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## DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION

The USSR — the former center of the world communism, the union on the Soviet (national) republics has been suffering at the end of the 20th century the greatest political, economic, social and cultural crisis since its formation over seventy years ago. The crisis is evident both on the internal and international levels. The policy known under the name of *perestroika* aimed at avoiding the internal crisis has gradually turned the big unitary country towards its possible disunion.

What factors might favour the disintegration of the Soviet Union? That is the main question an answer to which can explain many other Soviet historical problems and predict in a certain way the possibility of the further disintegration of the USSR.

The factors working against the present-day Soviet Union form a set of interrelated political, economic, social, national, etc. problems. This article stresses mainly the national causes of the plausible disunion. This does not mean underestimation of all the other issues. Fixing on those concerned with nationalities forms the ground to understanding the others, helping us deeper comprehend many processes of the Soviet past, *perestroika* and the current events.

In analyzing the possibilities of the disunion I shall start with the resistance to the assimilation policy in the Soviet Union, examining it mostly from the point of view why the assimilation did not succeed in general. Of course, there are numerous opposite examples of extermination of nationalities as well as assimilation facts, but bearing in mind the current task, it is more meaningful to outline some of the factors that might bring us nearer to the end of the union.

The USSR has not been so much a state of workers and peasants as "primarily a State of nations".<sup>1</sup> The nations living in the USSR have been united into the Soviet type federation based on the national-territorial principle. In the Constitution of 1936 the Soviet Union was characterized as being "a federal state, formed on the basis of the voluntary association of the Soviet Socialist Republics..."<sup>2</sup>, in 1977 it was declared that the Soviet Union was "an integral, federal, multinational state formed on the principle of socialist federalism as a result of the free self-determination of nations and the voluntary association of equal Soviet Socialist Republics." The USSR was stressed to be a union of the Soviet people drawing "all its nations and nationalities together for the purpose of jointly building communism."<sup>3</sup>

The last constitutional statements of the Fundamental Law of 1977 characterize the best the theoretical ideal of the Soviet federation involving simultaneously a federation and a unitary state. "Western constitutional

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<sup>1</sup> Carrère d'Encausse, H. Decline of an Empire: The Soviet Republics in Revolt. New York: Newsweek Books, 1979, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Information Bulletin. Embassy of the Soviet Socialist Republics, Washington, 1945, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1985, 41.

theory regards "federal systems" and "unitary systems" as polar opposites. The idea of a "unified federalism", as apparently contradictory as it is on the surface, poses yet deeper questions for understanding the Soviet system, the nature of communism and, indeed, for comparative political theory itself."<sup>4</sup>

Years ago the USSR was formed as a voluntary federation of the Soviet and autonomous republics, autonomous regions and nationality districts. In reality the country turned very quickly into a totalitarian-type unitary state with centralized power, authorities and economy, into a new empire with a ranked organization of nationalities, a kind of nationalities' stratification system where the dominant economic, political and cultural position was occupied by the Russians. The more privileged place of the Russians among the other nationalities in the USSR formed ground for the assimilation. The assimilation in the Soviet Union is called russification and some scholars define it as Sovietization in the Russian language. It is also important to mention here that for Russia "the process of state building and empire building merged to the point of becoming virtually indistinguishable"<sup>5</sup> and for the Russians the prevailing awareness has not been ethnic, national self-consciousness but state consciousness that has favoured the perception of soviet-communist-socialist values and standards as the Soviet totalitarian regime has historically been an expression of a dominant, absolute state without any civic society left.

The Soviet Union has experienced in its evolution the stages from arising totalitarianism and totalitarian movement to a completely developed totalitarian regime, dictatorship. "Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals"<sup>6</sup> that correspond best to the demand of their members' extreme loyalty to guarantee security of existence. "Such loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party."<sup>7</sup> The CPSU has been one of the key elements of the Soviet totalitarian dictatorship that has separated people into alienated individuals and has carried out the assimilation policy.

