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The incident in Mukachevo: a symptom of Ukraine's systemic weakness

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On 11 July in Mukachevo, the second largest town in the Transcarpathian region, there was an exchange of fire between a group of militants from the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, a military organisation created by the radical group Right Sector (RS), workers for the independent parliamentary deputy Mykhailo Lanyo and the local police. Lanyo's bodyguard was killed and 11 others wounded. The reason for the shooting was most likely a settling of scores concerning the distribution of income from smuggling. Transcarpathia borders with four EU countries: Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, and contraband cigarettes and drugs are the main sources of income for local criminal groups, operating in coordination with local authorities and the law enforcement authorities. The events in Mukachevo have revealed the central authorities' ineffective policy in the regions, as well as their lack of control over the armed formations which appeared after the outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas, and over the circulation of weapons in Ukraine. In response to the shooting on 13 July, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk dismissed the regional heads of the customs service, and President Petro Poroshenko promised firm action to resolve the situation in the region, as well as the elimination of illegal armed formations, and "a battle against the clans, contraband and corruption"; two days later, he named Hennadiy Moskal, formerly the governor of Lugansk, as the new governor of the Transcarpathian region. The shooting in Mukachevo has become a part of the election campaign before the local elections in Ukraine scheduled for October, as well as a pretext for increased criticism of the government by political parties, thus adding to the political disputes. This could lead to the destabilisation of the political situation in Transcarpathia, and could make it easier for Russia both to conduct diversionary activities in the region and discredit Ukraine on the international stage.

The course of events ...

On 11 July, about 20 members of Right Sector, armed with automatic weapons and grenade launchers, entered the Antares leisure complex in Uzhhorod, which belongs to Lanyo. Gunfire between them and the deputy's bodyguards broke out. Then the RS column drove off southwards, but on the international Kyiv-Chop highway there was a shootout with the police. As a result, two police cars were burned, RS managed to break through the police cordon, and headed towards the forest. The Interior Ministry and the Ukrainian Security Service have been carrying out activities aimed at stopping the militants while avoiding any open confrontation, while the Transcarpathian region's prosecutor's office has initiated

proceedings on the creation of a criminal organisation and the commission of an act of terrorism.

... and the characteristics of the region

The Transcarpathian (Zakarpattia) oblast is the most western region of Ukraine, which borders four EU countries, and is separated from the rest of Ukraine by the Carpathians. The region has been controlled for many years by the family clan of Viktor Baloha, who, like his two brothers Ivan and Pavlo and his relative Vasyl Petiovuk, are deputies to the Ukrainian parliament. It is also a culturally and ethnically diverse region, with a significant Hungarian minority (12% according to the census of 2001) as well as Romanian and Ruthenian populations. The Euromaidan and the change of power in Ukraine have not led to any change in the political landscape of the Transcarpathian region. In the face of the war in the Donbas and the economic crisis, it seems that Kyiv has decided to give the Baloha family a 'free hand' in the region, thus further strengthening its position. It is possible that this has resulted in the intensification of local rivalry over smuggling rings, and a desire to eliminate competition in the form of Mykhaylo Lanyo, who has been associated with the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc and whose roots lie in the criminal underworld. At the same time, the immediate cause of the shooting in Mukachevo remains unclear, because it has not been established whether RS was acting alone or was working to someone else's instructions.

Mukachevo: an indictment against the institutions of force

Transcarpathia had so far been considered as one of the quieter regions of Ukraine. However, the incident in Mukachevo has revealed the failings of the public safety system which are characteristic of the whole country. It has sharply called into question the effectiveness of the measures taken by the government aimed at the rapid reform of the institutions responsible for maintaining law and order, and challenged the state's monopoly on the use of force. It has also revealed that the personnel changes in the leadership of the Interior Ministry, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), the State Border Service and the customs service at the regional level have not broken up the long-term circles of corruption. Kyiv does not interfere in the regional political arrangements dominated by local oligarchs, for fear that any breach will make them openly undermine or even boycott the decision-making centre. The security situation in Transcarpathia has been exacerbated by the fact that the local elites benefit from smuggling goods to EU countries. One example of the deep-seated personnel disease in the local institutions of power is the situation within their leadership. The head of the regional Interior Ministry board, Serhiy Sharanych, has been linked since 1985 with the structures of the Interior Ministry in Transcarpathia. The head of the regional SBU, Volodymyr Heletey (the brother of Ukraine's former defence minister Valery) is considered to be a protégé of Viktor Baloha. The personnel changes in the border guard, where the heads of the Transcarpathian structures (the Chop and Mukachevo branches) are representatives of a younger generation, have not improved the situation in the institutions they run. The personnel are still being rotated there; most of the local heads of the border guards have been replaced over the last two months. These changes have not visibly reduced the scale of smuggling or limited organised crime.

