

The Kremlin Targets Ukraine Through Hungary

By Nataliya Bugayova with Franklin Holcomb

Key Takeaway: *Russia has likely exploited recent tensions between Hungary and Ukraine to support its campaign to drive a wedge between Ukraine and its neighbors. The Kremlin has also revived its subversion in Western Ukraine focusing on minorities' autonomy issues. It is unlikely that the Kremlin intends to create an insurgency there as it did in Eastern Ukraine, but it may create another fissure that destabilizes Kyiv. The Kremlin is also likely to attempt to stoke tensions between Ukraine and its other neighbors with minorities in Western Ukraine, such as Poland. The U.S. must watch these trends, which are likely to be slow-burning and subtle. They have implications for Ukraine's stability and provide insight into Russia's evolving methods of irregular warfare.*

Key Facts

- Ukraine passed an educational bill that mandates the use of the Ukrainian language in schools on September 25.
- Nationalists in Hungary, which shares a border with Ukraine, condemned the bill for infringing upon the rights of 150,000 Hungarians in Western Ukraine's Zakharpatiya (Trans-Carpathia) region. Hungary's Russia-linked extreme nationalist¹ Jobbik party participated in a rally calling² for the self-determination of Zakharpatiya in Budapest on October 13.
- The Hungarian government threatened to halt Ukraine's integration with the EU, though it received no support from key EU states. It also blocked³ the next Ukraine-NATO Commission meeting⁴ on October 27.
- Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán also has a relatively strong relationship⁵ with Russia. Hungary is the only EU country Russian President Vladimir Putin visited twice in 2017. The Kremlin also agreed⁶ on a \$12 billion nuclear plant modernization project in Hungary planned for early 2018.
- Other Eastern European countries with ethnic communities in Ukraine criticized the bill but did not take as confrontational a stance as Hungary.⁷
- The Russian media launched a campaign to amplify this self-determination narrative, which it has propagated in the past, and criticize the Ukrainian law as "anti-European."⁸
- Although Ukraine and Hungary might have come to a compromise⁹, the Kremlin intervened and set conditions to exploit this vulnerability in the future.

The Kremlin has likely attempted to foster separatist narratives within Hungarian minorities in Western Ukraine for years.

- **Russia likely developed and leveraged its ties with a far-right Hungarian party, Jobbik, to propagate the idea of Zakharpatiya's autonomy.** ISW assesses that the Kremlin supports Jobbik. The U.S. has reportedly been investigating¹⁰ Russian funding of political parties in Europe, where Jobbik is a potential Kremlin target. A Jobbik Member of the European Parliament, Bela Kovacs, has been under investigation¹¹ by Hungarian authorities since 2014 over suspicions of working for Russian intelligence. Kovacs has had an office in Berehove, a key Ukrainian town with Hungarian minorities, since December 2010¹². Kovacs advocated¹³ for the creation of a special administrative district for Hungarian-speaking towns in Zakharpatiya as a necessary precondition to Ukraine's joining the EU Association Agreement in 2013. Jobbik members were among the observers in support of the illegitimate Russian referendum¹⁴ in Crimea¹⁵ in March 2015 and the illegal election held in the Russian proxy "Donetsk People's Republic" in

November 2014¹⁶. Jobbik members conducted a rally calling for self-determination¹⁷ of Hungarians in Zakharpatiya in Budapest after the Russian occupation of Crimea in March 2014. Jobbik's leader, Gábor Vona, called¹⁸ Russia the “Eurasian power that could spearhead a real...resistance against the Euro-Atlantic bloc.”

- **The Russian media created false narratives that dramatically overstated the aspirations of Hungarian minorities to gain autonomy.** Two notable disinformation campaigns included reports¹⁹ about the Ruthenes, another ethnic group in Zakharpatiya, holding a congress demanding their autonomy in March 2015. Another Russian media campaign²⁰ claimed that Rusyn and Hungarian communities of Zakharpatiya held a congress in Budapest, where they allegedly called for the federal status of their region in August of 2015. The respective communities' leaders have debunked both Russian narratives.
- **The Kremlin likely attempted to build local organizations to use as a subversion tool.** The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) issued a warning²¹ to the Zakarpatiya Regional Organization for the Protection of Workers Rights about its potential criminal liability for encroachment on the territorial integrity of Ukraine in July 2015. The organization, registered only one month earlier²², promoted the idea of a special self-governing territory for Hungarian minorities as being essential for ensuring workers' rights. Local investigative journalists soon exposed²³ the organization's connections to Russia, and the SBU's warning followed shortly thereafter.

Russia may have exploited the recent tensions between Ukraine and Hungary to revive its subversion efforts on Ukraine's Western border.

