

## **The Soviet legacy: 16-17 million stateless Russians**

"Unbreakable union of free republics forged forever by the Great Russia," read the first two lines of the Soviet anthem in literal translation. (One is reminded of the Hungarian humorist Hofi's paraphrased text about the unbreakable can and the blooming cherry – as at that time he translated the revolutionary slogans issued by our party in March every year.)<sup>1</sup> Apart from the Russian Federal Republic, the Soviet Union consisted of Ukraine and Belarus, the three Baltic republics, Moldova, there are also in the Caucasus Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, as well as the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The Bolshevik empire was held together by the ruling Communist Party, the army, and a highly centralized, planned command economy. Gorbachev, the master builder of "perestroika" (transformation), whom the people referred to with the disdainful epithet "Komsomolets" (meaning the self-conscious, loud, but devoid of any content, hand-banging), wanted to place this alliance on a voluntary basis. But events overtook him, his power weakened from the summer of 1991, and finally the Soviet Union was dissolved on December 8, 1991.

Gorbachev's historical merit is unsurpassed: he freed the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the member republics of the Union from the grip of the Soviet Union. But he was an idealist, without any sense of real politics. (It is typical, for example, that in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the GDR, he only asked that the Germans build apartments for the returning Soviet officers – in return for those left behind.) After the collapse of great empires, great chaos usually arises, and it takes decades, until the situation is settled. (See, e.g., the collapse of the German Empire or the Monarchy after the First World War.) The biggest mistake made during the downsizing of the Soviet Union was that they did not take care of the fate of the population of Russian nationality living in the former member republics: as a precondition, they should have been given territorial, but at least also cultural autonomy. – Today's Russian-Ukrainian war can be partly traced back to this.

Russia's expansion began with Ivan the Terrible's accession to the throne in 1547. He recaptured Kazan and Astrakhan on the Volga from the Tatars. Russia colonized Siberia in the 1600s. At the beginning of the 1700s, Peter the Great realized the great dream of the Russians: by partially occupying the Baltic and Finland, Russia was able to enter into maritime contact with Western Europe. And in the 1800s, tsarist Russia – in competition with China – brought the Central Asian khanates under its rule. The Transcaucasian territories came to Russia under the terms of the 1812 peace with the Turks. The most recent acquisition was Bessarabia (Moldova) at the end of World War II. The Polish and Lithuanian territories, which were annexed during modern history, now belong to Ukraine and Belarus.

As a result of tsarist colonization, a strong Russian migration to the occupied regions began. And the first five-year plan, which began in 1928 – with industrialization as its banner – and

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<sup>1</sup> Long live the unbreakable Hungarian-Soviet friendship! Long live and flourish the Hungarian-Soviet friendship!

the ones that followed, entailed a mass flow of Russian workers and engineers to the underdeveloped member republics in order to create industry there.

Within the 15 Soviet republics, there were countless autonomous republics, autonomous territories and autonomous districts, all of which were created on a language and cultural basis. And they had real language-cultural autonomy. Nationalism did not play a significant role in the former Soviet Union, the proletarian dictatorship did not favour any particular nationality; everyone was equal in the repression (except the "nomenklatura", the top layer of party functionaries)... – the proletarian dictatorship and the one-party system were permeated by internationalism. As I have already mentioned, the role of the integrating force was played by the one-party system, the army and the central, planned command economic system.

In 1989, the population of the Soviet Union was 286.7 million, that of the Russian Federal Republic was 147.4 million, and 151.2 million people spoke Russian as their mother tongue. With the separation of the former Soviet republics, approx. 16-17 million Russians went beyond the borders to foreign countries. This causes strong ethnic tension in the Baltic republics and Ukraine. In the Baltic republics, even such radical "solution" was applied that people of Russian nationality were not granted citizenship of, thereby forcing them to "emigrate" to their homeland. Before the Russian attack, 8.5 million Russians lived in Ukraine, more than 17 percent of the population, without territorial autonomy and deprived of the official use of their mother tongue. (In the former Central Asian Soviet republics, a large number of Russian minorities also live, but this does not cause ethnic tensions there, the settled Russians played a civilizing role.)

The post-Soviet situation therefore – with regard to minorities – is eerily similar to Europe after the First and Second World Wars, only now Russia is the suffering party. The situation after the First World War led to another explosion. After the Second World War, ethnic issues fell off the agenda. Germany's moral capital is so worn out that even the mention of this topic would be unacceptable on its part. Over time, the French have "successfully" assimilated their nationalities, most recently the Bretons and Occitans. In recent years, the psychosis of the Catalans has caused some problems, but that has also been resolved (Catalan President Puigdemont, who declared independence five years ago, lives in exile). Today, we have reached a situation when Western Europe refuses to acknowledge that national minorities have the right to make any kind of demands. And the new whim, the prominence of sexual identity, completely displaced national and ethnic identity (not to mention class identity) – not only in the field of political action, but also in public discourse. That is why the argument that the Ukrainians oppressed and persecuted the 8.5 million Russian minority and did not grant them their basic minority rights means nothing to the Western European public. And that's why it doesn't even occur to the European Union that this fact could be an obstacle to Ukraine joining the EU.

Many emotional factors also contributed to the deterioration of Russian-Ukrainian relations. These are irrelevant from an international legal point of view, but it is worth mentioning them in order to better understand what is happening. The "father" of Russia was the more than one

thousand and one hundred-year-old Kievan Rus. The first economic successes of the former Soviet Union, the first five-year plans, the establishment of heavy industry and machine manufacturing are primarily linked to the Donetsk basin, which is located in the territory of today's Ukraine. The price of the industrial success of the first Soviet five-year plan, however, was the economic policy that mercilessly eviscerated agriculture, resulting in the death of millions of peasants, and mainly Ukrainian peasants became the victims (Holodomor), since Ukraine had the largest proportion of agriculture. According to Ukrainian opinion, this economic policy was a deliberate genocide against Ukrainians. (As if it mattered to Stalin what nationality his victims were.) During the Second World War, after the German occupation of Ukraine, the Ukrainian nationalists under the leadership of Stepan Bandera fought on the side of the Germans against the Soviet army and actively participated in the genocide (slaughter of Jews and Poles). . The Ukrainian Insurgent Army led by Roman Suhevich also fought on the side of the Germans against the Soviets (although their role is not clear, according to Suhevich they were anti-German). In today's Ukraine, Bandera and Suhevich are elevated to the rank of national heroes.

All this does not change the fact that Russia is waging an aggressive war against Ukraine. But if Western Europe were not ruled by political amateurs and media celebrities today, if they were aware of the historical facts and antecedents, if they had respected the international obligations towards the Russians, this war would not have broken out.

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