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WESTERN BORDER ISSUES OF UKRAINE IN CRISIS: TRANSCARPATIA, BORDER INTERFACE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION¹

Etienne Ciapin*

ABSTRACT

Not much observed when all eyes are directed towards Kiev or the eastern regions of Ukraine, the westernmost Transcarpathian region is a direct border interface with the territory of the European Union. As such, it provides an alternative input to political sociology to grasp the current issues of the country. After a short historical and socio-economic contextualisation, the present study investigates the current border uses for the population with neighbouring European countries and the main contemporary lines of work for decision makers looking for a regional integration. This overview is based on data collected on site from field observations and interviews with the actors. Transcarpathia appears to be deeply impacted by the crisis that Ukraine is facing, though geographically distant. There, it particularly exacerbates the contradictions of a border and marginal space, caught between the distant hope of a full European integration and the discouragement of the lack of support from Kiev. The current European neighbourhood policy and the bilateral efforts of neighbouring states are also put to the test by the crisis, raising the question of resilience and political will.

Key words: Border, Transcarpatia, Schengen, Ukraine, crisis

Introduction

“*The EU opens its borders with Ukraine*”, could be read in the European press in May 2017 (Vitkine, 2017). Sunday, June the 11, indeed entered into force on visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens for the Schengen space. On the same day, “*Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Slovak President Andrej*

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¹ This contribution is an extended and English version of the paper *Usages et enjeux aux frontières européennes e la Transcarpatie ukrainienne*. In ROUET, G., STOICHEVA, M. (eds.). 2017. *Identités, Démocratie, Frontières*. Paris : L'Harmattan, pp. 229-245. ISBN 978-2-343-12199-4

Kiska at the border opened a symbolic door to the European Union, au check point d'Uzhorod" (Poroshenko and the..., 2017) westernmost border check-point post of the country. Following them, *"Thousands of Ukrainians crossed the border once the twelve strokes of midnight sounded and the entry into force of the agreement, according to the Ukrainian border services"* (L'UE ouvre ses... 2017). A gathering was organised in Kiev to greet the news.

One month later, on July 13, 2017, the 19th Summit between the European Union and Ukraine took place in Kiev, and confirmed the ratification of the Association Agreement, which will become fully operational in September 2017, after years of political and diplomatic adventures with a backdrop of extreme geopolitical tensions with Russia. The agreement confirms the resolutely pro-European orientation of the post-Maidan Kiev power and the will of the European Union to secure the country in the West-orientation. The visa exemption, under certain conditions², was one of the most symbolic elements, which was hoped by some of the country's population. According to customs office, *"In the first month, over 95,000 Ukrainian citizens visited the Schengen area under the new conditions"* (European Commission, 2017).

However, if an important threshold is crossed, speaking of "openness" remains today a marker more political than effective, and the sudden highlighting of the Ukrainian borders with the European Union should not make us forget that they have been very poorly observed in recent years when the conflict was raging in Kiev and in the east of the country. It seems appropriate not to fall into the media shortcuts and to be able to think the new situation, to re-contextualize this territory in a longer time and then to reconsider the recent situation of the Transcarpathia region of recent years in order to understand the stakes of the actors on the place and echo what this news means. This is what the present study attempts to do – in line with the renewal of cross-border studies since the 2000s, which seeks to reintroduce the complexity of the social in opposition with incomplete representations of a deeply polysemic border fact (Deshaye, Francfort, 2010). It does so thanks to the materials collected during a research field trip conducted in late 2015 in the Slovak eastern borderland and Ukrainian west borderland in the region of Transcarpathia³ targeted on the uses

² Requirement for a biometric visa, mobility excluding certain member states (such as Ireland) or including other conditions for a series of states, up to 90 days on 180, for tourism or business, prohibiting the establishment and work.

