

If there are no schools, there is nothing

Any society can be rebuilt, provided there is an intelligentsia and an educational network — says László Brenzovics, the president of the Subcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association, the only Hungarian MP in the Ukrainian parliament.

- **In the last 100 years the situation of the Subcarpathian Hungarians has deteriorated with each regime change. The Czechs, the Russians and the Ukrainians came and the situation kept worsening. The educational law passed on September 5, which might put an end to the Hungarian schools, is the latest cruel blow. Where does this all end?**
- Undoubtedly, there is a regression in minority rights. We suffered the biggest setback when Subcarpathia was squeezed out of Central Europe after the Soviet annexation – without returning ever since. Under the Czech rule no one attempted to deny minority rights, despite all the nationalist oppression. The Soviet rule began with a huge shock, when they dragged away Hungarian men but later, even if in a socialist way, the Hungarian educational system was restored. After the birth of the independent Ukraine our rights were initially expanded. Cultural life improved and new institutions opened such as high schools managed by churches, lyceums, as well as Hungarian higher education and theater. After the adoption of the 1996 Constitution the process stopped, and the brutal developments that characterize the current ones are exclusively recent. Last year and this year draft bills and laws were created — in disregard of the Constitution of Ukraine and international treaties — aiming to eliminate earlier obtained rights and achievements.
- **There were attempts to do so after the Orange Revolution as well.**
- Yes, but back then they did not cross constitutional boundaries. According to the constitution, laws which restrict existing rights cannot be enacted.
- **Is it still included?**
- Yes. This is why the government of Yulia Tymoshenko backtracked several times. In those times they did not want to pass openly unconstitutional laws, but today they do not care about it anymore. They can do that, there is not enough pressure on them. Neither from the inside, or the outside. In today's Ukraine an atmosphere of fear prevails while international organizations do not grasp the gravity of the issues.



“People have suffered wounds that make reconciliation impossible” (Photo: VÉGH László / “Magyar Nemzet”)

- **Which organizations are you referring to?**
- Ukraine is a member of the Council of Europe. They are signatories to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. OSCE also has a High Commissioner on National Minorities. They should be asked why they aren't motivated to act.
- **Earlier, we thought that in such cases decisions were made against Russian interests, along the lines of Ukrainian-Russian animosities, incidentally also affecting the Subcarpathian Hungarians. However, it seems that recently you were also a target of nationalist politics. How do you cope with this?**
- Somehow we have become a target. Now the main press outlets regularly cover Hungarians. They bring up our separatism, our symbols, and object that we do not speak Ukrainian.
- **Indeed, many do not speak the language.**
- That is true, but the question should be posed first to the MPs and to the members of the government, to what degree they are aware of this issue. We have been fighting for 25 years for the improvement of the quality of Ukrainian language education in our

schools, which were based on totally wrong principles. They assume that children are familiar with the language when they start school. This is why they cannot even acquire the fundamentals. There are not enough Ukrainian language teachers, there are no books, and there were no dictionaries. And, I do not think that the Ukrainian knowledge among ethnic Hungarians is the most striking problem of the Ukrainian state. However, the attacks are increasingly sharper. There is no precedent, until now, with commercial television crews coming from Kiev with the sole purpose of creating programming that depicts ethnic Hungarians negatively.

- **Are we at an all-time low?**

- So far, unlike other significant parts of the post-Soviet area, peace was Ukraine's most important value. But this is over, since the war has changed everything. The educational law is only one element of the series of measures depriving our rights. However, it is critically important to see the end game, and what will be the response, if any, of international organizations, entrusted with monitoring Ukraine's compliance to the treaties. There is a seldom seen encouraging sign: the Hungarian and the Romanian governments acting in unison and bringing up the same arguments. We can mention the Poles and the Bulgarians too. It is true however that, on the other side, the US has welcomed the law.

- **What does it mean if they implement it? Will Hungarian schools cease to exist?**

- Hungarian language schools cannot continue independently, only classes and groups may remain.

- **There was a period in Soviet times, when concurrent Russian classes were launched in purely Hungarian villages.**

- I also taught in such a class in my birthplace, but the primary language of education was Hungarian, and the parents had the possibility to choose from the two options. In the Soviet Union that right existed, in Ukraine, it will not.

- **If we tried to draw the trajectory of Ukraine's democratic development, how would the past 25 years look like?**

- There is no such trajectory, just stagnation. The evolution of a stable democratic system has failed and we have been moving just from one crisis to another. It is not development.

From this perspective, what did 2004 or 2014 mean?

- In both situations, we had big hopes. Disillusionment followed. A significant proportion of the population thought these were revolutions. They waited for a miracle, they hoped everything would change. As it turned out, there is no chance for that. For the Hungarians of Subcarpathia it is an engaging dilemma. On one hand, the population of Subcarpathia — not only Hungarians — clearly supports European integration. On the other hand, they refuse intolerant minority politics. The more outspoken Ukrainians — for instance Galicians — connect the two questions. For them, an approach to Europe involves a national revolution. They think that Ukraine

needs to be a country — even if not ethnically homogeneous — in which Ukrainians should prevail. This is what the educational law expresses as well.

