading businesses.

There is a strong sense of a **Zakarpattian identity**, particularly among local Hungarians, 62% of whom cited Zakarpattia as their "motherland" in a recent poll, whereas only 27% of Ukrainian respondents felt the same.[3] This local identity has been shaped by geographic and political factors.

Hungary is omnipresent in all spheres of life in the region, from economic and political to humanitarian and charitable. Hungarian authorities consider the region as historical lands of the Hungarian nation and the Hungarian minority as a part of that nation that enjoys the same rights and opportunities as those Hungarians living on the borders of today's Hungarian state.

A **clan-based community system** has developed primarily as a mechanism for community survival under authoritarian rule. This model continues to impact upon the way in which decisions are made and resources are managed. At the same time, the need to manage life on the borders of two large states and the external pressures this brings means that people established informal systems of governance based on a network of interconnected yet individual communities.

> *"Clanship* [has been] *caused by the mountains. Group leaders make decisions, so-called opinion makers and priests are listened to. They might not have respect but they are listened to. A head of the village council may not have respect but* [people] *take note."*[4]

The economic, political and social crises that began with the break-up of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) led to a greater level of **self-organisation in the communities**. This was accompanied by ever lower levels of trust in the Ukrainian state authorities and politicians, especially at the central level. At the local level, this led to the formation of stronger **parallel institutions** to the state that were able to ensure economic survival and community security.

> *"People self-organise. There is quite a high level of self-organisation and the state* [was] *replaced where deemed defective. They understood there that there is no support from the state. In Dobrush, Velikaya, the people themselves started to renovate the roads. If we do not get aid, we will manage it on our own."*[5]

The civil service and local self-governance, service provision (budgetary) and small entrepreneurship (tourism and agriculture) are the mainstays of the **local economy**. The illegal and semi-legal business activities that exist are linked to cross-border trade and natural resource management. Remittances from family members abroad and aid provided by the Hungarian government constitute an essential source of household income.

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3   'Tandem' survey conducted by the Ferenz Rakotsy Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute and Godinka Research Institute: https://bgazrt.hu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/A5-tandem.pdf , accessed January 2019

4   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

5   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

Regional (oblast) and central (Kyiv) authorities are perceived as incapable of managing conflict, as weak, or as a crisis and conflict trigger. However, the same authorities are also seen to be taking on more functions and control of official and unofficial spheres locally. These contradictory perceptions may be explained by the confusion and tension between state authority and parallel structures.

Local authorities have limited tools and capacities for resolving conflicts and 'drown' issues in bureaucracy by creating working groups and holding endless meetings. Decision-making seems to be arbitrary, guided by the political context and the desire to hold on to power rather than the rule of law and effective democratic processes. Another common practice is to defer decision-making to Kyiv and then support public dissatisfaction with the outcome, thereby abdicating any responsibility for problem-solving.

The weakness of the executive branch and local police has brought to prominence the national Security Services of Ukraine (*Служба Безпеки України*, SBU) whose only tool for conflict resolution is force. The role of the SBU as nearly the only source of state power means that community issues are often presented as interethnic problems and threats of separatism, which triggers SBU's mandate to act.

Conflict tends to be managed internally, and the region has what researchers referred to as a "tradition of silence". This is due in part to its polyethnic and polyreligious nature, constant political and regime change, and absence of long-term political domination by a specific ethnic group. Family ties created between representatives of various ethnic and religious groups strengthened a tradition of stonewalling issues and non-escalation, which had become the foundation of how community life was organised internally and how external actors were engaged.

> *"Under all these conditions, people basically prefer not to address the formal authorities with their problems. They go to their acquaintances to 'fix' things. The average Zakarpattian will always try to solve their problems through friends and acquaintances, and will not rely on the state authorities to fulfill their functions as service providers."*[6]

Local and national media rely on rumours as a primary source of information, and propagate stereotypres and prejudices. There is a problem with access to television channels, particularly Ukrainian ones, as the signal is weak or does not reach certain areas. Cable television is used mainly for watching foreign (i.e. Hungarian) content. There is a clear division between local pro-Hungarian and pro-Ukrainian media.

