



RUSLAN ZHILENKO ON CRISIS, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN UKRAINE

Cassandra Puls / PASS, LLC

The Carpathians are a mountain range linking several Central and Eastern European countries, and they were the inspiration for the network of community foundations now known as the [International Carpathian Foundation Network](#). Ruslan Zhilenko is an expert in social work and history who has been Director of the [Carpathian Foundation Ukraine](#) since 2006. Here, Mr. Zhilenko discusses civil society, cross-border collaboration, and the ongoing crisis through the lens of community-based rural development in the Carpathian region of Ukraine.

How does the International Carpathian Foundation Network facilitate cross-border cooperation and information-sharing among its constituents?

The Carpathian Foundation itself is a really good example of cross-border cooperation. The foundation was established 20 years ago with the support of the [East-West Institute](#) (EWI) in the U.S. At the same time, EWI established the so-called [Carpathian Euroregion](#), which is an association of the neighboring countries of Ukraine, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Poland.

Until 2007, the Carpathian Foundation was one organization operating in five countries. Since 2007, we still share the same name, same history, but now we operate in our own countries. Nevertheless, we are still members of the International Carpathian Foundation Network. It's a good platform to share information, experience, and even more importantly, to cooperate. We have very simple rules. When looking for partner in Poland, we go to Carpathian Foundation Poland; or in Slovakia, we go to Carpathian Foundation Slovakia. Likewise, when they are looking for partners in Ukraine, first of all, they call us. So on the one hand, we operate in our countries trying to meet the needs in our own countries. On the other hand, we are partners and we cooperate together. It's easier for us to apply for bigger grants and receive international funding.



What kind of activities is Carpathian Foundation Ukraine (CF-Ukraine) now engaged in mainly?

We run several programs. One of them is about development of the rural communities and about involvement of young people into the process of democratization—in other words, into dealing with local community problems. Our projects also contain grant-making components. Organizations working with young people have the opportunity to get funding to implement their projects in their local communities. Another project is about the training of creative young people and matching them with businesses in order to enable them to implement their creative projects for the real needs of the businesses, of the organizations. Plus we have one project connected to development of tourism in the Carpathian Euroregion, so it's cross-border. In fact, all of our projects are cross-border. At the moment we mainly cooperate with our colleagues in Slovakia and in Norway.

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What is the relevance of rural development today when so many people are moving to cities?

We are the Carpathian Foundation, so we work in the Carpathian region of Ukraine, which is mainly rural. This means that rural development is our main focus. Most of our projects and grant-making programs are about rural development.

In this regard, our region is specific for sure. In our region it’s not so typical for young people to move to the city, in comparison to the center or east of the country. In rural areas in Carpathian region, there are still many young people. Younger people may work in the cities, can be seasonal labor migrants, or they can work even abroad—but most of them always return to their communities. That's a peculiarity in our region. It's connected to the fact that this region is much more traditional compared to other regions of the country: more traditional, more religious, more patriarchal. Whatever the reason, it's quite common that people always return back home to the rural areas.

What effect has the ongoing political situation and crisis in Ukraine had on CF-Ukraine’s activities, if any?

I cannot say that the crisis directly affected our activities in terms of possibilities. Currently the main donor in Ukraine is the European Commission. So we are bound by the requirements and the priorities of the European Commission and their programs.



On the other hand, we foundation staff members actually spend almost all of our spare money to support the victims of [Maidan](#)—those people who suffered during the revolution of dignity in Ukraine—but that wasn't a program of the Foundation. It was our own decision, as private citizens, to spend our own money and savings to support the army and victims of the regime. We heavily supported our army and we helped them to buy radio stations, batteries, or uniforms, especially winter uniforms during 2014 when it was needed. So we covered the main needs of our society at that time.

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What effect has the crisis had on Ukraine's civil society in general?

In my view, all these events had huge impact on Ukrainian civil society. I would even say that Ukrainian society became stronger during all these events, especially during the revolution when local organizational structures appeared. Not those supported by foreign donors, but original ones created by Ukrainians. When the war had just started and when all of us were shocked, Ukrainian society managed to raise money for the army and to provide all possible assistance for refugees and internally displaced people. Ukrainians raised tremendous amounts of money for charitable purposes, so it showed how our people, our society is able to react in crisis situations.

