

## **Károly Kiss: The long shadows of Gorbachev's legacy**

(Hindsight about the past decades)

In 1985, Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the CPSU, i.e. the first man of the Soviet Union. His plans for reforming the Soviet economy were ambitious but vague and little more than rhetoric (i.e. lip service). On the other hand, significant progress has been made in the field of democratization of public life: party supervision and control of the economy and the media has been abolished. He planned to reorganize the Soviet Union through the democratic and voluntary accession of the member republics. The camp of the socialist countries would not be held together by ideological terror and military presence, but by common interests. But – contrary to his intention – the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, and the processes he initiated buried the reformer under themselves. The former socialist countries freed from Soviet captivity in 1990 became allies of the West. Gorbachev was a great man, he brought about positive world-historical changes, but his benevolence was coupled with a lack of concept and lack of foundation, the consequences of which still affect us today. The renegotiation of his legacy is made topical by the worsening of the war in Ukraine.

If I had been in Gorbachev's place, I would have noticed what was happening in England already in 1979, as the regional party secretary of Stavropol. The Conservatives, with Margaret Thatcher at the helm, toppled Labor because the Labor government carried social policy too far, spent too much on the welfare state, was based on what Thatcher called a "culture of dependency", and this set back the UK's economy and international competitiveness. But if the British Labor government was already too socialist, pushed market forces too far into the background, how could the socialist planned economies have stood the test of time in international competition? ...And two years later *Kornai's The Hiány* (Economics of Shortage) appeared. I would have asked our leading economists at the time why they did not recommend its publication, why the book was only distributed in photocopies in professional circles. And they would have said that the main message of the *Economics of shortage* was that the problem with socialist planned economies (including indirectly planned ones, such as the Hungarian one) is not that they are "done" badly, that they are poorly implemented, but that they are born with birth defects, they cannot be "done well".

After that, I would have realized that the transition to a market economy was inevitable in perspective, and I would have announced "perestroika" in this sense. Not with the aim of perfecting the socialist planned economy, but with the intention of transitioning to a market economy. I would have paid attention to what happened in China, where under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, an economic transformation began after 1978 that preserved the political framework of the one-party system, central planning, but also enabled private ownership. Seeing the incredible development of the Chinese economy, it seems that this system is more economically efficient and competitive than Western market economies.

Of course, the situation was much easier for the Chinese, because in their case it was only about their own country. But Gorbachev had to consider that his actions did not only affect the Russian SSR; but also the other 14 republics of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The 15 Soviet republics were held together by the one-party system, the army and the central directive planned economy. Its Eastern Central European allies were bound to the Soviet Union by the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet troops stationed there, and ideologically by the primacy of the one-party system and the prohibition of private property. Gorbachev's basic idea was that these alliances: the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact and the CMEA should be maintained, but on a democratic and voluntary basis.

Unfortunately, it quickly became clear that when the CPSU renounced its role as economic leader in the framework of "perestroika" (economic transformation), and in the spirit of "glasnost" (media openness) party control of the press was abolished, the member republics began to go their own way, and the reorganization of the union on democratic grounds failed. Thus, on December 8, 1991, the Commonwealth of Independent States, which replaced the Soviet Union, had only Ukraine and Belarus besides the Russians – the others became independent. This was a regular process of democratization, it could not have been avoided or done better.

However, what was a big mistake on Gorbachev's part was that he did not ensure the rights of the Russian minorities living in the member republics. In exchange for the end of the CPSU's hegemony and the troop withdrawals, as well as independence, it should have been stipulated in bilateral agreements that the Russian minorities would receive territorial and cultural autonomy. However, without these guarantees, 16-17 million stateless Russians currently live in the former Soviet republics, who have been victims of gross discrimination in the Baltic republics and Ukraine. Furthermore: it should have been stipulated that the former member republics would not join NATO. However, the former Soviet Union disintegrated spontaneously and unchecked, with the hope that it would remain and be reformed in the form of a democratic union.

The guilt of this disorganized disintegration cannot be pinned entirely on Gorbachev. While he was the president of the Soviet Union, which existed only on paper, power in the Russian Federation fell into the hands of Yeltsin. And Yeltsin only cared about Russia, the introduction of market reforms as quickly as possible, and was not interested in what was happening to the Soviet Union.

In addition to the 16-17 million Russians becoming stateless, Gorbachev's other great crime is that he gave up the Brezhnev Doctrine without any compensation and without a political arrangement for the future, that is, he let the former socialist countries go. He also unconditionally agreed to the reunification of the two Germanys. (These are not considered a sin, but at least a mistake, if we consider the West – in the manner of Fukuyama – to be the best of the existing worlds.) For Gorbachev – logically –, should have released the former socialist countries from the socialist camp (eliminate their military occupation), and terminate the Warsaw Pact only on the condition if the West dissolves NATO in return. Of course, the logical counterargument is that what would have guaranteed that Russia replacing the defunct

Soviet Union would not pose a military threat to its neighbors. The West, NATO, could have tied this to the condition that Russia transforms into a democratic multi-party system, and included this in its new constitution. (It is even a weak joke that in return for his contribution to German reunification and the withdrawal of Soviet troops, Gorbachev asked the Germans to build apartments for the returning Soviet officers – since they had moved out of their apartments in the GDR, which were left there empty.)

Summarizing his omissions, Gorbachev should have demanded the following in return for the secession of the former Soviet republics, the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine and the consent to the unification of the two Germanys, as well as the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact:

- The Soviet successor republics should grant territorial and cultural autonomy to the Russian minorities.
- The Soviet successor republics should become politically neutral, not join NATO and not store nuclear weapons on their territory.
- Former socialist countries that become independent should also take the path of political neutrality and not store nuclear weapons on their territory.
- As soon as the constitutional system of the Russian Federation meets the criteria of a democratic state of law, NATO should be disbanded.

Gorbachev did for humanity a great good by freeing the former Soviet republics and socialist countries from the captivity of the communist empire, but he left behind a great chaos. The Cold War ended, the former Soviet republics (including the Russian Federation) and the liberated former socialist countries could embark on the path of independent, democratic development. But while he pulled out the pillars of the empire, the military and ideological pillars, he had no concrete idea of how to reorganize the region. Most of the countries in question joined NATO, and the rest fell into a great power vacuum. One of Gorbachev's grave sins was that he did not take care of the fate of the 16-17 million stateless Russians outside the Russian Federation. Russia, acting in their defense, is now confronting NATO, which has been strengthened with individual former Soviet republics and socialist countries. The other is that he did not count on the fact that the great power vacuum would become a maneuvering area for the American military industrial complex; which takes advantage of conflicts to incite and provoke war in order to weaken Russia.

It is the misfortune of the Russians (as well as ours) that for the young Western generations who have grown up since the transformation and are now in government positions, the concept of nation, nationality, homeland, does not mean anything. New identities have taken their place, gender and LMBTQ. For them, there is only one narrative: the Russians attacked a sovereign country. And it doesn't matter that since the meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan in Reykjavik in 1985 and then in the Minsk agreements, America and the West have repeatedly promised that NATO will not expand into the territory of the former Soviet republics...

Of course, it's easy to be smart in hindsight. The fact that I was a Sovietologist and Eastern European researcher at the time also entitles me to this. But the lesson that can be learned from history, unlike Seneca, is that no lessons can be learned from history. Also, we can't be in anyone's shoes. So it all happened that way because it had to happen that way.

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