Social media is a popular means of communication between communities; for example, there are Facebook-based activist groups with interethnic representation. According to local experts, there is a practice of resolving conflicts arising on social media platforms through face-to-face communication in an amicable manner. Social media is also used to communicate with local authorities.

> *"There is an active Facebook page for the city mayor with 8,000 followers. Locals write their comments, wishes ... the response* [from local government] *is quite prompt ...* [even with activities on] *public fora where the issues of interest to the community are discussed, some decisions of the local authorities are formed on the basis of them."*[7]

Migration has resulted in economic, political and social change. Labour and education migration from European Union member states bordering Ukraine to higher-income countries has led to the development of various programmes aimed at filling the vacuum with the Ukrainian labour force. There has been a shift from 'pendulum'

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6   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018
7   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

(daily/weekly commuting) migration to permanent residence among all age groups, not just young people. Therefore, migration involves not only one or two family members but the whole family. The result is that the population is decreasing, remittances are falling and the ethnic demographics are shifting through the decreasing number of ethnic Hungarians in the region.[8]

> *"There were years when only two or three families left, and now four or five families from the next block left in just half a year. Previously, whole families did not leave, but now people leave in whole families. In 2015 we recorded the fact that there were* [no longer] *100% ethnic Hungarian villages. In 2015, the smallest villages became 2–3% non-Hungarian."*[9]

Depopulation has also led to a decline in **transport connections** and the movement of social infrastructure and state institutions elsewhere. For a town like Berehove this is seen as a decrease in status and attractiveness.

> *"In the last five years that I worked, the post office, tax office and communication centre were taken away* [from our town of regional significance]. *They were taken away from us. It does not affect taxation, it just affects status – the status of a city that had regional significance … in the end we have nothing."*[10]

Much of **civil society** is poorly trusted, as civic activism is often perceived as having a hidden social or political agenda behind its public face, or as representing other political groups or regional clans.

Public life is, to some extent, ethnically divided. There is a wide network of Hungarian organisations interlinked across different sectors. Hungarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are mostly funded by the Hungarian government, promote Hungarian identity, cultural preservation, resistance to assimilation, and the unification of community and Hungarian nationality through links with the historical motherland.[11] There are NGOs that are deeply involved in politics, particularly during electoral cycles,[12] as well as big foundations that offer support to Hungarian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).[13]

On the other hand, the Ukrainian civil society in Berehove is defined by location rather than ethnicity. Organisations are orientated towards humanitarian, youth and environmental needs, as well as sports. There are no NGOs consistently involved in the issues of gender; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) issues; or advocacy. NGOs that support Roma people also operate, mostly to implement humanitarian programming. **Church-based charity** organisations have functions in individual communities, but they are not immune to political influence. For example, the Reformed church has a strict Hungarian slant and is a part of the network of Hungarian NGOs, while the Greek Catholic church is 'pro-Ukrainian'.

Unity in **civic activism** occurs when issues linked to or decisions made by the state authorities provoke a negative reaction among citizens. However, this activism is mostly ad hoc and limited to immediate interests of a particular group/person. Participation in civic and political life has been limited by shifts in demographics and employment. Seasonal employment, labour migration and study abroad mean that, outside of families, social relations are

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8   Conducted jointly by the Ferenz Rakotsy Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute, the Institute of Geography at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Hungarian National Policy Research Institute, the 'Summa' research states that the number of Hungarians in Zakarpattia has decreased by 21,000 since 2001 (13.7%): https://bgazrt.hu/nemzetpolitikai-kutatointezet/kutatasok/

9   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

10 Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

11 At the core of this network is the NGO Rakotsy Institute, which became the biggest taxpayer in Berehove. See: B.Z. Adalbertovich, [enter title], [enter location]: [enter publisher], [enter date] http://beregovo-beregszasz.gov.ua/ua/берегове/міський-голова/ (in Ukrainian). To see a table with taxes data, download file titled Звіт про роботу міського голови за період з листопада 2017 р. до листопада 2018 р.

12 Examples are the Union of Hungarian Culture (KMKS) and the Democratic Union of Hungarians (UMDS).

13 Between 2015 and 2018, the Edgan Foundation spent EUR 100 million in Zakarpattia, which was locally known as the 'Egan Plan'.

