

**THE INTERNET AS A SPACE OF DIFFERENT NOSTALGIC VISIONS OF THE
USSR BY THE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING INTERNAUTS**

TATSIANA AMOSAVA

Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology degree

School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

© Tatsiana Amosava, Ottawa, Canada, 2022

Unless otherwise indicated, this thesis is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

Abstract

Nostalgia for the Soviet past has been relevant for more than three decades since the demise of the USSR in 1991. The first scholars who studied this phenomenon believed that it related to backward Soviet mentality typical of the old generations. However, with the passage of time it has become clear that young people also not only express interest in the Soviet legacy, but many of them clearly state that they have nostalgia for the USSR. Here, we encounter an intriguing question: can we contend that nostalgia may be provoked by the live experience only, or it can be a longing for the unexperienced past?

Nowadays, there are many online nostalgic Russian-speaking communities that provide rich material for studying post-Soviet nostalgia. But Russian language should not be confused with “Russianness”. Moreover, as we go deeper into this topic, we understand that those people who are nostalgic for the USSR, experience longing for different aspects of the Soviet life, depending on their ethnic belonging. This study addresses the difference between Russians who long for the grandeur of the Soviet Union which was the most powerful and effective embodiment of the Russian empire, and the representatives of other nationalities who have another perspective on their Soviet past.

This thesis deals a lot with the issue of values, because, as it is shown in the research, longing for socialism is not a matter of age, but rather a matter of values. The most essential point which is recalled by many nostalgic persons is aspiration for the future. Now Russia and other post-Soviet countries do not have a clear plan for the future, while the USSR provided its population with a goal for future development. On the other hand, many nostalgic subjects admit, that a unique spirituality that was embedded in Soviet life is lost. It is another paradox, because the Soviet state was atheist, and now in Russia and other former Soviet republics, religion plays a significant role, however, the decrease of morals in comparison to Soviet times is apparent. Therefore, this thesis discusses compatibility of Communist (socialist) values and religion.

Many nostalgic subjects feel that the USSR was a bastion of science and technological advancement in comparison to the backward obscurantist Russia of today. They mourn the downfall of the USSR as a failed project of modernity. This is another important topic that is addressed in the thesis.

This study is based on online ethnographies of a few nostalgic communities on three Russian-speaking internet platforms: VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and Facebook. Initially, the focus of the study was on a group level of analysis, but the most valuable portion of this project turned out to be interviews conducted with individual participants of the studied communities. The research participants were from the following countries: Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russian and Ukraine.

The task of this research was to understand the nature of their nostalgia and to reveal their visions of the to-be-restored USSR. Depending on their worldviews (socialist/ non-socialist, nationalist/internationalist) the research participants provided very different and instructive pictures of this new potential unity which the researcher approached from the perspective of Benedict Anderson’s theory on imagined communities.

Table of Contents

THE INTERNET AS A SPACE OF DIFFERENT NOSTALGIC VISIONS OF THE USSR BY THE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING INTERNAUTS	i
Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Figures and Tables	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	xiii
1. Personal Statement of Interest in the Topic	xiii
2. Definition of Nostalgia, and Specifically, Nostalgia for the USSR/Soviet Past.....	xviii
3. Imagined Communities: Bound by the Novel, by the Cinema, and by the Internet	xxi
4. What “Russian Internet” is and Why My ‘Zone of Research’ Is Broader than Russia	xxiv
5. What I Intend to Find Out: My Research Question and the Set of Problems Addressed ...	xxv
6. Methodology	xxvii
Part I. Constructing the Problem.....	1
Chapter 1. Literature Review	1
1.1. Nostalgia	1
1.1.1. Evolution of the Concept of Nostalgia from Mental Illness to the Omnipresent Feature of Modernity.	1
1.1.2. How Nostalgia Differs from Collective Memory	6
1.1.3. Post-Soviet Nostalgia in the Former Warsaw Bloc..	11
1.1.4. Nostalgia for the USSR in Russia as the Mythology Production.	16
1.1.5. Nostalgia in the Former Soviet Republics as a Reaction to Neoliberalism with Special Attention to the Baltic Countries.....	21

1.2. Imagined Communities	28
1.3. Post-Soviet World.....	31
Chapter 2. Question and Methodology (Including “the Problem Constructed”).....	39
2.1. General Principles of Organizing My Research	40
2.2. The Characteristics of My Informants, and Why Their Region of Origin Is Important	48
2.3. Generalized Sociological Profile of My Participants.....	56
2.4. Online Ethnographies That Navigated My Research as Guides	59
2.5. Why Online Ethnography Is Challenging: a Few Emblematic Episodes of My Recruiting Informants	77
2.6. How I Worked on My Data: Three Different Sets of Data.....	81
Part 2. Overview	91
Chapter 3: The Post-Soviet World and Internet.....	91
3.1. Inequality	91
3.1.1. Gini Coefficients for Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Latvia and Lithuania in Comparison to the USA and Sweden.....	91
3.1.2. Statistics on Intentional Homicides in the Mentioned Countries.....	94
3.1.3. Statistics on Suicides in the Mentioned Countries.:.....	97
3.2. RuNet	101
3.2.1. General Characteristics of RuNet Drawing on Karina Alexanyan’s Work	101
3.2.2. Nostalgic Online Communities of the Russian Internet.	105
Part 3. Online Nostalgic Communities	113

Chapter 4: Nostalgia for Soviet Spirituality and the USSR as a Perished Project of Modernity	113
4.1. Nostalgia for the USSR as a Project of Modernity	115
4.2. Nostalgia for the USSR as a Just Society Inspired by Christianity, and Ideological Compatibility of Religion and Socialism.....	131
4.3. Online Humour about Compatibility of Religion and Socialism/Communism and Political Role of the Church.....	144
4.4 Summary of Chapter 4	149
Chapter 5. Different Platforms, Different Communities, Different Nostalgia	153
5.1. Three Online Platforms I Approached.....	153
5.2. How People Get to Nostalgic and Pro-Soviet Online Groups	157
5.3. How Socialists See the Most Valuable Achievements of the USSR.....	162
5.4. How Nostalgic Non-socialists See the Most Valuable Achievements of the USSR... ..	176
5.5 Summary of Chapter 5	191
Chapter 6. Different Circumstances, Different Nostalgia (Inequality and Nationalism That Influence Nostalgia).....	192
6.1. Inequality Contributes to Nostalgia	196
6.2. Spare Time Under Socialism, Soviet Lifestyle and Culture	204
6.3. Visions of the USSR Restoration Through the Lens of Nationalism and Internationalism	219
6.3.1. Visions of the USSR Restoration with a Focus on Nationalisms.	219

6.3.2. Socialist Visions of the USSR Restoration	227
6.3.3. Is the Chinese Model Socialist?	230
6.4 Summary of Chapter 6	234
Conclusion	237
Bibliography	248
Appendix 1. Interview Guide.....	263
Interview Guide in English:	263
Interview Guide in Russian/Опросник для интервью	265
Appendix 2. Forms and Documentation	267
Example of Consent Form (English)	267
Example of Consent Form (in Russian).....	270
Recruitment Script for Moderators of the Online Fora (English):.....	273
Recruitment Script for Moderators of the Online Fora (in Russian)	274
Recruitment Script for the Potential Interviewee:	275
Recruitment Script for the Potential Interviewee (in Russian):	276

Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 1. The Traces of the Soviet Civilization Remind Me That I Am from the Generation of the Last Soviet Children. (Siversky, the suburb of Saint-Petersburg, in 2016). Photo credit: my aunt Vera Bazueva	xv
Figure 2. An Ordinary Soviet School uniform for Girls and Boys. Photo credit: © Vyacheslav Argenberg / Вячеслав Аргенберг	41
Figure 3. My Fancy “Holiday” Soviet School Uniform with the Octobrist Badge on the Apron, Worn at School on Special Occasions	43
Figure 4. The Three Badges: “Only that one who has deserved these three badges has a right to talk about life in the USSR”	82
Figure 5. Soviet Embroidery Pattern Produced in the City of Borisov (Belarus) in 1957 (before My Intrusion into the Relic Artefact); a Perfect Illustration of How the Soviet Post-War Women Spent Their Spare Time.	86
Figure 6. “The Year 1991”, artist Gennady Zykov,	119
Figure 7. Debris of the Soviet Settlement. The inscription on the photo above (left) reads: “Do you know that there are facts proving the existence, on the territory of Russia, in the recent past, a highly developed civilization that greatly surpassed us in terms of technological development?” – “Are you talking about the USSR?”	120
Figure 8. “Buran”	120
Figure 9. “More developed civilization”. The inscription on the photo above is read: “In Russia, they increasingly find remnants of the more developed civilization”	121
Figure 10. Yuri Gagarin as an icon.....	124

Figure 11. Yuri Gagarin is talking on the phone, and “Ne-gagarin”, artist Vasya Lozhkin. Above left: Gagarin’s photos accompanied by his words: “Hello, descendants, how are you doing? Have you already landed on Mars? Are you sanctifying the space ships? Right: “Non-gagarin is attacking the firmament”, by Vasya Lozhkin	127
Figure 12. “Crucified Gagarin” by Alexandr Zhunev, Perm, April 12th, 2015	129
Figure 13. The Burned Cosmonaut, a popular meme, found in the group “Atheist” on VKontakte	130
Figure 14. Zyuganov in the Orthodox church and “Cognitive dissonance”	132
Figure 15. Zyuganov “praying for Communist movement”, and Lenin in despair (the “Lenin in Despair” meme is a variation of the “Captain Jean-Luc Picard Facepalm” meme from “Star Trek”).....	133
Figure 16. “Let’s return everything back”, a meme referencing artist Vasya Lozhkin’s original work	135
Figure 17. “We were hanging you up...” (Gennady Zyuganov and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow)	146
Figure 18. Spirituality, spiritual braces, the third/unique way for Russia	148
Figure 19. “Orthodox Devils”, artist Nikolai Kopeikin.....	149
Figure 20. Grocery basket in the USSR equal to 10 Soviet rubles.....	185

Tables

Table 1. Gini Index (World Bank estimate).....	93
Table 2. Intentional homicides (per 100 000 population).....	96
Table 3. World Bank. Suicide mortality rate (per 100,000 population) for both sexes.....	98
Table 4. Intentional self-harm, Deaths per 100,000 population (crude rates)	100

Acknowledgements

It is a great pity that not all the people to whom I am grateful for this thesis will be able to read these acknowledgements. I want to start by thanking Waren Grossman who introduced me to his brother, Professor Aaron Benavot, who informed Dr. Katerina Bodovski about me and my work. Dr. Bodovski and the now late Dr. Sonja Luehrmann made my academic journey possible.

My time at McMaster University in 2013-2014 was formative for my work as I already knew that I would pursue a project on nostalgia for the USSR. As such, I am grateful to Professor Cyril Levitt who conducted an individual course with me on nostalgia from the psychoanalytic point of view, as well as Professor Neil McLaughlin, Professor Victor Satzewich, and Professor Charlene Miall, who contributed greatly to my growth as a researcher.

At the University of Ottawa, I would like to thank Dr. José Lopez, who introduced important sociological concepts to me. He and Professor Stéphane Vibert worked with me during the first stages of my thesis. I am also grateful to Professor Vibert who kindly gave me advice on all my questions and who always generously devoted his time to me. I also want to thank Dr. Mireille McLaughlin, who not only has seen me progress in my PhD journey, but was also the lecturer in a course that I extremely appreciate (sociology of language with the focus on Francophonie). Further, I am grateful to Dr. Larisa Kurtović who spent a lot of her time and energy helping me come to terms with my work. Thanks to her, I received the Nicole Bégin-Heick Scholarship in 2018.

I also want to thank Professor Dominique Arel for the valuable directions and advice in conducting my research on three different online platforms. Many thanks to Dr. Nataliia

Stepaniuk, who read early drafts of my dissertation and allotted her personal time for suggestions and feedback.

Importantly, I am also grateful to Susan Mowers, the expert on data and statistics at the University of Ottawa library. Susan helped me with the retrieval of statistics for my thesis from reliable sources, while her colleague, Majela Guzman, was always present during this process which took a few sessions, and helped with good advice.

Undoubtedly, finances are the most important and painful issue in a student's life. I would thus like to take a moment and thank all the remarkable people who supported me financially and morally in this exciting academic journey: I am grateful to my girlfriends Pei Liu, Alena Barysevich, Albina Leonava, and Kristina Karpushkina who sent me money from very distant regions of the world. Their financial aid and moral encouragement have been invaluable to me. I am grateful to my aunt Vera Bazueva and my cousin Yulia Bazueva who supported me financially. My Belarusian friends in Ottawa, Vladislav Makarov and Alexander Malatok, were always very supportive and helpful, too.

I would like to say "thank you" to Pearline Hingston and Colin Hingston for our long-lasting friendship and for reading the early drafts of my thesis. I am very appreciative of the help of my girlfriend, Olga Varennikava, who became my guarantor for a student loan and who also read the early drafts of my thesis. I am grateful to my friends Ella Serebrennikova and Stephan Mongeon. My deepest thanks go to Katharine Shewchuk for editing the final version of my dissertation.

Looking at my completed work now, I can attest to the fact that throughout my academic career I faced the serious challenge of finding strategies to effectively analyze my data and grow

as a researcher and academic. My supervisor, Professor Claude Denis, provided me with exceptionally effective and strong strategies and it is thanks to him that the completion of this dissertation became possible.

Finally, I would like to thank all my informants who kindly shared with me their thoughts, opinions, and constructive feedback.

**The Internet as a Space of Different Nostalgic Visions of the USSR by the Russian-speaking
Internauts**

Shabby maps of the USSR,

Rubbed along the folds and edges...

We are separated by a curtain of time

From all this beauty, madam!

From all this power of the afterlife,

In comparison to which Rome is a pygmy!

From this elevated statehood,

From these giants and beasts!¹

¹ <https://www.e-reading.life/chapter.php/1031016/71/eduard-limonov-sssr-nash-drevniy-rim.html> - Eduard Limonov, collection of poetry *The USSR is Our Ancient Rome* published in 2013. Access: 2020-03-24.

Introduction

1. Personal Statement of Interest in the Topic

I strongly believe that every academic project comes from deeply entrenched parts of our subject positions. It is thus no surprise that we often see women writing about women, immigrants writing about immigrants, visible minorities exploring the destinies of visible minorities, queers studying queers, and so on. In a similar way, my identity as “a person born in the USSR” allowed me to envision the study on the intriguing subject of nostalgia for the Soviet past, which has become such a visible phenomenon during the last three decades, as indicated in the representative polls of Levada Center². Levada Center has been conducting representative polls on nostalgia for the USSR in Russia and other former Soviet republics since 1992. In fact, in Russia the peak of nostalgia fell on the year 2000 when 75% of Russians were nostalgic for the USSR, and the lowest level of nostalgia was detected in 2012 when only 49% of respondents (yet still one half of the Russian population) regretted its demise. And again in 2018 the level of nostalgia for the USSR increased to 66% against 25% who were not nostalgic. The main reasons for this nostalgia, according to Levada Center, are the ruination of the united economic system, the loss of the feeling of belonging to the great country, and the growing mistrust and exasperation in society.

Given the format of the studies conducted by Levada Center, that is, the fact that participants can choose from a predetermined range of options that show the reasons for nostalgia, I realized that some important causes for nostalgia were not listed among those options. This set of problems made me want to question how nostalgia is represented and

² <https://www.levada.ru/2018/12/19/nostalgiya-po-sssr-2/>. Access: 2020-05-13.

understood by communities and by researchers. I therefore asked: may it be that this sense of nostalgia is not related to a particular social order, but rather is a longing for a by-gone youth, or even produced intentionally by those who have commercial interests and exploit nostalgia as a stable source of profit and power? Such questions informed my academic curiosity and personal investment in this topic. Since I started fleshing out this question, I conducted a preliminary online ethnography thanks to the fact that the Internet is an immense depository of nostalgic content. Further, I began observing Russian-speaking nostalgic communities and conducted interviews with their participants.

I was born in Belarus during the late Brezhnev era (Soviet period). Having experienced the remnants of the Soviet civilization was certainly a valuable personal experience. Yet I admit that for a long time I had not felt this identification so acutely as other identity-positionings that have informed my life. For instance, the experience of being an immigrant, a Russian native speaker, or being a European were more dominant identities for me up to a point. In discussions about identity politics, it is undoubtedly very instructive to observe how far different types of solidarities, identifications, and attachments can lead someone. For example, once in Vancouver a woman approached me saying: “I know that you are from Europe, because I am from Europe, too!” (It turned out that she was from Switzerland). Thus, in the specific social, cultural, and political space of Canada, my personal circles of solidarity and identity broadened and encompassed Switzerland, and the rest of Europe. I make this point because I want to emphasize that a path toward understanding one’s identity is complex and can happen through various routes.



Figure 1. The Traces of the Soviet Civilization Remind Me That I Am from the Generation of the Last Soviet Children. (Siversky, the suburb of Saint-Petersburg, in 2016). Photo credit: my aunt Vera Bazueva

As stated above, my belonging to the extinct Soviet civilization was not my dominant identity and went unnoticed by me for a long time until I fell in love with a person who was born in 1973 and who experienced the Soviet-ness much deeper than I did, as he was a representative of “the last Soviet idealists” according to Kruglova (2017). The crucial difference between me and people like him can be critically located in the last phase of typical Soviet socialization. To contextualize this anecdote, he was a Komsomol member (Komsomol is the Union of the

Communist Youth), while I was not, having ended my Soviet ideological socialization as a “young pioneer”. Belonging to Komsomol was formal in many respects starting from the 1960s—1970s, as noticed by Yurchak (2006). Nevertheless, it was treated seriously by many. Unlike the “young pioneers” (Soviet schoolchildren aged 9 to 13), the Komsomol members (aged 14-28) were assumed to sacrifice their lives if needed (which many of them did during the Great Patriotic War from 1941-1945), along with the Communists. Many “young pioneers”, like the Belarusian teenager Marat Kazei, heroically sacrificed their lives during WWII, but it was not their obligation, while for the Komsomol members it was. That is, the burden of responsibilities was qualitatively different for the Komsomol members in comparison to the “young pioneers”. Therefore, those who were born before 1975 and joined Komsomol experienced their belonging to the Soviet civilization more vividly and saliently than those who were born later.

At this point it is important to explain why the year 1975 is liminal. In order to be a member of Komsomol, a person needed to be aged 14-28. Thus, those who were born in 1975, turned their 14th birthday in 1989, when the admission to Komsomol was already perceived with cynicism, and in many places these admissions were ceased. In identifying the year 1975 as a threshold, I rely on research of Anna Kruglova (2017) on the “perestroika teens”, or “the last Soviet idealists” born in the 1970s, who experienced three types of normalcy they had to adjust to: Soviet, post-Soviet, and post-post-Soviet (modern Russia). In this regard, Kruglova defines “Soviet idealism” as “Specific meanings of “Soviet idealism” differed from person to person, and changed over time. But in general terms, it was a desire to live not just “better” but somehow “truer” or more authentically (*nastoyashchii*) within some equally authentic collective life (although not necessarily a Soviet type of collectivity)” (Kruglova, 2017, p. 175). In her article

on the “perestroika teens”, Kruglova mentions that in Russia, those born before 1975 were not considered “young” already in 2010 and as a result they were deprived of many privileges allotted to “the young” and were “capable only of contributing to the mortality side of the Russian demographic equation” (Kruglova, 2017, p. 181).

It is possible to view 1975 as a conditional threshold because some researchers talk about another generation, the so-called “the last Soviet children” as a critical generation. For example, Abramov (2011) draws our attention to a famous nostalgic Internet resource “Encyclopedia of our childhood” which is designed specifically for those born between 1976 and 1982. Goralik (2007) identifies “the last Soviet children” as those born between 1971 and 1982; thus, in her terms, “the last Soviet idealists” and “the last Soviet children” partially overlap. However, if one considers a person born in 1973, we can assume that in 1987, they still could take their membership in Komsomol seriously, without cynicism, and they had a few years in front of them in order to try to live this “truer life”. On the contrary, those born in 1976 had no such opportunities. Importantly, the year 1982 also relates to an important stage of Soviet ideological socialization: the admission to the “young pioneers”, that is, those born in 1982 still had chances to become the “young pioneers” in 1991, before the very downfall of the USSR, and thus to capture in personal experience what it meant to belong to the Soviet civilization.

Being interested in the “last Soviet idealist” from Belarusian city of Brest, my colleague from the Belarusian State University who was born in 1973, I looked through his posts on the blogging platform LiveJournal in 2011, and I noticed that the majority of his posts were about the Soviet Union. As I told my friend, there was a generational gap between us because “this person, born in 1973, is nostalgic for the USSR, he might be too old for me...” My friend, who is younger than me, replied that she was nostalgic for the USSR, too. According to her, to be

nostalgic for the USSR is a matter of values, and not a matter of age. This metaphor helped me to formulate the topic of my research interests, when I did not even realize that nostalgia for the Soviet past was a rather “fashionable” academic domain.

Importantly, I also need to make a clarification with respect to the term “socialism” from the very beginning. The term “socialism” is one of the most frequent words in this work. I am going to use it without quotation marks because for those people scattered across the globe who are in their 40s-70s and who participate in the online nostalgic or pro-Soviet communities, their non-capitalist life experience is an authentic socialism, although from the theoretical point of view this regime falls short of its noble ideal type. In this respect I take a Weberian stance: I do not give a definition of socialism and I do not impose my vision of socialism on my research participants. Rather, for me it is important to examine how my interlocutors interpret this concept. If they are younger, they may be more prone to theorizing, but they, too, understand real socialism as something that is juxtaposed to the current capitalist, or under-capitalist society.

2. Definition of Nostalgia, and Specifically, Nostalgia for the USSR/Soviet Past

Starting in the 17th century until the 19th century, nostalgia was understood as a mental disease caused by the longing for a lost home. In 1688 Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer defended his doctoral thesis on nostalgia as a mental illness related to being away from native land. In terms of modern perception, the distance or dislocation from home could be insignificant, but it still produces nostalgia. In particular, “Hofer found nostalgia symptoms in a young man who had left Berne to study 40 miles away in Basel” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 10). Balzac also suffered from acute nostalgia while being in Milan, and complained about his possible death due to homesickness in his letter to Mme Hanska dated 23rd of May, 1838 (ibid.). It is important to note

that although those diagnosed with nostalgia died from dominant illnesses such as meningitis, tuberculosis, and gastroenteritis, the doctors still attributed those deaths to nostalgia. In relation to this, Svetlana Boym (2001) states:

It would not occur to us to demand a prescription for nostalgia. Yet in the seventeenth century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, akin to the common cold. Swiss doctors believed that opium, leeches and a journey to the Swiss Alps would take care of nostalgic symptoms. By the twenty-first century, the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition (Boym, 2001, p. XVI).

Boym therefore approaches nostalgia as “a symptom of our age, a historical emotion” whose core is “the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility” (Boym, 2001, p. XVI).

The concept of nostalgia has evolved. It is currently associated mostly with temporal, not spatial longing: that is, people now yearn for an irrevocable past, not for the traditional idea of the lost home. As such, “the meaning of the term soon shifted... from spatial displacement to the more pervasive sense of temporal discontinuity and loss endemic to modernity, “with its alienation, its much-lamented loss of tradition and community” (Hutcheon, 1998)” (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 193). Further, as Lowenthal points out, “Nostalgia is today the universal catchword for looking back” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 4). Lowenthal adds that people may be nostalgic for past thoughts rather than past things (1985, p. 8). In this regard, many attempts have been undertaken to make a typology of nostalgia. One of the most recognized—yet currently considered outdated according to Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004)—is the typology suggested by Boym (2001). According to Boym, nostalgia may be either reflective (when the nostalgic subject admits irreversibility of time), or restorative (when the nostalgic subject believes that the time can be reversed). Further, Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004), along with many other authors, argue that restorative nostalgia is irrelevant due to the fact that the element of irreversibility is crucial to the

phenomenon of nostalgia. In this sense, irreversibility constitutes the core of nostalgia. Another well-known typology of nostalgia was suggested by Davis (1979) who introduced the types of simple, reflective, and interpretive nostalgia. Simple nostalgia refers to an idealized, positive perception of the past. Reflective nostalgia presumes critical thinking, thus constituting the basis for collective memory, while interpretive nostalgia is based on the images of the past shared by the entire society and expressed in narrative form. These images, in turn, can evolve into nostalgic myth. In this aspect, it is important to clarify that not all sentiments of the past can be transformed into nostalgic myth, but rather only those which have mass popularity and significant emotional charge.

With the downfall of the Soviet bloc, post-Soviet nostalgia has become a visible phenomenon across Europe, especially in Germany (*ostalgie*), former Yugoslavia, and other post-Soviet countries (Todorova and Gille, 2010). Post-Soviet nostalgia has significant importance for the former Soviet Union due to many reasons. In Russia, it is used as a mechanism of national consolidation (Morenkova, 2017), while, for instance, in Lithuania, people express post-Soviet nostalgia as a reaction to neoliberalism (Klumbitė, 2009 & 2010). To some extent, post-Soviet nostalgia has a definite national critical and emotional investment in that each former socialist country experiences its post-Soviet destiny (and nostalgia) in a unique way. Stated otherwise, different nations mourn different pasts (Todorova and Gille, 2010). Yet this observation on nostalgia and different national pasts is broadened by the presence of the Internet, which allows us to re-establish the lost unity of the Soviet republics at least in the imagined and/or virtual mode.

3. Imagined Communities: Bound by the Novel, by the Cinema, and by the Internet

Some forms of social solidarity arguably have an imagined character when the members of these solidarity groups are dispersed in social space and do not know each other personally. Unlike the soldiers in a military regiment, or the neighbours in a small town's neighbourhood, who see each other's physical presence, the members of the generation of baby-boomers only know about each other's existence and can guess that they share the stages of socialisation, tastes, values, and memory. They imagine themselves as a unity, rather than constitute this unity in a physical space. In this regard, Benedict Anderson (2006) suggests looking at nations as imagined communities which became possible through different techniques (a novel, a newspaper) and via different technologies (printing, radio, etc.). Anderson demonstrates how novels and newspapers address a national audience which is assumed to share knowledge of the urban spaces (streets, particular buildings which are not known to outsiders), traditions, rites, or persons who became local legends³. The novelists cited by Anderson address their multiple unknown readers as friends and neighbours, thus creating a national community. A crucial role in creating nations as imagined communities thus belongs to technologies⁴. More specifically, Susan Buck-Morss (2002) argues that the USSR was imagined through the cinema. Further, according to Buck-Morss, the movies of Sergei Eisenstein helped imagine the idea of the people's masses: in his silent films *Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and *October: Ten*

³ In this respect, I recall a memorable episode from my life: I took a qualification exam in Hebrew to become a certified translator from Hebrew to English in British Columbia. The exam was extremely easy, but the texts contained the names of streets and buildings that every Israeli is assumed to identify at glance, while I did not recognise them as proper names. Although my Hebrew is fluent, due to this misrecognition of Israeli realities, I failed the exam.

