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## Prospects for Settling the Dispute over the Rights of the Hungarian Minority in Ukraine

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*The dispute over the rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia is based on a fundamental difference of interests. While Ukraine aims to strengthen its citizens' sense of belonging to the country, Hungary strives to extend the rights of the minority, which means there are no prospects for easing the tensions in the short term. What is more, further escalation is likely, since both parties use the dispute in domestic politics. The difference in Hungary's and Poland's approach to Ukraine will weigh on Polish-Hungarian relations.*

**Controversial Issues in Hungarian-Ukrainian Relations.** The crisis in their relations has lasted a year and is the worst since 1991. The education law adopted in September 2017 by the Ukrainian parliament that, among other provisions, changed the existing regulations regarding the language of teaching in schools, became the direct cause of the recent tensions. The Hungarian authorities consider it a serious restriction on the rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. In response, they have blocked Ukraine's efforts to strengthen cooperation with NATO and the EU. Hungary has vetoed the NATO-Ukraine Commission meeting a few times and in June voted against granting Ukraine a new EU macro-financial assistance package.

The disputes regarding the education of minorities have been occurring for at least a decade. It is based on the lack of flexibility in the Ukrainian education system to adapt teaching to the needs of the Hungarian-speaking youth and general underfinancing of Hungarian institutions. The increase in tensions between Hungary and neighbouring countries with a large Hungarian minority, including Ukraine, also stems from an amendment to the Hungarian Citizenship Law in 2010. The change made it possible for minorities in another country to obtain Hungarian citizenship through a simplified procedure, which some of these countries considered interference in their internal affairs. The change extended Hungarian citizenship and suffrage to possibly several thousand citizens of Ukraine. That country's authorities were aware of the practice but reacted to it only at the beginning of October. Ukrainian law does not recognise dual citizenship but does not prohibit it either. Ukraine expelled the Hungarian consul in Berehove after it was revealed he had handed out Hungarian passports. Consulate employees in turn urged the new citizens to conceal their Hungarian citizenship. Hungary also expelled a Ukrainian diplomat in retaliation.

The tensions in the bilateral relations increased further this summer when Hungary nominated a plenipotentiary of the minister for the development of Transcarpathia and again after a Ukrainian decision to reconstitute a military garrison in Berehove, which is the most important centre of Hungarian culture in Transcarpathia. The many disputes have also led both sides to block each other's diplomatic appointments: Ukraine has withheld approval of the new Hungarian ambassador and Hungary has blocked the appointment of a new Ukrainian honorary consul. Meanwhile, the Hungarian minority has suffered the most from the negative consequences of the diplomatic dispute. For example, lists with the names of

people belonging to the Hungarian minority who work in the Ukrainian administration and have dual citizenship are published online.

**The Rationale of the Hungarian Side.** Hungary has since the establishment of an independent Ukraine in 1991 perceived bilateral relations with its neighbour mainly through the lens of protecting the rights of the 130,000 or so ethnic Hungarians inhabiting Transcarpathia. This approach has not changed even with the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which appears in the Hungarian public and political debate only in the context of the situation of the Hungarian minority. This can be explained by the consensus in the Hungary regarding the need to support ethnic Hungarians abroad. At the same time, the attitude of the parties to the issue of the Hungarian minority in the neighbouring countries is an element of an internal political struggle. Although all parties argue that they are the defenders of the interests of these minorities, ruling Fidesz has assumed the position of the real representative of Hungarians abroad. However, the confrontational actions taken by the Hungarian authorities over the last year have gradually worsened the situation of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, which is evidence that its protection of the minority is secondary to the government.

The dispute with Ukraine is used by the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in foreign policy, too. Further support for the autonomy of the Transcarpathian region even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, claiming that Ukraine is most likely to become a buffer zone, or blocking its rapprochement with NATO can be considered gestures towards Russia. Such policy also allows for a greater impact on foreign partners than Hungary's potential. These actions helped Hungary gain the first bilateral meeting of the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs with the U.S. Secretary of State in six years. In addition, maintaining the tensions is a tactic of the ruling camp's sovereignty rhetoric used in foreign policy, which serves to maintain support for Fidesz among its voters.

**The Dispute from the Ukrainian Perspective.** The dispute over the rights of the Hungarian minority overlap the wider process of strengthening the sense of belonging to the country, which intensified after 2014 as a result of the Russian aggression. Among other efforts, the Ukrainian authorities increased the role of the Ukrainian language in the public space through both the education law and a new law on the status of the Ukrainian language as the state language, which is now being discussed in parliament, particularly serving this purpose. While the main goal has been derusification of the country, a side effect of these activities has been changes in the conditions in which other national minorities exist in Ukraine, including ethnic Hungarians.

Against this background, the dispute with Hungary has taken on a special character for Ukraine. Due to the convergence of rhetoric of the Hungarian authorities, Prime Minister Orbán's in particular, with Russia's, the Ukrainian side views Hungary's actions as fitting with Russian policy and suspects both countries of—though in fact unlikely—coordinating their activities. Hungary's demands regarding the rights of the Hungarian minority, especially granting autonomy to Transcarpathia region, are therefore almost wholly unacceptable for Ukraine, since they raise fears that any concessions given to the Hungarian minority will constitute a precedent for the Russian minority in Ukraine. At the same time, the upcoming presidential elections in Ukraine in March 2019 encourages the Ukrainian authorities to take an increasingly firm stance towards Hungary with the aim of demonstrating to the public the will to defend the national interest. This is favoured by the awareness that the EU and NATO will not openly support the Hungarian authorities in this dispute, since this could weaken Ukraine's position in the ongoing war with Russia.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** In the short term, there are no prospects for settling the Hungarian-Ukrainian dispute over minority rights. On the one hand, the authorities of both countries derive ad-hoc benefits in their domestic politics from the continuation of the dispute. On the other hand, the Hungarian side hopes that after next year's presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine it will be possible to obtain additional concessions. This means that in the near future none of the parties will be interested in reaching a compromise. It is even likely that the conflict will intensify, especially if the Ukrainian parliament adopts a law on the status of the Ukrainian language as the state language, or, if need be, embarks on introducing provisions stripping Ukrainian citizenship from people who obtain some other citizenship.

On questions regarding national identity, such as history or official language, since 2014 the Ukrainian authorities have been pursuing strict policy, regardless of reservations expressed by their neighbours. The Ukrainians have even provoked the tensions, such as the revival of the military garrison in Transcarpathia, although such an approach entails additional tensions in bilateral relations with their Western neighbours (Poland, Hungary, Romania) and adversely affects the international image of Ukraine given its war with Russia. This change is seemingly permanent, thus it is unlikely that after next year's presidential or parliamentary elections the authorities will switch to conciliatory policy in these matters. That will continue to hinder, among others, reaching consensus with Poland on historical issues.

The differences in Poland's and Hungary's policy towards Ukraine, and at the same time towards Russia, may negatively affect Polish-Hungarian relations. It is in Poland's interest that the Hungarian-Ukrainian dispute be resolved on a bilateral basis without further affecting Ukraine's cooperation with the EU and NATO.