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POST-SOCIALIST NOSTALGIA IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN SOCIETY



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The article touches upon the methodological foundations and peculiarities of identifying the phenomenon of post-socialist nostalgia in contemporary Russian society. The argumentation is based, on the one hand, on the basic works on the subject of the research, and, on the other hand, on the data of sociological surveys of the population. In contrast to similar works, the article focuses on the dynamism and complexity of nostalgia as a phenomenon, while raising a fundamental question: can the concept of “nostalgia” be applied to describe sociocultural processes on the collective level? The relevance of this problem is justified by two prerequisites. The first is the theoretical one: there is a point of view that memory exists only on the individual level, so this requirement can be extended to the related concept of nostalgia. The second is the empirical one: the author reveals the susceptibility of young respondents born after the events of 1991 to yearning for the USSR collapse, albeit to a lesser extent than in older age groups. The author sees the solution to these contradictions not in the compromise use of the term “nostalgia” as a metaphor, but in a series of complementary general theoretical models. A. Assmann’s model of human memory allows us to study nostalgia as a product of complex interaction of individual (neural), social and cultural memory. The sense of belonging of the witnesses of the USSR collapse to a single “brotherhood” is placed within the framework of the principles of functioning of B. Anderson’s “imagined communities”. The theory of cultural trauma, which treats nostalgia as a symptom of post-communist nostalgia, allows us to explore the role of “carrier groups” and intellectuals who form collective representations of the past. Finally, J. Alexander’s concept of iconic consciousness makes it possible to study objects of material heritage of the Soviet era as symbolic mediators that concentrate collective memory. Referring to empirical data and examples, the author shows the advantages of each of the above approaches

to the study and interpretation of the phenomenon of post-socialist nostalgia in contemporary Russian society.

Post-socialist nostalgia, cultural memory, cultural trauma, iconic consciousness, material heritage, RF, sociological survey.

Introduction

When we think about the familiar sympathy of Russians for the Soviet past and their regret over the collapse of the USSR, which not only can be detected by the naked eye in the political, social and media discourse of contemporary Russia, but are also recorded with the tools of sociological surveys, it is difficult to doubt the urgency of the topic of post-socialist nostalgia for the country at the present time. And here, it is probably necessary to reflect at once two very popular arguments of the opponents of such research endeavors. First, someone may simply not see sufficient grounds for further study of nostalgia bearing in mind the already accumulated impressive array of scientific literature on this topic. Second, the viciousness of the post-communist nostalgia issues may seem to someone greatly exaggerated due to the fact that its nature is supposedly exclusively psychological in nature, which means that any attempts to make the “collective feeling of nostalgia” an object worthy of sociological analysis are futile¹. Both claims can hardly be called completely groundless, but it is extremely difficult to recognize them as absolute. Thus, you can really count dozens or even hundreds of names among the researchers who have paid attention to the problems of post-communist nostalgia. But, summarizing their experience, and we should note that some of their works have become canonical, we inevitably come to the conclusion that they mainly cover the chronological framework in which the “biological” memory of contemporaries, who make up an impressive part of communities, is alive.

S. Boym called post-communist nostalgia a protective mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and economic shock therapy, citing vivid negative assessments of its role in

the modernization of institutions, which were present in the essays of liberal commentators of the 1990s, some of whom attributed the stalling of market reforms to the unpreparedness of a nostalgic society to change, while others pointed to the malicious and not unsuccessful attempts of elites to exploit nostalgia as a screen to hide economic crimes (Boym, 2001). We also find important thoughts about the therapeutic function of nostalgia in D. Bartmanski, who studied the iconic resource of objects of material heritage of the Communist era (Bartmanski, 2011). V. Kobyshecha, who published a detailed commentary on D. Bartmanski’s article, paid attention to his polemic with S. Boym, regarding the “buffer” function of nostalgia and pointed out an important nuance that was not very noticeable: unlike Boym, Bartmanski speaks not about “replacement” but about a symbolic frame that is able to combine within itself many undefined fragments that emerged as a result of social change (Kobyshecha, 2011). In our study, his approach is accepted as basic, but with the caveat that the nostalgic force that was present in the post-socialist world in the 1990s has been significantly lost today due to a simple generational change. And the transformational transition to the market principles of the functioning of the economy and the democratic foundations of the formation of power structures, has been accomplished albeit painfully and distorted.