Days That Shook the World (1927), he demonstrated this new historical subject as having agency in the creation of history. Due to being silent, his films were perceived as documentaries a few generations after their creation, and many Soviet people imagined storming of the Winter Palace exactly as it was shown in Eisenstein's film *October*. Thus, the collective memory of the Soviet people itself was based on such films (Buck-Morris, 2002). Also, cinematography engendered the idea of internationalism promoted in the USSR like in the film *The Seven Brave Ones* (1936) about the polar expedition where there were Russians, Ukrainians, Jews and Germans in the crew. This type of filmic works showed many nations and peoples that populated the Soviet Union and even introduced the idea of intermarriages among them like in the film of Ivan Pyriev *Pig-woman and Shepherd* (1941) that tells a story of romantic relations between a Russian girl from Vologda region and a young man from Dagestan.

Following this theoretical tradition, it is productive to look at the virtual restoration of the USSR as an imagined community which is possible through digital technologies, the Internet in particular. Anderson (2006) characterizes nations as imagined communities. Suggesting a definition of the nation, Anderson states that “it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). He explains that it is “imagined” because the members of even the smallest nation do not know each other in person, but in their minds “lives the image of communion” (ibid.). Thus, a nation is limited because it has boundaries, which are defined rather in terms of membership than in geographical terms: “The nation is imagined as *limited* [italics in the original] because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (Anderson, 2006,

p. 7). What could be understood as the boundaries of the imagined virtual USSR? Perhaps, defining these boundaries is the most challenging part of my task.

There are historical precedents that instead of having “natural boundaries” corresponding to the region of settlement, imagined communities had symbolic substitutes of them. For example, although having their historical home in Palestine, Jews were deprived of their land for 2000 years, and the Torah played the role of “the portable motherland” for them. Thus, the boundaries of an imagined community can be defined by shared values. Nowadays, the boundaries of the Jewish imagined community often include not only the Promised Land which is understood differently by different political players, but also diaspora and its complex sense of community and belonging while displaced or uprooted. As we see, the principles of membership in an imagined community play a distinctly different part from geographical boundaries and geography more broadly.

Also, it is necessary to stress that an imagined community is perceived as such by its members; that is, it is not an artificial configuration imposed on the group of people by an outsider, like a researcher, for instance. Rather, an imagined community is a form of “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 2006, p. 7) felt by the members of the community themselves. This comradeship or fraternity is understood in its own way by each community: some communities are more inclusive and some put particular restrictions on membership. For instance, in his public lecture on Inuit self-determination at the University of Ottawa, on November 4th, 2019, Natan Obed, president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and the national voice for Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic, said that perhaps he may seem “not Inuk enough” given his not knowing Inuktitut fluently; however, the Inuit community elected him as president,

demonstrating its inclusivity for people like him, while such inclusivity may not be a norm in other imagined communities.

For the participants of the Russian-speaking nostalgic groups on the Internet, which I consider as the base for the to-be-restored virtual USSR, it is very typical to claim the following: “A convincing request to those born after 1985 (the year when *perestroika* began – remark by Amosava): do not write about life in the USSR; you know nothing about it, you do not remember and do not understand anything. Tired of reading your nonsense!”⁵. These reactions thus put the anticipated fraternity and comradeship under question because some people born in the USSR may be denied the right of voice, and thus the membership in the imagined community.

4. What “Russian Internet” is and Why My ‘Zone of Research’ Is Broader than Russia

Russian internet (RuNet) is a segment of the Internet which uses the Russian language as the language of communication and its main platforms are administered in Russia (the headquarters of the most popular Russian-language platforms, such as VKontakte and LiveJournal are located in Russia). Karina Alexanyan (2013), in her dissertation, comes to the conclusion that the Russian Internet may be separated from the world web and may exist as an independent entity. Contemplating this particular case of inquiry with regards to the Russian Internet, my “zone of research” is broader than Russia. More precisely, I am looking at the Russian language as the binding force between communities which may be located somewhere outside of the predominantly Russian sphere of influence because Russian-speakers are not only Russians, and

⁵https://www.facebook.com/groups/1545122992449397/search/?query=%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%B4%D1%91%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B5%20%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%201985%20%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0&epa=SEARCH_BOX – Post in the Facebook group “Born in the USSR” dated September 25th, 2019. Access: 2020-03-23. Screenshot is available.

not all the nostalgic subjects choose specifically Russia-based online platforms or social networking services.

5. What I Intend to Find Out: My Research Question and the Set of Problems Addressed

With the shattering of the Warsaw Bloc and the Soviet Union, the circumstances of its former citizens/residents have also diverged sharply. People who “belonged” to the same country or geopolitical bloc are now spread across many countries and regimes. Their relationships to the former Soviet Union and to Russia (including among Russians) are varied and complex and as a result there is less of a literature on the many dimensions of this fragmentation seen as a whole, than through an interest in a particular country, particularly with regard to the articulation of past and present in people’s lives and identities.

As seen from the works of authors writing on nostalgia for socialism in the former Warsaw bloc (Todorova and Gille, 2010), every post-socialist country experiences its own unique form of nostalgia. Given that different historical and political contexts dictate different visions of nostalgia, I suggest that similar differences may relate to individuals because each individual has a unique destiny that may influence the perception of the past. It is therefore reasonable to find out whether an individual is nostalgic in a different way. To explain, individual forms of identification matter in the study of different visions of nostalgia. For example, it is crucial to consider if a person is/is not a Russian citizen or if the person is/is not ethnically Russian (whatever that means) either in their practices (online only, face-to-face clubs, flea markets...) or the content of their nostalgia (including how he feels about his “new” country’s official / political relation to the Soviet past and/or Russia today). The same questions may be posed at the group/communal level. Moreover, given that our field of research is specific

(the Internet) it is essential to understand how the online nature of the community impacts this set of research questions. Other issues that should be addressed here include the essence of nostalgia and the way it functions, the extent to which its content matters (as opposed to its general form and/or its practices), and what it tells us about the evolution of the post-Soviet social and political space, especially outside Russia, from the early 1990s to 2018 and beyond. Thus, considering all these questions it is productive to suggest that post-Soviet political space is rather dynamic. That is, at once we witness various types of alliances that recreate the former Soviet Union to some extent in some aspects. Further, at the same time over the past decades, the fact that Russia has acted as an aggressor against several former Soviet republics, is a parameter that also affects the perception of the Soviet past by the citizens of these republics.

The parameters explained above have led me to the following **research question**: *What are the nostalgic visions of the USSR found online, depending on the post-Soviet social, economic and political circumstances of nostalgic subjects? Given that every former republic of the Soviet Union experienced socialism in a particular way (Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004, Klumbité 2009, 2010), is it possible to trace any locally significant reference points of nostalgia for the studied countries (Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine) that would reflect “locally specific” character of the post-Soviet nostalgia in these countries today? And secondly, is it possible to identify some historical, political, and cultural events, or peculiar local features that could contribute to this distinctiveness of post-Soviet nostalgia? What are those reference points (things that evoke post-Soviet nostalgia most of all)? Is it possible to find proof that post-Soviet nostalgia is a reaction to globalization in the sense that the countries see more value in their unique paths and their pasts while facing “Americanization” (Lee, 2013)? Are there grounds to talk about the rehabilitation of the “restorative nostalgia” that Boym (2001)*

talked about, given that there are so many who want to restore the USSR and so many versions of what a restored and / or renewed USSR would look like? Is it theoretically-relevant to describe the online communion of the post-Soviet nostalgic subjects which participate in multiple post-Soviet nostalgic groups in terms of an imagined community (Anderson, 2006)?

6. Methodology

In order to answer the questions posed above, I have conducted a long-term observation of the Russian-speaking nostalgic communities on three different Internet platforms: Facebook, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and I have written an ethnographic diary from September 2017 to April 2018 which documented my observations. Also, twenty-two participants of these fora agreed to give me semi-structured interviews on post-Soviet nostalgia, the majority conducted via Skype, and some via video-chat (Facebook), or in chat (this mode was the preferable one for the internavts on VKontakte). Finally, I analyzed nostalgic poetry and memes found online.

Part I. Constructing the Problem

Chapter 1. Literature Review

1.1. *Nostalgia*

1.1.1. Evolution of the Concept of Nostalgia from Mental Illness to the Omnipresent Feature of Modernity. The sociology of nostalgia is closely associated with the sociology of memory (Olick, 2007). Yet it has such a developed inventory that deserves to be discussed separately from the latter. Nostalgia is a noticeable phenomenon of modernity which has changed its meaning since the 17th century when it was introduced by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer to describe the spiritual malaise of the Swiss mercenaries serving away from home and those individuals who undertook the extended travel which could mean 50 km or less from the place of birth (Boyer, 2010). Such a vision of nostalgia (homesickness) is presented in a famous movie of Andrey Tarkovsky under the title *Nostalghia* (1983), and was further discussed by him in his memoirs (1987). As the pre-date to the fall of the USSR, the film raises interesting questions on Russia's general rapport with nostalgia. However, in the 20th century the temporal aspect of nostalgia became more significant than its spatial or geographically-specific contexts. At a time when travel from one country to another took months, or the return home was impossible like in the case of Russian emigrants who left Soviet Russia after the October Revolution, homesickness was attributed to a sense of geographical distance. On the contrary, nowadays no distance is insurmountable, and due to the novel means of communication and connectedness, everybody can reach friends and relatives at any distance. In this sense, nostalgia began to be associated with the irreversibility of time. Accordingly, Lowenthal (1985) defines nostalgia as a play of mind, in which a person does not desire the restoration of the past, but

rather, entertains themselves with the memories of the past: “Many seem less concerned to find a past than to yearn for it, eager not so much to relive a fancied long-ago as to collect its relics and celebrate its virtues” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 7). Thus, people enjoy “longing for longing”. Further, Lowenthal argues that nowadays nostalgia is even planned (people predict that some precious moments will evoke in them nostalgia in the future). Very often people feel nostalgia not for past things, but for past thoughts. Nostalgia helps to restore self-esteem due to the fact that it reminds people that, although they may be sad now, once they were happy and worthwhile: “‘nostalgia is the memory with the pain removed’. The pain is today” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 8).

Importantly, there is a developed approach of nostalgia in psychoanalysis that takes its roots in the work of Sigmund Freud *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). In this work, Freud deals with a loss and explains that mourning and melancholia are similar reactions to loss. However, mourning is healthy because it presumes reconciliation with the loss, while melancholia causes self-destruction of the personality. In this sense, nostalgia is also an experience of loss, and overcoming this loss is possible through different strategies. To analyze the psychological complexities of nostalgia, psychoanalysts, following the Freudian tradition, distinguish between “normal nostalgia” (reconciliation with the past through healthy mourning) and “defective” nostalgia (no reconciliation) (Pourtova, 2013). Although not a psychoanalyst, Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) approaches this phenomenon in a similar manner: there is a “restorative” nostalgia (“defective”/ “unhealthy” when a person cannot admit the irreversibility of the past) and “reflective” (“healthy”) nostalgia. Following this theoretical approach, Tsivinsky (2014), for example, studies nostalgia for the USSR in adolescents from the psychoanalytic perspective. According to Davis (1979), nostalgia is a reaction to transitioning from one group of belonging to another, and therefore men who until recently were more likely

to change their environment during their lifespan (service in the army, college, different jobs in different geographical locations) were in fact more prone to nostalgia than women whose environments were more or less stable during their lives. Thus, according to Davis (1979), the reference to geography has not quite disappeared in our understanding of nostalgia. In this sense, ex-Soviets who have lost (materially or imaginatively) access to some part of the ex-SU would be in a similar situation to the men who changed the geographic locations of their work. As for the absence of nostalgia in women, Gille explains this phenomenon by referencing Hutcheon's (1998) axiom, which states that "women are rarely burdened with nostalgia". However, today we find nostalgia in women's accounts of the past (Gille, 2010, p. 284). Further, the transition from one life stage to another (from adolescence to young adulthood, from young adulthood to middle age, from middle age to retirement) also makes individuals inclined to nostalgia (Davis, 1979). In this regard, according to Holak et al. (2008), nostalgia can be seen as an individual, interpersonal, cultural and virtual phenomenon. Personal nostalgia is based on direct individual experience, interpersonal nostalgia assumes indirect interpersonal experience. Such a nostalgic experience incorporates memories of another person through direct communication with that person. Cultural nostalgia presupposes the group reaction to a particular stimulus and it is a direct experience which helps to formulate the group identity. Last but not least, virtual nostalgia is based on shared indirect experience. I approach virtual nostalgia as a reaction of the youth to an old movie or a song, thus connoting a sense of distance between generations of individuals. The authors describe the concept of virtual nostalgia as "the nostalgic equivalent of "virtual reality"" (Holak et al. 2008, p. 173). On the one hand, although these scholars do not make a reference to Arjun Appadurai (1996), it is clear that in the case of "virtual nostalgia", the concept of 'armchair nostalgia' coined by this scholar (when the object of nostalgia was not experienced

directly), can be considered. On the other hand, Holak and colleagues (2008) emphasize the group character of the virtual nostalgia, while armchair nostalgia can be individual, and underscore that virtual nostalgia, along with cultural nostalgia, are triggered in particular groups or segments of the market for marketing purposes. In this regard, the commercial use of nostalgia in capitalist societies is broadly discussed by Appadurai (1996). Furthering the conversation, Lee (2013) believes that group nostalgia may be a reaction to globalization and can be described in terms of “glocalization”. “Glocalization” is a term that became popular in the 1990s when Roland Robertson (1995) and others introduced it to the English-speaking world. “Glocalization” means co-presence of universalizing and globalizing tendencies. Due to globalization, people in different parts of the world start longing for the local. Lee argues that nostalgia is the most striking manifestation of “glocalization”. In this case, nostalgia is especially salient in Russia, which failed to effectively join the capitalist system in the mid-1990s. This is reflected in the case of Russia, a country with a high level of human capital, but also a country which nevertheless remains a raw material appendage of the West. In carbon trading, the buyer significantly influences the rules in one way or another. For example, in 2009 the European Union adopted a law according to which the owner of the pipe and the exporter of gas (oil) cannot be the same country. This hit Russia very noticeably, since it had invested heavily in the construction of gas pipelines. Export-oriented sectors of the economy are not developing in Russia, which makes it much less flexible economically than successful capitalist countries. Alexander Etkind (2014) writes about the “oil curse” that befell Russia, and states that “the proper name for the most powerful men in Russia is not oligarchs but rather oiligarchs” (Etkind, 2014, p. 163). In his article on the “oil curse”, Etkind (2014) cites Alfred Kokh who served as the head of the State Committee for State Property Management in the 1990s. According to Kokh

cited by Etkind (2014, p. 163), the population of Russia is an obstacle between power (Putin's regime) and oil. Putin's regime does not serve the people, rather it would prefer empty spaces of Russia full of gas and oil without people. Then Etkind furthers that the people who once were the wealth of the state, under Putin's regime become an object of the state's charity, and "[s]ince people do not create the state's wealth, they cannot control its government" (Etkind, 2014, p. 163). Referring to the book of Timothy Mitchell (2011) titled *Carbon Democracy*, Etkind (2014) explains the difference between the time when coal was the main resource and the time when the main resource is oil: coal was not transported to distant places, it met the needs of the local industries, and miners had significant political power because they could threaten their employers with a strike. Now, oil and gas are found in exotic and distant places and can be transported huge distances. Currently, there are very few specialists needed to extract oil and gas, and to maintain the equipment. Miners do not constitute a political power, as they did in the past, and the main threat is not a strike, but terrorism, because terrorists can sabotage oil and gas pipelines. According to Etkind, "Putin's regime effectively de-modernizes the country" (2014, p. 164), the people has lost its sovereignty, has no impact on the ruling regime and is seen by the latter as an impediment to its more effective enrichment; the oil curse has a great impact on female employment and reduces the role of women in society (this is a finding of political scientist Michael Ross (2011) cited by Etkind), and due to this new economic regime religion plays a greater role in Russia because women are instructed by priests of their place in society as an appendage to men, and "many feel uncomfortable in this contemporary Russia's oil-cursed, anti-intellectual, hypermasculine, habitually violent culture" (2014, p. 166). Etkind's idea to connect the oil-oriented economy with the rise of religion in Russia reveals the function of the church, and how it assists the regime through explaining to women that their place is at home. In

fact, religion justifies the new economic order where there is no place for full-fledged women's employment and political participation like it was under the Soviet Union. Devaluation of a woman in the new Russian society may also be a reason for nostalgia for the USSR. Taking into account what is said above, it is possible to attribute the emergence of post-Soviet nostalgia in Russia to this lack of integration of Russia into the modern capitalist world, as nostalgia is typically a symptom of crisis. It is important to note therefore that "Glocalization" is seen in combination and hybridization of local and global cultural phenomena: "...the representation of nostalgia in Post-Soviet popular culture is unavoidably combined with sophisticated forms and highly developed technology of global pop culture" (Lee, 2013, p. 169). Lee expresses the idiosyncrasy of the Russian "glocalization" in the following way:

If Stalin claimed some 70 years ago that culture should be "national in form, but socialistic in content" (*natsional'naya po forme i sotsialisticheskaya po soderzhaniyu*), it seems that in the post-Soviet era it should be global in form, but national (Russian) in content. This is the opposite of Stalin's declaration, but the logic is the same (Lee, 2013, p. 170).

This interpretation of the post-Soviet nostalgia in Russia in terms of 'glocalization' therefore although not prevalent seems fruitful. Lee (2013), in this sense, moves beyond an analysis that simply considers Russia as a case study to consolidate this phenomenon, as the ambitions of this study are higher: to demonstrate the impact of globalization on the world's culture.

1.1.2. How Nostalgia Differs from Collective Memory. Some authors (Appadurai, 1996; Boym, 2001; Oushakine, 2020) suggest that nostalgia can be separated from the live experience of the past. Second-hand nostalgia (the term coined by S. Oushakine) can be induced by things, or, for example, by the content found on the Internet. Nostalgia is getting more and more mythologized, and very often based on second-hand experience. Pierre Nora (1999) admitted that history is something frozen, deprived of life, it is a particular (often biased)

reconstruction of the past while collective memory is like a living organism which is changing and cannot reflect on its own being and modifications due to its “live” nature:

Memory is life, the carriers of which are always living social groups, and in this sense, it is in the process of constant evolution, it is open to the dialectic of memorization and amnesia, does not realize its successive deformations, is subject to all uses and manipulations, is capable of long-term hidden periods and sudden revivals. History is always a problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists. Memory is an always actual phenomenon, an experienced connection with the eternal present. History, on the other hand, is a representation of the past (Nora, 1999, p. 20).

To follow this understanding of collective memory, it assumes an element of myth creation.

Second-hand nostalgia (armchair-nostalgia, or ersatz-nostalgia) discussed by Appadurai (1996), Boym (2001), and Oushakine (2020) also has some element of myth-creation, and therefore it is essential for us to distinguish collective memory and nostalgia, because they have a lot of common features, and it is easy to conflate them. The first thing that catches your eye is that memory is never opposed to nostalgia, I know of no attempts to distinguish between them.

Memory is usually opposed to history. I will try to distinguish between memory and nostalgia.

As a basis for their comparison, we can take the definition of nostalgia given by Otto Boele and his colleagues in their recent volume on post-Soviet nostalgia: “...we define nostalgia rather loosely as a discursive practice stemming from a (shared) feeling of loss and potentially serving any political agenda” (Boele et al. 2020, p. 4). However, memory can also be defined as a discursive practice, but, for sure, of a different type.

Moreover, the authors of the definition refer to the feeling of loss, while a few articles collected in this volume edited by Otto Boele and his colleagues (Boele et al. 2020), talk not about loss, but rather about warm affective responses caused by Soviet objects, for example, Mandy Duijn (2020) explores the reactions of the participants of the online community *The USSR Our Motherland* to Soviet toys, and Oushakine (2020) who visited exhibitions of everyday

life in the former USSR, and examined the entries in the guestbooks of the exhibitions, where visitors expressed their warm nostalgic feelings and pleasant emotions because they saw a lot of objects familiar to them from their childhood. Due to mass production during the Soviet time, the interiors of the Soviet apartments, kitchen utensils, New Year tree's decorations and clothing were identical, so many left entries stating that all that was seen at the exhibit was literally taken from their apartments. And younger visitors also felt warmth about the historical period unknown to them due to their age. This shows that the visitors experience not the "feeling of loss", but "pleasant emotions and positive affection responses to the past" which have more grounds to be associated with nostalgia. Nostalgia is very selective, as Lowenthal notices ("nostalgia is memory with the pain removed" (1985, p. 8)), but memory is selective, too. As Pierre Nora points out, "Memory, due to its sensual and magical nature, gets along only with those details that are convenient for it" (Nora, 1999, p. 20). Further, according to Nora, memory exists only in that social group whose solidarity it maintains, while history, on the contrary, does not belong to anybody. But nostalgia has exactly the same features as memory. It also functions as a glue of a social groups' solidarity.

By now we see that memory and nostalgia share such features as mythologizing the past, selectivity and potential in consolidating social groups: both of them are essential for creating an individual's and group's identity. The only crucial difference between them is that nostalgia is "memory with the pain removed".

Ekaterina Kalinina (2014) in her dissertation on mediated post-Soviet nostalgia provides an overview of what memory, collective memory, history and nostalgia are. In particular, she turns to the works of Maurice Halbwachs:

Collective memory can stretch far back, but it is mostly concerned with events that are within living memory, which means that the group memory is shorter than the average human life. Often, social groups have participated in the events they recollect and are capable of grasping them directly. Halbwachs believes that, as soon as living communication turns into texts, images, rituals, monuments, or any other form of 'objectivised culture', memory is transformed into history. Essentially, history arises when the past 'is no longer included within the sphere of thought of the existing groups' (Halbwachs 1980, 106). So, history is the remembered past to which one no longer has a direct relation, while historical memory can be understood as memory that reaches individuals through historical documents (Kalinina, 2014, p. 34).

Kalinina (2014) explains that among scholars who deal with collective memory and history, there is no unanimity in the understanding of these phenomena. They talk about the same things using different terminology:

What Halbwachs conceives as collective memory Jan Assmann defines as a communicative memory, a memory based on everyday communicative practices. What Halbwachs defines as history Assmann calls cultural memory. Assmann argues that 'in the context of objectivised culture and of organised or ceremonial communication, a close connection to groups and their identity exists which is similar to that found in case of everyday memory' (J. Assmann 1995, 128). In other words, a group builds its understanding of unity and uniqueness upon this preserved knowledge and is able to reproduce its identity. Thus, he continues, 'objectivised culture has the structure of memory' (J. Assmann 1995, 128) (Kalinina, 2014, p.31).

Moreover, Kalinina (2014) refers to the ideas of Anne Whitehead, Paul Ricoeur and other scholars who made a distinction between collective (group) memory and history. The main task of the scholars was to distinguish between memory and history, not between memory and nostalgia.

Kalinina (2014) makes a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of nostalgia, too, having mentioned the majority of the authors whose ideas were presented in my dissertation above. However, there were two main points in her discussion of nostalgia: first, that nostalgia is a reaction to a particular trauma:

Gradually, nostalgia has come to be viewed more as a sociological phenomenon that helps individuals to adapt during major transitions in life. Some kind of disruption of continuous development is a necessary condition for the emergence of nostalgia. An abrupt change can become a cause of cultural trauma, which then gives rise to nostalgic sentiments.⁴ In fact the juxtaposition of nostalgia and a rupture or traumatic event is closely connected with the idea of progress (Kalinina, 2014, p.43).

Developing the idea of connection between trauma and nostalgia, Kalinina (2014) refers to Legg:

Legg, building on the previous studies, suggested that ‘while nostalgia denoted a positive attachment to a past real or imaginary home, trauma denoted the negative inability to deal effectively with a past event. While both conditions represent problematic engagements with the past, nostalgia often focuses on a time and place before or beyond a traumatic incident’ (Legg, 2004, p. 103). In this framework, both the destination of nostalgic longing and the traumatic event are located in the past and feed into contested memories activated in the present. With reference to the case at hand, what is seen as the trauma that causes growing nostalgic sentiments towards the past is not communism itself, but the period immediately after the fall of communism (Kalinina, 2014, p. 44).

Secondly, Kalinina points at a connection between nostalgia and irony, which is also a very instructive way of looking at this phenomenon:

Nostalgia as a strategy to cope with a problematic past can also include irony. In this case nostalgia is no longer a passive strategy of adaptation to life conditions. Svetlana Boym in 1995 identified ironic nostalgia as a particular subtype, while the Romanian scholar Diana Georgescu has called for ‘the analysis of the critical potential of irony to challenge mainstream memory discourses’ (Georgescu 2010, p. 156). She proposes the term counter-memory to indicate that certain memories are not included in the master narrative, but function as a disruption of widely accepted discourses. These alternative memory practices are cast in ironic modes, which of course does not mean they are not serious. The Canadian literature scholar Linda Hutcheon understands irony as a social and political issue which involves power-based relations and communication (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 1). She argues that irony ‘has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses into those who “get” it and those who don’t, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its “victims”’ (Hutcheon 1994, 1) (Kalinina, 2014, p.46).

Regarding irony, I cannot find meaningful objections, however, the connection between nostalgia and trauma evokes a lot of doubt. The relationship between nostalgia and trauma is not

universal. Thus, I understand nostalgia as a reflection in relation to the past with positive connotations when the past is perceived as the better time, but traumatic episodes are not necessary, while collective memory may deal with trauma, for example, memory studies often deal with genocides, victimization, deportation and other hard, traumatic experiences.