The events in Mukachevo have revealed the ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies in carrying out preventive actions. The local authorities, the Interior Ministry and the SBU were aware of the Right Sector militia's plans, but did not take any action. Roman Stoyka, the commander of the 1st reserve battalion of the Right Sector in Uzhhorod (created in July 2014), was warned by the police for participating in smuggling.

The smuggling via the Transcarpathian region (cigarettes, drugs, the organisation of illegal migration) causes continual concern to the authorities in Kyiv, as well as the European Union. EU experts estimate the amount of cigarettes smuggled from Ukraine to the EU countries in 2013 at 1.3 billion units. Half of this amount allegedly goes to the Hungarian and Slovak markets. Transcarpathia has also become part of a smuggling route leading from Belarus to the EU.

"Redundant people" as a growing threat to security

The participation of members of the Ukrainian Voluntary Corps in the Mukachevo shooting has drawn attention to the worrying phenomenon of the activity of armed groups which are not under the control of the state apparatus. In a broader aspect, this refers to the activity of current and former members of some of the volunteer battalions which fought in the Donbas, where subordination to the Defence or Interior Ministries is often only a formality, and the formations themselves are increasingly being accused of committing crimes. This situation indicates a broader problem affecting the state of security in Ukraine, related to the difficulties veterans of the struggle in Donbas have in adapting to civilian life. These individuals are armed, have combat experience and are faced with the challenge of making a living, and are vulnerable to criminalisation. It is difficult to estimate the number of people belonging to this group; according to imprecise data the figure may be about 25,000. Another problem revealed by the shooting in Mukachevo is the large quantity of weapons circulating illegally; the Ukrainian Interior Ministry admits that it is unable to determine their exact number. The scale of the situation may be demonstrated by the information that in 2014 about 200,000 firearms were recovered, and during the last arms amnesty in April 2015 only 4000 firearms were handed in.

The political consequences of the events in Mukachevo

The shooting in Mukachevo has become a convenient pretext for certain political parties in Ukraine to step up their criticism of the government. The Opposition Bloc has accused the ruling camp of failing to take effective measures to restore the state's monopoly on the use of weapons, and has demanded early parliamentary elections. The Ukrop party, which is linked to Ihor Kolomoyski, an oligarch in conflict with Kyiv, has blamed the events in Mukachevo on the central government. Right Sector, which for its part wishes to avoid accusations of responsibility for the militants' illegal actions, has decided to start a campaign directed against the authorities. To this end, it organised a picket in Kyiv (in front of the Presidential Administration) and other Ukrainian cities demanding resignations in the Transcarpathian structures of the Interior Ministry, the removal from office of minister Arsen Avakov, and the calling of early parliamentary elections.

The government in Kyiv, although it has clearly emphasised the criminal nature of the incident, is afraid of its political consequences. The personnel changes it has announced in the structures of the local administration and institutions of force, and above all the appointment of Hennadiy Moskal as the region's new governor, may in the longer term weaken the position of Viktor Baloha, and undermine the political situation in the region. Moskal, a former head of the civil-military government of the Lugansk region, who was governor of Transcarpathia in 2001-2002, and worked in the law enforcement structures in Transcarpathia in the 1990s, is well-versed in the region's affairs. He has a reputation as a supporter of robust combat against corruption. A possible conflict between the Baloha clan and the central authorities may also expand the space for destructive actions by Russia, which has been actively promoting the slogan of Rusyn separatism in the information sphere. The incident in Mukachevo was immediately picked up by the Russian media, forming a pretext to step up their information campaign undermining the authorities in Kyiv. This has focused on emphasising the idea that Ukraine's state structures are collapsing, that there is no control over radical groups which are going from strength to strength ('fascists', 'Banderites'), and that public opposition to the government's policies is escalating.