³ Thank you very much to Pavlo Khudish, who was at the time a PhD student in history, Ukrainian citizen from Transcarpathia, for his excellent collaboration in translations and observations.

of populations at the land border interfaces of the European Union and what they teach us in terms of meaning and social-spatial representations. This study focuses thereby on the elements of understanding and analysis extracted from a series of comprehensive interviews conducted in the region with the population and users. They aimed at continuing the reflection in the continuity of previous work (Zhilenko, 2009). In parallel, observation and study of institutional dynamics were possible as the sixth European forum on trans-frontier cooperation⁴ between Kosice and the city of Uzhgorod which show interest on this subject by a large number of institutional actors and officials, whether they are elected or experts from local, regional, national or international authorities, customs, journalists, associations or entrepreneurs, whose speech and representations can thus be taken into account from a perspective inspired by the sociology of the transaction concerning the border-spaces (Hamman, 2013).

1 The actual Transcarpathia

The term Transcarpathia, Zakarpatska Oblast in Ukrainian, means an *Oblast* - an administrative region of the country - whose regional capital is the city of Uzhgorod⁵. This oblast, the most western part of Ukraine, is in contact with the Polish, Slovak, Hungarian and Romanian borders, enveloped by the member countries of the European Union, mostly Schengen members. Today, Transcarpathia has just under one and a half million inhabitants. Uzhgorod, for its part, a little less than 200,000 inhabitants. Approximately 63% of the oblast population lives in rural areas (twice as much as in the rest of the country). It is a marginal region, geographically rather enclaved, and rather weakly developed. This area is very distant from Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, which is more than 800 kilometres away. It is also very distant from the major coastal ports, which have made the country prosperous, although road and railway infrastructure is passing through it in the direction of Central Europe. In 2013, customs data estimated that 8,755,000 people crossed the borders of

⁴ The event took place between 24 and 27 November 2015, in both cities. It has been prepared with the support of the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic and in close cooperation with the Institute for Stability and Development, the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, the National Institute for Strategic Studies (Uzhgorod Regional Branch) And the Consulate General of the Slovak Republic in Uzhgorod. For more information, please visit <http://www.eeagrants.sk/the-government-office-organises-a-major-conference-on-cross-border-cooperation/>

⁵ Zakarpatska is the transliteration of Закарпатська. Uzhgorod is the transliteration in English of Ужгород ; Oujgorod is also used, for example in French language.

Transcarpathia legally. In volume, this corresponds to nearly 4 million vehicles and nearly 25,000 tons of goods that crossed the checkpoints. Compared to previous years, this represents an increase in all categories.

The border territories of countries bordering on Transcarpathia can all be considered as peripheries of their own states, if we consider indicators such as differences in the standard of living of populations or urban development. Historically, this space envisaged in a wider perimeter has been divided, split, such a piece passing from states to states in the course of wars and treaties, and always remaining marginalised. The Hungarian Kingdom, the Hungarian Empire, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Socialist Czechoslovakia, then USSR after the Second World War. Transcarpathia has “*changed hands five times in less than a century*” and was “*taken in the whirlpool of the great turn*” at the end of the 1990s when “*changing of system, of state, of “century”, but not of place and of face*” Ukraine is born of the ruins the Soviet collapse (Chauvier, 1993). Today, this *oblast* is the main interface land area of Ukraine with the external border of the European Union, while the country has faced a deep political and military crisis since 2013, marked in particular by the attachment of the Crimea to Russian territory and an armed conflict in the eastern regions of the vast country⁶. These many border seams and historic cuts have impregnated – sometimes dramatically – the daily life of the regional population, even more marginalised as a mosaic of languages and cultural and religious groups composed it. In addition to the many changes in the nationalities of individuals and families, which are sometimes recounted in the tone of the anecdote, there has been added the terrible weight of family separations, of local community cultural vexations, sometimes “cut” in two pieces in the proper sense by the layout, the barbed wire, and the border institution and its bureaucracy. It was only after the Soviet disintegration, then the gradual normalisation of the relations between the new states and finally the European integration, that joint policies were made to open new checkpoints or to make the crossings more fluid and easy for the benefit of the border populations.

The past and present history of the two villages of Veľké Slemence in Slovakia and Mali Selmentsi in Ukraine in the south of Uzhgorod, narrated in the Jaroslav Vojtek documentary *Hranica*⁷, released in 2009, provided an exceptional

⁶ On the crisis and the conflict in Ukraine, see Geronimo, 2015, but also Arjakovsky, 2014 or Segal, 2014.