Today, the proportion of people in the Russian population who did not remember the USSR has increased, but even some of them regret about its collapse. For example, M.A. Yadova’s recent study of students’ post-socialist nostalgic sentiments revealed a pattern characteristic of this category, contrasting the USSR as a strong and prosperous state with today’s Russia with a divided population

¹ This idea of the attractiveness of the past, actualized at the level of the individual, is reflected in the ironic and widespread proverb “the grass was greener”. The Moscow poet D. Vedenyapin described it more delicately and subtly: “...not because of Brezhnev or Khrushchev, but because life was still boundless”.

and a corrupt government (Yadova, 2021). Consequently, describing the current situation in S. Boym's words "a nationwide crisis of middle age" would not even be demographically correct. Moreover, the memories of the older generation about the Soviet years, especially decades after the country's demise, are inevitably distorted, passing through the prism of subjective perception, acquired experience and accompanying reassessments of the past, the influence of political and cultural actors, and ultimately representing nothing more than representations of longstanding events (Brocki, 2020). Researchers of nostalgia in contemporary Russian socio-cultural space are not usually inclined to pose the question in methodological terms: to what extent nostalgia, based on individual memory, and regret for the past, constructed by the environment, relate and neighbor with each other. A characteristic example is the work of G.E. Zborovsky and E.A. Shirokova where the authors write that the difference between social nostalgia and individual nostalgia is that the first covers groups, classes, layers of society, whereas the second one covers individuals (Zborovsky, Shirokova, 2001). Such an approach to the analysis of the phenomenon of nostalgia is difficult to recognize as satisfactory. Meanwhile, the expert community occasionally raises important questions. In 2012, a collection of works by leading domestic researchers was published following the conference "USSR: Life after Death", where the authors agreed that the answers to the question of what form Soviet socio-cultural and everyday practices continue in Russian society are not as obvious as in the 1990s, and therefore they require new intellectual efforts (USSR..., 2012).

All of the above contributes to an increase in interest in the study of the phenomenon of post-socialist nostalgia in a time so

chronologically distant from the symbolic event. The predecessors' achievements should not be disputed, but in understanding nostalgia as a socio-cultural phenomenon in changing conditions, new steps are required and, if the need arises, the introduction of fundamental amendments to the algorithms for its description, taking into account the current contextual parameters and aimed at the future. In this we see the elements of scientific novelty of the undertaken research.

The purpose of the work is to clarify the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study of nostalgia as a socio-cultural phenomenon in modern Russian society.

Materials and methods

The information base for the study comprises the works of Russian and foreign researchers, as well as empirical data, primarily obtained within the framework of sociological surveys, including both the results of the all-Russian sociological measurements (Levada-Center*) and the results of surveys of residents of the Vologda Oblast carried out by Vologda Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences with the participation of the author². The data of Levada-Center* surveys were used to assess the prevalence of regret about the collapse of the USSR among the Russian population (respondents were asked the question "Do you regret the collapse of the USSR?") and identify age differences. Surveys of residents of the Vologda Oblast concerned respondents' opinions about the fate of objects of Soviet heritage as carriers of collective memory and, consequently, a source of nostalgia about the Soviet system. The question in the questionnaire sounded as follows: "Now disputes about the fate of the Soviet heritage are still relevant, the reconstruction of streets,

* Listed as a foreign agent.

² The surveys were conducted in the major cities of Vologda and Cherepovets and in eight districts of the oblast (Babayevsky, Velikoustyugsky, Vozhegodsky, Gryazovetsky, Kirillovsky, Nikolsky, Tarnogsky and Sheksninsky). The method of the survey is questionnaire survey at the place of residence of the respondents. The sample size was 1,500 people aged 18 and over. The sample is purposive and quota based. The representativeness of the sample is ensured by the observance of the proportions between the urban and rural populations, the proportions between the inhabitants of settlements of various types (rural communities, small and medium-sized cities), age and sex structure of the adult population of the region. Sampling error does not exceed 3%. The survey was conducted by means of a paper questionnaire.

the dismantling of monuments, the removal of preserved symbols are being discussed. How do you feel about this?”. Based on the data obtained during the survey, the loyalty index for symbols and objects of Soviet heritage is calculated. Arithmetically, the index calculation is a search for the difference between the respondents’ positive and negative assessments with further addition of the obtained value with the number 100 in order to avoid negative values.