1.1.3. Post-Soviet Nostalgia in the Former Warsaw Bloc. Nostalgia for socialism specifically deserves closer attention because it does not relate exclusively to the old age of the nostalgic individuals as many neoliberal thinkers try to present it. Lev Gudkov, a famous Russian sociologist who heads Levada-Center, in his interview with Nikolai Svanidze in 2016 clearly stated that the hopes of pro-Western sociologists including the founder of the Center, Yuri Levada, that Homo Sovieticus would disappear with the new post-Soviet generations, proved to be illusions. Not only the old people, but the young people, too, are under the sway of the socialist past. This sense of enchantment with socialism creates an obstacle for the successful transition to capitalism. In fact, people may be nostalgic for different aspects of socialism: security, stability, internationalism, guaranteed employment, a specific form of communalism and sincerity⁷ (Todorova and Gille, 2010). Nostalgia for socialism is growing in many post-socialist countries, and researchers like Petrović (2010), who writes about the veterans of the

⁶ <https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya/324693-lev-gudkov-nadezhdy-na-cto-s-molodym-pokoleniem-vse-izmenitsya-okazalis-nashimi-illy> - Access: 2020-10-24.

⁷ Many scholars share the idea that people are nostalgic for sincere, non-commercially oriented attitudes of people towards each other under socialism. The theme of sincerity and authenticity is discussed by Maya Nadkarni in her article "The Master's Voice: Authenticity, nostalgia, and the refusal of irony in post-socialist Hungary," *Social Identities* 13(5), September 2007, where she shows, how an old gentleman singing simplistic songs about animals became extremely popular in post-socialist Hungary due to this very "sincerity" (non-commercial orientation of his music). The theme of sincerity is elaborated by Alexey Yurchak in his article "Post-Post-Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts, and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today"(2008) in which he analyses Masyanya, a post-Soviet animation character, which became popular in Russia due to her openness, straightforwardness and boldness of her statements and behaviour, what was habitual in the Soviet times. One of my interviewees, the Scientist from Lithuania, underscored that under capitalism, people are always commercially oriented, they always seek for profit, while under socialism people were oriented towards making other people happy. Thus, "sincerity" correlates not only to openness and authenticity, but to non-commercial orientation towards life and other people.

former Yugoslav army, or Creed (2010) who depicts Bulgarian neoliberalism after the downfall of socialism, emphasize one condition for the emergence of restorative nostalgia: the condition that the socialist past must be irrevocably gone. However, Gille (2010), referring to Creed (2010), points out that there is another condition for such a nostalgia: that the living standard of the population must be significantly improved. This combination of these two factors (irreversibility of socialism and improvement of everyday life) explains the fact that the post-socialist nostalgia appeared significantly earlier in Germany than in other countries of the post-socialist bloc (Gille, 2010, p. 282). Indeed, the fall of the Berlin wall was the symbol of irreversibility of the end of “socialism” (real socialism), and albeit not doing so well as their Western German counterparts, Eastern Germans at least accepted the higher living standards as a desirable norm. In this regard, German researchers give diverse accounts of the phenomenon of *ostalgie* (nostalgia for the GDR): Berdahl (2010) demonstrates that marketers of the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) telling the story of a young man who tried to preserve the illusion of the GDR for his ill mother, thus commercializing nostalgia for the socialist past and making it a tool in promoting capitalism. Scholars like Boyer (2006), however, argue that nostalgia for socialism does not exist and maintain that it is manufactured artificially by the Western Germans as an ideological tool that helps them depict Eastern Germans as prone to totalitarianism, and therefore to make the latter solely responsible for the crimes of Nazism.

Todorova (2010) contends that while in the “free world” nostalgia is treated as a normal cultural practice dissociated from such meanings as bad memory or social disease, the reports on post-socialist nostalgia in the Western journalism still depict it as a malady (2010). She points out that in the Western journalism the comparison is made not between Communism and capitalism (or liberalism including neoliberalism), but between Communism and

Nazism/fascism. Like Germans who are invested in the reassessment of their Nazi history, with memory work, in the same manner a similar kind of memory work is expected from the countries of the former socialist camp. Yet this memory work does not happen in Eastern Europe with the exception of a few countries, as according to Todorova, Eastern Europeans do not recognize a similar critical ground and reject any similarities between Communism and the Nazi regime. Overall, the mandatory character of such work, according to Todorova, is under question. Instead of being associated with Nazism, Communism (socialism) is associated in Eastern Europeans with collective authenticity (in case of Hungary), with peaceful ethnic federalism in Tito's times (the case of Yugoslavia), with critical pedagogical methods of the socialist times that foment open-mindedness in the students (Bulgaria) and many other positive phenomena.

Through remembering and evoking the positive phenomena of socialism, neoliberalism is criticized (Gille, 2010, p. 283). However, Nadkarni (2010) argues that nostalgia is limited to the private realm, and hence that is why it cannot be mobilized for any political purposes. For example, in Hungary, the post-Communist Kádárist Workers' Party could not transform popular nostalgia for Communism into a renewed political agenda. The same happened in Russia where the nostalgic sentiments for the USSR are strong, but the Communist Party headed by Gennady Zyuganov could not mobilize this nostalgia to its benefit.

Finally, it would be a mistake to not consider the approach to post-Soviet nostalgia suggested by Roman Abramov (2013). Abramov is an active author who explores the phenomenon of nostalgia for socialism in Russia and in other former socialist countries both online and offline. In one of his articles, he demonstrates how Actor-Network theory introduced by Bruno Latour can be applied to the study of the memory practices related to the Soviet past in

the former countries of the Warsaw bloc. In his article on museumification of the Soviet⁸ (2013), he observes that the creators of “the houses of horrors” (museums dedicated to atrocities of Communism, or to the victims of Communism) in the former socialist countries which try to equalize Nazism and Communism do not reach their goal in persuading the public that the Soviet regime was bloody and atrocious. Rather, according to the live observations of Abramov in these museums (2013), the public is enchanted by the Soviet past because the Soviet artefacts that are exhibited in those museums have their own magic, their own agency to persuade and impact the visitors, something that is against the creators’ intentions.

As Abramov testifies (2013), the visitors’ reaction to the exposition of the “houses of horrors” which are usually located in the former buildings of the KGB-like institutions in Hungary, Lithuania, Romania and other post-Soviet countries, can be interpreted as the acknowledgment of the glory and greatness of the Soviet past: “Of course, in this case we are not talking about nostalgia for the Soviet - the mission of the “House of Terror” and other similar museums is the opposite. But the Soviet temptation for ordinary visitors, enthusiastically examining the sickle-hammer banners and other attributes of Communism, turns out to be strong and perhaps unexpected for the author of the exhibition, who is a famous Hungarian theater artist Attila F Kovács: instead of contempt, lively curiosity, instead of disgust, the attractiveness of a museum attraction. So, the aesthetics of Communism defeats the ethics of anti-totalitarianism” (Abramov, 2013, p. 7-8).

The theme of agency in objects that induce particular feelings, sensations, and nostalgia in people should not be reduced to the Actor-Network theory, however; in anthropology,

⁸ Everything Soviet, everything that belongs to the Soviet era

materiality of things and its impact on people's lives is broadly discussed. In his recent publication, Serguei Oushakine (2020) talks about a few exhibitions of Soviet everyday life (in Kazan', Minsk and Moscow) that he visited in order to see second-hand nostalgia which is not based on first-hand experience. Overall, Oushakine (2020) notes that the first wave of post-Soviet nostalgia studies, represented by the volume *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (2010) edited by M. Todorova and Z. Gille and other works has been replaced by studies of second-hand nostalgia for the Soviet past when the live experience is not needed. The new generation is introduced to this nostalgia not through narratives about the past, but through the things which directly induce second-hand nostalgia in people. It is the same theme that Abramov (2013) depicts in his article on the Soviet artefacts in the "houses of horror". Oushakine states the following: "By looking at three recent nostalgic projects in Kazan', Minsk, and Moscow, I explore the morphogenetic capacities of Soviet *trukhliashechkas*, of those half-disappeared, decomposing, or abandoned fragments of the past, which, nonetheless, continue to exercise their agentic power by capturing, stirring, and charming the individual" (2020, p. 41). Oushakine emphasizes the non-discursive character of the history and the past presented through the old things, which can "be touched, grasped, and handled". Oushakine's approach to things is different from that one of Pierre Nora (1999), who talked about things (and not only things) as the *places of memory*: places of memory (objects, places, monuments, holidays dedicated to memorable events, the French revolutionary calendar, or the red poppy worn by Canadians on the 11th of November) are always symbols of the past, they represent some historical discourse behind them. The places of memory are not reduced to the things only, but all of them serve as emblems of the past that assume a particular story that can be told, and everybody knows this story, because it is a shared memory. According to Oushakine, things may be "instead of memory": "What is essential about

the objects of second-hand nostalgia is not their ability to communicate or symbolize the proper historical location of these objects' appearance. Rather, it is their performative capacity to engender various sensations (e.g. tactile, visual, or aural) in their audience: objects are approached not as vehicles of memory, but instead of memory (Oushakine, 2018)" (Oushakine, 2020, p. 39).

One can see the similarity of approaches of Abramov (2013) and Oushakine (2020) to things as self-sufficient agents which can induce second-hand nostalgia in people, as Oushakine calls this phenomenon. For consideration, how many young people express nostalgia for the USSR while not having the experience of living there, it is therefore instructive to keep in mind that the agency of things and different artefacts of the Soviet era, especially those that can be found online, can induce this nostalgia, as Abramov and Oushakine explain.

1.1.4. Nostalgia for the USSR in Russia as the Mythology Production. According to Mazur (2015), there are two views on post-Soviet nostalgia in Russia. The proponents of the first view, for instance the Levada Center, claim that nostalgia in Russia is increasing. On the contrary, Mazur herself (2015) contends that nostalgia does not exist, but it is rather through an active sense of myth-making that the Soviet imagery is widely prevalent in all spheres of life (Mazur, 2015). In this regard, Chikisheva (2009) understands social myth as a "system of virtual representations which sets, confirms and translates the way of understanding, experience and action" (2009, p. 274). Chikisheva states that Russian culture is predisposed to social myth-making in general, and nostalgia is part of this trend (2009, p. 271). In referring to Dragunsky (2003), Chikisheva (2009) lists four popular social myths in today's Russia: liberal myth or myth of achievements (a person can make his destiny), the quasi-liberal myth or myth of luck (a person is influenced by superior forces), the destructive myth or myth of fate (this is the

opposition to the liberal myth), and finally the Soviet nostalgic myth or alternatively, the myth of kindness. Social myth has at least two mythologemes which denote the context (the situation), and what should be done (the program of action). Dragunsky calls the first mythologeme “a subject”, and the second one – “a predicate”. According to Dragunsky (2003), as cited by Chikisheva (2009), the Soviet nostalgic myth has the following structure: the world under socialism was complex, but humane and kind (subject), and therefore, the person in that world had to reject personal interests for the sake of the common ideal (predicate). Significantly, the beholders of this myth are the Soviet movies, nostalgic broadcastings, and some novels. As Chikisheva states, nostalgic myth is very popular in Russia because it plays the role of psychological compensation in times of social crisis (Chikisheva, 2009).

Mazur (2015) who looks at post-Soviet nostalgia in terms of “nostalgia of catastrophes”, which is typical of societies after the wars, political crises, and revolutions, believes that nostalgic myth is intentionally amplified at the current moment which is characterized by a climate of ideological stagnation and vagueness instigated by the Russian state, when there is no clear plan for the future. Both Mazur (2015) and Morenkova-Perrier (2017) point at unanimity in the Russian society in interpretation of the two most significant events of the twentieth century: the victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), which is commonly perceived as the greatest achievement, and perestroika, which is commonly understood as the catastrophe. Mazur states that the post-Soviet nostalgia is “manufactured” by the state, media, and businesses, thus turning into myth which generates a mostly positive connotation of the Soviet past (the sociological poll conducted by Mazur in Yekaterinburg among the students and their families who belong to urban middle class, shows that the most pronounced nostalgic phobia is the shortage of goods and food (2015, p. 231); also, bureaucracy is mentioned by the poll participants as a flaw of socialism).

Mazur draws on the typology of nostalgia suggested by Davis (1979) and points out that this myth creation is based on the live memories, or simple nostalgia (in 2010, 79 % of the Russian population were born in the USSR, while only 21% were born after its demise), omits the stage of critical nostalgia, and arrives to the point of interpretive nostalgia which emphasizes positive aspects of the Soviet life and downplays the negative ones.

As a specific manifestation of the nostalgic myth, Mazur (2015) explores the representations of the “golden age”. Accordingly, the “golden age” myth has three versions: the myth of common prosperity (paradise myth), which takes roots in the poem of Ovid; the myth of achievement (the acme of cultural, scientific, and industrial productivity); and the myth of power (“the USSR was a superpower”). The sociological poll conducted by Mazur (2015), demonstrates that people choose the Brezhnev era as the “golden age”, and nostalgic sentiments correlate with the age of respondents: that is, the older the respondents, the more nostalgic they are.

Very similar results are reported in the work of Boele (2011) who explored nostalgia for the Brezhnev era in the city of Novorossiysk where the Soviet leader had personal attachment. Boele (2011) discovered that nostalgic sentiments among the citizens of Novorossiysk correlate with the age group and reveal many features of myth.

Some scholars dealing with the post-Soviet nostalgia in Russia straightforwardly associate it with the people’s desire to return to the USSR. Researchers of nostalgia for the Soviet past such as Goriashko (2013) and Morenkova-Perrier (2017) believe that nostalgia takes place only in the situation when people want to return to the past: that is, if they do not wish to, they are not nostalgic. In fact, these scholars acknowledge only restorative nostalgia as genuine nostalgia. In the research conducted by Mazur (2015), the respondents demonstrate nostalgic

sentiments and simultaneously do not want to return to the USSR, which Mazur perceives as a sign of mythologized character of the post-Soviet nostalgia.

To further the conversation, it is productive to consider another group of scholars who believe that nostalgia for the USSR as a political or ideological project does not exist; but rather, it is longing for sincerity that can be found in the cultural products of the Soviet era. “Sincerity” in cultural production denotes non-commercial creativity, authenticity and naïveté, childish purity when eroticism and violence are not deployed and when elevated values are promoted (for example, sincere love, internationalism and friendship), and finally, when literature and cinema characters are honest and sincere, and when the art is soulful.

Moreover, a particular standard of studying the Soviet reality was established by a seminal work of Yurchak (2006), who emphasized the importance of rituals in Soviet life, explaining that the Communist ideology did not really interest the Soviet people. As such, people participated in the rituals in order to maintain the stability of the Soviet system, and the Soviet ideological discourse degenerated into a performative one by the late Soviet time (Brezhnev era). Yurchak’s works on nostalgia for the Soviet past and its exploitation by the young Russian artists maintain the same idea of ideological detachment of those interested in the USSR, and their enchantment not with the ideology, but with sincerity of the Soviet past, something that is considered unusual in today’s standards (Yurchak, 2008).

It is therefore instructive that the theme of sincerity which has gone with socialism is discussed in the papers of sociologists from other post-Soviet countries, too. For example, the Hungarian scholar Nadkarni (2007) explores extreme popularity in post-socialist Hungary of simplistic songs performed by an aged non-professional singer who makes up an outstanding example of sincerity on the background of commercial music production in the capitalist epoch.

Following Yurchak's approach to studying the post-Soviet nostalgia in a sense of detachment from the Communist ideology, a number of scholars prefer to look at this phenomenon as a cultural form or practice deprived of ideological content. Further, Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004) argue in their article on the politics of nostalgia, that it is more productive to study nostalgic practices: "To think productively about nostalgia, then, is to treat it as a "cultural practice, not a given content"; that is, to attend to how the meaning of nostalgic practices, far from being pre-determined by their historical referents, is shaped situationally in the process of their creation and re-enactment" (2004, p. 492). Thus, to register involvement in a practice is arguably more testable than finding out the true motives of behaviour because people may be insincere. Moreover, in discussing nostalgia in terms of its political potential, Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004) believe that its socio-historical context and political infrastructure are of greater importance. That is, nostalgia does not have any political meaning by itself, and it is only the interested people who can ascribe this meaning to nostalgia. From this point of view, nostalgia is a hollow cultural form whose content is modifiable depending on the circumstances.

As the notion of cultural form is mentioned, it is instructive to remind ourselves that according to Simmel (2000) cultural form embodies a certain constancy of being, the form restrains life, and the entire development of culture looks like a conflict of cultural content (life) and cultural forms of its historical expression. Developing these ideas of dynamics between cultural content and forms, Simmel was influenced by the Marxist doctrine of economic development, according to which economic forces create a form of production appropriate to them in a particular historical period, grow in it to such an extent that this form does not longer fit them, and finally destroy it and create a new form. Simmel believed that this doctrine "applies far beyond the economic sphere" (Simmel, 2000, p. 103).

On another note, Oushakine (2007) also draws attention to the forms of the Soviet cultural objects, and not to their content. He believes that “symbolic forms of the past cannot be limited to their original context, meaning, or genealogy” (2007, p. 453). Further, he suggests focusing on pragmatics of post-Soviet nostalgic evocations, namely tracing why the old forms of the Soviet culture can be useful for the new content. In fact, he thinks that perception by analogy is the most common thing and when people recognize the old aesthetic form, they better perceive a new content shaped by it. This is how he explains the enormous popularity of the nostalgic TV project “The Old Songs About the Most Important” (1994). Like his colleagues, Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004), Oushakine does not consider ideology in talking about post-Soviet nostalgia (Oushakine, 2007).

1.1.5. Nostalgia in the Former Soviet Republics as a Reaction to Neoliberalism with Special Attention to the Baltic Countries. The Baltic countries were among the first who left the USSR even before the agreement of its dissociation signed in December of 1991 by the leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. The Baltic countries strived for freedom and prosperity outside the Soviet borders, but in fact for a few decades they lived in a regime of austerity (Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). The first so-called mistake, according to Bohle and Greskovits (2012), consisted of industry destruction in Lithuania and Latvia and to a lesser degree in Estonia because it was not industrialized to the same extent as the former two republics. The national leaders of the Baltic states hoped that they could emulate the Swiss model and would turn their countries into banking Meccas with a developed system of banks and financial institutions. Of course, this attempt failed. Moreover, according to Bohle and Greskovits (2012) the nationalist leaders of the Baltic countries were so inexperienced in economics, that they took the ideals of neoliberal economists such as Friedrich Hayek at face value, as if the entire capitalist world lived

according to the ideas articulated by this specific thinker and other neoliberals. In fact, they created experimental zones out of their countries where they applied neoliberal principles in their most sheer and brutal forms.

Due to the recession of 2008 and the following politics of austerity, Latvia and Lithuania experienced a strong wave of discontent with the national elites (Sommers and Woolfson, 2014). Moreover, for the Baltic countries, these moods were discovered even earlier before the crisis of 2008: “In Lithuania, a poll in 2004 revealed that 34 percent of respondents characterized the period of 1990-2004 as the most unfortunate in the country’s history, more than the 30 percent that thought the same of the Soviet period. As in Estonia, intellectuals and political commentators have begun to speak of “two Lithuanias,” “westward-looking and economically vibrant Lithuania, celebrating its dynamism, and rejoicing over accession to the European Union and NATO, and an elite-abandoned, long-suffering, divided and depressed Lithuania, longing for something like the ‘equality in misery’ it knew in the Soviet Union (Leonidas Donkis, 2005, cited in Bohle & Greskovits, 2012, p. 229).

Neringa Klumbitė (2009, 2010) studies nostalgia for socialism as a reaction of Lithuanian people to inequality, emerging class differences and neoliberal policies, which became reality after the demise of the USSR. According to Klumbitė, “nostalgia is a restorative discourse through which an individual reclaims one’s own dignity and respect by transposing himself or herself onto an idealized chronotope of the Soviet past” (2009, p. 96). The participants of her research identify the “Soviet times” as “better times” while the present is characterized as “decline, chaos, destruction and dissolution” (Klumbitė, 2009). She contends the following: “Nostalgia for the Soviet times is related to anti-democratic, pro-Communist, and populist sentiments. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe and Russia, nostalgics are thought to long for a

strong leader, as well as to oppose neoliberal reforms and Europeanization” (Klumbité, 2009, p. 99). In this regard, Klumbité (2009) agrees with Todorova (2010) that the post-Soviet nostalgia is intentionally depicted by the Lithuanian elites as a disease which is typical of the most “backward” segment of the Lithuanian population (rural residents, elderly, pensioners, unemployed) who are called “turnips” in the modern political discourse in Lithuania: “By portraying nostalgia as a disease, intellectuals undermine the claims of inequality, injustice, and experiences of alterity embedded in nostalgia discourse” (Klumbité, 2009, p. 96).

Klumbité (2009) demonstrates that sensations of cold caused by the absence of central heating in the rural houses, darkness due to the inability to pay electricity bills, hunger and necessity to buy clothing at a second-hand store, evoke nostalgia for the Soviet past, when central heating, electricity, running water and decent food were available to everybody. In agreement with many researchers, such as Anna Kruglova (2017), for example, Klumbité also finds that “the USSR was a morally superior universe” (2009, p. 108) where theft, homicide, alcoholism and other social problems were not widespread to such an extent as in the present Lithuania and other former republics of the USSR (one of Klumbité’s informants speaks about Russia’s debauchery).

At the same time, the present “progressive” Lithuania stands in stark contrast with the “backward” USSR’s reality: that is, many rural dwellers, after the central heating was ceased in the modern houses built during the Soviet times, constructed fireplaces with chimneys and use coal and logs for heating their apartments, which shifts the “modern” Lithuania into the pre-Soviet era.

Klumbité (2009) also discusses the problems of alterity (feeling and being different in comparison to the rest of society), marginalization, and exclusion from the mainstream society of

those who cannot adjust to the neoliberal reality. She explains that even hunger is felt more acutely due to awareness of social inequality: in the Soviet times many food products were difficult to find in the stores, but they were not available to anybody. Therefore, everyone was in the same situation (a notable example was that bananas and oranges were rather rare at the tables of the Soviet citizens). It is true that special stores were available for Nomenklatura who had special access to luxuries, and sometimes it became evident when the former representatives of Nomenklatura tried to pretend that they were a part of the people in the days of the USSR (Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2004), but as the internavts point out in their multiple posts in the nostalgic online groups today, the former Communist bonzas are perceived now almost like ascetics compared to the grown insolent elites of post-socialism. Nowadays, products are available, but many people cannot afford them, and at the same time, they see what other people can afford, which makes their sensation of deprivation even worse. This situation therefore supports the idea of Leonidas Donkis (2005) (cited in Boehle & Greskovits, 2012, p. 229) that for many Lithuanians, ‘equality in misery’ is preferable to inequality.

To understand the impact of neoliberalism on populations of the former Soviet republics, it is essential to look at their policies related to the post-Soviet privatization of housing. Policy in relation to privatization of housing in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova allowed the occupants of the housing provided by the socialist state for free, to privatize it. Initially, after 1991, privatization did not cost a lot, and it mostly meant the signing of an agreement with the state indicating that a resident became an owner of the property. Later on, an individual could invest an amount of money which was growing in a process of time: “The other form of legitimate privatization [in contrast to restitution, like in the Baltic states – remark by Amosava] was the transfer of ownership to occupants of agricultural land or housing, which became

standard in the former Soviet Union where residents possessed such strong quasi-property rights to their apartments that they claimed them for free” (Åslund, 2013, p. 186). Denationalization of housing was a crucial point in populational destabilization in the Baltic countries, because many people in Latvia and Lithuania became homeless due to corruption during denationalization of housing (Snieskienė & Dulinskienė, 2014) and harsh methods of communication of the new owners with the occupants. According to Khudenko (2016), in the denationalized apartments in Latvia resided 220 000 persons (10% of Latvia’s population) who became hostages of the situation, while their compatriots residing in the municipal housing could privatize it almost for free (like in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova) (Khudenko, 2016). This point requires further explanation as it is important in understanding the specific contexts of different republics. For the case of Latvia and Lithuania, for example, after these countries obtained their independence, the state began seeking the previous owners of the real estate (those who possessed it before the Soviet rule, under the Nazi regime), many of whom resided abroad and as Khudenko (2016) states they were technically not the owners of the apartments anymore because they had taken loans in the banks before the WWII and did not pay those loans. That is, despite this situation for the new governments it was essential to demonstrate their break with the Soviet rule, and they invited those “former owners” who did not pay off their loans to the banks to become owners of the buildings and apartments in today’s Latvia and Lithuania. This decision, according to the way the government promoted it, was allegedly “restoring their rights”, while the then occupants who got their housing from the Soviet state for free were left with little to no choice. Stated otherwise, when the former owners who fled to the West after WWII, were invited by the post-Soviet neoliberal governments to possess their real estate, the current occupants were deprived of their housing; while in Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus the occupants just had

to sign a contract with the post-Soviet state, as the ownership was rather inexpensive for an occupant. For example, this can be understood through a personal anecdote: I privatized our apartment in the Minsk suburb for my mother in August 2010, having paid the deposit of 400 US dollars; and then, in effect, it is similar to a 40-year-long mortgage where the monthly payments do not exceed a few dollars.

In this context, in the Baltic countries the level of depression increased. According to Stankunas et al. (2006), Lithuania experiences a culture of poverty (the controversial term coined by Oscar Lewis in 1966) which is closely associated with depression, a strong feeling of marginality, helplessness, dependency, and feelings of alienation and un-belonging. The author investigated the relation between depression, suicide, and unemployment, which increased drastically both in Latvia and Lithuania. This study found that the relation between suicide and unemployment is rather complex as both in Latvia and Lithuania the level of suicides dropped when the level of unemployment grew (2006). Put otherwise, when people understand that they are not exceptionally unlucky, they do not commit suicide. According to the opinion of the Lithuanian scholars, suicides in Lithuania occur as a consequence of the culture of poverty. The term “culture of poverty” is thus debatable because it is difficult to measure it in sociological research, and as a result it is a term that has received criticism (Gajdosikienė, 2004).