⁷ Reference: *Hranica*, a film by Jaroslav Vojtek, LEON Productions, 72', 2009. “*Hranica*” means “the border” in slovaquian language.

document to understand and to heft the weight of this story. Before 1946, there was only one village in this eastern part of the Czechoslovakia, and it was called Slemence. The Hungarian-speaking community played an important role there. The village was cut into two by the Soviet border, erected overnight. This partition, which has separated people and families, broken lifestyles and work, has lasted for decades. The population of the time, victim of an arbitrary wall, marginalised population - marginalised by the powers on both sides, struggled to keep the link, village link, family tie, bond of a rural community. Even the Soviet collapse did not translate into the fall of the wall, as a negative echo of the events of 1989 in Berlin. The population waited for the Slovak European accession and negotiations for a pedestrian checkpoint to be established in 2005. Then, however, many protagonists of this story were already old or dead, while the two villages and their population, their links and their uses, have gradually changed.

Picture No.1: The checkpoint of Veľké Slemence in Slovakia and Mali Selmentsi in Ukraine.



Source: Etienne Ciapin, 2015.

For those who have the opportunity to go there, seven years after the release of the documentary, they could feel, gathered there, overlapping, all the complexity of this border area. The modest houses are now converted into stalls selling counterfeit clothing or other goods, everything seems to be organised around the checkpoint, which is crossed on foot by both sides but which does

not allow the passage of vehicles, and therefore will not attract “the manna” of mobility flows on which the inhabitants count to make their recipes. The signposts in Ukrainian and Slovak respond to others, written in Hungarian runes, rehabilitated today by Hungary and used in regions where the Hungarian communities are strong, whereas in 1850 King Stephen I preferred the Latin alphabet to them. Small gatherings of pro-Hungarian militants are sometimes held in the village near the border. It is the language that is heard most in the streets, or in the bar, on the Slovak side. These two villages and their common check-point can be used as an introduction to the issues of the region, since one clearly perceives the weight of the history and its seams combined with the necessities of the daily life; and the central place of the border in both cases.

2 Daily uses of the boundaries by a borderland population

The city of Uzhgorod is directly located after the main checkpoint of the border dyad (Foucher, 1991) that Ukraine shares with Slovakia. This checkpoint is located between the small Slovak village of Vyšné Nemecké and the capital of the Ukrainian oblast. A road lined with different standards hotels, petrol stations, liquor stores and exchange offices crosses the most western part of the city in the direction of the border checkpoint and its stalls, located just ten minutes from the heart of the city. Cars queues are long morning and evening in both directions, the passage time is variable, because of the systematic checking of visas that are needed for Ukrainian nationals, while at the same time for European Union citizens a passport is enough. Daily bus lines leaves at fixed time from Kosice Bus Station towards Uzhgorod Bus Station located in the city centre, with a stop in the small city of Michalovce in Slovakia, and vice versa. It is necessary to count at least four hours to reach the two agglomerations by bus; it takes less time by an individual car. However, crossing the border requires at least one hour, more in case of more intensive custom control from officers on both sides, and the traffic congestion regularly distorts the calculations. The border is also the place for the change of time zone. It is only eleven hours in Slovakia when a motorist arrives for noon before the Ukrainian side controls and starts the crossing procedure.

Several times a week, Dasha goes by the road and watches. When the bus coming from the bus station of Uzhgorod arrives at a few tens of meters from her, she approaches it, and goes up there. The ride is cheaper when you arrange hands-on with the drivers. This bus crosses the border. Dasha, as