Results and discussion

Nostalgia as a symptom of cultural trauma

P. Sztompka called one of the fundamental moments of post-communist cultural trauma the reflection on the boundary between the past, perceived by people in a rosy light, and the future, with which their anxious expectations are associated. Referring to the sociological data for the beginning of the 1990s, P. Sztompka revealed extremely low loyalty of the population to the chosen political and economic course, fear of the future and a feeling of lack of prospects. He also recorded the presence of nostalgic sentiments in society by means of information about the dynamics of personal welfare, which was assessed negatively by slightly more than half of respondents in comparison with the socialist period (Sztompka, 2001a; Sztompka, 2001b). Adequate interpretations of citizens’ low satisfaction with the dominant political agenda and rising poverty seem important here. In our view, the critical symptom of trauma at the time was not a decline in living standards, but the disagreement of respondents with their proposed image of the future, indicative of a crisis of legitimacy, which, to recall S.M. Lipsett, is the willingness to follow a chosen course despite the accompanying economic turmoil.

Agreeing with P. Sztompka that nostalgia is one of the key features of the post-socialist cultural trauma, we note the presence in the Russian society of a number of other criteria described by the Polish sociologist, which, however, are not considered here in detail due

to the initial narrowness of the subject of the article, we record the presence of these socio-cultural trends in contemporary Russia with the help of the data of a sociological survey published by experts of Levada-Center*. The piety of Russians for the USSR as a state remains at a consistently high level: in 2021, 63% of Russians regretted the collapse of the Soviet Union, whereas 28% did not feel any regret on this occasion. The general data hides important age-related nuances: if among respondents from 18 to 24 years old 24% regretted the collapse of the USSR, then for each of the following age categories this proportion increased substantially, reaching 43% for the group with the age limit of 25 to 39 years old and 69% for respondents aged 40 to 54. Finally, to the greatest extent, in 84% of cases, nostalgia was characteristic of respondents in the age group of 55 and older³.

On the one hand, there is nothing sensational in the established age differences. On the other hand, regret about the collapse of the USSR is also noted among citizens who spent only their early childhood years in the Soviet Union or were born after 1991. This cancels the categorical statement that post-socialist nostalgia is a phenomenon of an exclusively psychological nature. In other words, regret for a past in which the new bearers of nostalgia were not physically present is generated not by personal memories, but by cultural interpretations and descriptions of the era. Representations of the events of the Soviet period are shaped by parents’ stories and works of art and culture. A special and even almost exclusive role in the formation of collective representations and, accordingly, in society’s living of the trauma is played by “interest groups” (M. Weber’s term) and intellectuals (in the sense used by R. Eyerman in the context of the cultural trauma of slavery for African Americans). It is they who formulate rational or emotional statements that orient the audience toward the ideological agenda they promote. In addition, a significant proportion of the responses of the two younger

³ Nostalgia for the USSR. Levada-Center*. Yuri Levada Analytical Center. Available at: <https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/24/nostalgia-po-sssr>

* Listed as a foreign agent.

age groups (22% and 17%) are “I find it difficult to answer”, which in itself provides ample opportunity for integrated communications with this audience.

The figures who actively popularized the advantages of the Soviet system (A. Rudoy, D. Puchkov, K. Semin, E. Spitsin, S. Vasilyev, etc.) became famous in the Internet environment and especially among young audiences. With their remarkable organizational skills and discursive talents, they made a significant contribution to the formation of positive associations with the socialist past in the minds of citizens. At the same time, the media environment is filled with statements by intellectuals with opposite views and assessments, and the ideological cliché “liberals” is often applied to them. They make negative assessments of the Soviet past, and their argumentation schemes are based on facts about the crimes of the regime, Red terror, repressions, collectivization, resulting in many millions of victims, which generally fit the format of the Communist cultural trauma. Here we find an interesting and characteristic detail: the task of groups of bearers and intellectuals is not the search for historical truth, but precisely the competition for the superiority of the concept to which they are committed and the vision of the past which they believe to be correct. This leads to numerous manipulations, deliberate distortions of information about certain historical events, logical errors and inconsistencies in argumentation, followed by ignoring the revelations of the opposing side. But the most widespread situation is when intellectuals on both sides of the ideological line, relying on objective data and historical facts, demonstrate selectivity in their choice, which inevitably leads to a distortion of the overall picture. For example, the “construction of communism”, often used as proof of the power of the Soviet state, is devalued as economically inefficient and ruinous (Gaidar, 2006). The number of people repressed during the Stalinist repressions is being constantly argued and may be considered incommensurate with the number

