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Hungarian–Ukrainian agreement on the rights of national minorities in Ukraine

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On 3 June, Prime Minister Péter Magyar announced that Hungary had reached a 'comprehensive agreement' with Ukraine on expanding the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine's Zakarpattia Oblast, estimated at 60,000–70,000 people. The agreement, reached following several weeks of expert consultations, expands the linguistic, educational and cultural rights of ethnic Hungarians. The details of the agreement have not yet been published, but the Hungarian government regards it as a step towards restoring some of the rights curtailed by language and education policy reforms in Ukraine over the past decade.

According to media reports, Ukraine committed itself to incorporating the agreed measures into national legislation and integrating them into its action plan for EU accession negotiations. In return, Hungary expressed its readiness to support the opening of the first negotiation cluster covering the so-called fundamentals, thereby breaking a two-year deadlock resulting from the veto imposed by the previous government led by Viktor Orbán. However, Magyar emphasised that Hungary remains opposed to a 'fast-tracked procedure' for accession negotiations with Ukraine.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha described the agreement as a new chapter in bilateral relations, founded on mutual respect, trust and a shared European future. Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Taras Kachka characterised the dialogue with Hungary as constructive, while Education Minister Oksen Lisovyi noted that the proposed changes to the education system would not be unprecedented for Ukraine.

Most of the changes will liberalise Ukraine's legislation concerning national minorities. They could also mark the beginning of a new phase in Hungarian–Ukrainian relations and strengthen Hungary's position in Brussels. At the same time, the agreement will test Magyar's effectiveness, as he must demonstrate his ability to translate political declarations into lasting results. In Ukraine, the agreement has not provoked negative reactions among the political elite, although it has attracted criticism on social media.

Commentary

- **The changes to legislation concerning national minorities announced by Ukraine are not the first to have been adopted under pressure from Hungary** – the most recent amendments were introduced in December 2023 (see: '*Ukraine: another amendment to the law on national minorities*'). The restoration of minority schools does not alter the fact that some subjects will still have to be taught in Ukrainian. Current legislation already

allows students to sit final exams in a minority language until 2030. Provisions permitting the use of minority languages in the service sector and public offices are already in place, but these will now be extended to higher levels of government.

- **The most significant change concerns the requirement to translate legal acts issued at the oblast level into minority languages.** However, this provision could be scaled back as a result of political opposition during parliamentary proceedings. A further important concession to minorities concerns the relaxation of the requirement to provide simultaneous interpretation at public events. Under the current rules, organisers must provide interpretation into Ukrainian if requested by at least 20 individuals no later than 72 hours before an event; this requirement will no longer apply in all cases. As the proportion of ethnic Hungarians in Zakarpattia has fallen during the war, the community may lose some of their rights following the next census.
- **The Polish minority is likely to benefit from the changes introduced in the field of education.** Polish schools will be able to resume full operation, rather than being limited to teaching only some subjects in Polish. In practice, Polish schools have taught most subjects in Ukrainian owing to a shortage of teachers proficient in Polish and for practical reasons. The change will permit the unrestricted use of the Polish language during school assemblies, in communication with parents, on school trips and within school administration. However, the Polish minority is unlikely to benefit from other measures envisaged by the agreement, including those relating to political rights, organising events and communicating with public authorities in a minority language, as the community is too small and geographically dispersed. There are no administrative units in Ukraine in which Poles account for more than 10% of the population.

- **Despite the official portrayal of the agreement as a success, sections of the Ukrainian public have expressed dissatisfaction on social media.** Nationalist commentators have accused the government of making excessive concessions and yielding to external pressure, claiming that ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine will now enjoy more extensive rights than those in Romania. Others have accused the Hungarian government of resorting to political blackmail and laying the groundwork for establishing Hungarian autonomy in Zakarpattia, while some have opposed concessions on language issues at a time when Ukrainians are dying on the battlefield in defence of their national language.
- **The agreement with Ukraine represents an effort by the new Hungarian government to reconcile the protection of national interests with the restoration of Hungary's standing in Europe.** Magyar has emphasised that he has achieved more in a matter of weeks than the previous government managed over the course of more than a decade. Since 2017, the dispute over the status of the Hungarian minority has constituted the principal source of tension between Budapest and Kyiv. By reaching this compromise, the new government can present itself as an effective defender of the rights of Hungarians living beyond the country's borders, while simultaneously signalling its intention to pursue a more constructive European policy based on negotiation and compromise rather than the permanent confrontation that characterised the previous approach. At the same time, although Magyar has declared his readiness to unblock the first stage of Ukraine's accession negotiations, he continues to oppose fast-tracking the process and has announced plans to hold a binding referendum on the matter before ratifying Ukraine's

accession. This represents both a gesture towards voters concerned about the consequences of EU enlargement and a signal that the new government does not intend to relinquish its capacity to influence the further course of the accession process.

- **The agreement between Budapest and Kyiv paves the way for the formal opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine (and Moldova).** Previously, Hungary's opposition had prevented the opening of the first negotiation cluster (Fundamentals). Under the most optimistic scenario for both candidate countries, a political decision on the matter could be taken at the intergovernmental conference in Luxembourg on 15 June, followed by the opening of one or more negotiation clusters at the EU summit later that week.

APPENDIX

Proposed changes to national minority rights

The changes that Ukraine has pledged to introduce will apply not only to the Hungarian minority but to all national minorities, with the exception of Russians. In the field of education, minority schools will be allowed to resume operations. At present, only Ukrainian educational institutions offering minority-language classes are permitted to operate. The changes will also allow the use of minority national symbols and minority languages in school administration. In addition, the reforms will clarify that teaching certain subjects in Ukrainian at these schools will be permitted only at the request of two-thirds of parents. An exception will apply to several subjects that must be taught in the state language, namely Ukrainian language, Ukrainian history, Ukrainian geography and defence education. Students will also be permitted to sit final exams in a minority language.

The changes also broaden the scope for the use of minority languages, for example by granting the right to communicate with public authorities in a minority language and to use it when accessing public services, receiving healthcare and attending organised events. At present, this is permitted only in a *hromada* (municipality) 'traditionally inhabited by a minority' – defined as an area in which a given ethnic group has lived for at least 100 years and accounts for at least 10% of the population – or 'substantially inhabited by a minority', where that minority constitutes at least 15% of residents. Under the proposed changes, these criteria will also apply at the *raion* and *oblast* levels, which are broadly equivalent to counties and provinces. As a result, the rights of the Hungarian minority will extend beyond the *hromadas* inhabited by the community to the entirety of Zakarpattia Oblast, where ethnic Hungarians accounted for more than 10% of the population according to the 2001 census, although their share of the population is now considerably lower. However, the use of dual place names will continue to be permitted exclusively at the *hromada* level. The reforms will also require normative acts adopted at the oblast level to be translated into the relevant minority languages. Moreover, Hungary has secured simplified rules for organising cultural and sporting events: the requirement to provide simultaneous interpretation will be lifted for events intended exclusively for members of a minority community.

In the area of political rights, national minorities will be permitted to conduct election campaigns and to print ballot papers, notices and informational materials in their respective minority languages. At the same time, Ukraine declined to guarantee parliamentary representation for the Hungarian minority, arguing that such a measure would be

incompatible with Ukrainian law. Ukraine also rejected proposals for the introduction of cultural autonomy for national minorities.