Ceremony on the start of school year, at the town of Berehovo, in Zakarpattya oblast, Ukraine © Serhiy Hudak

difficult to maintain. For many people, political and social activities are perceived as political processes beyond their reach.

"Zakarpattia is exhausted – parents go abroad to work, they have no time to think about everything, to do better. It is easier to go to the Czech Republic, earn 20,000 [more than EUR 600] per month, come and spend it here. I think that they are just exhausted to think in a direction that could stir us or anything up, or that could aggravate the situation, or what kind of conflict it could make. Maybe there are 1–2% of people involved, but that's hardly enough…"[14]

14   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

4. Key Conflict Dynamics

Respondents tended to assess themselves as peaceful and tolerant, and did not identify themselves as conflict-affected or as experiencing conflict. However, they did speak about using violence to resolve problems (e.g. throwing projectiles, burning cars, vandalism, blockading streets, etc.).

There are, however, several key areas in which community tensions and conflict are increasing:

- **Political conflict between 'pro-Hungarian' and 'pro-Ukrainian' blocks:** The Hungarian minority is highly organised and vocal, which has led to artificial ethnic representation of pro-Hungarian and pro-Ukrainian political forces. National and cross-border processes are intensifying confrontation and stimulating conflict at the community level.
- **Resource management and distribution:** Conflict mainly arises around budget allocation and distribution, and the management of municipal property. The rise of civil society in the last five years has strengthened demand for transparency in reporting and management; civil society trying to change the status quo can also provoke conflict.
- **Exclusion of the Roma community:** Despite 'elastic' social ties and relative social cohesion, social and ethnic segregation exists in the community, particularly related to discrimination of the Roma community.

4.1 Political conflict between 'pro-Hungarian' and 'pro-Ukrainian' blocks

There is a history of ethnic quotas in regional politics. This is reflected in the practice of representative mandates, whereby if one ethnic group representative leads an institution, the representative of a different group will be appointed as a deputy. The Hungarian community is well organised and represented, from networks of community groups, NGOs, and educational and cultural centres, to representation in local governance institutions at different levels. Growing perceptions of external threats to 'identity', caused both by political and demographic change, are currently leading to further mobilisation of Hungarian community in local politics.

The presence of Hungary in all spheres of life in Berehove (and indeed the whole region) has significantly increased over the last eight years. In this period the Hungarian government implemented a series of projects in the region with the characteristics of a systemic government policy, including lending programmes for SMEs, subsidies to employees funded by the Ukrainian state budget and reconstruction of social infrastructure (schools, libraries, an open theatre, churches, etc.). Among the main 'pragmatic' factors attracting Zakarpattian Hungarians to Hungary, respondents highlighted the following:

- possibility of obtaining a European education;
- employment and the possibility of moving permanently to Hungary (or further in Europe);
- fewer visa restrictions for travelling in Europe with a Hungarian passport;
- individual social assistance and material support from the Hungarian government;
- participation in cross-border projects (a favourite of local governmental officials); and
- business and consumer credits and access to European infrastructure programmes.

Kyiv, on the other hand, offers little investment and fewer opportunities.

"If there was a [credit] *fund from Kyiv through which you can get* [money for] *a tractor, not a single Hungarian would ask for a passport from Hungary. For now, the authorities are only looking at the Hungarians as enemies."*[15]

Any changes implemented by Ukrainian authorities (decentralisation reform, education, medicine) do not bring political or rapid material dividends and are seen as hostile. This disconnect coincides chronologically with the return of the conservatie party Fidesz and its leader Viktor Orbán to office, as well as Hungary's ideological and nationalistic shift to the right.

The level of support for pro-Ukrainian parties would seem to be decreasing, but the level of support for pro-Hungarian parties is increasing. This suggests that perceptions of an external threat to Hungarian identity are growing. The 'us' and 'them' paradigm can offer a symbolic guarantee of security to a community. The logic behind this is not one of separatism, but rather community consolidation, which locals also like calling "Hungarian pragmatism". That said, with greater decentralisation and siloed communities the foundations of separatism can be laid.