of highly professional personnel trained for the national economy at the time⁴. Thus, it is ultimately up to the audience to decide whether to accept or dispute, agree or refute the arguments of the parties, but it is difficult to deny the fact that the way of life of the Soviet man and society showed the world and the future a fundamentally new civilizational alternative, which, however, lost in the historical confrontation and, as F. Fukuyama controversially, but not unreasonably noted, deprived liberal democracy of the last ideological alternative. It is not only and not so much about the change of one paradigm to another – post-communist trauma as a new cultural tension already includes the experience of the past, and therefore involves an internal struggle (R. Eyerman mentions the “struggle of meanings” in one of his works), which is even more fragmented by the participation and presence of various social and technological dimensions in the modern man’s life. If in the early 1990s, having witnessed the collapse of the country, the authors of the “ordinary Soviet man” concept predicted the inertia of this socio-cultural phenomenon, “the man of post-Soviet society will remain “Soviet” for a long time” (Golov et al., 1993), then today we can claim a partial, but noticeable presence of the “Soviet” in Russian society. As N.S. Smolina rightly points out, the identity of the modern Russian person, on the one hand, absorbs “traces” of the Soviet and, on the other hand, reflects the moduses of modernity, primarily “the modes of consumerism and the framework of the information society”⁵. It is interesting that P. Sztompka, analyzing the changes in Polish society in the first half of the 1990s, also noted this paradoxical interaction of cultural traumas, the “communist” and the “post-communist” ones (Sztompka, 2001a).

Can nostalgia be social and collective?

The theory of cultural trauma, while offering a broad perspective on nostalgia, is also important because it raises questions about the interplay of the individual and the collective. Individual traumas are experienced

⁴ Alexander Zinoviev in “Russian Century” (TVC) 2005. Inna Ponomarenko Channel. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqOKfQVEPOs>

⁵ Smolina N.S. (2009). The Soviet/Post-Soviet as an object of socio-philosophical analysis: problematization of collective identity. Ph.D. in Philosophy thesis abstract. Yekaterinburg.

by individuals, affecting only their personal fates, but they also tend to involve loved ones, relatives, community members, helpers, and anyone else who cares. When a tragic event disrupts the life of an entire social or ethnic community, however, it can be a collective trauma, experienced both by the individual participants and by the group. Both individual and collective trauma arise as a result of a shock, and mutually reinforce one another. R. Eyerman writes that “during economic crises or war, one’s personal loss is closely related to the losses of other people. The cumulative effect only deepens the trauma, as a result of which the sense of belonging to the community, collective as well as individual identities are undermined” (Eyerman, 2013). R. Eyerman summarizes that cultural trauma, in contrast to individual and collective trauma, refers to a more abstract and mediated notion of collective identity, including religious and national identities⁶. But the main essential feature of the concept of “cultural trauma” concerns its genesis: traumas are not born, but are created by interpreting the experience (Alexander, 2013). Thus, the collapse of the USSR is only an initial dramatic incident (according to P. Sztompka it is a “traumatic event”, according to N. Smelser it is a “structural event”), but the trauma itself as a socio-cultural process is a dynamic gap between the “traumatic situation” and its representations in collective representations formed in response to descriptions and interpretations transmitted by intellectuals of the reference group (we have already written above about the “struggle of meanings”) (Eyerman, 2016).

The process of constructing retrospective traumas sooner or later enters a phase (perhaps, in some cases, it will be primary) when the relationship between the individual and the collective ceases to matter due to the natural death and, consequently, the elimination from the realm of actual discourse of witnesses of the

original dramatic incident. Their testimonies, opinions, and evaluations as eyewitnesses, however, will remain on paper or electronic media, or embodied in the form of cultural artifacts. With regard to nostalgia, these aspects are fundamental, for the described situation suggests the use of the term “nostalgia” only as a metaphor. Perhaps this kind of usage of the word has already become common practice: in the above-mentioned Levada-Center⁷ survey, the word “nostalgia” itself was not mentioned, respondents were asked if they regretted the collapse of the USSR.

The answer to the questions of whether nostalgia can be collective and, most importantly, whether it is appropriate to use this term to describe individuals’ mental experience of events they did not witness, should be sought in the once and still ongoing discussion of a similar theoretical problem, but in the more general theoretical framework of the concept of “collective memory”. S. Sontag, for example, took an unambiguous position: memory is individual and unreproducible by definition whereas “collective memory” is nothing more than an accepted convention, a frame for interpretation of signals from the past set forth by the political and cultural environment. Sontag’s notion of “collective memory” is no less absurd than “collective guilt” (a list that could easily be extended to include “collective representations”, “collective intelligence”, “collective unconscious”, etc.) (Sontag, 2003).