To summarize the ideas presented above, it is essential to underscore the following: the concept of nostalgia has evolved from the notion of mental illness to an omnipresent feature of modernity (Appadurai, 1996; Boym, 2001) which emphasizes displacement and longing for the irreversibility of the past or even irreversibility of the experienced mental states (like the social romanticized vision of first love, for instance). That is, some people arguably enjoy “longing for longing”, and they entertain themselves with nostalgia (Lowenthal 1985). Psychoanalysts

(Pourtova, 2013; Tsivinsky, 2014) and Boym (2001) point at the existence of healthy (reflective) and unhealthy (restorative) nostalgia: in the latter the loss of the past is not mourned properly. Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004) believe that the latter, unhealthy (restorative) nostalgia is irrelevant because acceptance of irreversibility of the past is the essential feature of nostalgia, something that makes up its core meaning. At the same time, the same authors argue that nostalgia has no political meaning in itself: it can be adjusted to any situation. Oushakine (2007) also argues that the ideological aspect of nostalgia (especially when we talk about nostalgia for the Soviet past), is not so important as its formal aspect: people recognize old cultural forms which can carry new meanings.

Further, Yurchak (2008) argues that those young Russian people who turn to the images of the Soviet past are not interested in the Communist ideology: they are attracted through authenticity and sincerity, values that were well-known and almost habitual in the Soviet times. Other scholars, like Mazur (2015), contend that there is no nostalgia for the Soviet past in Russia: nostalgia is understood as an intentional myth creation. Mostly, these critiques read nostalgia as a tool-set that was beneficial to the Russian government which cannot produce any new meaningful ideology for the Russian society, hence that is why it has to resurrect the greatness of the Soviet past. This appeal was and continues to be made mostly to the older generations with certain attachments. Entering this dialogue in a critical way, however, the research conducted by the Levada Center almost annually demonstrates the steady growth of nostalgia for the Soviet past not only among the old generations, but also among the young people since the year 1992 when Levada Center started this type of research.

There are arguably a few explanations of the post-Soviet nostalgia growth. The Levada Center associated nostalgia for the USSR with the generational factor; that is, Levada scholars

believed that nostalgia was a generational trait of the old people and it would fade when the old generations passed into new ones. However, they admitted that this view was illusory (Gudkov, 2016). In this sense, Lee (2013) approaches nostalgia for socialism in Russia and other countries as a reaction to globalization. Stated otherwise, according to Lee, people value their pasts more when they face “Americanization”. Abramov (2013) applies Actor-Network theory to nostalgia for socialism in the former socialist countries arguing that Soviet artefacts themselves have an agency to influence minds of our contemporaries and persuade them of greatness of the Soviet era. Klumbité (2009, 2010) importantly also points out that nostalgia for socialism may be a reaction to neoliberalism (so, nostalgia may have a political aspect, but as Oushakine (2007), Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004) contend the political aspect is mobilized when it is needed, it is not an immanent feature of nostalgia).

Despite the fact that the idea of nostalgia as a disease is a thing of the past, some Western journalists present nostalgia for socialism as a social malady that needs to be eradicated (or cured). In addition, researchers of post-Soviet nostalgia see nostalgia as a natural process, and not as something unhealthier than the nostalgia for the past of the Westerners (Todorova & Gille, 2010).

1.2. Imagined Communities

Although we see that the political landscape after the demise of the USSR is very diverse and unpredictable, it is very possible that a form of consolidation of the former Soviet Union—albeit in a problematic or defective mode—has already begun. The alliance of the autocratic states headed by Russia is the foundation of this restoration (Silitski, 2010). However, in addition to political initiatives, there are also grass-roots initiatives that can be observed on the Internet, which can compensate for this “political defectiveness” of the existing alliance. This is because

the Internet allows all the former citizens of the USSR—wherever they might live today (including the Baltic countries, Ukraine and Georgia which obviously fall away from this alliance)—to speculate on the possible restoration of the USSR. In contrast to this alliance of the autocracies led by Russia, the USSR is seen as an authentic imagined community through the Internet.

We can thus arguably ground our understanding of “imagined communities” from the seminal work of Benedict Anderson (2006) to the origin of nations. Anderson (2006) explains that earlier forms of human solidarity were based on three fundamental cultural conceptions: the idea that a particular script-language offered privileged access to ontological truth, thus giving birth to such transcontinental solidarities as Christendom, Islamic Ummah, and others; the idea that monarchs, being apart of other human beings, ruled by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation; and a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, and in which the origins of the world and of men were essentially identical. People often felt that they lived “at the end of times”. These three ideas, intertwined, gave certain meaning to everyday fatalities of existence and offered a sense of redemption in various ways.

When this trinity started deteriorating (first it happened in Western Europe), “a harsh wedge” was driven between cosmology and history. Humanity faced a necessity to link fraternity, power and time in a new way. Anderson contends that it became possible due to print-capitalism (Anderson, 2006, p. 36).

Anderson stresses the importance of printing. This technology in combination with capitalism led to the stabilization of the local vernaculars and, as a result, to the national consciousness. First, the mass book producers saturated the European market with books in Latin, but they were destined to a small reading audience (bilingual intelligentsia), while the

majority of the European population was monolingual. The development of the book market made businessmen in the printing industry reorganize the books' production. By the 17th century the national languages were stabilized due to the spread of printed books. But the printing itself could not lead to the emergence of nationalism: it appeared in China around 1000 CE, along with the paper, but it did not lead to the emergence of nationalism. Capitalism without this technology would not lead to nationalism, either: the class of capitalists became visible in Europe by the end of the 13th century, but Europeans did not have paper and a print at that time. Nationalism is a product of constellation of the three main factors: capitalism, printing technology and fatal language diversity (the linguistic unification of humankind cannot be achieved).

Anderson (2006) pays special attention to technology in terms of achieving national unity. For example, for Anderson a novel and a newspaper are considered to be “technical means” that allowed representation of such imagined communities as nations. Reading a newspaper in the morning replaced the morning prayer, according to Hegel (n.d.). In fact, both a novel and a newspaper addressed an audience which consisted of individuals whose identity is unknown, but yet they have similar characteristics, and they share the same knowledge. For instance, Anderson discusses a novel of a Filipino novelist of the 19th century who addresses his readers as well-known acquaintances: “All of you know that house on that street in Manila...” Or, in a Mexican novel “The Itching Parrot” the protagonist visited “the schools, the prisons, the villages” (plurality is emphasized) of that sort, namely, the institutions of the hated Spanish regime, which is well-known to the generalized reader (Anderson, 2006). Anderson mentions radio as one of the technical means that created such an imagined community as a nation; radio was especially effective when the population was illiterate.

Later, another technology stepped on the stage: the cinema. The idea that cinematography created the Soviet Union originates from the American philosopher Susan Buck-Morrs (2000) who believes that culture and art are profoundly political. With the Bolshevik revolution, a new historical subject – people’s masses – came into being, but it was difficult to imagine this subject without seeing it. According to Valerii Podoroga, cited by Buck-Morrs, a cinema screen “creates an imagined space where a mass body exists that can exist nowhere else” (Buck-Morrs, 2000, p. 147). Then Podoroga analyzes the famous movies of Sergei Eisenstein *Strike* (1924), *Potemkin* (1926), and *October* (1927) which created a mass that became “a reference point for the future meaning”. When the future generations of the Soviet people imagined the seizure of the Winter Palace, they drew on the images of the revolutionary masses created by Eisenstein. It is important to stress that Eisenstein’s films are black and white and silent: they are very similar to documentaries. Further, Buck-Morrs writes the following: “The particular characteristics of the screen as a cognitive organ enabled audiences to see the materiality not only of this new collective protagonist, but also of other ideal entities: the unity of the revolutionary people, the idea of international solidarity, the idea of the Soviet Union itself. Indeed, it is doubtful, whether the Soviet experience would have been possible without cinema, and Lenin turned out to be more right, than he could have anticipated when he called cinema, of all the arts, “for us” the most important” (Buck-Morrs, 2000, p. 147).

1.3. Post-Soviet World

The theory of “imagined communities” can be effectively applied to the post-Soviet world. Belonging to a particular region as an imagined community plays a crucial role in the processes of political transformations. Regionalism, or the “relationship between a state’s internal political process and the values and norms that dominate its geographic region”

(Ambrosio, 2006, p. 409) is essential in making political choices. Thus, belonging or not-belonging to Europe as an imagined community were significant factors in how processes of democratization and specifically “coloured revolutions” (also known as “electoral revolutions”, peaceful protests against the political elites of the first decade of the 21st century in the post-Soviet space, which received their names due to the symbols and colours chosen by the peaceful protesters: roses in Georgia in 2003; orange in Ukraine in 2004; and yellow or pink colours in Kyrgyzstan in 2005; the latter became referred to as “Tulip revolution”) were unfolding, not to mention the fact that later these processes were curtailed in the post-Soviet space, and consolidation of the local autocracies around Russia as a regional hegemon was achieved.

As Kollmorgen (2013) argues, the former socialist countries were “worlds apart”, and it is only anticipated that their post-Soviet destinies would also be different. That is, if one considers the former Soviet republics, it is obvious that Latvia and Turkmenistan, for instance, are following absolutely different economic and political trajectories. In my research, I am studying the former Western Soviet republics⁹, which are close geographically, but yet they have very different political destinies. For example, republics like Belarus are considered as “adaptive authoritarianisms” (Frear, 2018). And although now the situation in Belarus is dramatically changing, aspects of the current historical and social moment are reminiscent of the past. Take as an example, for instance, how the peaceful protests that have been taking place in Belarus after August 9th, 2020 are similar to the “coloured revolutions”, which happened in Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia. So, while republics like Belarus are considered to be “adaptive mechanisms” other places like the Baltic states presumably turned into full-fledged democracies. The region under investigation was subject to very similar political processes; that is, some former Soviet republics

⁹ I was not able to recruit informants from the former Caucasus and Asian Soviet republics.

experienced the so-called “coloured revolutions” (non-violent overthrows of the former elites in the first decade of the 21st century), while in some former Soviet republics these “coloured revolutions” failed. Importantly though, we notice that political fragmentation of the post-Soviet space continues. In this context, Iglin (2016) contends that the “coloured revolutions” have led to the situation when the former Soviet republics, which are the zone of strategic interests of Russia, are being alienated. However, as the present time shows, this alienation touched only the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Georgia, while the rest of the former Soviet republics, on the contrary, have consolidated around Russia in their effort to stop the spread of “coloured revolutions” (Silitski, 2010).

Before discussing the “coloured revolutions”, it is imperative to contextualize how the future of the post-Soviet world as well as the broader notion of post-socialist space was envisioned after the demise of the Soviet bloc. Indeed, post-socialist transition in Eurasian societies is a complex process that has been continuously fueling vivid debates for almost three decades. It should be emphasized that the concept of “post-socialism” is not perceived identically by all the participants of the debates due to the diversity of polities, economies, and cultures of the former socialist countries. For example, Chen and Sil (2007) propose to “stretch” the concept of post-socialism/post-Communism in using “conceptual stretching”. That is, Chen and Sil suggest not to limit our understanding of Communism to Marxism-Leninism, but rather to take into account “...a Communist/socialist ideology that favors social equality, cosmopolitanism, and scientific-technological progress while rejecting pre-existing sociocultural identities and institutions as well as individualism underlying Western conceptions of modernity” (Chen & Sil, 2007, p. 283). Thus, they include China, Vietnam, West Bengal and Tanzania into the post-socialist space.

Importantly, post-socialist transition is also seen from different perspectives. In the 1990s two perspectives were dominant in debates on post-socialist change: the modernization and the transition approach. Having emerged in the 1950s, the theory of modernization was relevant till the 1970s when it was replaced by postmodern theories, and then “revitalized” in the 1990s. Raj Kollmorgen (2013) points out that the theory of modernization was widely criticized due to many reasons: “The main objections were that they¹⁰ placed emphasis on systems while neglecting action and subscribed to evolutionism and Westernisation in the sense of believing in the need for the transition societies to catch up with and model themselves after Western society and its basic institutions” (Kollmorgen, 2013, p. 89).

The transition approach was the second dominant theoretical stance in the 1990s and transformed itself into ‘consolidology’. This approach traced actual stages of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe. More specifically, the works of Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik (2010), Michael McFaul (2010) and others illustrate this approach. Kollmorgen characterizes the transition approach as follows:

[...] the transition approach since the mid-1990s has incorporated the long-term path-dependencies of democratization, the problems of state-ness, and the relation between the architecture of political institutions and actual actor behaviour along with its political-cultural foundations. On the other hand, the once dominant bias towards a logic of consolidation has been dismissed to allow for the possibility of deconsolidation as well as for enduring autocracies, ‘defective democracies’, or ‘hybrid regimes’... (Kollmorgen, 2013, p. 90).

The first decade of the debates demonstrated that these two approaches are insufficient in grasping post-socialist reality and scholarship asserted that more contextualized approaches are needed. Thus, a new form of theoretical understanding with regards to those transformation

¹⁰ Proponents of modernization approach

processes emerged. According to Kollmorgen (2013), the main feature of this form was the rejection of focusing only on the deficiencies of post-socialism that do not allow it to approach the Western standards. As such, this retheorization expressed a critical need and an attempt to evaluate advantages and benefits which could potentially give an opportunity to the societies of this new type to develop in a unique way.

In this sense, *Post-Communism* is understood as a broad range of theoretical strands that represent this “more contextualized ” theoretical stance. One of the strands of post-Communism indicates to a great extent, the unique character of each socialist society, hence Kollmorgen’s (2013) use of the metaphor “worlds apart” to describe this view of socialist societies.

Accordingly, “Soviet socialism in the mother country of the proletarian revolution and its Albanian or Polish off-springs or “socialism in the colours of the GDR” were ‘worlds’ apart...” (Kollmorgen, 2013, p. 92). Then, if “socialisms” were so different, their “off-springs” (post-socialist societies) would differ in the same way. This theoretical stance is presented in works of Richard Rose (2009), William Outhwaite and Larry Ray (2005), Ivan Szélenyi and Balazs Szélenyi (1994), and others.

One can differentiate the varying approaches as follows: on the one hand, the modernization approach assumes a convergence of the West and the East through common trends in economic development (industrialization and bureaucratization). On the other hand, the transition approach envisages convergence of the West and the East through democratization of the latter and therefore theories of post-Communism place emphasis on unique path-dependencies of each post-socialist country.

The socialist societies were seen in the West as industrial societies of the Fordist type. According to the theory of modernization, socialist societies were expected to converge with

Western societies. This, of course, did not happen. After the downfall of socialism, democratization was viewed as the main source of convergence. However, it is important to note that democratization is not being carried out smoothly in the post-socialist space. Sometimes the new authoritarian or hybrid regimes would emerge in the former socialist countries, and this emergence must be further explained. Accordingly, democratization presumes convergence, which has become possible due to the processes of globalization. Democratization is analyzed by many scholars through the prism of the waves' theory introduced by Samuel Huntington; and Huntington's theory is interwoven with the transition approach.

In this context, after the collapse of socialism, a values vacuum and an ideological vacuum emerged¹¹. Such vacuums therefore needed to be filled in with something. Arguably, these gaps were gradually filled in with ideals of nationalism¹² and different types of religiosity. However, the architects of democracy had a desire to fill these ideological social vacuums with a new sense of democratic consciousness whose primary result and success would be civil society, an ideal taken from the era of the European Enlightenment. In this sense, the need for democratization on the basis of Tocqueville's model of civic activity in American democracy was a significant point of reference for those who promoted the Western values of freedom and individual initiative in the former Communist countries (Outhwaite & Ray, 2005). The first decade of the 21st century was especially critical for those shifts, as the intense desire for Western values, freedom, and democracy seemed to be prevalent in the post-Soviet space and led to a few "coloured revolutions". As stated by Silitski (2010) the leaders of the protests that took

¹¹ The literature on the last decades of the Soviet world, and more broadly on its externally imposed nature in a number of countries after WWII, argues that these vacuums developed well before the fall of the Soviet bloc: that the regimes' official ideology was bankrupted over time, starting at least with the invasion of Hungary and culminating in Brezhnev stagnation (which brought about perestroika and glasnost').

¹² The ideals/goals of national sovereignty were not new. Rather, they had been repressed to varying degrees during the period of Soviet/Russian domination.

place in Georgia and Ukraine were able to use this aspiration for democracy in the mentioned former Soviet republics because these countries felt themselves as a part of an “imagined community”, in this case Europe. As such, their efforts to promote democracy through peaceful protests were successful because for them this resistance meant that they were in a way “joining Europe” or “returning to Europe”. However, for Kyrgyzstan this did not work because the “Tulip revolution” led only to superficial changes. As a result, the wave of democratization became extinct, moving further from the traditionally understood “Europe”. In this sense,

Yet, regions, like nations, cannot survive as imagined communities without proper organization and institutionalization. The further the wave of revolutions proceeded, the more difficult it was to agitate for regime change by putting forward a vision of ‘joining’ Europe. Geographic remoteness also made the work of “roaming revolutionaries” in the new territories more and more difficult, if not impossible. Even more importantly, the wave of electoral revolutions inadvertently helped to crystallize and redefine the former Soviet Union as an authoritarian region, where new democratic breakthroughs became increasingly unlikely to happen and those that had already been achieved increasingly difficult to consolidate (Silitski, 2010, p. 341).

Therefore, in this case the region which opposes Europe as an imagined community, has a few contested names: ‘Russian world,’ ‘Eurasia,’ ‘East Slavic civilization.’

In this framework, Silitski (2010) contends that in this region “authoritarian convergence” takes place. Indeed, the Belarusian sociologist describes in detail different forms of co-operation between the authoritarian states led by Russia in their effort to stop the spread of democratization and to prevent any future “coloured revolutions” in the region. He states that this “authoritarian convergence” is becoming global:

The fear of a globalized crusade for democracy also drew authoritarian leaders from different continents and regions closer together. It is not surprising, for example, that presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Mahmoud Akhmadinejad of Iran, both charismatic and outspoken autocrats with broad international ambitions who recently attempted to build authoritarian hegemonies in their respective regions, made extensive

forays into the former Soviet Union in 2005–2006, forging political and economic partnerships in Belarus, Russia and Central Asia. The non-alignment movement summit in Havana in August 2006 was attended by Chavez, Lukashenka, Akhmadinejad and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, among others, and was a showcase of the globalized trend of authoritarian convergence. At the same time, the intensification of U.S. efforts to promote democracy worldwide put Russia and China on alert. In these countries ruling elites perceive the past and future episodes of regime change in their neighborhoods, and indeed worldwide, as a potentially destabilizing factor for their own internal political stability as well as for their broader regional interests (Silitski, 2010, p. 347).

Although Silitski (2010) wrote about “authoritarian convergence” a decade ago, today's reality shows that this convergence continues in the post-Soviet space and arguably even further. Consider, for example, the fact that after the fake presidential elections in Belarus in August, 2020, Putin supported self-proclaimed and self-appointed dictator Lukashenka not only morally, in having congratulated him with re-election, but also financially. To sum up, we can simultaneously observe the political diversification and convergence of the countries in two imagined communities which are also the two geopolitical and cultural regions, that is, “Europe” and “Russian world” (Eurasia, East Slavic civilization). In addition to these two imagined communities, it is also important to remember a third imagined community, which exists in the virtual space: the virtual to-be-restored USSR.

Chapter 2. Question and Methodology (Including “the Problem Constructed”)

As mentioned in the **Introduction** and **Literature review**, there is a constellation of factors that makes us wonder why socialism is so attractive, both to those who experienced it more than thirty years ago and to those who have never experienced it. So, why are people so nostalgic for the USSR? Taking into account recent political developments, we can assume that the restoration of the USSR is already taking place in two different dimensions: the political dimension (in a form of different political, military, and economic alliances in Eurasia) and the virtual dimension (on the Internet where people express their aspirations and opinions concerning the future to-be-restored USSR). Entering this critical conversation, my work posits the following *research question*: What are the nostalgic visions of the USSR found online, depending on the post-Soviet social, economic and political circumstances of nostalgic subjects? Given that every former republic of the Soviet Union experienced socialism in a particular way (Nadkarni & Shevchenko 2004; Klumbité, 2009, 2010), is it possible to first trace locally significant reference points of nostalgia for the studied countries (Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine) that would in turn reflect a “locally specific” character of post-Soviet nostalgia in these countries today? Secondly, is it also possible to identify the historical, political, and cultural events, as well as peculiar local features that could contribute to this distinctiveness of post-Soviet nostalgia? What are those reference points (things that evoke post-Soviet nostalgia most of all)? Is it possible to find some proof that post-Soviet nostalgia is the reaction to globalization in the sense that the countries now see more value in their unique paths and their pasts while facing “Americanization” (Lee, 2013)? Is there enough reason to talk about the rehabilitation of the "restorative nostalgia" that Boym (2001) talked about, given that there are so many who want to restore the USSR and so many versions of what a restored and/or renewed

USSR should be? Is it theoretically meaningful to describe the online communion of the post-Soviet nostalgic subjects which participate in multiple post-Soviet nostalgic groups in terms of an imagined community (Anderson, 2006)?

2.1. General Principles of Organizing My Research

My methodology includes an online ethnography which is comprised of participant observation and in-depth interviews with 22 participants of digital communities. In addition, an important methodological aspect of my work is the attention to post-Soviet nostalgic poetry and memes available online¹³. Thus, among my methods, I can list discourse-analysis of poetry and memes as integral to my project. I want to clarify that I did not undertake an artistic analysis of these cultural artefacts; rather, I systematized and compared the main themes of the nostalgic poetry and memes found in the nostalgic fora.

Before obtaining permission from the ethics board to conduct my research, I already had been a participant in some nostalgic fora on Facebook. There I mostly surveyed the character and quality of posted materials and I often “liked” the posts which contained images of things owned by almost everybody in the former USSR. For example, many posts were dedicated to the Soviet school uniform (See **Figure 2**), which many nostalgic subjects find highly aesthetic, while for me, this school uniform was a rather sad experience. More specifically, for girls the uniform was a brown wool dress with a black apron for regular days and a white apron for holidays. As I have found out recently, this style was copied from the uniform of high school students in Tsarist Russia.

¹³ I presented my analysis of these manifestations of the post-Soviet nostalgia in the conference “Life After the Fall: Ruins in the Literary and Cultural Imaginary” held by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ottawa on February 28-March 1, 2020. My presentation was titled “Ruins of the Soviet Civilization in Online Images and Poetry: Nostalgia for the Soviet Past as a Failed Project of Modernity” (February 29, 2020).



Figure 2. An Ordinary Soviet School uniform for Girls and Boys. Photo credit: © Vyacheslav Argenberg / Вячеслав Аргенберг¹⁴

Anecdotally, my own aprons were stitched by my mother from guipure and they were extremely beautiful and unique, although very simple models of them were available in the stores.

Moreover, a girl's uniform included a lace collar and lace cuffs that often got dirty. My collar was also unique because it was a hand-made Vologda lace. However, those brown dresses were absolutely impractical: they were very hot for the summer and cold for the winter time, as well as uncomfortable to wear because of the wool fabric. Against the background of the common

14

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/36/%D0%A1%D0%A1%D0%A1%D0%A0%2C_1986%2C_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%94%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%83%2C_%D0%A1%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F_%D1%88%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B0%2C_%D0%A8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B8%2C_%D0%A4%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%8F_%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B0%2C_Soviet_school%2C_Soviet_Union.jpg - Cropped photo. Access: 2021-12-13.

admiration of the Soviet school uniform, I became aware that the lived reality behind these dresses was not in tune with popular views of nostalgic subjects. Importantly, it was even more surprising to see the reactions of the other participants of the forum when I expressed my opinion. They doubted that I had this specific Soviet experience at all. In response to them, I posted my own picture at the age of 8 in my “holiday” ultra -aesthetic uniform with the star of the young Octobrist on my chest from the board of honour (there were such boards in the Soviet schools where the portraits of the students with the highest grades were displayed) (**Figure 3**). The participants of the forum unanimously reacted to my photo saying that they did not see that my uniform caused me a lot of suffering: rather, I was looking like an absolutely happy Soviet child. In this manner, I conducted a preliminary investigation of many nostalgic fora on Facebook where I am doing most of my social networking activities.



Figure 3. My Fancy “Holiday” Soviet School Uniform with the Octobrist Badge on the Apron, Worn at School on Special Occasions

When I received permission from the ethics board of the University of Ottawa to start my research, the mode of my participation in the different fora was mostly the same: I “liked” some posts and rarely commented on the publications.

With time, I started building my ethnographic diary, which I organized as a bi-monthly report on all the significant events, including my attempts to contact the administration of the

fora, their reaction to my request, attempts to contact potential participants, their responses, and the reasoning for rejections to participate, or on the contrary, the agreement to participate.

Further, I also noted some interesting events in particular fora under observation, such as conflicts among the participants, and subsequent conflict resolutions. To explain this part of my methodology, I provide an example of an entry in my ethnographic diary and I also provide the official message of gratitude written by the editor of the Internet resource that used my interview with a member of their community, for self-promotion purposes:

Dear comrades! We are grateful to you for your participation in September of the Special¹⁵ 2017th year in the work of our community “PEOPLE OF THE COMMUNISTS’ COUNTRY.” The gratitude to you is also expressed in the synoptic post for September: https://vk.com/public121099997?w=wall-121099997_6461

We will be pleased to fruitfully and usefully cooperate with you in the future.

With great respect - the editor of the community

Osokina Svetlana Vladimirovna (dated November 1st, 2017).

This message was a token of gratitude for the interview conducted on September 23rd, 2017 with the former KGB major Vladimir Matveevich Sidorov. Although I found Galina Makeeva (his comrade) and through her, Vladimir Sidorov, in the forum “Our Motherland is the USSR”, they participate in their own community called “People of the Communists’ Country” where they published our interview.

When I joined the Marxist club associated with one of the fora under my observation, where the books of Maurice Cornforth, Karl Marx, and other classics of Marxism were read and discussed, I was conveying the character of the discussions in those meetings in my diaries because there was a lot of interesting literature that was mentioned, and many important ideas

¹⁵ It was the year of the 100th anniversary of the Great October revolution.

were expressed. Below, I am citing an entry from my ethnographic diary for March-April, 2018. The specific entry contains a summary of activities for January-February, 2018, in order to demonstrate the character of its content:

During the sessions of the Marxist circle, which is a branch of the community organized by Vyacheslav from Chisinau, we read the chapters of Maurice Cornforth's book *Dialectic Materialism* and listened to the presentations. Usually, we have three presentations per session. The first session took place on January 14th. Since then, I attended all the sessions: on January 21st, January 28th, February 4th, February 11th, February 18th, February 25th, March 4th.