- **Jobbik called for the autonomy of Hungarian minorities in Western Ukraine.** Jobbik reportedly organized²⁴ a “Zakharpatiya self-determination” rally in Budapest on October 13, calling for the autonomy of the region. News reports showed some of the participants holding signs reading “Hungary wants Transcarpathia back!”²⁵ Jobbik renewed its push for a regular all-Hungarian roundtable²⁶ on the Transcarpathian issue on September 29. Jobbik promised to launch a significant “struggle²⁷ for the autonomy of Hungarian communities living abroad” within the context of its election campaign. Both Jobbik and Hungary's ruling nationalist Fidesz party are likely to use the issue of Hungarian minorities abroad to gain political capital ahead of Hungary's 2018 elections.
- **The Kremlin launched a media operation to amplify Hungarian nationalist criticism of the Ukrainian educational bill.**²⁸ The Hungarian Government threatened to ask the EU to revise its association agreement²⁹ with Ukraine, and strongly condemned the bill. Poland, Romania, and others with ethnic communities in Ukraine criticized the bill but did not further press their concerns. Polish officials stated on October 23 that they do not view the bill as a threat and that minority groups should be able to know both Ukrainian and Polish³⁰ languages. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin stated that Ukraine and Hungary found a compromise³¹ and will cooperate on the execution of the law on October 19. Nevertheless, the Hungarian government escalated by blocking³² the next Ukraine-NATO commission meeting on October 27. Russian propaganda boosted the Hungarian nationalist narrative and continued to frame Ukraine as an oppressor of minorities, suggesting that Ukraine is about to lose additional territory³³ and push away its European³⁴ and NATO³⁵ partners.

- **The Russian media campaign is also likely targeting Hungarian minorities in Ukraine to inflame ethnic tensions.** The Russian media narratives warn of alleged Ukrainian repressions against ethnic Hungarians in Western Ukraine, which greatly resembles Russia’s propaganda in Ukraine’s Donbas region.³⁶

The Kremlin is likely pursuing a broader campaign aimed at driving a wedge between Ukraine and its European³⁷ neighbors. Ukrainian authorities arrested a group of saboteurs on October 2 who were attempting to destroy a Hungarian monument in Zakharpatiya. Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov stated the detained individuals were connected to the defunct pro-Russia Party of Regions in Ukraine. Avakov stated that the gang was responsible for at least eight other incidents intended to inflame tensions between Ukraine and EU in 2016-2017. Earlier in 2017, for example, protest participants claimed that Russia-backed elements paid them to instigate anti-Polish Ukrainian nationalist protests at the Polish embassy in Kyiv on July 7.³⁸

Implications

It is unlikely that Russia intends to or is able to create a Donbas-like insurgency in Zakharpatiya. This Western Ukrainian region has strong pro-Ukrainian sentiments, small minority communities, and other differentiating factors. However, sustained Russian subversion may create another destabilization problem for Kyiv to solve. Growing pre-election rhetoric from Hungarian nationalist parties about protecting Hungarians abroad has amplified the Kremlin’s continued cultivation of minorities’ self-determination and autonomy movements. The Kremlin’s information operations in turn amplify Hungarian messaging. The cumulative effect may lead to more discussions about special status for the region and, potentially, to a referendum in the longer term. Kyiv’s increased focus on its own 2019 elections and the continued war in Eastern Ukraine may prevent the Ukrainian government from allocating necessary resources to address underlying concerns in Zakharpatiya and otherwise resisting Russia’s subversion. The complexity of the situation may allow Russia to effectively conceal its hand and portray any escalation as indigenous confrontation between ethnic groups within Ukraine or Ukraine and its neighbor. Additional destabilization may stretch Kyiv’s already thin resources and damage Ukraine’s relations with its European partners. Finally, the Kremlin’s reinforcement of regional self-determination narratives and the rhetoric about protecting minorities abroad among Eastern European states helps Russia legitimize its own expansionist actions, which it claims are motivated by its desire to “protect” Russian minorities.

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⁸ “Ukraine’s law on education undercuts legal norms of any state, official says” TASS September 26, 2017 Available [http://tass\(.\)com/politics/967613](http://tass(.)com/politics/967613)

⁹ “Ukraine and Hungary will work together to implement the Law on Education” [Russian] Pravda, October 19, 2017 Available [http://www\(.\)pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2017/10/19/7158982/](http://www(.)pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2017/10/19/7158982/) ; “Paruby - Venice Commission: The discussion about the Law on Education has more political than legal grounds” [Russian] Censor.net October 31, 2017. Available https://censor.net.ua/news/461178/parubiyi_venetsianskoyi_komissii_diskussiya_vokrug_zakona_ob_obrazovanii_i_meet_bolshe_politicheskie

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