

# **"The Duleba Concept"**

## **as a Lifeline for Accelerated Development of Communities in the Slovak-Ukrainian Borderlands**

Border regions of each country have not only their vulnerable areas but also significant advantages that have a substantial impact on their socio-economic development. The history has made the modern Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands, situated in the heart of Europe, a true civilization boundary for decades between the West and the East, democracy and totalitarianism, market and planned economy, civic initiative and state dictate, and ultimately between the dominance of Christian values and aggressive atheism.

Accordingly, life in these territories has also been shaped. While the border towns and villages of the Zakarpattia region served as nearly closed doors for almost seven decades, leading from the empire to the civilized world, occasionally allowing progressive ideas to seep through and scarce goods to come in, the extreme "East of the West" was relegated to a role of a dead-end alley of civilization. Thus, it is not surprising that during the entire period of "socialist construction," only one checkpoint, Uzhhorod-Vyshne Nemecke, on the Soviet-Czechoslovak border sufficed for ensuring economic, social, cultural, educational, humanitarian, and all other ties along the border, while Slovak villages and towns along the border gradually transformed into a depressive zone.

After gaining state independence, opening up, and intensifying economic cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia, one checkpoint was no longer sufficient, leading to the opening of a new road and pedestrian crossing, Malý Bereznyj-Ubl'a, in 1996 on the Ukrainian-Slovak border. Its opening was primarily aimed at reviving economic and humanitarian relations between the two young countries. The settlements of both countries simultaneously gained an opportunity to transform from dormant interiors into international transit centers for people, capital, goods, and services.

Mayor of Ubl'a Jozef Feisák, who took office just nine months ago, shared with us the recent history and current situation of this Slovak village on the border with Ukraine. In the recent municipal elections in the fall of 2022, he defeated two competitors, including his predecessor. Mr. Jozef is a native of Ubl'a. After completing the local school, he studied at the Technical School in Košice, where he

obtained a diploma in plumbing. He proudly mentions that he was involved in the construction of a water tower and water network in the village. Despite considering the times of the former unified and "stable" communist Czechoslovakia as one of the best periods, he left as a worker to seek a better life in Germany in 1991, where he worked for several decades in construction in Cologne and knows the "price of a worker's bread."



The village of Ubl'a has 790 inhabitants, an elementary school with 80 students, a kindergarten, a post office, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformed churches, two shops, four inns, and a fast medical aid station.

Road signs and public institutions in the village are written in both Latin and Cyrillic script, as 64% of the village's population are Slovaks, 22% are Rusyns, and 10% are Ukrainians. The opening of the customs crossing somewhat slowed the pace of migration of the village's inhabitants. Young people from the village, like those from other villages in eastern Slovakia, are leaving at an alarming rate to work in Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, or in newly established businesses in Bratislava, Košice, Nitra, and other cities, where European car manufacturers set up production plants after Slovakia's accession to the EU. Local resident Marta, whom we spoke to near the Church of St. Nicholas in the village center, told us that after her husband's death, she was left alone in the village because her daughter and son had long left Ubl'a and were working in Bratislava and Germany, where they have families and only visit their hometown from time to time. And Mrs. Marta is not the only one in the village in such a situation.



After the opening of the border crossing in 1996, Ubl'a residents and inhabitants of surrounding villages began traveling to Ukrainian district centers and markets for shopping and to supermarkets in Uzhhorod. The significant price difference not only allowed them to save money in their family budget but also to earn from

reselling. Enterprising Ukrainians also started actively shopping on the Slovak side, and self-organized teams of Carpathian construction workers were working on new buildings in Slovakia even before the extensive Russian invasion.



At the end of 2018, Ukrainian "Euro-cars" flooded Ubl'a. These cars waited for days for the favorable moment of preferential customs clearance for vehicles purchased in the EU. Not everyone imported used cars for themselves; many people wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to earn. Fights began among the Ukrainians in a line created by the Slovak police in front of the village.

However, not everyone managed to bring cars into Ukraine before the new customs rules were introduced, resulting in Ubl'a becoming a dump for abandoned cars. Some of these cars still rust away near the customs checkpoint.

In the early hours of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Ubl'a also became a humanitarian center for refugees from Ukraine. The current mayor, Jozef Feisák, along with other residents, volunteered to help and housed refugees in the village's school and cultural center, where they provided food and warmth before transporting them to transit points in Michalovce and Bratislava. Milan Šebák, another volunteer at the UNICEF Refugee Assistance Center, located just across the border, said that in the early moments of the Russian aggression, he was filled with pity and sympathy for the Ukrainians who had been driven from their homes by the war and the risks of hostile occupation. In the initial weeks of the war, there was a real Armageddon – thousands of frightened, exhausted,

hungry, and freezing people, including desperate elderly, children, and women, the overwhelming majority of whom didn't know where to go or what to do next. The well-coordinated and organized work of Milan and his colleagues became a beacon of hope for refugees that life would continue. Today, in his free time, he maintains contact with volunteers in Uzhhorod, including Hanna Melehanych, the volunteer coordinator of the Uzhhorod National University.



On the Ukrainian side, thanks to the opening of the checkpoint, a 3.1 km road was built from the checkpoint to the village of Malyj Bereznyj. In 2022-2023, it underwent major repairs and currently meets European standards. The presence of the border crossing and the new road created conditions favorable for easier border crossings for residents of territorial communities who have family ties in Slovakia. A significant number of residents from communities near the checkpoint have the opportunity to find employment abroad.

However, all these positives are just the "flowers" of the mutual benefits of open borders. Ukraine's accession to the EU could become the real fruit for the advanced development of neighboring areas on both sides of the border. Alexander Duleba, advisor to the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, known expert, renowned academic economist, and analyst of the Slovak Society for Foreign Policy, is currently the initiator of comprehensive cross-border cooperation and a lobbyist in the most positive sense of the word. Duleba is a native of Svidník, a Slovak town with a Ukrainian spirit.

"The Duleba Concept" is based on a multi-level comprehensive research and convincingly demonstrates that economically and socially underdeveloped remote parts of countries, which have been separated by borders for many years and have become something of a dead end, can dynamically develop if they have access to territories located on the other side of the border. As a clear and compelling example, the scientist cites the Austrian Burgenland, which was the most depressive region in Austria during the Cold War. Everything changed when Slovakia and Hungary declared their intention to join the EU. "When Ukraine

becomes a member of the European Union and the borders between our countries become internal borders, it will significantly accelerate socio-economic changes in the cross-border region. The positive example of the most dynamic development of border regions in the Czech Republic, Austria, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia after their accession to the EU is the best illustration of such cooperation," Duleba said at an international conference held at the University of Prešov in June of this year as part of the project Safe and Inclusive Border between Slovakia and Ukraine (SIBSU). So far, I haven't heard any evidence-based and convincing counterarguments that would refute Duleba's concept, so it should be implemented as soon as possible.