On February 25th, during our session which took place starting at 5 pm (according to Moscow time), and at 9 am (according to Ottawa time), our chairman Pavel said that he read an article of one of the leftist journalists who wrote about Marxist circles; this journalist even mentioned our community and provided an electronic link to it. Also, he mentioned some Marxist circles which did not function anymore. The journalist tried to show that the principles of the Lenin-style socialist work and propaganda organized as Marxist circles are alive. Pavel was really pleased with this.

In his interview, Vyacheslav said that although in 5 years this online socialist activity may become illegal, they hope for the popularization of their community, and for going out at the "international stage/arena" thinking that I may be of help with this.

Gabriella Coleman (2014), in her book, describing the Anonymous online community, emphasized that the participants of this community were interested in cooperation with journalists. They had a few "regular journalists" whom they specifically contacted with some valuable information. Coleman writes that they even phoned Forbes reporter Parmy Olson to share a valuable data set with her while she was sleeping (Colman, 2014, p. 250). One of the Anonymous assumed that this sharing may be an encouragement for her to write her book: "maybe it will push her to write her book." Coleman points out that if they gave this information to her, her own book would have come out a year earlier, but they did not consider her candidature, because she was a researcher, and not a journalist.

As far as I understand, the Foundations of Marxism approved me as a popularizer of their activity "on the international arena."

My analytical notes in the ethnographic diary are mostly in English, while some quotations from the conversations are in Russian. Moreover, in this ethnographic practice, I got the chance to observe the dynamics of the fora's growth. More precisely, I deemed it important to trace how fast their membership was growing and try to understand what were the reasons for the

significant growth of some nostalgic groups, while others had different degrees of growth, as their numbers remained stabilized or some even lost participants.

Overall, I have conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with the participants of the same fora that I participated in, or observed (See **Appendix 1** for the Interview Guide in Russian and in English). The interviews contained 18 questions that were related to a few main topics. Some of the questions include: *Why did a person prefer a particular Internet platform or forum to others? Why is he/she nostalgic for the USSR? What kind of nostalgic visions of the USSR does he/she have now? What was the most valuable aspect of the USSR? And whether the restoration of the USSR is possible and in what format?* I was interested in understanding whether, according to my interviewees, if all of the internauts have a right to express their opinion on the USSR, or is this something that needs to depend on age? That is, do younger internauts have to be deprived of the right of expression, or is this a fundamentally erroneous practice? Also, I asked about the character of communication on these fora, and specifically whether the communication is similar to the friendly “Soviet-kitchen style”, or “sincere”, or not, given that it is technologically mediated.

All my research participants received an official invitation to participate, approved by the ethics board of the University of Ottawa. The administrations of the fora I conducted observations in, were also sent requests formulated in accordance with the guidelines approved by the ethics board (Please, see a sample of the letter I sent them in the **Appendix 2**).

I conducted my interviews through different ways: on Skype (or similar video chat technologies) which are embedded in the modern social networking platforms, or in chat modes, which were preferred by the majority of my informants from VKontakte. Chat mode allows pauses for tea breaks, and in a few cases (for example, with Ilya from Ufa and Alexey Ixanov

from Hannover) my interviews in chat mode lasted for 6 hours or more. Also, I had to accommodate the time zone of my informants because many of them were from other continents (I had two informants from Australia and many informants from Europe) with considerable time differences. For example, the time difference with Ufa was 9 hours, so I often had to stay awake all night long in order to conduct my interviews.

Sometimes I also had to meet with a few informants in the virtual space more than once. For example, we conducted a long interview in chat mode with Vladimir Sidorov, so that this interview could be used by the non-registered Communist party which he represents for promotion of their activities online, and then I met with him again on Skype and conducted another interview which lasted for three hours.

I want to note that my voice recorder failed twice during the interviews. The first time it happened was during my interview with Denis from Saint Petersburg. At that time, I could not record the interview at all, and we tried a lot of alternative modes of voice recording but nothing worked well, although I made detailed notes of our conversation. Denis kindly answered the questions in a written form, but the answers were not so well-elaborated. The second time that my voice recorder failed was when I interviewed Alena from Minsk. Fortunately, I managed to restore the 45-minutes interview (first part), and then Alena kindly agreed to record the second part of the interview when I bought a new voice recorder. Later, I found out that it was possible to borrow voice recorders from the university. Some informants like Dmitri Ustinov and Anatoly from Bulgaria filled in questionnaires which coincided in their structure with the interview plans.

2.2. The Characteristics of My Informants, and Why Their Region of Origin Is Important

Neringa Klumbitė (2009) emphasizes that nostalgia for the Soviet past is a biographical phenomenon: those who did not feel alterity during the days of the USSR, and who after its demise became marginalized, feel nostalgia for the USSR most of all. However, nostalgia does not relate to poverty unconditionally: there are some poor people in Lithuania who were tortured by the Soviet regime as participants of the nationalist resistance movement, so they are not nostalgic, and there are some prosperous and successful intellectuals, who are still nostalgic for the USSR (Klumbitė, 2009, p. 101). In short, it is not only neoliberalism, but some biographical facts which make a person nostalgic. I contend that the region of the USSR where the Soviet identity of a particular person was formed plays a significant role in how he or she remembers the Soviet past. For example, my mother was born in Vilnius in 1951, and she remembers conversations with her aunt that there were bars in the Lithuanian capital almost immediately after the war where beer and crayfish were served, buns with raisins were available because her aunt was a regular in those bars. Meanwhile in Krasnoyarsk, the Siberian city where my mother's family moved to in 1956, people did not eat anything except for potatoes and cabbage. The Baltic region (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) was always privileged in the USSR in terms of prosperity of its population: Armin Bohnet and Norbert Penkaitis (1988) who provide the statistics from 1970 to 1984 state the following:

It is clear that the per capita national incomes in the Latvian SSR and the Estonian SSR are more or less equal, and that both exceed those of the Lithuanian SSR and the RSFSR by some 15%; this can be explained by the higher industrial production levels in the Latvian and the Estonian republics. The agricultural output of the Lithuanian SSR, on the other hand, is almost twice that of the RSFSR and significantly higher than that of the Estonian and Latvian republics. Per capita state expenditure in the most important areas of state activity - namely, economic development, education, health, and other social services - is significantly higher in the Baltic republics than in the RSFSR. These data alone do not determine the standard of living, but they do constitute one vital component

thereof. The economic data presented in Table 1 show that, on the basis of a per capita analysis, the economies of the Latvian and Estonian republics are considerably stronger than those of the RSFSR and Lithuania. The differences in state expenditure, however, constitute a more serious problem, because state expenditure is significantly higher in all three Baltic republics than in the RSFSR and the Union (Bohnet & Penkaitis, 1988, p. 35).

Neringa Klumbitė (2009) mentions that for her Lithuanian informants (Lithuania is one of the Baltic countries) eating meat (and not just bones) under socialism was a sign of prosperity in comparison to the present neoliberal situation in Lithuania where many people do not have access to meat, while the neoliberal authorities claim that under socialism Lithuanians ate only bones. In his Master's dissertation dedicated to meat consumption in the former USSR republics for the period 1985-1988, Marc Legault (1992) states that "the Baltic republics both produced and consumed large quantities of meat relative to other regions" (Legault, 1992, iv).

Therefore, the post-Soviet neoliberal crash is felt much more acutely there in comparison to other regions of the former USSR. I must underscore that "region of origin" means rather that place where a person spent his youth, and not the place of birth: I have a few informants in my sample, who moved from their places of birth to other regions of the USSR: for example, Artyom from Melbourne was born in Nizhnekamsk (the city in Tatarstan, "Russian oil refining capital"), but spent his youth in Ukraine.

Below I am presenting short characteristics of each of my research participants (the age of participants is given on the date of the interview that took place between September 2017 and April 2018; the real names of some of them are preserved with their permission)¹⁶.

¹⁶ See Appendix 2, Example of the Consent Form, p. 268. The issue of anonymity, pseudonyms and the possibility to use real names in my study was discussed in detail with all the participants. The participants chose their pseudonyms themselves.

First, I am introducing those encountered by me on VKontakte:

Igor Shapovalenko from Lugansk is an amateur poet aged 44, he is a mathematician according to his specialty, a member of the Communist party of Ukraine, and an Orthodox Christian. Igor is an author of multiple nostalgic poems, has a few collections of poetry published, and he loves theater. We conducted an interview on Skype.

Andrey from Saint Petersburg is a 62-year-old PhD in engineering who emigrated to Germany in 1998 due to criminal outburst during “The Unruly Nineties” in order to save his family; at the time of the interview (which we conducted in chat mode), he worked in a research institute. He was going to retire soon, and we discussed *the* difference in life expectancy between Germany and Russia. In Russia, the life expectancy of a man is around 60 years old, and life after this age is devalued for men. Andrey was rather pessimistic in relation to long life expectancy in Germany: he stated that many Germans live the remnants of their lives in a vegetative state in the houses for seniors, thus, for him, long life expectancy is a disadvantage. Andrey is a supporter of Leo Tolstoy’s social ideas and an amateur scholar of the Marxist theory. Overall, Andrey characterizes Marxism as follows: “Marxism is a very aggressive teaching, good for taking power. But as a guide for building a new society, it is not good. I'm not even talking about blatant blunders, like socializing wives. The philosophy of Marxism is not just poor; it does not exist at all”.

My next participant, Ilya, is a big fan of Tolkien, a PhD in philosophy from Ufa, Bashkortostan, aged 35. He is an author of a book on the archaization of the Russian regions published in 2016. We conducted an interview in chat *mode*. In his interview, he referred me to multiple authors and works of scientific fiction where the Communist-like society is depicted.

Ilya shares Manuel Castells's ideas on the downfall of the Soviet civilization as a result of information technology lag.

The next person from the same discussion circle as Ilya and Andrey was a kindergarten teacher and tram driver from Saint Petersburg, aged presumably between 50 and 60, because she mentioned changing her career in the 1990s. She may be a colonel of the Federal Service of Security (according to her discourse). She did not want to be cited, because everything that was said to me “was said in a private conversation”. I will not quote her without her consent in my “analysis chapters”, but I cannot help referring to my experience with her in the “methodology chapter” using a nickname (Olga) and listing the main points of her discourse (extensive, two-week-long discussion through non-instantaneous messaging).

My next research participant is Alexey “Homo-Sovieticus” Ladyshkin, aged 31, an IT professional from Vladimir. We conducted an interview in chat *mode*. Alexey attracted me with his nickname (Homo Sovieticus) and avatar (hammer and sickle) in his profile on VKontakte. I thought that he was a follower of Alexander Zinoviev's ideas on Homo Sovieticus¹⁷, but Alexey assured me that his nickname and avatar are the expressions of his social position, and not the affiliation with a particular influencer. Alexey demonstrated sharpness of his mind and the

¹⁷ Iurii Levada (2001) suggested the model of the “simple Soviet man” which assumes the dependence of people on the paternalistic state which penetrates all the spheres of life as “the gas substance”; I have noticed that many researchers associate the brand “Homo Sovieticus” exactly with this model. However, Alexandre Zinoviev (1981) drew an absolutely different image of “Homo Sovieticus” in his book under the same title: he described there a super-human, whose capabilities of survival under the harshest conditions are unprecedented, whose intellect exceeds the intellect of his Western counterparts, who cannot be misled by any kind of ideology and treats any kind of ideology with cynicism, while his Western counterparts are naïve and easily manipulable. The majority of the scholars make an accent on cynicism of “Homo Sovieticus”, and some of my informants who discussed Zinoviev's books with me, also made a stress on cynicism of “Homo Sovieticus”, while in reality Zinoviev described a new, more advanced type of humanity under this name. For sure, Zinoviev wrote a lot about the cynicism and bad qualities of the Soviet people. He knew about them better than others: it was his official duty under the USSR to read and analyse anonymous slander of some Soviet citizens against others. Nevertheless, he spoke of the military prowess of Soviet people, of their ability to overcome severe crises and of their intelligence as unparalleled. If you look for the equivalent of this human race in history, according to Zinoviev, “Homo Sovieticus” is rather the Spartan, and not that wrecked and hesitant, non-initiative, lamenting and miserable somebody described by Levada.

refinement of formulations. For example, when we discussed the possibility of the death penalty for corruption, and I said that he proposes to deprive a corrupt official of his whole life for theft, which is unfair, he replied: "Not his whole life, but only what is left of it!"

Another informant found on VKontakte is Alexey Travnikov, a father of three sons, aged 44, from Saint-Petersburg. He is a business manager in a private enterprise who earlier worked as an artisan making miniature models of ships. We conducted an interview on Skype. In his interview Alexey talked with me extensively about "The Unruly Nineties", and about the current frightening criminal situation in Russia, while in the calm Soviet times a policeman was needed "only to ask for directions". Alexey was very kind to borrow some equipment from his sons (a microphone and some other equipment) in order to be able to answer my questions. During our interview we were disturbed by the fire alarm test in my building of residence.

Denis from Saint Petersburg, aged 42, is a businessman and amateur historian who published his first book on the Great Patriotic War recently. I experienced technical difficulties while conducting an interview with him: during our interview on Skype my audio recorder was out of order and we unsuccessfully used multiple technologies, different online programmes to fix the problem; we had an interesting talk but I could not record it; later Denis completed a questionnaire with the same questions as we discussed during the unrecorded interview.

Vladimir Matveevich Sidorov, (he passed away in October 2020), lived in Moscow, and was a former KGB major (he served in KGB till 1989). He was an activist with the non-registered Communist-oriented party of laborers, aged approximately 70. He believed that he and his two comrades saved Russia from looting by Soros having organized mass protests of workers in Novgorod in 1989. Vladimir Matveevich was proud of the fact that once his paper on national mentality (which was written as a course assignment in the school for the KGB officers) received

a special prize. He loved Germany, spoke German, and visited Bavaria on many occasions. I conducted an interview with him in chat mode, and on the next day we had a 3-hours interview on Skype.

Alexey Ixanov, aged 32, is a student from Hannover; he is an immigrant from Russia (originally – from Kaliningrad). He is a Communist, but Alexey does not belong to any party officially. Our interview in chat lasted for 6 hours. Alexey impressed me with his level of the Russian language. All my participants from the socialist circles, being well-educated people, demonstrated a high level of proficiency in written Russian, but Alexey was unmatched. For online communication it is an extremely rare phenomenon.

Vyacheslav from Chisinau (Moldova), aged 31, is a former poker player, who currently works in a supermarket; he is a founder of the group “The foundations of Marxism” on VKontakte, married, has a cat named Martin (the cat was present during the interview on Skype). Vyacheslav invited me to study Marx under supervision of “experienced comrades”; I accepted this invitation, and for two years (starting from January 2018), I was reading the classics of Marxism, having completed two volumes of “The Capital” by Karl Marx, a book of Maurice Cornforth on dialectic materialism, and a few articles written by Lenin and Mao Zedong in a Marxist online circle which dissolved only recently.

Dmitry Ustinov is a radical leftist, aged 30, who believes that the New Economic Policy (1922-1928) was the best time for Russia. He is a Marxist-progressist who considers the USSR a failed attempt of building socialism, and uses Karl Marx’s portrait as his avatar. He completed a questionnaire.

The following group of participants was recruited by me on Facebook:

“The Scientist” from Lithuania, aged between 50 and 60 is unemployed, with degrees in engineering and pedagogy, and a former university lecturer. He has a daughter born in 1993 who lives in England. We conducted an interview on Skype. I know his exact location, but he asked me not to disclose his identity including his city of residence, because there are “not so many people like him in Lithuania”. He is an ethnic Lithuanian.

Igors Ivanovs from Riga is a 57-year-old construction worker, and has a 7-year-old son. He is conservative in his views, and is anti-gay. Igors is an ethnic Russian whose many generations of ancestors were born in Latvia. He is fluent in Latvian, and initially was looking for friends and companions by communication on the Latvian-language online platforms, but then he felt that he is “attracted by everything Russian”. We had an interview on Skype.

Anatoly is a car mechanic born in Dnepropetrovsk (Ukraine) who lives in Bulgaria, aged 44. He completed a questionnaire. I asked him about post-Soviet nostalgia in Bulgaria. He believes that only the older generation of Bulgarians is prone to post-Soviet nostalgia: the youth are not nostalgic.

Maria Gennadievna from Donetsk-Kiev (Ukraine) was an accountant in medicine in her country of origin; now she lives in Canada. She was born on December 11th, 1971. We conducted an interview on Skype. Maria Gennadievna is a critic of the USSR.

Alena from Minsk (Belarus), aged 36, is a mother of a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, a translator, and a Polish language instructor. We organized our interview on Skype. During our interview my audio recorder failed, and I had to pay 100 CAD in order to restore the first part of

the interview which lasted for 45 minutes. Then, Alena was very kind to devote another day to my project, and we recorded another part of the interview with the aid of the new audio recorder.

Artyom from Melbourne immigrated to Australia from Kharkov (Ukraine) in February 2017, married, and has a son. He was born in Nizhnekamsk (the city in Tatarstan, “Russian oil refining capital”) in 1976. He is a critic of the USSR, and when he joined the group “We are made in the USSR” on Facebook, he had to answer two questions which are now obligatory for all the new members because the cases of hooliganism are getting more frequent: “Do you love the USSR?” He replied “No”. The second question was: “If you don’t love the USSR, why do you want to join the group?” He replied: “I just want to look at people who are nostalgic for the long-ago dead and miserable state.” Surprisingly, his application was accepted on his second attempt to join, when he did not answer the questions, just submitted the application. And moderators did not pay attention to his avatar image: it’s a symbolic representation of the victims of Maidan (“The Heavenly hundred”) – a new symbol of Ukrainian struggle against Russians.

Alexei-Instructor from Cyprus (originally – Kyiv, Ukraine) was born in 1976. He is a lawyer who currently works as a diving instructor; Alexei is married and has two sons. Alexei saw Leonid Brezhnev in person and shared with me a very sentimental nostalgic story related to this. We had our interview on Skype.

Yekaterina from the Arab Emirates (originally from Odessa, Ukraine) was born on June 28th, 1974; she is a stay-home mother married to a sailor, once she was writing a PhD thesis on marine commerce. Yekaterina is a daughter of a former KGB officer. She was interviewed by me on Skype.

Yevgeniya (Zhanna) from Sidney (Australia), in her 70s, is originally from Ukraine; she worked as a sports trainer at school and at a factory; she is very religious, active in her Orthodox community in Australia, and lives with her adult children (two daughters). Zhanna is her real name, while Yevgeniya is the Orthodox name. She was interviewed by me on Skype. Yevgeniya is “stuck” in Australia, because she feels that after 2014 it is unsafe in Ukraine. At the time of our interview in 2018, she had lived in Australia for 5 years. She has a brother in Ukraine, so she knows all the current events that happen in her native country.

The following group of participants was recruited by me on Odnoklassniki (“Classmates”):

Sova (a nickname), a lawyer from Saint-Petersburg, originally from Donetsk (Ukraine), was born in 1968; she is a Russian patriot, who described her political ideal as ‘monarchy’; Sova has an adult daughter who is studying the history of art. We conducted an interview on Skype.

Sova’s husband, also a lawyer, aged 44, lives “between two countries – Russia and Ukraine”; he is also a ‘monarchist’; when the spouses were asked whom they see as the best candidate for the Russian throne, they hesitated but hinted that Putin is OK in this role (interview on Skype, separate but in presence of his wife; he came home later after I interviewed his wife).

Natalya from Toronto, a double-immigrant (from Donetsk (Ukraine) to Ashdod (Israel), and from Israel to Canada), aged 35, is a mother of two children (interview on “Odnoklassniki” *video call*). I talked with her for about an hour, and our discussion was focused on a comparison of safety in the USSR, modern Ukraine, Israel and Canada.

2.3. Generalized Sociological Profile of My Participants

This section is dedicated to the generalized profile of my informants. Some characteristics may be a clue to understanding their position.

- **Gender:** in my sample, there are 16 men and 6 women (73% and 27% respectively); the bias towards men is explained by the fact that many of my informants are socialists with a pronounced political position, and they are easier to make contact with. The socialist groups that I took my informants from had more men than women.
- **Age:** as it was explained in the **Literature Review**, some scholars see a relation between nostalgia and belonging to the older generations. Also, in the nostalgic fora some individuals are denied the right to speak out about the USSR and the Soviet past on the grounds of their young age (if they are born later than in 1985 when perestroika began, they are considered too young). I have pointed at the liminal meaning of the year 1975 as a year of birth that allows for all the three stages of the traditional Soviet socialization (Octobrists, young Pioneers, Komsomol members), that is why I am grouping my participants in clusters according to two principles: first, I take the year 1975 as liminal: 13 individuals from my sample were born before or in 1975, while 9 individuals were born later. If I take the year 1985 as liminal, only 4 individuals were born later than this year, but all of my participants were born before the demise of the USSR.
- **Country of origin:** all my informants were born before the demise of the USSR. Thus, they all have the USSR as the country of origin. However, it is crucial to mention the region or republic of origin within the former USSR that are currently known as countries, because the populations of these different regions and republics within the USSR had different experiences of socialism. Therefore, it is important to mention the countries in order to understand the opinions of my participants: 8 participants are from Russia (36%), 10 participants are from Ukraine (45%), 1 from Belarus (0.5%), 1 from Latvia (0.5%), one from Lithuania (0.5%), and one from Moldova (0.5%).

- **Living abroad vs staying at home:** many of my research participants have emigrated from their countries of origin, namely, 11 participants live abroad (50%) and 11 participants stay at home (50%). A married couple, Sova and her husband, are from Donetsk, but they live in Saint-Petersburg, and I count them as those who emigrated, although Sova's husband has business in both countries (in Ukraine and Russia).
- **Marital status:** 13 individuals are married, 5 individuals are single, 1 is a widow, and I did not manage to find out the marital status of 4 individuals.
- **Having children:** 15 individuals from my sample mentioned that they have children, and even talked about their children. For instance, Sova and her husband are proud that their daughter is a specialist on arts; the informant whose nickname is Scientist from Lithuania told me a long story about his daughter's disease, his efforts to teach her to walk anew under desperate conditions; and mentioned that she lives in England.
- **Being nostalgic vs being a critic of the USSR:** the overwhelming majority (20) of my research participants are nostalgic for the USSR, while 2 of my informants are critics of the USSR. Of course, there are people with a Soviet background, who are neutral about the topic of nostalgia for the USSR, but I looked for my respondents in specialized nostalgic fora, and although many got there because they were recruited by automatic algorithms, I focused on people who showed an interest in the topic of nostalgia.
- **Religious vs non-religious:** Under "religious" I mean that they are not ardent followers of a particular confession, but rather those who are tolerant towards religion. The fact is I did not ask about belonging to a particular denomination, but given the answers of my participants concerning religion, I can group them as follows: 8 individuals said that they were religious (36%), 7 are atheists (32%), 7 did not self-identify clearly (32%).

All these variables may be important, because each of them may relate to nostalgia: according to Davis (1979), men were more prone to nostalgia than women; according to Mazur (2015) and Boele (2011), representatives of older generations are more nostalgic for the USSR; the country of origin is also significant: we may expect from those born in Russia, nostalgia for the imperial grandeur associated with the USSR. Living abroad or staying at home may also be a factor of nostalgia: those living far away from their homeland may demonstrate more proneness to nostalgia. Being married and having children may also be a factor of nostalgia, because people often compare their investments in children and family under capitalism to what was available for families with children in the USSR. Although I anticipated that participants in my research would be nostalgic individuals, to know the alternative view on the Soviet past is also instructive, thus, to get the opinions of the critics of the USSR is beneficial for the entirety of the picture. The relationship between the Soviet state and religion was controversial, therefore, it is important to know how religiosity reconciles with nostalgia for the USSR.

2.4. Online Ethnographies That Navigated My Research as Guides

I have familiarized myself with Nancy Baym's (2000) project on online communities of soap-opera fans and Gabriella Coleman's (2014) work on Anonymous, both of which constitute good examples of online ethnographies.

Baym (2000) provides us with concrete criteria that allow us to identify a unique culture of a particular online forum. She teaches us what exactly makes an online forum a community (among other features, it is a shared sense of humour of the forum participants, commonly understood language which may be unique for this community, and so on). Baym also shows that some form of intimate relationality emerges in these spaces to such an extent that the participants share their very personal events and sufferings, such as information about miscarriages, for

example. Thus, in these virtual spaces, participants also expect communal or social support; and they receive it from other members. Although Baym's observations about the community aspect of virtual spaces are important, her findings are not perfectly applicable to today's online communities because in those days when she conducted her research (the mid-1990s) the Internet fora were comparatively small, including no more than a few hundreds or maximum a few thousands of people, who often lived in the same area/city/town and could meet off-line in order to maintain this feeling of comradery. Nowadays, online communities are much larger and they include hundreds of thousands of participants who inhabit different countries or continents.

Coleman's (2014) work demonstrates how critically sensitive the role of an online researcher can be: in Anonymous, Coleman often was in a situation where there was a temptation to participate in illegal activities, and since the researcher already enjoys the trust of her subjects of research, it is very difficult to draw a line between those subjects and herself. One of the most intriguing aspects is the fact that she communicated with "the traitor" who gave the most prominent participants of Anonymous to the FBI. Coleman was friendly with him. This situation demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining a balance between involvement in the affairs of her subjects of research and keeping a level of distance in order to pursue her academic goals which was a critical aspect in Coleman's work.

The works of Baym (2000), Coleman (2014) and others helped me to draw a portrait of a "classical online community". For my analysis, it was essential to understand if those communities that I am dealing with fit this classical image and have features of what other researchers were studying in the recent past. Thus, my next section is the summary that contextualizes what a "classical online community" looks like.

It is hard to expect from the modern-day online communities the same characteristics that were typical a decade or two ago. The bulk of research that exists on online communities since the early 2000s describes a particular kind of sociality that we can call “a classical online community”. The main difference between those old-style communities and today’s fora is rooted in the accessibility of the Internet which allows much bigger numbers of people to join online groups of their preference, while two decades ago only “chosen” people had such an access. At this point, it is important to provide a short historicization of how online communities used to look like, in order to use this contextualization as a backdrop, when studying the traits of the communities I will be looking at in this work.