Local political actors and elites try to gain political and personal benefit by escalating local conflict and linking it to tensions between Ukraine and Hungary. Conflict and populist rhetoric have become the springboard for a political career. Personal ambitions and attempts to gain legitimacy by manipulating conflict dynamics are exploited, thereby undermining stability. Politicisation of intercommunal conflict is also viewed as a professional enabler, for example, for those who struggle to break through traditional roles and ascribed expectations based on gender and/or ethnicity (women and Roma were given as specific examples).

The central government's strategy for communicating with local communities is proving ineffective, as both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Hungarian factions do not trust Kyiv. The one-way nature of this communication increases mistrust in central authorities and builds conflict potential. Local communities also appear to be left out of conflict-resolution efforts, resulting in a growing sense of exclusion and increasing levels of distrust and scepticism in both the actors involved in the process and the agreements reached.

"Now Klimkin and the Hungarians are having a meeting. A closed meeting. Sorry, but what the hell? Why is the minister of foreign affairs meeting with people who are potentially accused of separatism, and they make some agreements behind closed doors? Everyone knows that this meeting is held behind closed doors. Whom should I trust in this situation? As a resident of Zakarpattia, whom should I trust? What are they talking about that journalists should not know? Journalists are not allowed. What is wrong with these methods of working with the community? Again, not only Hungarians live in our region. There is a bunch of other people who are wondering what kind of solution would be accepted."[16]

"The situation is perceived that Kyiv talks with Budapest about the Ukrainian Hungarians over their heads. Nobody wants to talk with the local population; by and large, they are excluded from the negotiation process and are pretty much used as hostages. Budapest presses [using international law] *and Kyiv uses the local population as a bargaining chip."*[17]

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15   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

16   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

17   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

The way in which the region is described in the media has an impact on conflict escalation. The use of the language of separatism is particularly problematic, and respondents indicated frustration with the way in which journalists have portrayed the region.

"Well, if you want to make a conflict narrative, you can, of course. Therefore, in fact, I began to refuse to give comments to journalists because I was tired of this. […] when I look at those reports about Berehove, I see how little they correspond with reality."[18]

4.2 Resource management and distribution

Members of parliament are the main actors and public representatives who actively influence the distribution of state subsidies for political purposes. Local politicians (deputies), business groups and community leaders (cultural, religious) do not have sufficient resources for independent activities and have to cooperate and coordinate with each other. According to an OPORA (an independent nationwide network of public activists in Ukraine) analysis of the allocation of state subsidies in 2016–2017, Berehove did not get this type of funding at all.[19] This situation is typical for Berehove but also the majority of locations where the Hungarian minority is compactly settled. The evidence suggests that complaints among the Hungarian minority that it is not receiving sufficient attention from the central authorities are grounded in truth. Local political elites and representatives of local self-governance might potentially start to exploit existing tensions between Hungary and Ukraine as political blackmail and apply political pressure to correct budgetary imbalances.

Open tools of democracy are not recognised by locals as means for political influence but as representations of 'clan' interests or tools for political manipulation. Elections are seen as a mechanism for 'fixing' the status quo that suits the regional elites, not as a real tool of representation and the protection of common interests.

"I think that since the Soviet times there was a rooted distrust of each other. That is, if a person wants to do something, it's simply because there is a personal interest, it does not mean that the person wants to do something good. It means there is some hidden agenda, an attempt to deceive."[20]

Despite apathy, the nature of self-organisation is changing. It was noted that there has been a general growth in activist groups, which are starting to participate in local and national campaigns and movements. This has been facilitated by a shift in civic activism across Ukraine over the last five to six years, and the construction of national networks, which has brought greater access to national and international political actors. There are growing calls for accountability and the introduction of community-orientated approaches from communities themselves. In the context of a closed political system, this can contribute to a growth in tensions.