At the beginning of the formation of the USSR the various Soviet nationalities as specific associations of people represented a plausible threat to the totalitarian movement. However, nationalities could not be exterminated or dispersed overnight. The even more dangerous situation could be expected to emerge from closely communicating republics with horizontal, direct ties. The best the arising regime could do was to propagate the importance of *being different*, that is specific national attitudes, values, norms and cultural development were stressed to prevent the formation of horizontal connections between the nationalities changing them into vertically conducted relations in the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s. Right after being formed into more or less fixed totalitarian dictatorship, having gained enough power to resist and suppress any kind of opposition, the regime attacked the nationalities — physically, politically, socially, and culturally (in the 1930s). In the conflict situation of personal, national values and official communist-proletarian values the former were oppressed by the latter. Under the threat of being punished

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<sup>4</sup> Gleason, G. *Federalism and Nationalism. The Struggle for Republican Rights in the USSR*. Boulder; San Francisco; London: Westview Press, 1990, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Pipes, R. *Survival Is Not Enough. Soviet Realities and America's Future*. Simon & Schuster, 1984, 179.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego; New York; London: A Harvest/HBJ Books, 1979, 323.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 323—324.

or even exterminated many of the Soviet people changed into personalities of double standards with double values and value systems, thinking, speaking and behaving differently at home and in public.

The above-mentioned circumstances form the general framework within which the specific national features and those related to them work as factors against assimilation.

Nationalities are groups of people with common interests and orientations, they have a common territory, language, religion, history and traditions.

The territories of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union have been basically retained regardless of the deliberate change of some symbolic boarderlines in the Soviet totalitarian past to move minor territories from one republic's subordination to that of another. The unfairness of such policy has surfaced during *perestroika* causing in some cases severe unrest (Central Asia) and sometimes even civil war (Caucasus).

Language is a very specific characterizer of a nationality. It "both unifies and separates, at once includes and excludes. This is the very nature of language, as well as in the ways language is used."<sup>8</sup> Russian has been the most widely used language in the Soviet Union, forming a lingua franca. At the beginning of the establishment of the totalitarian regime numerous new ideological terms and expressions were introduced to displace the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and replace it by the Soviet secular, ideological norms and values among the Russians. Later the same function of the Russian language was brought into practice for the non-Russians alongside with its operating as a means of communication between the different nationalities. The invasion of the Russian language into the life of non-Russian minorities was accompanied by its third, rather concealed aim — assistance to the assimilation policy. "Although it is true that groups may retain their identity without a unique tongue, it is difficult to visualize complete assimilation in other areas if their native languages are maintained. In this sense language provides an important shield against assimilation."<sup>9</sup> With the formation of the union the boundaries between the Soviet national republics were broken down. Feeling strong and powerful enough the totalitarian dictatorship started the liquidation of the (differences of) nationalities by destroying the languages because "linguistic differences form a major obstacle to assimilate and merger".<sup>10</sup> For better ideological effects, for the reduction of cultural differences, the non-Russians were forced to a certain linguistic russification through which they were expected to adopt the new values. The Central Asian nations' written languages, for example, were changed from the Arabic into Latin script, and finally, following the Soviet totalitarianism's logic, the Cyrillic script was implemented, "cutting them off from their national heritage and from the contact with Muslim communities outside the USSR"<sup>11</sup> at the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s during the Stalin's multilateral experiments. The step was also undertaken to bring the non-Russians nearer to the Russians under the typical Soviet propaganda slogan of friendship between the Soviet nationalities, concealing the real totalitarian goals. Once again vertical relations instead of horizontal were advanced as the Russians formed a symbolically superior nation. By now such a language policy has resulted in a shift of the mother tongue between generations and in many Central Asian intellectuals

<sup>8</sup> Ruiz, R. Introduction to "Ethnicity and Language". Vol. VI: Ethnicity and Public Policy Series. The University of Wisconsin, 1987, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Lieberman, S. Language Diversity and Language Conflict. California: Stanford University Press, 1981, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Pipes, R. Survival Is Not Enough, 183.

speaking only Russian. In the rural areas of Central Asia the Russian language has been less influential as thanks to the absence of large Russian-speaking communities and owing to their lower level of education rural inhabitants have maintained their native language and traditions.