borderland inhabitant, applied for and obtained a short distance visa document (under local border traffic regime)⁸. There are dozens of regulars of these trips, shaking hands, saying hello, and joking. The main destination of these commuters is not the terminus, Kosice, but Michalovce, about 35 kilometres. Dasha carries cigarettes, alcohol, some consumer products in a plastic bag, all bought in town before departure, or at the Ukrainian side stall before the border because the time of some repair at the checkpoint, the “duty free” is closed. The quantities are legal. She will return back without, but with provisions found in the shops or supermarkets of the Slovak city, where it is more advantageous to buy certain processed products since the beginning of Ukrainian crisis. Then she proceeds with reselling to acquaintances, or in the street, but discreetly. Alternatively, she will keep in the pocket the few euros obtained by the resale there. Dasha is retired, and it is hard to keep up with the money she gets. As a widow, these punctual passages allow her “to improve the ordinary” as she confides. This practice is quite common at all border crossing points in Transcarpathia, and informally nominated as commuters, *tchelnoki* (Chomette, 2004), those who practice are also sometimes named of more pejorative qualities, such as “ants”. Some regular commuters even pack cartons full of goods, buying in bulk for domestic use for several households, or more discreetly also to supply stocks from their stalls. However, their number is limited by the difficulty in obtaining visas (far from being automatic) and the fear of losing them in case of too zealous control from border officers. The *marchroutka*⁹ that connects Uzhgorod and Mali Selmentsi brings on daily basis for small amount persons crossing the border on foot, going to practice these exchanges in Veľké Slemence in Slovakia before leaving back. The customs officers particularly control these passages of products, scrupulously observing the quantities and establishing statistics as they can. This does not always prevent some attempts to pass a little more cigarette pack than it is allowed. It is also to channel this type of use that the pedestrian crossing was prohibited on the post of Uzhgorod -Vyšné Nemecké checkpoint a few years ago. In addition to food products, gasoline is particularly affected by these cross-border consumption practices, and customs rules have been put in place to limit the

⁸ REGULATION (EC) No 1931/2006 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 20 December 2006 laying down rules on local border traffic at the external land borders of the Member States and amending the provisions of the Schengen Convention

⁹ Minibus making a route and taking or dropping passengers on call, for a small fee.

amount of commuter fuel used to avoid siphoning and resale after crossing. In the same register a large number of cars owned by Ukrainian citizens of the oblast are registered in Slovakia to circumvent Ukrainian import taxes and for this reason the owners must justify a frequent passage to the country of origin, which is sometimes circumvented by administrative techniques. These "small arrangements" are known, people give themselves the good advice between relatives, friends, neighbours, although no one fully assumes these practices at first sight in front of a stranger. They constitute a "system of coping", of "bricolage", practiced to improve the ordinary, for those many inhabitants of Transcarpathia who had liked to have a job on the other side and a "European" but cannot, because this possibility is rare.

Indeed, the opportunities for a large majority of the Ukrainian inhabitants of the region to practice pendular work – which means crossing the regular border often daily or in the longer term within the framework of an economic activity - are quite rare. Nearby employment areas in neighbouring countries, attractive for their higher wages paid in euros currency (which benefits from a stronger and interesting exchange rate), are low, and these regions are also undermined by unemployment. According to the Slovak-Ukrainian cross-border report headed by Ruslan Zhilenko (*ibid.*), official data refer to less than a thousand Ukrainians residing in *Oblast* who legally declared to be working in Slovakia. Concerning the opposite, the case of the Slovaks crossing the border for work is even more rare, and concerns only qualified executives or engineers. Language problems and bureaucratic burdens for companies seem to play a role in it, as much as the border itself, because the visa system as well as the traffic constraints (traffic jams and controls) do not make it a fluid boundary for work mobility. However, observations and interviews point to informal practices, which are difficult to quantify, especially on small jobs "under the table", "on the moonlight" and paid cash from hand to hand. Moreover, and especially for students and young adults, emigration of work -even temporary- is wanted and frequent, and not necessarily in the regions close to the border. Natalia, met in Uzhgorod, illustrates this. After obtaining a six-month Schengen visa, she intends to work in a restaurant in Poland with maximum work hour schedules and minimum food and housing expenses to save as much as possible and then return. The border also opens up opportunities for illegal activities and smugglers recruit among the youth who face unemployment and at the same time dream of easy money. In addition, customs officer jobs offers will never

compensate for the hundreds of temptations provoked for those who ogle these shadowy trades as a solution to improve their living conditions.