Nancy Baym conducted one of the first studies of online communities which took place in the 1990s. She studied one of the soap opera fan groups on Usenet which was called r.a.t.s. In her analysis, Baym chose the word “community” in order to emphasize the cordial relations that emerged between the participants of the discussion group. The word “community” certainly has an emotional aspect (Baym, 2000, p. 2). Baym noticed that the term “virtual community” became a common parlance by the mid-1990s thanks to Rheingold’s (1993) book. It was difficult for researchers at this point to find an academic work that would describe the specific characteristics of such communities and that would explain how they functioned. The majority of authors that used this notion, for example, Cherny and Reba Weise (1996), presented their autobiographical accounts of online life or speculated on the topic to what extent the online communities threatened the existence of offline communities (Porter, 1997).

Baym undertook an ethnography of “talk”. This study is close to the work of Nancy Ries (1997) on Russian talk in its identification of genres of talk as the main research strategy. However, the Russian talk and the soap opera fans’ talk online have totally different genres.

Specifically, Baym analyzes meta-discourse that is produced by online group participants over the talk which is the main content of soap operas. Pointing to the essential features of how soap operas are made, Baym draws our attention to the fact that they are mostly comprised of dialogues in the familiar interior settings between a few people who are interconnected by multiple ties and whose destinies are intertwined. For example, people who live in a fictional small town (and not in a megalopolis) and who are mostly middle-class, white, and the main characters are women. It is important to note that those who tend to be overly critical of soap operas often say that there is no action in soaps, while the fans of this genre believe that talk is already an action (Baym, 2000, p. 57). In this sense, fans share the insights of the British philosophers of language John L. Austin, who was among the first thinkers who stated that the word is a mode of performing an action (Austin, 1962), and John R. Searle, who elaborated Austin's ideas in his famous book *Speech Acts* (1969). Indeed, a lot is said about performativity of the act of uttering by Asif Agha (2007, p. 55-64), who demonstrates that some utterances have the power of creating social facts, as in the example of the words of the priest "I now pronounce you husband and wife" which solidifies a new unit of society that is, a family that is a social fact that endures well beyond the moment of utterance. Utterances therefore create new identities, statuses, and intersubjective relations.

In this context, Baym (2000) also explains that communication in the online discussion groups should be understood as "talk" and not as correspondence because it is perceived as talk by the participants themselves, although the conversations between the discussion group members might have an asynchronous character (unlike in chat rooms where people talk in a real time mode). Accordingly, "Despite the similarities to writing, r.a.t.s. participants experience their own interaction as 'talk' ... Although r.a.t.s. participants do describe themselves as 'reading'

rather than ‘listening,’ they characterize their own messages as ‘sharing’ or ‘expressing’ and never as ‘writing.’ Like speech, Usenet is interactive and contextualized” (Baym, 2000, p. 13). Further, Baym points out that communication in the online discussion groups is a hybrid of interpersonal and mass communication that creates a possibility for establishing a community. She dedicates her research to understanding how the participants of the online community under discussion use these structural resources “to create the practices, norms, relationships, and identities that come to define the group” (Baym, 2000, p. 14).

Baym also contends that it is possible to understand a soap opera fans’ community from three different viewpoints: as an online community connected through the network and thus technologically mediated; as an audience, which indicates a community organized around a text; and finally, as a community of practice. Baym heavily relies on the practice approach in studying online communities, that is, the approach that assumes that structures of any community are instantiated and recreated by daily habitual practices of its members. It is critical to also note that special importance in the context of this approach is allotted to language activities. In fact, methodologically, the practice approach draws on the method of discourse analysis. The practice approach was originally developed to examine “geographically grounded communities”; yet in order to understand the online communities, the best way is to study their language practices because language reflects the meanings of geography, of institutions, and artefacts taken for granted by the offline communities. In short, Baym analyzes verbal, and to a lesser extent, non-verbal communicative practices in terms of the soap opera discussion group (Baym, 2000, p. 21-24).

Choosing specific practices for examining such virtual communities is a significant and challenging process. Baym realized this challenge, especially in her approach to talk in e.r.a.t.s.

Language and discourse in this study are framed in different genres and there are diverse perspectives on what is discussed by different participants. In addition, talk is almost always characterized as friendly, and finally the interaction is seen as fun and funny (Baym, 2000, p. 27). Taking into account these aspects of the daily practices of the r.a.t.s., Baym has chosen to scrutinize the genres of posts, strategies and topics of disagreement, and humour in this online group.

In her recent book on mediated communication, Baym (2015) elaborates on the notion of online community (Baym, 2015, p. 82-100). She points out that the idea of distinguishing between community and society originates from Ferdinand Tönnis who argued that community was a primary condition for developing close social bonds. So how is this point of departure productive in understanding the navigation tools of YouTube that direct their multi-million users to different “communities”? Can a community be comprised of millions of members? According to Baym (2015), an online community has five basic qualities. First of all, an online community is a shared space. The opponents of the idea that a community can be located online, stress that there is no shared geography. However, the participants of online communication perceive the situation differently:

...people who are involved in online groups often think of them as shared places. The feeling that online groups meeting on software and hardware platforms constitute “spaces” is integral to understanding the language often used to describe the Internet. Consider the term “cyberspace” coined by science fiction author William Gibson... (Baym, 2015, p. 84).

Moreover, the notion of space is particularly applicable in theories about video games, such as *Second Life* in which the players create their own spaces to inhabit (buildings, offices, parks).

The same is applicable to textual groups, one example being the official board for fans at the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Baym, 2015, p. 85).

The second criterion of an online community is shared practice, and as it is clear from *Tune In, Log On* (Baym, 2000) this sense of sharing space is mostly a discursive practice:

“Online speech communities share ways of speaking that capture the meanings that are important to them and the logics that underlie their common sensibilities. Groups share insider lingo and literacies, including acronyms, vocabulary words, genres, styles, and forms of play” (Baym, 2015, p. 85). Although Baym does not consider Twitter a community, it is still important to emphasize that its users have a common style of expression and vocabulary and they share common language practices. For instance, the expressions “epic” and “LOL” are common among them. Baym mentions that four founders of a Swedish file-sharing site, Pirate Bay, went on trial in 2009 and one of them characteristically tweeted from the courtroom to his supporters/followers “EPIC WINNING LOL,” a phrase which produced extreme support. Although they did not win the trial, they were able to create a political party - the Pirate Party whose member was elected to the European Parliament (Baym, 2015, p. 86-87). In this sense, the twitters’ use of “epic” demonstrates shared values and humour. Another example of shared practice among a particular online group is the strict following of editorial ethics by the editors of Wikipedia. Accordingly, “On Wikipedia, adherence to norms is critical to remaining an editor or rising through the editorial ranks. In his analysis of the use of the word “community” by Wikipedians, Pentzold (2011) describes Wikipedia as an “ethos-action community” committed to ideals of openness, fairness, objectivity, consensus, and following the guide-lines. No one enters the community with trust, but new editors are able to earn it by acting in accordance with that ethos” (Baym, 2015, p. 88).

A very good example of the online (and offline) community whose main feature is shared practice consisting of common projects, common argot, and a specific shared humour (“lulz” when they laugh at somebody else’s expense) is presented by Gabriella Coleman (2014) in her study of the Anonymous. Indeed, this is a community of hackers and tricksters whose “sociology is labyrinthine” (Coleman, 2014, p. 14). The Anonymous is a community of Internet hooligans who gradually became involved in political activism. Originally, their shared practices were mostly focused on having fun in targeting selected victims (people and organizations), thus demonstrating the general insecurity and anxiety in terms of being online. To put this more colloquially, these members began as the Internet “trolls” who were involved in doxing (leaking personal information such as Social Security numbers, addresses, emails, telephone numbers, personal intimate photos), and cyberattacks like DDoSs (distributed denial of service campaigns). This is particularly evident if we consider how the members of the Anonymous used a tactic “...which disrupts access to web pages by flooding them with tidal waves of requests, [that] was directed against financial institutions that had refused to process donations to WikiLeaks, including PayPal and MasterCard” (Coleman, 2014, p. 3). They organized different pranks such as ordering thousands of unpaid pizzas and taxis from particular telephones, like they did on behalf of the Church of Scientology in 2008. However, they later became involved in political protests such as Arab and African Spring (2011), the Occupy Wall Street events, and many others. Their geography became extremely diverse. As Coleman explains, this happened due to the fact that nobody could claim the brand name “the Anonymous” and its symbols, and therefore it can be used almost by anybody around the globe. Yet the Anonymous make up a community which follows a particular ethic whose main component is freedom of speech on the Internet. In this regard, Coleman notes that:

Although devilishly hard to study, Anonymous is neither wholly random nor simply chaotic. To be Anonymous means to follow a series of related principles. Anonymous follows a spirit of humorous deviance, works through diverse technical bodies (such as IRC), is built on an anti-celebrity ethic, and intervenes politically in astoundingly rich and varied ways (Coleman, 2016, p. 17).

As we see, the Anonymous, although resisting institutionalization, constitute an online community which meets the following criteria indicated by Baym: common humour (although sometimes very immoral and humiliating), common practices, common argot (using such words as lulz that originates from the better known lol), and common projects like destruction of somebody's reputation. Gradually, their activism also expanded offline.

The members of online groups that can be qualified as communities share resources and support. Online fans and hobbyist groups exemplify this in the most productive way. The members of the group often share the information. For instance, let us say that I am a member of a closed group that shares an interest in beauty products and beauty procedures. The members may turn to the group with a request: "Please, recommend a good Russian-speaking dentist in Ottawa" or "Share your opinion on a particular cosmetic procedure or indicate if it is worth this money or not?" Thus information, impressions, or experience constitute shared resources. Emotional support is another significant resource. For example, Sarah R. Brotsky and David Giles (2007) presented a study on the "pro-ana" online community. Indeed, Brotsky conducted a covert participant observation of this closed online group pretending that she was one of the women suffering from anorexia. This research was interesting in many respects, especially from the ethical point of view because in reality it was espionage, but nevertheless, the groups which promote unhealthy behaviors like anorexia, body mutilation, and suicide are often under censorship and surveillance by the state. It is therefore difficult to enter such groups and to receive the informed consent of the members to participate in any research because they disguise

themselves under nicknames and hide their real goals and identities. Considering this, Brotsky and Giles wanted to know if the community under their investigation really promoted anorexia. Their findings show that this group mostly existed to render emotional support to those whose weight is abnormally low and they could not discuss their problems with their close environment. Although some participants declared that anorexia was their life-style, the majority saw a problem in it which must be solved, and when the fictional participant embodied by Brotsky announced in the group that she was going to be treated for anorexia due to her own will and desire, and that is why she was leaving the group, many participants cordially supported her decision (Brotsky & Giles, 2007).

Another important quality of an online group that makes it a community, according to Baym, is shared identities. Shared identity is an ideal criterion applicable to those post-Soviet nostalgic online groups in my investigation in order to qualify them as communities because many of them express their identity in the title of the online group itself: “Made in the USSR”, “Born in the USSR”, and so on. Thus, group identities dictate in-group norms and codes of behaviour. Also, participants develop common strategies of how to resist outsiders. In this sense, it is especially salient and visible in pro-ana groups and those groups which promote body mutilation. As Brotsky mentions in her account of being a member of a pro-ana online group, the most cautious members immediately suspected her of being a spy, an outsider, and their tone and behavior toward her were extremely aggressive, thus costing her a lot of time and effort to gain some trust from other participants of the pro-ana community (Brotsky & Giles, 2007).

Finally, the fifth essential quality that helps us to identify an online group as a community is interpersonal relationships which develop among the members. The formation of communicative pairs is a very important “product” of being in an online community. Rheingold

stressed the significance of those interpersonal connections, pointing out that virtual communities are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). For example, Baym (2000) mentions that the members of the discussion group on soap operas from her town Champaign-Urbana in Illinois had their meetings offline (Baym, 2000, p. 155). Soap opera fans from other US cities who were members of the r.a.t.s. practiced the same social gatherings face-to-face.

In her work on the ethnography of online communities, Christine Hine (2008) emphasizes the importance of multi-sited studies, which indicates that an ethnographer should switch between virtual and real field sites. Hine presents a popular perspective, stating that an online community cannot be studied and understood without studying its offline environment:

A variety of models of ethnographic field inquiry have developed in response to cultural practices which cross between online and offline domains. Ruhleder (2000) argues that virtual and real are not separate environments, but that the two overlap and interact with one another, whilst Sade-Beck (2004) claims that ethnography which focuses only on the online cannot give more than a partial, limited understanding of the kind of issue in which an anthropologist might be interested. Wittel (2000) argues that ethnographic understanding of the Internet often requires a movement between multiple field sites, many of which may be offline... Moving between different sites and forms of data can also enable different analytic approaches to be deployed. Howard (2002) describes an approach tying together the potential of online and offline research by using social network analysis of online data to orient towards particular offline places to focus research efforts (Hine, 2008, p. 266).

I consider that this combination of online and offline research cannot be acknowledged as universally useful. Moreover, the perspective that insists on a combination of studies of both domains was prominent in the early 2000s, as seen from the works and authors mentioned by Hine. In reality, however, the Internet underwent a significant change from the early 1990s -to the early 2000s, and then later on from the early 2000s until the present (the late 2010s and the

beginning of the 2020s). What is essentially different is the access to the Internet. In the early 1990s access to the Internet was a prerogative of educated white men who were technologically savvy and who had their computers at their workplace and not at home. It was, in this way, also possible to trace the offline networks because initially the Internet was designed to serve the needs of the US military. Later, the Internet became available at universities and to be a participant of an online discussion group a person either had to be an academic worker or a student with an Internet account. In this regard, Nancy Baym's study (2000) is instructive in that the discussion group she analyzed constituted predominantly of women; however, the majority of them were not housewives, but professionals having their computers at the working place. Due to the policy of personal disclosure in the online discussion group she studied, the work places of its participants were easily identifiable. As she points out, being a participant of the online discussion group was a prerogative of the educated elite in the late 1980s-early 1990s. In this respect she cites one of her informants: "The old timers started reading r.a.t.s.a. when Usenet was a reserve of academia and other learned professions. They have built relationships and friendships, encompassing not only their time online but including physical visits to each other's homes." (Gloria, 1998 survey; Baym, 2000, p. 183).

Then the influx of people with a wide array of diverse backgrounds exploded the Internet. A person did not need to be involved in academia anymore to participate in an online discussion group. Computers became accessible not only at homes (at the time of Baym's study the demographics of her participants were as follows: mostly white, middle-aged professionals with an average income of 35 000 USD annually, having an access to the computer and the Internet from their working places), but at any place where wi-fi was available. Stated otherwise, the demographics of the Internet users have changed so dramatically since then that it is mostly

irrelevant to speak about the necessity to explore the offline environment of the online community nowadays, as it may not exist at all. In the late 1980s- early 1990s the number of the Internet users was very limited, and these people were attached to the particular physical places, geographical locations where their computers were situated. Now the number of Internet users is enormous, and their computers are portable. These early studies of Internet use, like Baym's (2000) research, or the research of Miller and Slater (2000), who combined the exploration of online and offline environments studying the internet users in Trinidad, attested a very different epoch of the existence of the Internet. Therefore, to consider an offline environment as an essential feature and characteristic of an online community today may be irrelevant.

In organizing my research, I also relied on Christine Hine's paper on conducting ethnography online (2008), and the book on online research ethics by Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter (2009), who promote a rhetorical, case-based approach to Internet research and suggest how to solve ethical dilemmas providing a range of interviews with Internet researchers who share their experience. The researcher who is planning his/her own research online may take into consideration those precedents that are discussed by McKee and Porter (2009).

The collection of papers edited by Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym (2009), guides qualitative Internet researchers, helps them to define the boundaries of their qualitative projects, and to interpret online data and to make online ethnographies meaningful "across time, space, and culture". This group of texts was important in guiding me to make my research ethically acceptable. I realized that the Russian researchers did not face the same ethical dilemmas as I did due to the fact that in the Russian academic culture the ethical behaviour of the researcher online does not create an issue. As a result, I constantly compared myself to them in terms of my level of freedom and their level of freedom, and felt like a hobbled mule. Thus, I

would like to emphasize the importance of conducting an online ethnography for a few months of the nostalgic and pro-Soviet online communities because only immersion, and not simply skimming, into their work allows to identify the real ‘orientation’ of the forum (national-patriotic, socialist, entertaining). There are hundreds of fora with the typical names like “Born in the USSR.” It is impossible to identify the general concept of such a forum without tracing its content for a significant period of time (at least half a year). For instance, Tom Boellstorff et al. (2012) who studied virtual worlds (video games) suggests even longer periods of online ethnography (participant observation) to make sure that it is of good quality, and not just “rapid ethnography” or “quick and dirty ethnography”:

Historically, ethnographers typically considered one year [of being in the field] the norm, or even longer. In contemporary research the amount of time can vary. If we have conducted preliminary fieldwork, or do not need to learn a new language, or are returning to a well-known field site, the time necessary for participant observation may be considerably less than a year... While we do not want to give a strict overall time recommendation, in general we cannot imagine effective ethnographic fieldwork taking less than six months if research has not yet been conducted at the field site in question (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 88-89).

That is, Boellstorff and his colleagues mean that a particular video game requires at least half a year of studies and the same relates to a particular forum because a forum, like a video game, is also a zone with its own rules.

Very often, the announced rules of the community may lead to an incorrect impression about the online group. For example, people of different nationalities are invited to participate (“and Muscovite, and Kievite”) and then I reveal the strictly pro-Russian position of this forum with anti-Semitic moods expressed by the participants in their discussions. Therefore, the mentioning of the USSR in a positive context (“We are made in the USSR,” “Our Motherland is the USSR,” “Born in the USSR”) does not guarantee either nostalgia for the USSR, or

internationalism of the participants. Indeed, there are many factors distracting from the genuine orientation of the forum. For example, one of the fora under my investigation opens with the anonymous poll in which participants of the online group are invited to identify the nationality of the popular cartoon character named Cheburashka (semi-monkey, semi-bear, illegally transported to the USSR from Morocco in the case of tangerines, who speaks Russian as a native language). The majority has chosen the Russian nationality, although the option “Soviet” was available as well. This opening poll could make an impression that this forum is entertaining and “historical”, while in reality it is leftist, with the moderator being Alexandr Sokolov, who was imprisoned as a dissident against the Putin regime, and was released from prison only in August, 2018. Sokolov was in fact detained since July 2015, and sentenced to three and a half years in prison in August, 2017. The charges against the journalist were filed in 2015 and were based on his involvement in a group called *For a Responsible Government* which campaigns for a referendum on legislation making government officials more transparent and accountable. The journalist had created and administered the group’s website, according to news agency RBK. Prosecutors claimed *For a Responsible Government* was a cover for a militant left- wing group called the *People’s Will Army*, which advocates for the violent overthrow of the government and was banned for extremism in 2010.¹⁸ He is an investigative reporter whose PhD thesis in economics defended under the supervision of Professor Ruslan Dzarasov, a prominent theoretician of Marxism,¹⁹ was dedicated to the schemes of money laundering used by the Russian government.

¹⁸ <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2018/08/31/russia-journalist-alexander-sokolov-released-from-detention/> - Access: 2020-07-01.

¹⁹ <http://www.dzarasov.ru/> - Access: 2020-07-01.

LiveJournal has received significant attention from the Russian researchers as the most politicized Russian-language digital platform “for adults” (Abramov, 2011; Morenkova, 2012; Alexanyan, 2013). However, the communication on LiveJournal, according to one of my respondents, has a “sectarian” character. Blogging is the main format promoted by this platform. It is not surprising that an “owner of the blog” has a decisive voice in any debate. It was one of the reasons why LiveJournal was not taken into consideration by me from the very beginning. Moreover, the youth are not accustomed to reading long texts, while LiveJournal is famous exactly for its long-text format, thus proving its reputation as the platform “for adults”. I have decided to focus primarily on such online platforms as Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki. Facebook is an international platform, while VKontakte and Odnoklassniki are Russia-based. In order to select digital communities for further observation I put “USSR”, “nostalgia for the USSR” into the search engine of each platform, and they provided me with multiple results (for instance, over 300 communities on Facebook). Then I selected those with the most impressive membership, making up clusters of 3-5 most “inhabited” communities on each platform (Facebook, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki).

In my attempts to contact the administrations of the fora, I faced enormous difficulties. On some fora I was told that “the administrators voted against my presence as a researcher”, and it was instructive to find out that some fora practice democratic procedures of ‘voting’ in order to make a particular decision. In some cases, like with “Our Motherland is the USSR” on VKontakte it was very difficult to identify an administrator whom it would be possible to contact because different people who were marked as “administrators” were unavailable. One person could be contacted only after “sending him a gift” which required a miserable, but real amount of money from my Visa. Another person who was shown as the administrator of this group, replied

to me, that “although once upon a time he was prominent in different kinds of this stuff, and had many past achievements, now he is not involved in this”. Finally, I realized that I needed to address Alexandr Sokolov (who was a political prisoner in Russia at that time), and I contacted him via his personal page on VKontakte. His friend who replied on his behalf, allowed me to start my research.

Besides the difficulties with receiving permissions from the administrations of the fora, I was banned from some nostalgic groups where I was a member before obtaining permission from the ethics board, for misconduct and transgressing the rules.

Eventually, I retained a few communities as my objects of observation:

- “We are made in the USSR” (Facebook, description “public group”, 108 787 members on December 8th, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1615378045168531/members/>),
- “Born in the USSR” (Facebook, description “public group” changed to “closed group”, 184 509 members on December 8th, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1545122992449397/>),
- “Anecdotes and Unconditional Humour” (Facebook, 58 190 members on December 8th, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/384344158586350/>), whose members are recruited from the previous two groups through the automated algorithm,
- “Brain Orthodoxy Treatment” (Facebook, description “public group”, the title reflects the play of words and hints to “brain cancer treatment”, 35 401 on December 8th, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/groups/hospitalpgm/?ref=br_rs),

- “Our Motherland is the USSR” (VKontakte, description “historical group, open community”, 20 996 members on December 8th, 2019, https://vk.com/nasha_rodina_sssr),
- “The Foundations of Marxism” (VKontakte, description “education”, 3670 members on December 8th, 2019, <https://vk.com/lenmarx>),
- “The Marxist Circle” associated with “The Foundations of Marxism” (description “private group”, 47 members on December 8th, 2019, <https://vk.com/mrxkrom1>),
- “Atheist” (VKontakte, description “humour”, earlier it was described as “science”; and even earlier it was promoted as a ‘character’ without an opportunity to comment on the content, 745 730 members on December 8th, 2019, https://vk.com/atheist__blog),
- and “Born in the USSR” (Odnoklassniki, 108 006 members on December 8th, 2019, <https://ok.ru/borninudssr>).

Some of them appeared in my sample because my research is fieldwork-driven. For example, while conducting an interview with one of the members of the community “Our Motherland is the USSR” on VKontakte (my informant Vyacheslav from Chisinau), I found out that he was a founder of his own online group that promotes education on Marxism. Moreover, he reserved a place for me in the “elitist circle”, associated with his group, for those who read Marx under careful supervision of “experienced comrades” like Bolsheviks did in the end of the 19th-beginning of the 20th centuries. Thus, my research on nostalgia for the Soviet past online received its extension and materialized in studying the leftist activism online. Two interviews conducted by me with my interviewees were published on their resources in order to promote their digital groups and political parties.

The long-time observation of the Russian-speaking nostalgic communities shows that many online fora that promote a positive image of the USSR have very different ‘orientations’ (purposes) and agendas, and the generational belonging. The age difference of the participants is not the main criterion for being a member. The agenda of the forum founders and administrators may not coincide with the sentiments of the participants. An online forum is a product of cooperation, bi-lateral contributions of the forum designers and participants; that is, both sides have agency, and it is important to distinguish between these types of agencies.

I not only focus on the group-level nostalgia for socialism, but I am also curious to know the interpretations of the Soviet past given at an individual level. Therefore, while surfing through the content of the nostalgic fora I recruited 22 individuals who shared with me their opinion on the Soviet past. The geography of my interviewees is very broad: the participants in my research live in Australia, the Arabic Emirates, Belarus, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine (Lugansk People’s Republic). One woman who is a Canadian citizen now, lived in Israel before. Many of them are natives of Ukraine, which is significant for understanding post-Soviet nostalgia in light of the events of the years 2014-2015, and I thus will pay special attention to the Russian-Ukrainian relations in **the Overview**. My work is about an imagined nostalgic international collectivity that uses Russian as a lingua franca and for whom the Soviet Union is either a dearest memory or a source of inspiration for building a new socialist (fair) society.

2.5. Why Online Ethnography Is Challenging: a Few Emblematic Episodes of My Recruiting Informants

At first glance it may seem that being an Internet ethnographer is much easier than going in the field. In reality, as I have understood from other researchers’ projects, field workers almost

never enter the “virgin land”: they are introduced to their sites of research by the previous researchers, and use connections and acquaintances, while an online ethnographer is thrown into the cyberspace, as an astronaut into the space of the galaxy: that is, on the one hand, you have a plan of actions and some control of the situation, and on the other hand, you may encounter a lot of unexpected difficulties that a “landed” researcher would never face.

The main problem for an Internet ethnographer is anonymity of the online communication which causes mistrust from the side of the potential informants. We may guess that the degree and type of mistrust may be dependent on a variety of factors specific to different people. For instance, a Swedish informant may be less mistrustful than a Russian one with regards to questions of a political character, or a wealthy person may be more reluctant to talk about money than a poor person, etc. In short, the potential online informants cannot be sure that I am not a swindler who is trying to get their personal data for some inappropriate purposes. One of my potential informants whom I found in the forum “Born in the USSR” on “Odnoklassniki” on the 12th of December, 2017, when he was given the entire description of my research and the link to my official uOttawa profile, replied to me:

[12.12.2017 03:00] Oleg K.: Sorry Tatyana, this is impossible. I don't deal with voice recorder conversations.

[12.12.2017 03:01] Oleg K.: And since I don't know you, I will not be discussing these topics in another format either.

[12.12.2017 03:01] Oleg K.: All the best.