A. Assmann, emphasizing S. Sontag’s rationality and other critics’ arguments about possible existence of any memory other than individual memory, nevertheless suggests to look at the discussed problem in a complex way, basing on the multilevel model of memory as a phenomenon (Assmann, 2014). According to A. Assmann, a matrix reflecting differences between neuronal, social and

⁶ We also find the following R. Eyerman’s reasoning on this subject: “Unlike psychological or physical trauma, where there is a wound and an experience of intense emotional suffering of the individual, cultural trauma means a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a rupture in the fabric of society, which affects a group of people who have reached a certain degree of cohesion. In this sense, it is not necessary that all members of the community feel the trauma or that any of them directly experience it. But there must be some event that becomes a meaningful “cause” and its traumatic meaning must be validated and perceived; this process takes time and requires mediation and representation” (Eyerman, 2013).

⁷ Listed as a foreign agent.

cultural types of memory on the basis of triad of essential criteria: “medium”, “environment” and “support” allows to describe the complex structure of human memory. Importantly, there are no clear boundaries between the three designated levels. The process of mutual exchange between layers of neuronal and social memory is evident even at the intuitive level; in fact, social memory is coordinated memory of individuals, as M. Halbwachs wrote (Halbwachs, 2007), whereas understanding of transition from social to collective memory is difficult because of accompanying separation of memory and experience (it is based on “...a resource of experience and knowledge that is separated from living carriers and transferred to material information carriers”).

To describe post-socialist nostalgia in the mode of transition from biological memory to social memory, it seems appropriate to refer to the concept of “imagined communities” by B. Anderson, in the broadest sense and somewhat abstracting from the emphasis made by this British ethnographer and sociologist on the emergence of national communities and nationalism (Anderson, 2016). We emphasize that such a shift in focus, despite the author’s prediction that by the beginning of the millennium nothing but republics will remain of the USSR, is not fundamental, because, as Anderson himself wrote, almost any community of the modern world is “imaginary”, that is, its members may not face each other throughout their lives, but have an unshakable idea of their parallel existence and functioning in a common spatial and temporal context. Thus, representatives of one or several generations of living witnesses of the epoch assume in their imagination the existence of a community of like-minded individuals with similar experiences, floating simultaneously with them in the stream of homogeneous, empty time (this term is borrowed by B. Anderson from W. Benjamin). However, if in the famous example of the author himself the disappearance from the front pages of the newspaper of the news about the famine in Mali does not cancel the readers’ idea of his further independent and simultaneous existence, for the generations of people who

survived the collapse of the “last empire”, the inclusion in the new “imagined community” begins to be actualized through the feeling of being involved in something important for them, even if abstract, not delimited by administrative borders anymore. Quite symptomatic here is the frequent use of the modus operandi of the first plural in the process of actualizing the experience of the imagined community (“we”, “people”, “our time”, etc.). As for collective memory, its supports are not symbolic mediators as in the case of individual and social memory, but the brain of the individual. Mediators are externalized and objectified bearers of “memories” that record and represent the experience of previous generations and provide the memory with a long-term perspective that goes far beyond the chronological framework of the life of an individual or even a generation. As a result, the self-identification of the individual occurs through the acquisition of personal experience and the experience of their contemporaries, as well as the assimilation, through a critical, but limited to the interpretive scripts available to them, of the cultural baggage embodied in the objects of tangible and intangible heritage of ancestors.

Tangible heritage as a carrier of cultural memory and a source of nostalgia

In Frantsiya – pamyat’ [France – memory], which has become a truly landmark in the problems of cultural memory, P. Nora noted: “Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders—these are the boundary stones of an-other age, illusions of eternity. It is the nostalgic dimension of these devotional institutions that makes them seem beleaguered and cold...” (Nora, 1999). In our opinion, two categories are clearly distinguished among these symbolic carriers of memory: the first are objects of the material world, the second are ritual practices (such as holidays and anniversaries). The latter, unlike monuments, steles, etc., appeal to action and the active perception of meanings. Material objects as such are indeed basic carriers of cultural memory, but without an appropriate interpretation of their role, they can become

(and do become) little more than familiar elements of human life or the urban landscape. If collective memories of the Soviet period of national history are materialized in monuments, monuments, steles, etc., then the victory in the Great Patriotic War, for example, is also animated by regular ritual actions related to the celebration of its anniversary (we note that May 9 is the only memorable date remaining from the Soviet era in the Russian calendar).