These consumption and labour practices play on the economic, administrative or cultural differences from either side of the border. It is possible to speak of “differential uses” about “differential spaces”, because the interface that connects two spaces with different standards creates opportunities effects that can be grasped and exploited by individual actors.¹⁰ For Transcarpathia inhabitants, the challenge to access these opportunities depends on two main things: The ease of obtaining a visa, necessary for the passage, and the practical facility to pass the checkpoints, according to the way of passage and the possibilities of transport. In addition to the purely economic calculation, these choices and opportunities also develop via the cultural side, another driving force of the cross-border choice. Crossings and shuttles are partly for family, cultural and even sporting uses. The presence of parents on the other side is one aspect, but this category of use also includes proximity tourism (including memorial or identitarian tourism (Losonczy, 2014)), or religion when a church or religious event takes place on either side. The first observations and the first discussions with the inhabitants put forward a real difference between the Hungarian borders and the others. The passage is easier because visas facility and infrastructure are better. But these elements draw their source in history and culture, and then the politics appear: Transcarpathia contains a large ethnically or culturally Hungarian population, and the Hungarian state has long allowed the acquisition of nationality on the basis of proof of family origins, a facilitation supporting a certain policy of influence on the bordering countries by minorities. A number of Ukrainians have used it, some driven by desire for identity, but above all because a Hungarian citizenship is also a European citizenship and breaks the Schengen visa wall. However, dual citizenship is prohibited for Ukrainian citizens: every year people are prosecuted for this fact, and even though there are no clear statistics, the estimates amounting to several tens of thousands of number of Ukrainian citizens trying to play on both tables seem to be realistic.

The border seems to be a central element of the relationship that the inhabitants of the region have with their space and their daily lives. A real culture border exists, whose recent success of the book *Karbid* by Andriij Lubka is a clue among the others. This book tells stories of smugglers, customs, walls

¹⁰ This concept will be explored and developed in my thesis dissertation.

and loves where the border holds a central place. It has enjoyed a great popularity since its release in Transcarpathia, then also beyond. In addition, the inhabitants of the *oblast* have a certain “margins culture”, shared with the populations of neighbouring territories. But the “culture of the frontier” does not say “cross-border culture”, and if practices are acquired and also constitute a partial subculture of this space, it is certain that other more symbolic elements rub shoulders with more rational arbitrations, when the inhabitants practice or not the crossing, regular or not, and destined to which neighbouring country. A part of the inhabitants of Uzhgorod, although living with the border, do not cross it, as an inhabitant of a seacoast village would not have sea-going practice but an essential place of the sea in its daily life and its representations of the world.

3 Some words from decision-makers: “Development”, “Regional integration” and “Security”

During the field study period, it was possible to meet with institutional officials, whether experts or elected from local, regional, national or international authorities, customs officers, journalists, association activists, or entrepreneurs, on several occasions, in particular by participating in the sixth European forum on cross-border cooperation organised between the city of Košice and Uzhgorod. Unfortunately, other institutions have preferred to keep closed doors to the solicitations of the investigation, such as the official Ukrainian customs office of the city of Uzhgorod. It is easy to see that from the point of view of local and regional institutions, especially in the situation of instability that the country is facing, the border is perceived directly as an issue for security, development and regional integration.

The current security issues for the Transcarpathian border are mainly concerned with the fight against organised traffics and the mafia networks that operate there. The newspapers (hard or numeric) in the region relay the almost daily criminal cases that dot the border. From seizures to trial, they oscillate between the banality of the taking of objects of smuggling and their destruction, or the sensational clashes with the customs and police forces and the settling of accounts between traffickers. In addition to the smuggling of cigarettes, alcohol and diesel fuel, mafias send arms, but also human organs, to neighbouring countries. Trafficking in women, prostitution, as well as irregular border-crossings are also practiced. Sometimes it is the techniques used that denote: these groups have human and material means allowing a certain spirit of

innovation, for example the use of electrified tunnels several meters in the ground, or more original again like the use of balloons. These stories, presented as so many criminal chronicles of the border, also feed anecdotes and fantasies representations of local populations. The sums of money at stake for the traffickers are high, and even if the trials follow one another, we do not see how the attractiveness of easy money could no longer find recruits in an area where the population suffers poverty, further increased by the crisis of the Ukrainian state. In addition to the direct struggle against these mafia networks and these practices of smuggling and trafficking by police means, the challenge of inter-service cooperation or the technical improvement of the devices, in symmetry is drawn a second: the one aimed at fighting corruption and the agreement that may exist between certain officials and these networks. The inviolability of the border and the guarantee to ensure the monopoly of violence are purely regulatory functions. Cross-border cooperation initiatives are strengthening in the area of security, especially since the countries bordering Ukraine entered the Schengen area. The latter then became the immediate neighbour of the EU external border.