I encountered a large number of refusals to participate (29 individuals). Some persons contacted by me agreed to participate but delayed for a month under diverse pretexts such as “renovation in the apartment”. When I contacted them again, I discovered that their online profile did not exist anymore. The importance of connections in conducting research is explored in Morenkova-Perrier's thesis (2017). The Russo-French scholar describes how she tried to

recruit participants not online, but without any connections. She phoned in person to 9 directors of the secondary schools in Russia to distribute her questionnaire on the Soviet past representations among the school students, and received 9 refusals from them. The real shift to the better happened only when she leveraged her connections in the Russian system of education. Thus, the problem of mistrust from the side of potential informants or the gatekeepers is prevalent.

One episode of recruitment where I encountered a lot of difficulty was as follows: I found a Ukrainian journalist on the forum “Our Motherland is the USSR” on VKontakte, and I realized that he has his own YouTube channel where he conducts polls on nostalgia for the USSR (and on other topics which may interest the Ukrainian audience). Basically, he intrudes in the lives of passers-by, he stops them in the streets of Ukrainian cities while they are going somewhere, and poses questions on nostalgia for the USSR, Ukrainian politics, and many others, while some people do not want to be filmed. At the beginning, he agreed to give me an interview, but very soon he changed his mind. He did not explain his reasons.

The second significant problem that I faced was the anticipation of the potential participants that the researcher herself must be aligned to the topic that she studies: for example, it was expected from me that I had to be a member of the Communist party, or to be nostalgic for the USSR. It is clear that the person who can associate himself with the studied topic is the most motivated, but simultaneously, he or she might be the most biased exactly due to the same reason, that is, due to engagement or partisanship. If a researcher says that he is not a member of the Communist party, or at least, not “sympathetic” to the Communist ideals, the researcher may lose a valuable informant. At the same time, nobody expects a scholar who studies the methods

of struggling cancer to be a cancer patient himself. This situation when the person is expected to be “one from the community”, is typical, namely of the social sciences.

One of my potential informants whom I found in the forum “Our Motherland is the USSR” on VKontakte whose nickname is Olga, claimed that, firstly, I was not nostalgic for the Soviet past, and thus I had no moral right to study nostalgia. Secondly, she doubted the scientific nature of my method, about which we had a very heated debate. I was involved in the recruitment of this woman for two weeks because; initially, she promised to give me an interview if I told her the truth about my immigration to Canada. I told her everything including the exact amount of money (10,833 CAD) that I had to bring with me to Canada. After obtaining a lot of information from me, she accused me of betraying my Motherland multiple times in different refined forms. She also accused me of being unprofessional, of not knowing the souls of people, and providing me with multiple examples of immigrants’ life as miserable. She accused me of propaganda when I tried to provide a counter-argument.

This was not the only case of recruitment that took me so much time and energy, but this woman was the only one who questioned the appropriateness of my method, my moral fitness to conduct such research, and moral correctness of well-established practices in the social sciences such as using pseudonyms by the participants of the research, and overall, the normalcy of protecting their identity. Another participant, Alexey Ixanov, when I asked him whether he believes that only a nostalgic person can study nostalgia, responded: “It is the same as to expect from a chicken to be the best expert on omelettes!”

2.6. How I Worked on My Data: Three Different Sets of Data

I have collected data of three types: I have a diary of observations in the fora with the entries for each day starting from September 1st 2017 to April 30th 2018 where I registered the number of participants in the observed fora for each day tracing the dynamics of the communities' growth or decline; in the same diary I registered conflict situations and their solutions. When I started participating in the activities of the Marxist circle, I registered the topics that we discussed and the literature that we read.

My second dataset is a collection of the copied posts taken in all the observed communities with the indication of the date of publication, community, online platform, and link to the post. I have copied informative nostalgic posts which are rotated in all the nostalgic communities under my observation. Some of these posts (images and citations) even inspired me to include particular questions in my questionnaire, for example, a post about three badges (See **Figure 4**, the badges of an Octobrist, a Young Pioneer, and a Komsomol member). This meme is very popular in the nostalgic communities of all sorts and its main purpose is to exclude from the discussions about the USSR those people who did not undergo all the “necessary” stages of the ideological indoctrination in the USSR. For example, I was not a Komsomol member due to my age, so I must be excluded from the community of those who have a moral right to speak out.



Figure 4. The Three Badges: “Only that one who has deserved these three badges has a right to talk about life in the USSR”

This collection has become a result of my everyday participation in the nostalgic communities, which was mostly limited to liking those posts and leaving some commentaries such as “I remember the USSR well enough, and I do not see any reason to be excluded from the discussion”.

I would like to stress that my participation in all the nostalgic communities was useful not only from the point of view of collecting data, but also as a pretext to approach potential research participants, as it was easier for me to start a conversation with a person saying that “I am a member of the same nostalgic community as you are, and I am trying to understand what people are nostalgic for most of all...” Thus, my main (third) dataset is made up of interviews conducted with the members of those nostalgic communities which I was observing.

I would like to explain how I processed the data and obtained some themes for further analysis. Some themes emerged out of my fieldwork, while others were embedded in the questionnaire and were driven by the literature review and my research question.

To start with the research-driven themes, I would mention the question about compatibility of religion and socialism that was initially absent in my questionnaire, but it was immediately added after the first interview with Igor Shapovalenko, an amateur poet from Lugansk, because he proved to be an adept of the Orthodox church and a member of the Communist party simultaneously (being interviewed by me via Skype he demonstrated a cross on his naked chest). I did not think about including questions about religion to my questionnaire first, although the theme of symbiosis of Communism and Christianity is a well-known and widely discussed topic in the literature on the post-Soviet nostalgia. For instance, Maria Todorova in her introduction to the volume *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (2010) cites a moral philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, who although was a hater of Communism, nevertheless explains its appeal in France with its closeness to Christianity stating that “the Communists were the only ones who were ready to go from house to house, to do the shopping for an old lady who didn’t have a car, to help an old handicapped man and so on. They did what Christians do, as a rule” (Todorov cited in Todorova, 2010, p. 3). The topic is not new, but its relevance to my work was not clear until I realized that some of my informants (Yevgeniya from Sydney, Sova and her husband from Saint-Petersburg, Igors Ivanovs from Riga) self-identify as Orthodox Christians.

On the contrary, the question about possible/desirable restoration of the Soviet Union was included in the questionnaire from the beginning, although many of the post-Soviet nostalgia scholars (Nadkarni, Shevchenko and others) emphasize that nostalgia and desire of restoration of the object of nostalgia are incompatible because the possibility of restoration eliminates the

essence of nostalgia itself. In this respect, I cannot but mention the film of Andrey Tarkovsky *Nostalghia* (1983) where the main character, a Russian writer who came to Italy in order to write a biography of the 18th-century Russian serf composer who studied music there, felt nostalgia for the object that was not lost by him, and was not irreversible: he felt acute nostalgia for his motherland where he could easily return to. However, it should be noted that at the time of this film's creation the film director himself left the USSR forever, and soon died of cancer, so his sense of irreversibility and final loss of motherland could influence his depiction of nostalgia in the film: Tarkovsky depicts nostalgia as a severe mental disorder which paralyses a person, and it is hard to believe that a person can experience such pain knowing that he can go back easily. Some commentators on the film point out that the writer (the film's protagonist) decides not to go back home, but this is his personal choice. His desire/decision to stay in Italy forever does not cancel the very possibility to return home. The main character in Tarkovsky's film establishes limitations for himself, but in actuality these limitations are artificial.

I witnessed such a form of acute nostalgia when the object of nostalgia was not lost forever; however, this did not prevent the emergence of nostalgia: in 2005, I went to the UK by plane with two girls from Belarus, who complained that "they didn't want to leave their motherland, they already felt strong longing for their home city sitting in the plane, and did not know how they would survive in Scotland for a month". These two cases – Tarkovsky's film and my personal experience with two Belarusian girls going to Scotland in 2005, show that nostalgia is not strictly about irreversibility of loss: the irreversibility can be fictional or artificial, while nostalgia is still there, it is real. The fundamental inaccessibility of the object and the irrecoverable loss are not a prerequisite for nostalgia. That is why the desire to restore the USSR

and belief in restoration of the USSR, on the one hand, and nostalgia for the USSR, on the other hand, are compatible.

Svetlana Boym's (2001) approach to nostalgia and to the past which assumes both restorative and reflective variants, has more evidence than the ideas of her critics who insist that the only "legitimate" version of nostalgia is reflective. The main difference between reflective and restorative approaches to the past is in the fact that "reflective" is "passive", while "restorative" is "active": according to Boym, reflective nostalgia is like admiring the patina on old bronze, while restorative nostalgia is like active cleaning of bronze from the patina: "Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (Boym, 2001, p. 41). This is especially pronounced in the field of architecture and art: the reflective nostalgic subject will prefer to admire the ruins, but genuine ones! And the subject prone to restorative nostalgia will prefer to rebuild a new castle on the site of the ruins, but will incorporate the foundation and the remains of the old walls into the new project in order to get some "legitimacy" from the past. He intrudes into the past's future!

I have recently implemented such a restorative approach in practice. I have inherited a few embroideries made by my grandmothers in the 1950s. I have decided to put them in a frame, but one of them was not completed (See **Figure 5**): due to some reason a needlewoman (one of my grannies) gave her work up two stitches from completion. I was trying to approach this issue as a reflective nostalgic subject: to preserve that enigma, that understatement and intrigue, because now I have no chance to ask them why they did not finish the work. For a few weeks, "I was admiring the patina", but finally, I finished the embroidery myself, I "restored the wholeness". My participation in this transgenerational project did not detract from its

authenticity and antiquity, although I would not promote this mode of handling any given piece of art.



Figure 5. Soviet Embroidery Pattern Produced in the City of Borisov (Belarus) in 1957 (before My Intrusion into the Relic Artefact); a Perfect Illustration of How the Soviet Post-War Women Spent Their Spare Time.

Upon having collected my data, I needed to code them properly, and for that reason I attended a few classes on using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo which were held in February 2018 in the library of the University of Ottawa. Although the classes were very informative, I realized that this software functions like how “Google translate” used to function (at present, this translating software is improved), however, in the past, when it translated the phrases with “she, he” pronouns for inanimate objects like in the French phrase “Il la (la pomme) mange” the result was “He is eating her”. In short, such an intensive intrusion into the translation made by Google translate was needed, that it was safer to translate anything relying on personal knowledge and skills. The same issue was encountered with the programme NVivo. Therefore, organizing my data with the aid of this software would make my task more difficult, that is why I decided to arrange my data manually.

Due to the fact that I decided to code my data manually, I had to elaborate the strategy of dealing with them. In addition to my research diaries that I kept for half a year (where I recorded my observations of online groups with the special focus on the daily growth of the number of participants in them that could show the popularity of a forum, on the one hand, and the effectiveness of its administrators and moderators, and their biasedness or non-biasedness, conflicts and their solutions—evident in the example of one of my informants – Maria Gennadievna, a victim of the nostalgic group’s bullying – was recruited by me immediately after one of such conflicts), I also have 22 interviews (some of them were conducted in chat mode, and some of them needed transcribing because they were conducted via Skype or similar technologies). I made transcripts with footnotes and extended commentaries of all of my interviews, making references to other transcripts when people were mentioning the same individuals or the same phenomena, and making references to the secondary sources in transcripts. Also, I have developed a theme coding with colours: the purple stood for mentions of “nostalgia”, “longing for the past”, “missing the past”, “missing the USSR”; the blue colour was chosen to highlight the concrete objects of nostalgia such as “friendship of peoples”, “humanism”, “safety”; the red colour was used for “Communism”, “revolution”, “Marxism”, “Lenin”, “Stalin”, “proletarians”; the khaki colour was used for proper names of different influencers (for example, a few people mentioned an amateur historian Nikolai Starikov as their influencer); the yellow colour indicated countries’ names; and the green colour highlighted miscellaneous useful information.

Here is a commented fragment of the transcript of the interview with Vyacheslav from Chisinau that contains 15813 words without footnotes. In this fragment, we discuss the reasons for the downfall of the USSR, and to my question on what happened in the world that could

influence its demise, he responded that we should rather say “what did not happen” – the world Communist/proletarian revolution:

What did not happen was that, let's say, [the world Communist/proletarian revolution] did not happen... the revolution took place in the Russian Empire, but the advanced powers - they, let's say, resisted. There was an attempt in Germany - the Bavarian Soviet Republic, but they suppressed it all there, and so on. These advanced capitalist powers - they resisted, held on, and then we can observe how they quite quickly - the capitalists - adjusted to the changed circumstances, and that is, they... artificially created the middle class, when capitalists - they tempered their appetites in order not to provide a basis for [consolidation of] the proletariat - in order for them [proletarians] to somehow do something too, that is, in the metropolis they created such conditions that there would be no grounds for a revolutionary struggle, therefore that the revolutionary struggle cannot be brought in from outside: neither fascism nor Communism can be exported, that is, there must always be some basis in the economy. If they rebuilt the economy in their metropolis in such a way that this [revolution] would not happen, then that's it. And already will not [happen]. If, for example, at that time in Germany, France, Great Britain and all these leading powers, a revolution would nevertheless take place, well, maybe a little later, but it would have happened, and they would have united with the Soviet Union into one union, then maybe now everything would be different.

This particular fragment contains two footnotes. The first footnote relates to the term “the world Communist/proletarian revolution”, while the second footnote relates to the reasons for the revolution failure in Germany: according to this footnote, Alena from Minsk explains the failure of Communism in Germany with the absence of *sobornost'* (universal communion, priority of collective values over individual ones) in Germans, noticeable individualism which was formed in Germans under the influence of Protestantism. Thus, I have prepared 22 transcripts with multiple references to interviews with other participants and extended commentaries. They are color-coded by topic. Thanks to this strategy, I have seen what newly emerging topics are discussed by several participants at once independently of each other, in which the unanimity of my informants is manifested, and in which themes their opinions differ.

I also paid special attention to fragments of my interlocutors' interviews if their thoughts overlapped with some ideas highlighted in the academic literature. For example, being at a stage of formulating my thesis topic, I was reading a lot on Soviet consumerism. Among others, I read an informative book written by Natalia Chernyshova (2013) on Soviet consumerism during Brezhnev times, where she expresses an idea which I have encountered rather often on the Internet: Soviet consumerism had a feminine face. In fact, there were women who led to the destruction of socialism because their exorbitant consumerist requests distracted men from building Communism. These consumerist requests vulgarized the very idea of Communist construction, because, instead of building cities in permafrost conditions, a man first of all had to think about where and how to buy a carpet and furniture set for his beloved woman under the conditions of commodity shortage. Chernyshova provides an analysis of Soviet prose and cinematography. Dealing with Soviet consumerism, I discovered many references to Jukka Gronow's (2003) work about launching the production of luxury goods in the USSR in the 1930s. Jukka Gronow writes about the desired aristocratic lifestyle under the USSR in the 1930s, while the concept of *culturnost'* (cultured-ness) is well covered in the works of Timo Vihavainen and his colleagues (2015) whose main focus is also on Soviet consumerism.

Desire for luxury goods was a part of cultured-ness: Soviet people highly appreciated silverware, crystal wine glasses, porcelain table sets. They tried with all their might to approach the ideal of "cultured-ness", the ideal of aristocratic lifestyle, and this style required investments of time! To support this lifestyle, a person had to balance between work and leisure. Olga Shevchenko (2009) writing on post-perestroika crisis in Russia, points to the fact that the structure of personal time in Russians dramatically changed after the downfall of the USSR, being redistributed from personal growth activities to making money. In addition, Arlie Russell

Hochschild (2003) writes about commercialization of intimate life in capitalist countries, where she points out that people in the West prefer to substitute emotions with money, because they do not have the strength to work and simultaneously to invest emotionally in their significant others.

My research curiosity was piqued because among my informants I found people who gave me a complete picture of what the totality of these books was about: the fact that capitalism takes up all of a person's time, forcing him or her to work. The only meaning of life is money, but in the USSR the meanings of life were different. It is understood that many people living under capitalism do not share its values of mercantilism, however, many people follow them. Socialism formulated alternative goals in life for a person, for example, making other people happy, or sooner colonization of Mars.

Part 2. Overview

Chapter 3: The Post-Soviet World and Internet

3.1. *Inequality*

As Klumbité (2009) contends in her article, the post-Soviet nostalgia is evoked by sensations of cold, darkness, hunger and even a foul smell (people save on water and do not flush their toilet every time when they use it). Nostalgia for socialism has a materialistic basis. It is rooted in inequality in comparison to equality of the Soviet times, it is re-enforced by high levels of crime which were not typical of the Soviet era; people are longing for those days when they even did not lock their doors, and the fact that the present is the time of chaos and destruction, while the “Soviet times” were “better times” is illustrated by the high rates of suicides in the so-called “mortality belt” (Brainerd, 2001). In this section I am providing a few statistics for the countries of my informants’ origin (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Lithuania, and Latvia) – the Russian-speaking internauts originating from these particular countries, who kindly agreed to participate in my research. These statistics will tell us which countries out of my sample retain some socialist legacy such as the remnants of the welfare state, and which lost them. Presumably, this may be associated with how nostalgic the populations of these countries are.

3.1.1. Gini Coefficients for Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Latvia and Lithuania in Comparison to the USA and Sweden. The impact of neoliberalism on the former Soviet republics can be measured with some statistical tools. The level of inequality significantly grew in them which is detected by the growth of Gini coefficient. Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or, in some cases, consumption expenditure) among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A

Lorenz curve plots the cumulative percentages of total income received against the cumulative number of recipients, starting with the poorest individual or household. The Gini index measures the area between the Lorenz curve and a hypothetical line of absolute equality, expressed as a percentage of the maximum area under the line. Thus, a Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality. For the Baltic countries, they experienced enormous growth of Gini coefficients when almost all the dreams of Hayek came true in these states:

Workers in the Baltic states suffered a dramatic loss of income in the early transformational period. Real wages fell by as much as two-thirds in 1990-99, and even with the recovery thereafter, by the end of the millennium they only reached between 40 and 60 percent of their 1989 levels. Employment levels decreased sharply, leading to significantly lower labour force participation and high unemployment. The transformation has also been accompanied by a significant increase in income inequality, especially in Latvia, where the Gini coefficient increased by 17 percent points between 1990 and 1994. In Estonia and Lithuania, it increased by 10 and 11 points respectively (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012, p. 123).

Unfortunately, in the data that I obtained from the World Bank database, the Gini coefficients for the countries discussed in the years between 1990 and 1994, mentioned by Bohle and Greskovits (2012), are not given systemically. Nevertheless, we can estimate the tendency for these six countries and compare their coefficients with the inequality level in the USA and in Sweden (which has the lowest Gini coefficients among the three Scandinavian states). The United States has a rather stable level of inequality with the comparatively high Gini coefficient that oscillates between 40.2 and 41.5 in the period from 1994 to 2016, while Sweden has rather low Gini coefficient oscillating between 25.3 to 29.2 for the period from 2003 to 2016, indicating comparative equality.

Table 1. Gini Index (World Bank estimate)

Country Name	Belarus	Latvia	Lithuania	Moldova	Russian Federation	Ukraine	United States	Sweden
1993	..	27	33.6	..	48.4	28.9	..	..
1994	..	..	..	..	..	..	40.2	..
1995	..	31	..	..	..	39.3	..	..
1996	..	31.6	..	..	46.1	35.2	..	..
1997	..	..	..	36.9	38.4	..	40.8	..
1998	32	..	..	39.5	38.1	..	..	..
1999	31.7	..	..	42.6	37.4	..	..	..
2000	31.2	..	..	36.4	37.1	..	40.4	..
2001	30.6	..	..	38	36.9	..	..	..
2002	30.3	..	..	35.8	37.3	29	..	..
2003	28.8	..	..	34.9	40	28.7	..	25.3
2004	26.5	36.4	37	35	40.3	28.9	40.5	26.1
2005	27.6	39	35.3	36.3	41.3	29	..	26.8
2006	28.3	35.6	34.4	35.4	41	29.8	..	26.4
2007	29.6	37.5	34.8	34.4	42.3	27	41.1	27.1
2008	27.8	37.2	35.7	34.7	41.6	26.6	..	28.1
2009	27.7	35.9	37.2	32.9	39.8	25.3	..	27.3
2010	28.6	35	33.6	32.1	39.5	24.8	40.4	27.7
2011	27.2	35.8	32.5	30.6	39.7	24.6	..	27.6
2012	26.5	35.2	35.1	29.2	40.7	24.7	..	27.6
2013	26.6	35.5	35.3	28.5	40.9	24.6	41	28.8
2014	27.2	35.1	37.7	26.8	39.9	24	..	28.4
2015	25.6	34.2	37.4	27	37.7	25.5	..	29.2
2016	25.3	..	..	26.3	..	25	41.5	..
2017	25.4	..	..	25.9	..	..	..	..

World Bank. (2019). "GINI index (World Bank estimate)" [Table]. World Development Indicators.

Washington, D.C.: The World Bank (producer and distributor). Retrieved from:

<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>

From the table above we see that Gini coefficients for Russia, Lithuania and Latvia are approaching the Gini coefficient of the USA. In particular years (1993, 1996) the Gini index for Russia exceeded drastically the Gini coefficient for the United States, thus revealing an

enormous level of social inequality in this country. For a particular period of time, till the year 2012, it was true for Moldova, too, but since 2012 its Gini coefficient dropped below 30 and has been continuing to decline having reached 25.9 in 2017, thus having reached the “Scandinavian standard” of equality. Both Belarus and Ukraine demonstrate this “Scandinavian standard” of social equality, however, we should take into account that unlike in the Scandinavian countries where the population is equally prosperous, the population of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova is equally poor.

Before the year 2000, Gini coefficients were higher than at present in almost all the former Soviet republics, because, according to Konstantin Semin (2017), “The Unruly Nineties” were the time of the “primitive accumulation of capital”²⁰, often by criminal means, which one of my informants, Ilya from Ufa, characterized as “deriban” (looting of socialist property).

3.1.2. Statistics on Intentional Homicides in the Mentioned Countries. “The Unruly Nineties” were the time of extreme rise of criminality in the former Soviet republics. This can be illustrated by the homicide rates in the six post-Soviet countries under question, whose homicide rates can be compared to that of the USA and Sweden. Sweden is a peaceful place where the homicide rate oscillates around 1 person per 100,000 people for a period of time between the years 1990 and 2017, while in the United States, this rate varies between 4.5 and 9.7 per 100,000 for the same period. The homicide levels in the European zone of Russia were close to other western Soviet republics before the demise of the USSR, while the generalized rate was significantly higher. France Meslé et al. (1992) provide a comparison of suicide and homicide rates for men in the USSR, Finland, France, Hungary and Sweden for the period 1970-1987. For

²⁰ <https://umerop.ru/konstantin-semin-pervonachalnoe-na/> - Access: 2020-07-01.

example, in 1985 the homicide rate for men in the USSR was 14 persons per 100,000 people, while in Sweden the corresponding rate was 1.5 persons per 100,000 people (Meslé et al., 1992, p. 299). In 1990 the number of homicides in Russia made up 14.3 in comparison to 9.3 homicides per 100 000 people in the United States, however, all the former Soviet republics, including Belarus, Moldova, Lithuania, and Ukraine demonstrate very moderate levels of homicides in the year 1990: with the lowest for Lithuania (4.9) and the highest for Moldova (6.6). By the mid-1990s, the rate of homicides almost doubled in all the former Soviet republics, while in Lithuania it almost tripled in 1995 in comparison to 1990 (13.8 cases against 4.9 respectively). In Russia, the number of homicides doubled and reached a horrific 32.3 in 1994, having made Russia one of the most dangerous places in the world, although, in terms of danger it concedes to some countries in Africa and Latin America.

Table 2. Intentional homicides (per 100 000 population)

Country Name	Belarus	Latvia	Lithuania	Moldova	Russian Federation	Ukraine	United States	Sweden
1990	5	..	4.9	6.6	14.3	5	9.3	1.1
1991	4.5	..	5.8	6.6	15.3	5.1	9.7	1.3
1992	5.8	9.9	7.2	11.4	22.9	6.6	9.2	1.3
1993	7.4	15	11.3	8.9	30.4	7.2	9.4	1.2
1994	8.1	13.7	12.7	9.2	32.3	8.3	8.9	1.1
1995	9.5	11.5	13.8	9.3	30.5	8.7	8.1	1
1996	9.6	10.8	11.2	9.3	26.4	9.7	7.3	1.1
1997	10.1	11.1	10.9	9.7	23.7	8.4	6.7	1
1998	10.3	10.3	8.7	8.8	22.8	8.4	6.2	1
1998	9.8	9.5	8.8	9.3	26	8.6	5.6	1.1
2000	10.2	10	10.6	10.3	28.1	9	5.5	1.1
2001	9.8	9.3	10.2	9.8	29.4	10	6.7	1
2002	10.1	9.2	8.5	9.6	30.5	9	5.6	1.1
2003	9	8.8	10.1	7.6	28.9	8.5	5.7	0.9
2004	8.4	7.9	10.1	6.6	27.3	7.4	5.5	1.2
2005	8.6	5.6	11.1	7.1	24.8	6.5	5.7	0.9
2006	7.7	5.8	8.7	6.3	20.1	6.3	5.8	1
2007	6.8	4.3	8.5	5.3	17.7	5.7	5.7	1.2
2008	5.7	4.6	9.3	5.7	16.6	5.3	5.4	0.9
2009	5.1	5	8	6	14.9	4.9	5	1
2010	4.2	3.3	7	6.5	..	4.3	4.8	1
2011	3.9	3.3	6.9	7.5	..	..	4.7	0.9
2012	3.6	3.4	6.7	5.6	11.3	5.2	4.7	0.7
2013	3.5	2.5	6.6	4.2	11.2	..	4.5	0.9
2014	3.6	3.2	5.4	3.2	11.5	6.3	4.5	0.9
2015	..	3.4	5.9	..	11.6	..	5	1.1
2016	..	3.5	5.2	..	11	..	5.4	1.1
2017	..	4.2	4.5	..	9.2	6.2	5.3	1.1

World Bank. (2019). “World Development Indicators: Intentional homicides (per 100 000 population)”

[Table]. World Development Indicators. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank (producer and distributor). Retrieved

from: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>

The last decade demonstrates a decrease in homicide rates in all the former Soviet republics under discussion; however, the homicide rates of the Soviet times were reached only in

2009, which means that the populations of these countries were suffering from boosting criminality, untypical of the Soviet era, for two decades.