In later years, especially in the late 1970s and the early 1980s the reiterated importance of the Russian language took the shape of a bilingualist language policy. Bilingualism "can be an end product of linguistic contact or an intermediate stage in the transition from linguistic pluralism to unilingualism."<sup>12</sup> The bilingualist stage in the USSR was exactly meant as a transitional period to Russian unilingualism. Regardless of all the Soviet totalitarianist aspirations for one nation with one language, in many cases the official language policy was a failure or maybe *perestroika* started before the effects of the policy of bilingualism became evident. Anyhow massive bilingualism was not achieved by the mid-1980s in Caucasus, in the Baltic republics and in some other places.

The language is not one of the most important characteristic features for every nation. "For some people religion, not language serves as the common denominator."<sup>13</sup> For the Muslims the fidelity to the Islamic world has broader importance than being a member of a nationality with a specific language or belonging to a concrete state. This aspect of Islam may also be one of the reasons of apathy and passiveness towards the processes and changes during *perestroika* among the population of the Central Asian republics of the USSR, one of the world's biggest Muslim states.<sup>14</sup>

Another aspect of the analysis of religion lies in its contradictory value-substance to the communist-atheist ones regardless of the type of religion, be it Christian or Islamic, Buddhist or sectarian. Despite of all the Soviet totalitarian regime's attacks and pressure on religion the historical practice has shown the viability of the religious (moral) values and norms constituting the universal basis for human behaviour. Many originally religious values have been officially accepted in the new Soviet reality of *perestroika* in their abstract terminology of all-human values replacing the old narrow ideological class position. That marks a great defeat of the traditional Soviet-communist-socialist values in the world's first and once strongest communist country, concluding the destruction of the whole system. In the circumstances of the conflict situation between the national attitudes, values, and behaviour versus internationalist-proletarian and religious versus atheist feelings and norms, the nationalist and religious form a deeper ground of consciousness and basis for the persistence of the respective values which cannot be easily overtaken by the newer, greatly experimental ones, moreover, directly conflicting to the old and proved attitudes.

In its attack on the nationalities over the years the Soviet totalitarian regime's attempts to exterminate or assimilate the nationalities followed one big aim — to create a historically new unit — the Soviet people. The formation of the so-called Sovietman seems to have been more successful in the republics where prerequisites for assimilation were more favourable. Two non-Russian Slavic nations — the Ukrainians and Byelorussians whose languages belong to the same language group with the Russian language, and whose religion and also ethnic background are related to the Russians are examples. In case of the absence of common or close

<sup>12</sup> Liebersson, S. Language Diversity, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Carrère d'Encausse, H. Decline of an Empire, 271.

<sup>14</sup> According to the number of the Islamic population in the USSR it is the world's fifth Muslim state after Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. See: Benningsen, A., Wimbush, E. Muslims of the Soviet Empire. A Guide. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986, 1.

religious, linguistic, cultural-traditional basis or ethnic origins with the Russians, the assimilation and change of identity, i.e. sovietization seem to have been less successful.

Alongside with the national-historical characteristics of the Soviet federation working in the direction of the destruction of the existing state structure, there are also factors that can help hold the empire temporarily together like the use of force. But the historical preconditions of the formation of the USSR and its conflictual multinational existence over seven decades presuppose the disunion of this huge country.

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### NÕUKOGUDE LIIDU LAGUNEMINE

On käsitletud NSV Liidus 20. sajandi lõpul valitsevat poliitilist, majanduslikku, sotsiaalset ja kultuurilist kriisi, mis autori arvates viib lõpuks NSV Liidu lagunemisele. Rohketest kriisi põhjustest on keskendutud üksnes rahvuslikule aspektile, sest see on ka paljude teiste põhjuste alus ning võimaldab mõista käimasolevaid protsesse. Pikemalt on analüüsitud NSV Liidu keskvoimu poolt rakendatava assimileerimispoliitika vorme ja nende mõju rahvusvabariikidele.