- **Is this European integration possible coupled with the national revolution — or independently from it?**
- It is up to Europe to accept Ukraine. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and others have stated several times that this is not realistic. While the government of Ukraine, regardless of political affiliation, justify everything they do in the interest of European integration, we can only see rejection from the other side. Subcarpathian Hungarians understand this, and they see it as a tragic phenomenon.
- **Are the Ukrainians seriously interested in integration?**
- The fundamental aim of politics is gaining and preserving economic power, but to do that an ideology is also needed. In Ukraine, the point of departure has always been European integration, regardless of the faction in power. When Ukraine was still cohesive, political direction ran along the known cleavages, but even those who gained power with eastern votes usually ended up favoring pro-European policies.
- **Can we say that one of the causes of problems is the demise of the east-west balance?**
- That balance will never return. The loss of Crimea, and the state of war have destroyed it. People have suffered wounds that make reconciliation impossible.
- **Will this ever be resolved?**
- The conflict cannot be treated on solely domestic grounds. Seeing the Minsk process and its failings, knowing the position of the United States, and knowing the Russian interests, it is without question that only an international solution is viable.
- **Given the demise of the balance, do we have to get used to a constant nationalistic pressure on the Subcarpathian Hungarians?**
- I cannot fathom why we should accept this. We are on the same page with the government of Ukraine. European values are most critical for the Subcarpathian Hungarians — and there is no place for 20th century-style nationalism.
- **Not in theory, but we can see, that it does exist.**
- The reality has to be presented to European decision-makers, one cannot remain silent regarding these issues. And after we have communicated the essential facts to them, they also will have to let the Ukrainians know “you cannot do this and that.”
- **But they do not.**
- No, they do not, and it will lead to severe crises.

- **As for example, in the population decline of Subcarpathian Hungarians?**
- We do not have a reliable population count. In the year 2001, the last year of a complete census, we were 151,000 in Subcarpathia, and 156,000 in the entire Ukraine. Population decrease is a trend in Ukraine. In 1990, 52 million people lived in the republic, and current estimates are 37 to 40 million, including the regions of uncertain status. Emigration is a huge factor. Reasons vary, but a persistent economic decline is definitely one of them.
- **To be on topic: is the educational law the most salient problem as we consider the overall rather hopeless state of affairs in the country, or just only one of the difficult issues?**
- Any society can be rebuilt if there is an intelligentsia and an educational network. The elimination of the educational system, however, means the eradication of the community. This is especially true for minorities.
- **According to some observers, multilingual schools would eliminate the competitive disadvantage of Subcarpathian Hungarians.**
- As I see it, an unexpected national unity was created in Hungary. The government has voiced its concerns, statements have been unanimous, opposition forces have organised demonstrations, the parliament have adopted a five-party resolution, the press have denounced the events. But in the meantime, a derogatory narrative has also appeared in some of the media. The issue of the educational law is partly legal, partly pedagogical. As for the legal part, we have already touched upon legal equality as an underlying principle. The constitution must be observed! As for the pedagogical part: on the basis of our experiences and practical knowledge, we know quite well that in the case of a compact minority area Ukrainian efforts lead to a dead end. There will be only one result: Hungarian children — save for a few extraordinary and talented minds — will not be able to learn in either language.
- **Overall, what do you think the chances are for that, in a couple of years, we will talk about about some kind of improvement instead of further deterioration of the situation?**
- We are witnessing a decisive geopolitical face-off. We need a general and overarching compromise. This could come into fruition by solving the conflict in East Ukraine. It is in everybody's interest that this process should involve the issues of national minorities. Russia, the patron of the eastern regions will represent the issues of Russians, but other national minorities must also have representatives: their nation-states which belong to the European Union. It looks like there is a chance for that, as their current stance suggests.
- **Could one see that Ukraine will be once integrated to Europe?**
- I repeat myself: the question should be posed to Europe. I have always found odd that the integration process did not start after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Why was it necessary to wait out these conflicts? Why did 25 years have to pass? After the

breakup of the Soviet Union, such a vacuum was created in the region that, with more confidence, an integrating expansion to the east could have been possible.

- **Should Ukraine be expected to do something? More to the point: is it possible to negotiate exclusively with the current leadership, whose performance has been disgraceful?**
- The international community let this leadership emerge. They turned a blind eye to election fraud as well to a reckless privatisation. It could have happened differently, had Europe exercised more proactive policies towards Ukraine after the demise of the empire.
- **Is it possible for Ukraine to retreat under the wings of Russia?**
- For the whole of Ukraine, it is impossible. It is also a matter of geopolitics how communication will be renewed, how the Russia issue will be dealt with. It has always been like this: the region of Central Europe has been grinding between these two giant countries. When the relations between the two blocks are bad, we suffer, too. And, right now, not just a little. The hybrid war, the problem of demography, and the decline of the standards of living have had a catastrophic effect on us.
- **With the most pessimistic scenarios, Subcarpathia could be simply a lost cause for Hungarians.**
- Let us not forget that this is a practical border issue, with a constant fluctuation. Its speed is always increased by any conflict, but there is still something strange and inexplicable to me. If Ukraine will choose western integration, it will have to confront this reality: it is Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Poland bordering it on the west. What could be achieved by expelling us? Integration is not an empty term; it needs to be filled with content. We are dependent on each other; not only Ukrainians, but Hungarians will be here, too, since there is no other option. Within rigid borders, closed off not only from the eastern, but also from western neighbours, it will be impossible to integrate.
- **Are you then optimistic after all?**
- I cannot be otherwise. How could I not? How?