"We had several attempts to create a public board under the city council. When the mayor's office saw that the public board became uncontrollable, not in their pocket, they, through their 'infiltrated' organisations, declared the self-dissolution of the board. Since then nothing like this was created. But this suggests that there was interest."[21]

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18   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018
19   Forget the territory of Zakarpattia: 3 cities and 3 districts for two years without any Hungarian subjects, Rada, 7 June 2018, https://rada.oporaua.org/novyny/novini/22390-zabuti-terytorii-zakarpattia-3-mista-ta-3-raiony-dva-roky-bez-zhodnoi-hryvni-subventsii (in Ukrainian)
20   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018
21   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

4.3 Exclusion of the Roma community

Another interethnic conflict has been manifested in the exclusion of the Roma community and the limiting of their access to educational, medical and social services, particularly related to registering newborns and as multiple children families, which brings social benefits. There are two Roma representatives on the city council but their participation is rather tokenistic. Another vivid example of exclusion is the construction of a 'border' wall to physically separate the Roma district. Conflicts occur frequently (there is a growing number of conflicts between young men) but do not escalate into large intergroup ones, mainly due to the involvement of the Roma community leaders, who are regarded highly internally, and the fear of pogroms.

Roma women are particularly vulnerable. Unlike women in some other conservative communities, they are expected not only to take care of the family but also to make livelihoods (through menial jobs and often petty crime) and be prepared to physically defend themselves, the family and the property if attacked. Non-Roma employers commonly practise child labour, although this issue exists in non-Roma communities as well.

During the Hungarian holiday "Bread of Hungarians - 15 Million Grains', village of Gatcha Berehovo district Zakarpattya oblast
© Serhiy Hudak

5. Conflict Triggers

Significant conflict triggers for the local community are traditional issues: family, children and the church, as well as efforts to curb or regulate illicit activities such as cross-border smuggling, which is considered a threat to livelihoods and welfare.

According to local respodents, acute, violent conflict is perceived to only take place in cases of external interference, although external interest in internal conflicts is growing. Even paramilitary groups that have mobilised are considered incapable of causing mass disorder. However, the local criminal networks that control illegal cross-border movement and narcotics distribution are considered (externally) as a destabilising source due to their many networks, resources and skills to initiate violence.

Conflict triggers can be grouped into the following categories:

Threats to the escalation of the acute majority-minority feeling in key communities of Berehove, which can be instrumentalised by national political actors in Ukraine and Hungary:

- In pro-Ukrainian groups there is a feeling of insecurity. This is driven by an increasing lack of quantitative representation at the community level, both politically and culturally. This spiked with the escalation of armed conflict in the east.
- In the pro-Hungarian community threats are perceived in demographic change, growth of the Ukrainian state's interference in their life and forced integration, such as the demand for the Ukrainian language in both the public and private sectors.

Actions arising from official state policies and their impact on the ground:

- The official policy of **Hungary** dictates that the protection of foreign Hungarians is a constitutional duty of the Hungarian government and all of its bodies. Actions arising from this policy aggravate local conflict, exacerbated by Ukrainian Hungarians' lack of trust in the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian authorities' ineffective communication strategy towards local communities.
- Attempts by the **Ukrainian state** to counter Hungarian influence have included moves to prosecute individuals for holding and planning anti-state positions and actions. Lists of officials accused of holding dual citizenship have been made public and could be used as another pressure tool. Some argue that negative publicity and the threat of criminal action threatens to bring about a decline in Ukrainian Hungarians participating in executive bodies and local self-government and elections.

"In 2020 they won't be able to find even candidates for deputies ... Because they do not have citizenship, residence and other issues, because of verification, there will be a big problem."

Threats to the political and economic status quo, particularly related to (illicit) cross-border trade:

- In addition to conflict caused by Ukrainian-Hungarian relations, other conflict themes that can mobilise residents are mostly related to the income policies around semi-legal/illegal border crossing and smuggling, mining and the distribution of natural resources. Beyond a sense of loss of control over resources, this presents a direct threat to the status quo and may provoke counteractions.

6. Existing Peacebuilding Capacities and Recommendations

5.1 Peacebuilding capacities/sources of stability

Sources of stability include a **tradition of mutual respect and a system of interdependency** between groups along familial, historical and economic lines. Non-violence forms part of the community identity, and when redlines are crossed, violent actions demonstrate to the violator the need to comply with the status quo.