Material objects are traditionally ascribed two powers of influence on collective identity: formative and adaptive, but the boundaries between them are discontinuous, and it would be most accurate to recognize the adaptive function as a particular example of formative. The theoretical basis for the discussion of the constructive role of material objects for the sphere of ideas is provided by the works of E. Durkheim (Durkheim, 2018) and Z. Freud, as well as the iconic consciousness conceptualized by J. Alexander (Alexander, 2008). Their development in relation to the topic of nostalgia we find in M. Chase and K. Shaw, who considered the presence of material objects in an individual's environment a necessary condition for the emergence of nostalgic feelings (Chase, Shaw, 1989), and especially in D. Bartmanski. Relying on the idea of iconic consciousness, he emphasizes the importance of the therapeutic function of the material attributes of the past, which contributes to overcoming the obstacles on the difficult path to a new political and social reality. The main evidence in favor of the adaptive role of the objects of material heritage of the past the author puts forward the acute reaction of the society to the attempts to dismantle, remove these witnesses of the era from the life world of the contemporaries (Bartmanski, 2011).

How relevant are these conclusions today? The policy of decommunization, which has been widespread in the former socialist countries in recent years and is accompanied by the demolition

of monuments to the Soviet era, provides rich material for research on the recurrence of post-Socialist nostalgia. The destruction of the monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, which has already been desecrated several times⁷, or the monument to the Liberators of Latvia from the Nazi invaders in Riga⁸, and the so-called "Leninfall" in Ukrainian cities are the acts of ideological scale, although they may be masked by architectural and aesthetic adjustments of the urban landscape (for example, getting rid of objects with no artistic value) (Krinko, Khlynina, 2015). It is no coincidence that these actions provoked, albeit modest, protests from citizens, who saw an encroachment on the shared past in them, the representations of which are woven into the fabric of group identity.

In Russia, calls for the dismantling of Soviet monuments are heard with moderate regularity, except for those erected to commemorate the feat of the Soviet soldier in the fight against fascism, which is still regarded as sacred. There are examples of acts of spontaneous vandalism against monuments dedicated to the Great Patriotic War, but they provoke an unequivocal and acutely negative public reaction. For these reasons, public proposals for mass dismantling concern mostly Lenin monuments⁹. In terms of the theory of cultural trauma, such statements by individuals with wide media exposure should be interpreted as "statements" that can provoke a response from the public, including by awakening feelings of nostalgia.

In connection with the above it is interesting to analyze the opinions of the respondents on this subject and their vision of the future of socialist material inheritance. In the corresponding question of the questionnaire we used, there is not a statement itself, but a certain reference to the point of view present in the media discourse. *Figure* below shows the indices of loyalty to the objects and symbols of the Soviet period, calculated on the basis of the sociological survey of the Vologda Oblast

⁷ Monument to the Soviet Army will be removed from the center of Sofia. Kommersant. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5863704>

⁸ Riga authorities have banned a protest at the Liberators Monument. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1383283/2022-08-22/vlasti-rigi-zapretili-aktciiu-protesta-u-pamiatnika-osvoboditeliam>

⁹ A historian advocated the demolition of Lenin monuments across the country. Lenta.ru. Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/12/08/pamyatnik>

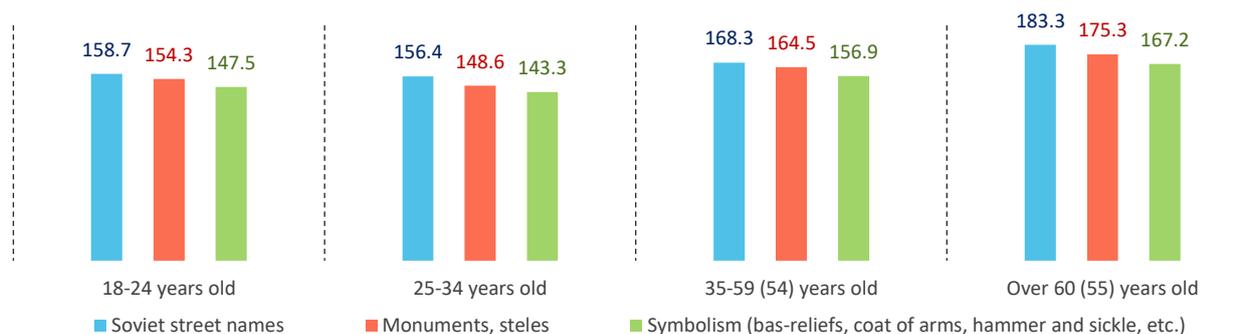


Fig. Index of loyalty to symbols and objects of Soviet heritage (in the context of age groups)

Source: data of the sociological survey of the Vologda Oblast residents “Socio-cultural portrait of the region” (VoIRC RAS, 2021, September, N = 1500).