However - and the sixth European Forum on cross-border cooperation organised between the city of Košice and Uzhgorod confirmed that - the maximum attention focuses at the theme of development. Frontier socio-economic disparities are well targeted as one of the causes of trafficking, but the border is also thought to be the main potential development lever for the region. Simplification and greater openness is promoted by certain actors - primarily Slovak and Ukrainian entrepreneurs - to promote industry growth through the use of commuters in neighbouring countries, as well as trade and commerce. Which, if it increases, will in turn benefit customs taxes, an argument that attracts the attention of regional and national decision-makers. Specifically, advances such as easing the visa regime for Ukrainian people and the opening of a special queue at checkpoints for commuter workers are defended as basic measures for the deepening of cross-border economic cooperation. These requests have to be made to the competent authorities, since it is not the local authorities that can replace the states and the negotiations with the Schengen borders, and in this sense, we can see logics of influences and promotion with lobbying type that occurs during meetings of this type. On a local scale, many projects, particularly tourism, such as between the border villages of Ubla and Velyky Berezny, are thought to be local economic boosters capable of receiving support from European funds, local and regional

institutional actors. The cross-border map would make it possible to gain investment in an area affected by unemployment and precariousness, where their local benefits in terms of employment and social standards would be welcome. Less central but still present, we can note the highlighting of the activities of various foundations or cross-border institutes on cross-cutting issues such as youth, or ecology, in addition to economic issues. It is true that the Uzh River, for example, will not be able to avoid pollution -that is too strong and with deep health and economic consequences- only through concerted efforts across the borders. The launching of a project of this type shortly before the COP 21 held in December 2016 in Paris is not fortuitous, especially since the conference confirmed the global approach of promoting ecological efforts as a lever for economic development.

More generally, it is for a rapprochement of territories and their institutions and for the development of cross-border public policies that some of the local and regional decision-makers in Transcarpathia express their interest in the meetings and forum on cross-border cooperation. The European integration process is highlighted as the main spearhead of this dynamics. Although different positions are expressed about the current European Union reality, it is clear that a significant part of the decision-makers want a regional integration process that is central in their perspective to open up the region. There are many hopes for negotiations with the EU on the liberalisation of visas, and in the longer term for an effective Ukrainian application for a realistic future full integration. Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman was on an official visit to Brussels in July 2016, and these two axes are currently being carried by the new Kiev regime following the severe crisis that began in 2013, triggered partially by the refusal by the Ukrainian government at that time to sign the association agreement with the EU.

4 Crisis and tensions... when prospects become only distant hopes

Thus, from the most modest inhabitants of Transcarpathia to the most influential political decision-makers in the region, the border situation and with it the European perspective embody prospects for improvement, stability and progress. For the inhabitants, the border is a means of improving the ordinary, as much as a direction to take to try to live better, by emigration or commuting. For decision-makers, the border issue points out the main prospects for

developing the region, with the long-term objective of fully benefiting from the European integration process. However, the events from the far away Maïdan square in Kiev and the year-long war in the east of the country are powerful historical accelerators that weigh on the contradictions of the region and risk relegating projects – from the most personal to the most political level - to the rank of hopes, far to become a full reality.

Already on the border strictly speaking, the atmosphere is close to tension. The control devices and the presence of armed personnel are much more significant at the Ukrainian border; the crossing, even for the regulars and the commuters, takes aspect that is more dramatic. The country is going through a period of war, and the level of alert and tension is greatly increased. It is palpable, even in the streets of Uzhgorod, where patriotic slogans are tagged on the walls and houses, and where the barns of the charitable associations of support to the troops of the Eastern front remind the population the current state of war. Since the beginning of the crisis, the economy is in recession¹¹, a situation that particularly affects already socio-economically fragile territories. In Transcarpathia, the most visible phenomenon, which affects the whole population, is the increase in the border effect due to the brutal decline of the Ukrainian economy: The difference between the exchange rate and the prices on both sides has soared. One of these consequences is an even stronger departure towards the West for the young people, based on the interviews. Another one, that of the clear reinforcement of the daily "system of coping", or the small traffic as a direct interest. Inserts in the newspapers recount one of the consequences of Ukrainian instability, which is reflected here, for example, by the revival of the struggle of influences of mafias and far right groups to control illegal flows. Occasional fighting happens, with the use of weapon of war, as in Mukachevo in July 2015, where Pravy Sector¹² mercenaries have used rocket launchers to try to dominate against a mafia group.