NSV Liidu ajalugu näitab, et 1920. aastate algul väljakujunenud föderaalüsteem, mille aluseks oli vabatahtlikult ühinenud vabariikide liit, kujundati üsna kiiresti totalitaarseks, tsentraliseeritud võimu ja majandusega ning erinevat ühiskondlikku seisundit omavate rahvastega unitaarrigiiks. Juhtiv roll majanduses, poliitikas ja kultuuris langes venelastele. Nende privilegeeritud seisund teiste rahvuste hulgas saigi assimilatsiooni aluseks. Seda protsessi nimetatakse venestamiseks või ka venekeelseks sovetiseerimiseks. Venelaste ühiskondlikus teadvuses ei domineeri mitte etnilis-rahvuslik eneseteadvus, vaid riigiteadvus, mis soodustas kommunistlike väärtushinnangute ja totalitaarse režiimi omaksvõttu. Totalitaarne elukorraldus eeldab üksikindiviidide omavahelist isoleeritust ja nende koondumist massiorganisatsioonidesse, milles esmatähtsaks peetakse lojaalsust organisatsioonile. Indiviidi kohta selles ühiskonnas määrab tema parteiline positsioon, mille saavutamist rahvuslikud ja kultuurilised erinevused võivad ainult takistada.

NSV Liidu formeerumise alguses, 1920. aastatel, kujutasid rahvused kui inimeste spetsiifilised kooslused ilmselt ohtu totalitaarsele suundumusele. Seetõttu propageeris tõusev režiim rahvuslike erinevusi vältimaks rahvustevahelisi horisontaalkontakte, kogunud aga piisavalt jõudu, asuti totalitaarsest väärtussüsteemist erinevat aktiivselt ründama (1930. aastate teine pool). Löögi alla sattus kõik rahvuslik. Individuaalsete rahvuslike väärtuste ja ametlike kommunistlik-proletaarsete väärtuste vahelises konfliktis jäi peale viimane. Surve all kujunes inimesel topeltväärtussüsteem, erinev avalikus paigas ja kodus.

Lisaks territooriumile, ajaloole ja religioonile on ka keel üks olulisi rahvuse määratlejaid. Totalitarismi arengu algetapil püüti venelaste seas ja vene keele kaudu juurutada nõukogude väärtussüsteemi ja ideoloogiat. Hiljem rakendati sama meetodit vene keele vahendusel teiste rahvaste suhtes. Vene keelele anti eriline funktsioon, ta kuulutati rahvustevaheliseks suhtlemiskeeleks ning rakendati assimileerimisprotsessi teenistusse. Surudes maha rahvuskeeli ja sellega koos ka rahvuslikku identiteeti, püüti saavutada kultuuri-erinevuste kadumist ja koos vene keelega ka uue väärtussüsteemi omaksvõttu. Horisontaalsidemed rahvuste vahel asendati vertikaalsidemetega, mille puhul venelased olid kõrgem rahvus. 1970. aastate lõpus võttis assimileerimispoliitika kakskeelsuse propaganda kaju. Kõik mittevenelased pidid omandama vene keele teise emakeelena. See oli vaheaste keeleliselt mitmekesisusel ükskeelsusele. Kuigi edukas see poliitika siiski polnud, eriti Taga-Kaukaasias ja Baltikumis. Keel pole aga mitte kõigi rahvuste jaoks tähtsaim identiteedi tunnus. Kesk-Aasia muhameedlastele on selleks islam, mille väärtussüsteemi ei purustanud seegi, et enamik Kesk-Aasia intellektuaalidest on ka oma igapäevases suhtlemises läinud üle vene keelele. Perestroika käigus on uuesti esile kerkinud religioossed ja rahvuskultuurilised väärtused, mis on tunduvalt sügavamad ja juurdunumad kui pinna-pealne klassiideoloogia ja nõukogulikud kommunistlik-sotsialistlikud väärtused. See olukord viib lõpuks kogu imperiaalse süsteemi hävingule, tõendades ühtlasi uue ajaloolise üksuse — nõukogude rahva — kujunemise võimatust.

