



The American Hungarian Federation

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Upheaval in Ukraine: Protecting the Forgotten and Repressed Hungarian Minority

The American Hungarian Federation (Federation), representing a cross-section of the Hungarian American community, strongly supports cultural diversity, democratic development and human and minority rights for all people. Recent events in Ukraine, home to a sizeable Hungarian minority, illustrate the continuing need for a broader discussion on human and minority rights to include the right for the ethnic Hungarian minority to preserve their language and cultural identity.

The vast majority of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine live in the Zakarpattia Oblast (Province of Transcarpathia), an area that was an integral part of Hungary for 1000 years until it was annexed first to the newly formed Czechoslovakia after WWI and later by Stalin to the Soviet Union in 1945. Today, it forms the Northeastern border with Hungary and is still home nearly 200,000 Hungarians and is one of the poorest regions of Europe.

While there has been a great deal of attention given to issues related to the conflict between ethnic Ukrainian and Russian communities in Ukraine and debate over laws designed to permit or limit the use of the Russian language in official parlance, the needs of the Hungarian minority have been largely ignored. The pro-Western Hungarian community find themselves inadvertent participants in the middle of a growing ethnic and East-West conflict.

Recently released former Prime Minister, Julia Tymoshenko, a key figure in the Orange Revolution of 2004, campaigned aggressively to restrict the use of languages other than Ukrainian in public life and education. Although the main targets were ethnic Russians, Hungarian speakers suffered under the new rules. Ironically, the ethnic Hungarian community benefited when pro-Russian Yanukovich, in support of his Russian-speaking base, eased the language rules. While no fans of Yanukovich and a pro-Russian stance, Hungarians continue to fear Ukrainian nationalists who have shown a penchant for vandalizing Hungarian monuments and intimidating citizens based on their ethnicity.

The Federation sincerely hopes that Ukraine will respect pluralism, the rule of law, and the rights of the Hungarian minority, including their democratically asserted right to autonomy.

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