> *"In general, the fact that everything is peaceful here can be explained, firstly, by the mentality, and secondly, over the years, a lot got intertwined. There was no difference – Madyars, Ukrainians – strong family ties appeared, the city is small and there are very strong family ties. It, of course, can be spoiled, but the majority of people have family ties, and they are better off not getting into conflicts and keeping away..."*[22]

> *"No matter what language and origin, we know a lot of languages to do business."*[23]

The ability to exert pressure and wield power is seen as what makes an individual or institution effective at conflict management. Power can either be physical or relating to status. Accordingly, this disconnects women from public/formal influence. Traditional perceptions of gender roles block the opportunities for public engagement of women in most arenas except for the humanitarian sphere and service sector.

Local authorities are the key structure responsible for the mitigation of tensions. However, there is a strict delineation in the perceptions of different levels of authority. For example, bodies representing the executive are perceived as external as they "are appointed from the top (i.e. the president)".[24] District councils, however, are elected from among local deputies (and thereby command greater trust). A share of respondents identified the incumbent **mayor as a negotiator and stabiliser of local tensions**. Although conflict resolution is expected from the local authorities, when they do engage in resolving conflict they are perceived as using listening, meeting and negotiation as a tactic to slow down the process and find a resolution that benefits the authorities directly.

> *"State authorities decide and formulate everything in a manner they themselves fashion. We have the feeling that the procedures developed enable the authorities to legalise nonsense but not make important decisions. This creates plenty of mistrust between the public and the authorities."*[25]

Regional (oblast level) and central (Kyiv) authorities can also be perceived as an instrument of external coercion, one that is hostile and directed against an individual, family or group. For all these reasons, people still refer to parallel networks to solve problems (particularly when the authorities themselves are seen as part of the problem).

The church also plays an important role in the region. The absence of a dominant religious organisation means that different faiths – Ukrainian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Reformers, Greek Catholic, various Protestant

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22   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018
23   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018
24   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018
25   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Berehove, November 2018

denominations – respect each other's 'borders' and do not compete, thus deterring conflict.[26] The language of worship further isolates communities from each other: Hungarian covers Reformers and Roman Catholics, Russian/Ukrainian covers Orthodox[27] and Greek Catholics.

5.2 Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations for strengthening stability factors and reducing conflict potential emerging from this study. These are summarised below.

- **Central authorities need to build inclusive and effective communication mechanisms with the local population.** This needs to include communication around the implementation of policies and reforms in the region, and around relations at the Kyiv-Budapest level. It should include the organisation of public platforms in a discussion and dialogue format, which would become not only the basis for the development and testing of ideas, but also a means for communities to vent tensions (blow off steam). The region also needs an information policy that should include both a technical aspect in order to provide the region with the coverage of Ukrainian media, primarily television, and content that aims at destroying stereotypes about the region as separatist, backward, contraband and 'Hungarian' through success stories from minority groups, as well as examples of positive interactions between different ethnic groups.

- **Support educational and cultural institutions to build interconnections between representatives of different communities.** It is important to establish a multicultural approach to public events and initiatives when developing local policies and action plans for educational and cultural institutions. The activities should foster the development of practices that support and underpin social cohesion. Activities like cooking and eating common dishes are suggested as ways to bring communities together.

- **Strengthen transport infrastructure between communities, and between communities and the centre.** Roads are perhaps the biggest factor in blocking access to services and the mobility of citizens themselves, thereby sealing communities off from one another. In addition, the dependence on small forms of private entrepreneurship significantly raises prices and industrial goods in the region's communities. It is important to ensure the construction of transport routes that connect the region to itself and to the wider Ukraine. Infrastructure projects can also be one way for Kyiv to demonstrate its interest in the region.

- **Support the development of networks of self-employed SMEs, particularly in the tourism sector.** Hotels, the production of natural products, services and the entertainment industry can stimulate connections and build interdependence within Zakarpattia, but also with other regions. The recent formation of small networks of cheese-makers and breweries is seen as effective in this regard, but need both organisational and financial support. The growth of enterprise is also important in creating opportunities for young people, providing an option to stay in the region rather than seek employment elsewhere.

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26   Tolerance towards religion is, however, only directed at Christian insitutitions. According to local experts, attempts to open a mosque/ Islamic cultural centre in Uzhgorod prompted calls by radical rightwing organisations to 'defile' the dedicated plot of land.

27   This research was done before the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was granted independence from Russian Orthodox Chirch. https://www. bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46768270

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