Table. Opinion of the Vologda Oblast residents on the fate of the tangible heritage and symbols of the USSR

Answer option	Age group				
	overall in all age groups	18...24 years old	25...34 years old	35...59 (54) years old	over 60 (55)
Renaming of Soviet street names					
They need to be preserved. They are part of our history	76.1	64.7	63.3	74.3	86.7
They need to be removed. They prevent us from developing, from moving forward	5.3	6.0	6.9	6.0	3.4
I find it difficult to answer	18.7	29.3	29.8	19.7	9.9
Dismantling of monuments, steles					
They need to be preserved. They are part of our history	71.7	62.1	58.0	71.0	81.0
They need to be removed. They prevent us from developing, from moving forward	6.8	7.8	9.4	6.5	5.7
I find it difficult to answer	21.5	30.2	32.7	22.5	13.3
Removal of symbols (bas-reliefs, coat of arms, sickle and hammer, etc.)					
They need to be preserved. They are part of our history	66.8	57.8	54.3	66.3	75.2
They need to be removed. They prevent us from developing, from moving forward	9.3	10.3	11.0	9.4	8.0
I find it difficult to answer	23.9	31.9	34.7	24.3	16.8

Source: data of the sociological survey of the Vologda Oblast residents “Socio-cultural portrait of the region” (VoIRC RAS, 2021, September, N = 1,500).

population¹⁰. In general, the respondents have a constructive attitude toward the issue of Soviet heritage. Despite age differences, the index of nostalgia significantly exceeds the threshold of 100 for all categorical units. The highest values of the index are for Soviet street names, and the lowest – for Soviet symbols, although the difference cannot be regarded as fundamental.

The loyalty index is important both for the full interpreting of the data and for an adequate choice of the way and direction of political actions, but because of the way of its calculation

it does not take into account the contribution to the distribution of answers of those who find it difficult to choose a variant of two polar judgments. Let us compensate for this omission by paying attention to the distribution of the proportion of respondents’ answers between the proposed options. The contribution of those who found it difficult to choose an answer in the final summary of the survey results reaches the highest values in the groups of young respondents and, what is important, it exceeds their negative assessments by several times (*Table*).

¹⁰ The wording of the question: “Now disputes about the fate of the Soviet heritage are still relevant, the renaming of streets, the dismantling of monuments, the removal of preserved symbols are being discussed. How do you feel about this? The answers indicated in the table were offered.

This can be interpreted as a low level of interest in such aspects of life and the political situation in the country in general, which, probably, with regard to young people can be considered understandable if not justified, and as a consequence of a low level of humanitarian education. Perhaps it would be appropriate to offer a positive version of interpretation as well, where the choice to preserve heritage can be explained by the order of the educational system operating in the country, free of ideological clichés. In some cases, the diagnostic power of a sociological survey is diminished, since a vote in favor of material heritage may indicate not loyalty and nostalgia, but politically and ideologically neutral support for the perpetuation of history with a corresponding explanation of its contradictions and dramatic nature.

Ultimately, it is of real academic and practical interest to anticipate the political consequences of nostalgic tendencies that have emerged or are about to emerge in society. From this purely utilitarian perspective, the task of identifying and substantiating a set of essential features of nostalgia as a theoretical concept recedes into the background, ceding primacy to interpretations of the fact that a substantial part of the population still feels genuine regret for the Soviet system that has passed into history. The presence, albeit not as wide, of young people in this sample indicates that nostalgia is reaching the level of collective perceptions and collective memory, and that the experience of the socialist project is being incorporated into the structure of the community's identity.