On the other hand, it's visible right now that people right now don't have enough resources to continue these activities at the previous level, as it was last year or two years ago. People spent a lot of funds for donations, and they simply don't have enough funds to continue. However, I would also add that, during this period, many new organizations appeared, charitable organizations, completely new NGOs, which are very successful in fundraising, in providing direct assistance to those that are in need.

What are CF-Ukraine's main mechanisms for determining the needs of local communities? Do you find that you are able to include the voices of all members of the community?

We are trying to do this in a simple way. Our grantmaking programs are quite wide. For instance, our social transition program, it's about social services—but we never defined what kind of services we support or don't support. Rather, communities define their needs by themselves. It was up to the community to decide whether they need services for elderly, for children, for the addicted. We use the same approach for other projects. We are working mainly with NGOs, but from time to time we closely cooperate with the local authorities, like the village council or city council or regional district council. We advise our grantees—the NGOs—to cooperate with local



Foster home in the Carpathian region of Ukraine which CF-Ukraine co-financed.

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businesses, local authorities. This is one of the conditions. We provide funding but we try to persuade these organizations to cooperate with local business and local authorities.

In terms of inclusion, in most cases, yes. I would say that there was a different problem three or four years ago, when all types of authorities looked a bit suspiciously at the NGOs and at the grantmaking organizations—but the situation changed after the revolution in Ukraine. Now there is a shortage of funds for the local authorities, too. They are looking for additional funding, so now they are much more willing to cooperate with all possible collaborators inside and outside the community, with business, with the non-governmental sector.



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What is CF-Ukraine's most consistent challenge?

I would say that the main challenge is that the donors have their own programs with their priorities. We are somehow donor-driven. On the one hand we have communities with their needs; on the other hand, we have our donors with their requirements. That's our main challenge.

We are finding ways to balance between our donors and our grantees. For instance, right now we are running a cross-border cooperation program between Ukraine and Slovakia. It is about involvement of young people in decision-making at the local level. So we managed to build up this program in a way that it's not just about transferring of Slovak experience, but also local communities, young people, they have opportunity to implement real micro-projects in their own communities. So on one hand, we are up to the requirements of donor about transferal of Slovak experience. On the other hand, we provide for our grantees opportunity to implement what they really need. It's not just about learning from Slovakia, it's also about meeting the real needs of the young people of their communities.

How do you at CF-Ukraine define civil society? What are the foundation's main challenges in enhancing civil society in Ukraine?

In our view, civil society is the ability of people to organize themselves, to mobilize themselves, to define their own needs, and to determine the course of their own lives. And all of our programs are intended just to support people in this activity. The challenges are connected to a certain extent to the situation in the country as a whole. In our country, the reform of local-style governance—or the so-called “decentralization process”—started when the main power was going from the central government to the local communities. In this situation, the biggest challenge is to do everything possible to help the community use the power right. The biggest challenge is how to assist local communities to properly use the power which they received from the central government.

Our projects include components to help people use power responsibly. For instance, in the project mentioned above about transferring Slovak experience to Ukraine, the youth were first trained in how to cooperate with the local businesses and other stakeholders in the community. Only after that they were able to apply for the grants and implement projects in their communities.



What is CF-Ukraine's vision?

Our vision is that Carpathian region be a comfortable place for people to live in all respects: economic, environmental, and social coexistence of people of different nations and religions. Our region is unique because of tremendous mixture of people of different nationalities and different religions. Besides Ukrainians, we have communities of Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Romanians, Roma, Czech... We want to encourage harmonious coexistence of people, while at the same time preserving our unique culture and region and being flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of our region.

This interview was conducted and compiled by Cassondra Puls and originally published on [Vantage Points](#). The cover photo depicts two participants in the Buddy Project, in which CF-Ukraine matched disabled and able-bodied youth based on shared interests. Learn more about the Carpathian Foundation Ukraine at their [website](#).