## РАСПАД СОВЕТСКОГО СОЮЗА

На исходе XX в. СССР поразил политический, экономический, социальный и культурный кризис, что, по мнению автора, в конце концов приведет к его распаду. Из многочисленных аспектов кризиса выбран лишь национальный как первопричина всех происходящих процессов. обстоятельно проанализированы насаждавшиеся центральной властью Советского Союза разные формы политики ассимиляции и их воздействие на национальные республики.

История СССР показывает, что сложившаяся в начале 1920-х годов советская федерация, как союз добровольно объединившихся республик, довольно скоро превратилась в тоталитарное, с централизованной системой административно-хозяйственного управления унитарное государство, в котором были объединены народы, находившиеся на разных ступенях общественного развития. В силу объективных и субъективных причин ведущая роль в экономике, политике и культуре отводилась русским, что неизбежно придавало политике «советизации» других народов элементы русификации. В результате интенсивного пропагандистского воздействия в массовом сознании большинства русских этнически-национальное самосознание было вытеснено великодержавными предрассудками, что способствовало утверждению коммунистических идеалов и тоталитарного режима в СССР. Организация жизни в тоталитарной системе предполагает изолированность индивидуумов друг от друга и их сосредоточение в массовых организациях. Место индивида в этом обществе определяет его партийная ступень, для достижения которой национальные и культурные различия могут только мешать.

В 1920-х годах, когда шло формирование СССР, народы как специфические сообщества людей представляли собой опасность для тоталитарного направления. Поэтому нарождавшийся режим пропагандировал различия между нациями, чтобы элиминировать горизонтальные связи между ними. Собравшись с силами, режим начал активно атаковать все, что отличалось от ценностной системы тоталитаризма (вторая половина 30-х годов). Под удар попало все национальное. В конфликте между индивидуальными, национальными ценностями и ценностями официальными, коммунистическо-пролетарскими победили последние. Под давлением этой системы у людей сформировалась двойная мораль — одна для общества, другая для дома.

Наряду с общностью территории, истории и религии язык является важным признаком национальной идентичности. На этапе зарождения тоталитарного режима посредством русского языка внедряли ценности советской системы и идеологии среди русских. Позже этим же методом действовали в отношении других народов. Русскому языку отвели особую функцию — его объявили языком межнационального общения и использовали для обслуживания процесса «советизации». Игнорируя национальные языки, а вместе с ними и национальную идентичность, пытались нивелировать различия между культурами и привить через русский язык ценности новой системы. Горизонтальные связи между нациями ( народами) заменили вертикальными, отдавая русским роль высшей нации. В конце 1970-х годов пропаганда двуязычия фактически приняла форму политики ассимиляции. Все нерусские должны были овладеть русским языком в качестве второго родного. Это была промежуточная ступень из многоязычия в одноязычие. Тем не менее эта политика особенно успешной не была, особенно в Закавказье и Прибалтике. Язык, однако, не для всех народов является важнейшим признаком национальной идентичности. Для мусульман Средней Азии — это ислам, систему ценностей которого не разрушило даже то, что большинство интеллигенции Средней Азии в своем повседневном общении перешло на русский язык. В ходе перестройки на первый план снова выдвинулись религиозные ценности и ценности национальной культуры, которые, в отличие от поверхностных ценностей коммунистическо-социалистической классовой идеологии, имеют несравненно более глубокие корни. Это еще одно доказательство невозможности образования «новой исторической общности» — советского народа, что в конечном итоге и приведет к распаду «советской империи».