If tensions in the Transcarpathian population between pro-Maïdan and pro-Russian factions are not extreme as in other parts of the country, it is undeniable that war accentuates tensions on minorities. Since it multiplies to Transcarpathian destinations the articles on the web aiming to extrapolate the

¹¹ The World Bank estimated in April 2015 that the country would experience a 7.5% drop in its gross domestic product (GDP) in that year.

¹² "Right sector", a conservative nationalist political group with armed and violent militia networks. See as well *Ukraine, the masks of the revolution*, by Paul Moreira (Fr., 2016, 55 minutes).

distrust towards Kiev as a real separatist will, which if it can be shared by groups of inhabitants here is infinitely minority. The geopolitics of the minorities set up around the presence of the Ruthenian and Hungarian communities in Transcarpathia reveals one of the fragilities of the region. Many associations and networks are active and promote Hungarian language, culture and history. These networks can sometimes flirt with irredentism, or be instrumentalised in this way, and are the catalyst for social discontent, which sometimes expresses itself through identitarian revendications. In this configuration, the investment of the Hungarian state can be perceived as intrusive by the Ukrainian authorities or by part of the population. The government of Fidesz is punctually criticised by the neighbouring states for its statements on the great historical Hungary and its proximity with radical groups claiming it. The discourse of tolerance and of living together between communities can also be transformed into social tensions. During the crisis, particularly in 2014 and early 2015, videos and articles from pro-Russian sites relayed messages to the Ruthenian and Hungarian communities of Transcarpathia promoting the idea of an uprising in the West in solidarity with the uprising in the East. Calls without effective scope, but which are clear indications of tensions on the subject.

More generally, Transcarpathia is at the direct external border of the EU and Schengen, and Ukraine is situated between the EU and Russia. Since independence and the constitution of the country, this position places the country and this *oblast* in a singular place in the global geopolitical game. In 1991, the people of Transcarpathia voted in referendum for the independence of their region of the new Ukrainian state, but Kiev by-passed the referendum, and the crisis and the urgency of daily life helped to swallow the pill. At every elections in Ukraine since then, Transcarpathia citizen does not follow the positions of the central regions, as did the Donbass and the East of the country. Between the opportunity for the region of a European accession of Ukraine and the Russian tropism as opposed to Kiev, the stability of the region is another internal and external stake, although it is much less, than it is for the oblasts of the East of the country.

Conclusion

Thus, although geographically distant from Kiev and eastern territories, Transcarpathia is like all the territories of Ukraine deeply marked by the crisis that crosses the country. Here, it exacerbates in particular the contradictions of

a border and marginal space: So close to opportunities “on the other side of the borderline” but hampered by the border institution itself, but on the other hand far away from them because of geopolitics of which capitals and nation-states are accountable and in which Transcarpathian actors have no voice. Paradoxically, this situation could be seen as a genuine test of the resilience of the population through cross-border use as well as resilience about cross-border co-operation for decision-makers.

Symmetrically, Transcarpathia had also questioned the neighbouring states and the European Union: European Neighbourhood Policy and bilateral efforts are also a test of resilience and political will for the neighbours themselves. The signing of the Association Agreement in 2017 could be seen in part as an answer to the test, and confirms the resolutely pro-European orientation of the post-Maidan Kiev power and the will of the European Union to secure the country in the Western orientation. It will be extremely interesting to observe how the mobility practices of citizens will evolve since the visa exemption, and how these measures might open up new opportunities for actors. It will be equally important to see how they will be maintained in the long term, or changed according to new developments in international relations and regional geopolitics, which will undoubtedly arrive due to its instability. It is complicated at this stage to be able to have strong forecasts, but new studies can already be drawn.

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