We will only mention one more question as a problematic one. If post-socialist nostalgia is present in the public consciousness, why is it not converted into political and civic activity? While we understand that the discussion of this complex topic goes far beyond the scope of this study, we will outline only the main, most convincing vectors of its resolution. In our opinion, the clue lies in the very form of political system in contemporary Russia, which is successfully and reliably described by the parameters of the model called by the American

political scientist G. O'Donnell delegative democracy (O'Donnell, 1991). Participation in the political life of the country is limited to electoral activity for most citizens. Elections give the leader not only the reins of power, but also *carte blanche*, trust, and the ability to act as he or she sees fit. This is another characteristic sign of the deep-rooted stereotypes and values of the Soviet period in the mass consciousness.

Conclusion

Regret about the collapse of the USSR, which is still registered in public attitudes today, more than 30 years later, can be found in all age groups. And if the role of the age factor in the strength of nostalgia hardly requires additional and lengthy comments (older age groups are more exposed to it), the presence of nostalgic sentiments in the generation of compatriots born after the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe”, at the very least, it makes researchers pay close attention and raise the question of the validity of applying the term “nostalgia” not to the experiences of individuals, but to the analysis of collective perceptions of the past that have developed in society. Indeed, can an individual feel nostalgia for the past if their perceptions are not shaped by personal experience, but by the knowledge and meanings assimilated through social and cultural sources?

Post-socialist nostalgia has no exclusive theoretical and methodological basis that could orient a researcher exclusively to this socio-cultural phenomenon. At the same time, such a need does not arise, as nostalgia is successfully described in terms of a number of sociological concepts and theories, the combined or selective use of which allows us to successfully analyze the state and dynamics of nostalgic attitudes present in society.

The article shows that the problem of delineating the boundaries of the concept of post-socialist nostalgia is resolved in the same way as the interpretation of the more general “collective memory” term. Since nostalgia relies on human memory, it needs to be researched in the same way. In this connection, the fundamental question of the

breadth and legitimacy of applying the term “nostalgia” to dynamic social contexts can be expanded if we take into account the opinion that the phenomenon of collective memory is not excluded from scientific discourse. However, this contradiction is not fundamental if we approach the study of modern post-socialist nostalgia as a phenomenon constructed by complex interactions of three levels of human memory – neural, social and cultural. Nostalgia is a complex phenomenon that can be formed both through individual experience and in response to external signals, capturing new generations of people who, for example, did not have to witness the Brezhnev stagnation and the events of the August Putsch. These nuances are most accurately and fully covered by the methodological framework of the theory of cultural trauma, which allows us to interpret nostalgia as a symptom of socio-cultural changes in collective identity caused by the response to the USSR collapse. From this perspective, even the participation of individual experience in the formation of nostalgia is mediated by the cultural factor, the role of interest groups and intellectuals involved in the construction of a desired image of the past. Taking into account that Russian society is represented by groups of bearers of communist cultural trauma and intellectuals (political parties, social movements, journalistic publications, Internet speakers, etc.) opposite in ideological vector, but comparable in strength, who also participate in the formation of meanings, we can conclude that post-communist nostalgia exists in the mosaic cultural space in which different ideas collide and compete with each other. The conglomerate of ideas, competing meanings, and cultural contexts will remain for the foreseeable future.

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Under these conditions, the tangible heritage of the Soviet era, the objects of which are present in the life of Russian citizens, is an important tool in the ideological struggle. On the basis of the data of sociological survey we analyzed the loyalty of the residents of one of constituent entities of the Russian Federation, the Vologda Oblast, to the material objects of the socialist system as an indirect criterion of the presence of post-socialist nostalgia in the society. The analysis is based on the concept of iconic consciousness, according to which monuments, steles, street names are involved in the formation of collective representations about the past, so the physical or perceived encroachment on their integrity and their place in modern cultural landscapes can be perceived as a threat to identity.

The results of the study allowed us to draw a number of conclusions. There is a sacramental but insignificant age differentiation of respondents in assessing the importance of symbols of the Soviet era for the life and future of their contemporaries: the older age groups demonstrate greater conviction in the preservation of material symbolic heritage of the Soviet period of national history than the younger ones. At the same time, the presence of a significant proportion of those who cannot define the importance of preservation of the Soviet heritage in the sample of young respondents is highly symptomatic. It indicates both a decrease in the interest of this age group in the Soviet past and, consequently, a weak (if we exclude the possibility of deliberate neglect) activity of the authorities and carrier groups to actualize the cultural memory depicted in the material artifacts of the Soviet era, and the still preserved levers of influence on this audience, the possibility of orienting it toward either of the opposing sides.

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