3.1.3. Statistics on Suicides in the Mentioned Countries. From what we have seen earlier, many people in the Baltic countries and in other former Soviet republics suddenly became homeless, unemployed and depressed. Many had to bear the culture of poverty discussed above, which correlates with feelings of desperation and suicidal intentions (see Table 3). Lithuania retained the status of the world's leader on suicides for a quarter of a century after disintegration of the USSR²¹, conceding only to Greenland. Today, Lithuania keeps the first rating on suicides in Europe, and the fifth in the world, while Russia keeps the fifteenth rating in the world. In 2016, Russia had the first rating in the world on men's suicides. High suicide rates in the 1990s, especially for men, were typical of all the former western republics of the demised USSR to such an extent, that Elizabeth Brainerd (2001) even called these countries (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic countries) "the mortality belt". She explains that men's suicides are impacted by macroeconomic reforms (a shift to neoliberalism) while, according to her, women's suicides are non-sensitive to economic changes; rather, they are caused by personal reasons and alcoholism:

Male suicide rates in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltic countries increased substantially in the early 1990s and are now the highest in the world. To what extent is this suicide epidemic explained by the macroeconomic instability experienced by these countries in that period? Fixed effects regressions across 22 transition economies indicate that male suicide rates are highly sensitive to the state of the macroeconomy, suggesting that the steep and prolonged declines in GDP in the western countries of the former

²¹ Meslé et al. (1992, p. 299) provide us with sensational (or at least extravagant) numbers on suicides in the late USSR (1970-1987). According to them, the suicide rate only for men in 1984 (before the anti-alcohol campaign launched) was close to 53 persons per 100,000 population. These numbers are too high when compared with other statistics available for this period. For example, Ya. Gilinsky and G. Rumatseva (2004) state that the suicide rate, for both men and women in 1984 was 29.7 persons per 100,000 population: that was equal to 81,400 persons in absolute numbers ([Динамика самоубийств в России \(demoscope.ru\)](http://demoscope.ru) - Access: 2021-12-14). I would like to emphasize that the levels of suicide in the former USSR countries after its demise, especially in the "mortality belt" as it is called by E. Brainerd (2001) are unprecedented compared to statistics on suicide of the post-WWII USSR.

Soviet Union may have been partly to blame for the suicide epidemic. Evidence also indicates that the general adult male mortality crisis in the region had a feedback effect on suicide rates, with the loss of a spouse or friend – or declining life expectancy itself – contributing to rising suicide rates. Female suicide rates, in contrast, are insensitive to the state of the macroeconomy and are more strongly related to alcohol consumption (Brainerd, 2001, p. 1007).

Table 3. World Bank. Suicide mortality rate (per 100,000 population) for both sexes

Country Name	Belarus	Latvia	Lithuania	Moldova	Russian Federation	Ukraine	United States	Sweden
2000	43.1	34.7	50.7	16.4	52.6	36.9	11.3	15.6
2005	45.1	26.7	43.9	19.2	51.6	34.5	11.9	16.4
2010	38.2	22.7	37.3	20.9	40	27.1	13.2	15.3
2015	26.3	21.6	34.9	16.4	32.1	23.1	15	15.7
2016	26.2	21.2	31.9	15.9	31	22.4	15.3	14.8

World Bank. (2019). “World Development Indicators: Suicide mortality rate (per 100,000 population).” [Table].

World Development Indicators. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank (producer and distributor). Retrieved from:

<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>

Table 3 demonstrates that Sweden has a stable level of suicides oscillating around 15 per 100,000 people for the period from 2000 to 2016, while all the former Soviet republics except for Moldova, exceed this level by 2 to 3 times. The USA demonstrates even lower levels of suicide than Sweden for the same period. For the year 2000, the suicide levels in Lithuania and Russia exceeded the US level by almost five times.

To make a comparison between the post-Soviet period and the times of the USSR, I have also retrieved the suicide rates from another source (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), which unfortunately does not present the data on Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, but, nevertheless, contains the data for pre-perestroika period for Russia, Lithuania and

Latvia, which are absent from the World Bank dataset. *Table 4* demonstrates that the rates of suicide were very high in the former Soviet republics even before the demise of the USSR²², in the early 1980s; however, in the middle of the 1980s the rates of suicides fell down significantly due to the antialcohol campaign of the years 1985-1987, when many population indicators (birth rates, life expectancy, especially for men) were drastically improved. However, as a side effect, the consumption of the bootlegger alcohol increased and caused many deaths due to poisoning with the beverages produced illegally. Against the background of the comparatively stable USA and some improvements for Sweden, we notice extreme growth of suicide rates in Latvia, Lithuania and Russia since the year 1992 (the first year after the demise of the USSR). Its peak was reached in 1994 for Latvia (42.9), in 1995 for Russia (41.7) and in 1996 for Lithuania (47.8). Latvia returned to the pre-perestroika level of suicide rates in 1999, followed by Russia in 2004, and by Lithuania in 2006, although the latter country experienced two more outbreaks of suicides in 2008-2009 (Recession) and in 2013.

²² The high suicide rates in the former USSR (at least – in Russia) are associated with high men’s mortality through self-harm. This men’s mortality may be interpreted in Durkheimian terms as a result of social isolation of men, their exclusion from the institute of family. Responsibility for the families was taken from the Russian men not only by the Great October Revolution when a woman got access to earning money and got an opportunity of raising her children independently. According to Nancy Ries (1997), ruination of the Russian family started from Peter the Great who introduced 25-year-long conscription for the younger sons of peasants having created a segment of society (unmarried men) freed from family “burden”, and women deprived of marriage partners who brought up their children by themselves. Due to multiple wars in which Russian empire, and later – the USSR - took part, a man was perceived of as a “gift”, and not as a breadwinner. The issue of men’s suicide is addressed in a story written by the famous Soviet writer and actor Vasilii Shukshin, “Suraz” (“Bastard”), where he depicts how devaluation of the institute of marriage and family by the protagonist leads him to suicide: <http://lib.ru/SHUKSHIN/suraz.txt>

Table 4. Intentional self-harm, Deaths per 100,000 population (crude rates)

	Latvia	Lithuania	Russia	Sweden	United States
1981	33.5	33.6	34.2	17.5	12
1982	34.3	33.9	34.8	19.4	12.2
1983	33.5	..	..	19	12.1
1984	34.1	..	..	19.5	12.4
1985	29.4	34.1	31.2	18.2	12.4
1986	25.3	25.5	23.1	18.5	12.9
1987	23.3	29.1	23.3	18.4	12.7
1988	23.1	26.6	24.4	18.8	12.4
1989	25.7	27.1	25.9	18.6	12.2
1990	26.1	26.2	26.5	17.2	12.4
1991	28.6	30.8	26.5	17.2	12.2
1992	35.2	35	31.1	15.6	11.9
1993	42.9	42.7	37.8	15.7	12
1994	41	46.6	41.7	15.1	11.8
1995	41.2	46.7	41.1	15.3	11.7
1996	37.5	47.8	39	14.2	11.5
1997	36.4	45.6	37.2	13.6	11.2
1998	34.8	43.8	35.1	13.9	11.1
1999	32	44	38.9	13.8	10.5
2000	32.5	46.6	38.8	12.7	10.4
2001	30.3	44.2	39.2	13.4	10.7
2002	29	45	38.1	13.2	11
2003	26.4	42.6	35.8	12.4	10.8
2004	24.9	40.9	34.3	12.8	11.1
2005	25.2	39.7	32.2	13.5	11
2006	22	32.1	30.1	13.2	11.1
2007	20.6	31.7	29.1	12.3	11.5
2008	24.2	34.7	27.1	12.7	11.8
2009	24.1	36	26.5	13.3	12
2010	20.8	32.9	23.5	12.1	12.4
2011	21.4	33.6	21.8	11.7	12.7
2012	21.8	31	20.8	12.1	12.9
2013	19	36.7	20.1	12.8	13
2014	19.2	31.7	18.5	11.8	13.4
2015	19.5	30.8	..	12	13.8
2016	..	28.7	..	11.4	13.9
2017	..	26.4	..	..	..

OECD. (2019). "Intentional self-harm, Deaths per 100 000 population (crude rates)" [Table]. OECD.Stat.

Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (producer and distributor). Retrieved from:

<http://stats.oecd.org>

Increase of inequality, criminality and desperation prepared the ground for post-Soviet nostalgia in the former republics of the USSR, however, history has brought some amendments to this situation.

3.2. RuNet

3.2.1. General Characteristics of RuNet Drawing on Karina Alexanyan's Work.

From the very start, it is critical to emphasize that the Russian Internet (RuNet) and the Russian-speaking Internet are two different entities because the former one is associated with Russia (it structurally and legally belongs to Russia), while the latter one is associated with the Russian language as lingua franca. The borders of the second are much broader: "Russia" and "the Russian language" do not coincide.

Karina Alexanyan (2013) dedicated her thesis to understanding the role of the Russian Internet in political mobilization in Russia. She contends that, if the Internet plays some role in political mobilization, it is not due to the fact that the Internet is a source of reliable information, but rather, that it is a platform for conversation.

Alexanyan draws on Leon Aron, writing the following: "In Russia, the Internet and social media share metaphors, and both are often compared to the kitchen table debates of Soviet times, places of lively and free conversation between trusted friends. The Internet and social media are also likened to Soviet era Samizdat – grassroots publications of underground information, also shared and distributed outside state channels, between trusted individuals" (2013, p. 32).

Alexanyan points out that many students of the Russian Internet see this similarity between the Soviet-times kitchen table and cyberspace: "Dr. Eugene Gorny, one of the pioneers of the

Internet in Russia, and a Russian social media scholar, argues that, “the opposition between the “official media” and the blogosphere seems to be very similar to the historical opposition between the dullness of Soviet propaganda and the freedom of expression and communication in kitchen-table talks and samizdat... The re-alienation of media in the 2000s led to the revival of Soviet kitchen-table talk culture, the only difference being that now the kitchen has moved into cyberspace” (2013, p. 33-34).

It is very important to stress that Alexanyan explores the Russian Internet (RuNet), which is formed more or less in the borders of Russia, although she acknowledges that not only Russian citizens contribute to this segment of the world’s net, but also the citizens of Ukraine and Israel (and, for sure, other Russian-speaking people, but Ukrainians and Israelis were especially active by the moment when Alexanyan defended her thesis). She points out that every nation has its specific relations with the Internet and its unique media ecology which contains three main elements: unique historical, cultural and social contexts. According to her, every nation leverages the Internet idiosyncratically: “in a way that is specific to each nation, as a consequence of that nation’s particular social, cultural and political history” (Alexanyan, 2013, p. 2). In this way, the Internet contributes to maintaining nations as ‘imagined communities’. This supports what I said earlier about the Internet as a technology which helps “imagined communities” to consolidate.

Although RuNet can be considered a comparatively free zone of conversation, it is, nevertheless, vulnerable. The Russian Internet is under control of the Kremlin because it is “domestically-grown” and owned by Russian entrepreneurs who are close to the Russian government. A group of Finnish, British and Russian scholars published a collection of essays titled *Freedom of Expression in Russia’s New Mediasphere* (2020) in which they present a range of topics dealing with the shrinking freedoms of expression in Russia, while the Internet still

provides new opportunities even under such a pressure. In particular, in the Introduction to this volume Mariëlle Wijermars and Katja Lehtisaari state that the Russian government has dramatically expanded its restrictions on the Internet since its social media-powered protest movement of 2011-2013, while simultaneously consolidating its grip on traditional media. The Internet, which long provided a space for alternative media and free speech, is restricted by a growing corpus of legislation and expanding state surveillance. However, because of its transnational configuration, the Internet continues to evade comprehensive state control and offers ever new opportunities for disseminating and consuming dissenting opinions (Wijermars & Lehtisaari, 2020).

In summary of the main ideas of Alexanyan on the RuNet we can say the following: according to her, contemporary individuals use online media for private and public discourse in a manner that is specific to each nation. In the case of Russia, the country's unique social media ecology is the result of three intertwined factors: the Soviet era legacy of grassroots communications via unofficial networks (computer and interpersonal); the specific timing of Russia's Internet development, evolving simultaneously with social media; and the formative impact of Russia's dominant social media platform, the social network and blogging hybrid LiveJournal (2013, p. 234). In contrast to American society, in which the Internet had existed for years before social media emerged, for most Russians, the Web has always been 2.0 – social, interpersonal and user driven (2013, p. 235).

Alexanyan also studied the structure of the Russian Internet having conducted analysis of the quantitative, qualitative and visual data generated by the patterns of hyperlinks between the blogs in the RuNet Discussion Core, as well as semantic analysis of the blogs themselves; she identified 35 clusters, segmented into four key zones: Politics and Public Affairs, Culture,

Regional and Instrumental. The two key structural findings of her case study, that is, the fact that Russian social media networks are structured according to the closed style of social networking platforms and the fact that the RuNet Discussion Core is localized around LiveJournal, show the extent to which Russia's social media ecology has been shaped and influenced by this pioneering blogging platform. Such a platform combines features of social networks and blogs, and has historically contained the core of Russia's online public affairs and cultural discourse. It is difficult to identify a distinct political cluster of the Russian Internet and then to parallel it with the existing offline political structures (2013, p. 336).

Alexanyan discusses different clusters of blogs that she selected for her study, and describes the Patriotic/Nationalist cluster as follows: "The spectrum includes Russian "Ethno-nationalists" concerned with ethnic and racial purity, as well as "Imperialists" who are nostalgic for a powerful Russia of the past, especially a Soviet or Imperial past. Bloggers in this cluster often criticize the West and hail Stalin, but they also criticize the current Russian government. This cluster has the highest concentration of male bloggers on the map - 90%. It consists primarily of bloggers in Russia (74.6%) and Ukraine (11%)..." (2013, p. 130). This last paragraph demonstrates that there is a special segment of the Russian Internet devoted to nostalgia for the Soviet past (rather to Russia's grandeur, not nostalgia for socialism). It is a very instructive remark, as other scholars of the Russian Internet, for example Morenkova-Perrier (2017), also agree that for many Russians the main value of the Soviet past is in its equivalence to imperial power. Also, it is very important to pay attention to the fact that before 2014 a significant portion of these "Russian imperialists" (11%) was located in Ukraine, thus RuNet was not purely "Russian" in terms of geographic boundaries. Alexanyan did not study nostalgia for

the Soviet past online specifically, therefore it is essential to turn to the works of those scholars who addressed this topic in their research.

3.2.2. Nostalgic Online Communities of the Russian Internet. In order to get familiarized with nostalgic communities, I draw on comprehensive research of Morenkova-Perrier (2012, 2017). In agreement with Alexanyan (2013), Morenkova-Perrier (2017) argues that LiveJournal is the most politicized platform of RuNet while other networks such as Facebook, Twitter, as well as national Russian networks such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, MoiMir and MoiKrug are less politicized. During the protests of 2011, LiveJournal was in the epicenter of the events. Among the 25 most popular blogs, 8 belonged to the activists of the opposition. Alexey Navalny also started his activity on LiveJournal (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 233).

As Morenkova-Perrier states, VKontakte has the largest audience in Russia: 100 million users, while only 7.5 million Russians use Facebook (2017, p. 233). That indicates that this is the preferred network of the youth. Thus, LiveJournal is a platform for ‘adult’ social and political discussions, while VKontakte is characterized as a platform for youth. LiveJournal assumes the long, elaborated texts on Soviet history (blogs) where professional or semi-professional historians and journalists participate, the VKontakte assumes vivid discussions of a much broader range of participants.

Morenkova-Perrier (2017) describes the stages of how she made her sample of the groups, and confirms that LiveJournal is a platform for personal expression, while VKontakte is a platform for group activities. Then she made a manual selection in order to exclude very specific groups like the fans of the Soviet postage stamps. She considered groups popular if they had more than 500 members on LiveJournal and more than 1000 members on VKontakte.

Morenkova-Perrier accepted two main criteria for selecting groups out of the first preliminary sample of 350: that is, the most frequently visited and pertinent to the discussion. She conducted a quantitative analysis of the groups before posing questions about the content. The questions were: what are the topics and the historical periods that dominate the discussions? What period of Soviet history is the most brought to recall? How do the participants construct and share their vision of the past and in what form? What opinions are at stake? Do the dominants of the virtual space reflect the division of the Russian public sphere? In fact, she has come to the same dichotomy as she demonstrated before (“Slavophiles” against “Westernizers”). Morenkova-Perrier (2017) argues that due to anonymity on the Internet the opinions are radicalized, and that is why this dichotomy becomes possible. She mentions the Holy war, the term invented by the Internet users themselves in relation to irresolvable conflicts over the Soviet past (Holodomor, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the image of Stalin). The list of these topics is available on Lurkmoar.ru under the title “Permanent dramas of the USSR that we’ve lost which are as old as the Internet itself” (the article “Sovkosrach”) (2017, p. 236).

The same cleavage of opinions (“Slavophiles” against “Westernizers”) as in the press, on TV and in the cinema is detected. The communities promoting positive images of the USSR have bigger audiences (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 237). For example, on VKontakte there are 887 communities dedicated to Stalin and only 3 are anti-Stalinist. The community “Joseph Stalin, go to hell!” has 2,101 members, while “Joseph Stalin in our hearts” has 32,000 participants. The same situation is on LiveJournal: there are 39 groups dedicated to Stalin’s glorification, nostalgic groups, militant patriotic groups, and only three anti-Soviet ones. Morenkova-Perrier identifies four main forms of memorial practices in the Russian Internet users (commemoration, nostalgia, alternative histories and patriotic contestation).

In this regard, Morenkova-Perrier (2017) distinguishes between “nostalgia in the classical sense, i.e. anchored in the personal experience” and “pseudo-nostalgia” or “the nostalgia of non-experienced” with a strong identity function based on the Soviet mythology and presented by the communities on VKontakte whose audience is significantly younger than on LiveJournal, where people are mostly immersed in the “classical nostalgia”.

The Russo-French scholar compares nostalgic groups on LiveJournal where people try to preserve their memories, and where groups are clearly organized around a particular period of time when people were born (1976-1982, 1970-1975, 1962-1969), they express “classical nostalgia,” with the groups on VKontakte which consist of the young people whom Morenkova-Perrier calls “false nostalgic individuals” (“faux nostalgiques”) (2017, p. 238). In this case, this nostalgia is “not personal, but collective formed through the different cultural and media vectors”; this “non-experienced memory”²³ fed by all sorts of myths, fulfills the identity function, producing the sentiment of belonging to the abstract glorious past (2017, p. 238-239). In 2007, a text appeared on VKontakte whose author talked about the absence of obsession about security in the USSR (it was no obsession, because the security was absolutely guaranteed). Morenkova-Perrier observes how the representatives of the new “overprotected” generation react to this text of a person, who, certainly, lived under the USSR. According to the description of the USSR given by one of the nostalgic communities cited by Morenkova-Perrier, “the Soviet Union disappeared as a state having left to humanity the biggest diaspora ever known... The USSR has disappeared, but we, we stay here” (2017, p. 240). In this context, Vera Zvereva calls this phenomenon of immersion in the glorious fabulous past “social escapism” (2017, p. 240). That is, those who technically can claim their belonging to the USSR (born no later than in 1991) can

²³ This is Amosava’s translation from French.

construct their own unique identity of those “born in the USSR” who appreciate “the true values” despite their very young age, and can separate themselves from the rest of the society that shares the values of consumerism.

Importantly, Morenkova-Perrier (2017) sees the link between nostalgia and social pessimism. As a rule, the debates in such communities evolve around the most acute problems of contemporary Russia. The participants themselves believe to be “the deceived generation.” The Russo-French scholar notes that the most valuable thing in the USSR was the clear project for the future (2017, p. 242). She admits that the participants of the nostalgic fora desire to restore the USSR in its “improved” version: that would mean, without repressions, without the Iron Curtain, with the market economy (but the leading industries must be under the control of the state), with the more democratic laws. Thus, the participants constantly compare the stability of the USSR with the chaos of contemporary Russia. According to Morenkova-Perrier, the most controversial topic is the quality of life in the USSR (2017, p. 243).

The Russo-French researcher argues that on VKontakte, people, due to their age, are mostly engaged with pseudo-nostalgia for the USSR, while on LiveJournal people share memories of their childhood (so, this is “the classic” nostalgia based on the lived experience). The group for those born between 1976 and 1982 is called “the Encyclopedia of Our Childhood.”

One of the practices of this “real nostalgia” fora is the collective reconstruction of fragments of the Soviet past: a title of a film, a book, a street, details of a particular event (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 246). Some people doubt the veracity of their memories so they ask other participants to confirm that they are right. To illustrate the ideas of Maurice Halbwachs about collective memory, Morenkova provides an example, the story of a hole in a fence: a girl from Moscow who lived in Boston as a child passed through the hole in the fence to sneak into a

theme park. When she came to Moscow on her most recent visit, the hole was absent and the people whom she talked to about the hole reassured her that there was no hole there at all. She was bothered by her memories and asked the online participants of the nostalgic group if she was right or wrong. She got 51 responses: the hole really existed (Morenkova-Perrier 2017, p. 247). This is the classical example of the collective restoration of memories.

Morenkova-Perrier (2017) also writes that moderators try to avoid the clashes of memories, but what happens if such clashes occur (It mainly happens when people discuss the everyday life in the USSR and the life standards)? These people may be ignored by the rest of the community, or called ‘trolls’, but more often they are excluded from the groups by moderators (here, she refers to Abramov’s article of 2011 in which the situations of exclusion are analysed) (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 248).

Importantly, there are commemorative groups online. Morenkova-Perrier provides description of commemorative online groups which appeared in the 2000s in Austria, Germany, Poland and Czech Republic, dedicated to the memory of disabled children that were euthanized by the Nazis. In 2009, the commemoration of the Warsaw resurrection in 1944 appeared on Facebook (2017, p. 249). In this regard, Morenkova states that commemorative practices of the Russian Internet users coincided with the official commemoration politics. However, if the communities dedicated to commemoration of the Great Patriotic War have hundreds of thousands of participants (the biggest has 157,000 participants), the only group dedicated to the memory of the repressed counts only 35 members (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 249). These commemorative groups are created by the young people who were born in the early 1990s. In these groups people say “thank you” to the veterans, commemorate the anniversaries of different

battles, and in their discourses the veterans are treated as the social treasure (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 250).

Moreover, strongly pro-Soviet (“patriotic” as Morenkova-Perrier calls them) groups are created on VKontakte by young individuals. The groups with the “extension” “in our hearts” like “The USSR in our hearts,” “Stalin in our hearts,” “Lenin in our hearts,” “Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in our hearts” are administered in a centralized manner by 15 individuals of the young age (born between 1980 and 1990) (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 256). The Russo-French researcher suggests that these groups can be considered “patriotic.” These groups are “socialist” especially given that they call their members “comrades.” She distinguishes nostalgic groups from the “patriotic” groups. These groups are more militant than nostalgic. For example, they discussed the program of the commemoration of the repressed by Stalin which the Russian government launched in 2011, but the debates in the group “The USSR is in our hearts” started in 2010. The reaction of the participants towards the official view of Stalin’s repressions was very negative (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 257). The participants asked: “De-Stalinisation: to whom does it serve?” According to many participants, this program was launched by the “liberasts” (translated into English as “liberal faggots”) who are in power (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 257). Their goal is to impose on the young Russian people the ideal of democracy. For that reason, they need to erase from the people’s minds all the glorious achievements of the Soviet (non-democratic) times many of which relate to Stalin (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 257). These groups believed that the goal of this program of de-Stalinization was “to destroy the national pride” (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 258). Thus, these groups challenge the official politics of memory.

Then the Russo-French scholar analyses anti-Communist groups. She notices that a group named “Anti-Communists” has 1,979 members. Another group “I am an anti-socialist” has 14,335 members (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 258). The group “Joseph Stalin, burn in hell!” positions itself as the only island of resistance to “stalinoïdes” on VKontakte (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 259). Overall, the number of participants in these groups is comparatively low.

Having analyzed the RuNet communities discussed above, Morenkova-Perrier argues that there is a “cleavage” in representations of the Soviet past: there are two dominant viewpoints – “liberal” and “patriotic” (“Westernizers” and “Slavophiles”). Also, Morenkova juxtaposes the “democratic” vision of the Soviet past to the “mythologized” vision (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 262). If the former one was dominant during the 1980s-1990s, the latter has been dominant since the 2000s in public space. The accent from the trauma caused by Stalin’s repressions shifted to the period of *perestroika* which is presented now as a true “black hole” (Morenkova-Perrier, 2017, p. 263). We see that her inferences are similar to those ones of Mazur (2015). Morenkova-Perrier is not the only student of the RuNet nostalgic communities. She refers to Abramov (2011) who studied practices of such communities much earlier. Overall, his findings are fortified by the observations of the Russo-French scholar (whose study is the most recent).

As it becomes clear, all the research in this context is focused on Russia and its internal interests and problems, while my research promises to be broader in terms of geography and views on the USSR. Neither Abramov nor Morenkova-Perrier conducted interviews with the fora’s participants, thus having limited their research to observations of the nostalgic communities and discourse-analysis of discussions and commentaries in them. In my work, in addition to analyzing visual and textual contents of the fora, I was able to receive an unfolding picture of how people join these communities and why they choose to do this. I also evaluated

the broader worldview of the participants, finding out about their hobbies, families, pets, exact age, political preferences, and their visions of the future. What I am doing is not namely classification of the nostalgic fora, but rather understanding people who may feel that they belong to a broader imagined community which can be perceived as an online reincarnation of the Soviet Union.

Part 3. Online Nostalgic Communities

Chapter 4: Nostalgia for Soviet Spirituality and the USSR as a Perished Project of Modernity

I would like to discuss nostalgia for the USSR as a project of modernity and look at the ways of how this nostalgia articulates the role of religion in modern Russia. Also, I will approach nostalgia for the USSR as a just society whose ideals and values are inspired by Christianity; I will talk about the compatibility of religion and socialism under the USSR, and finally, I will discuss the online humour which mocks the symbiosis of Christian and Communist ideas. This **Chapter** is dedicated to the specific spirituality of the atheist Soviet society which has a very complicated relationship with religion. Why is it so important to discuss this unique, incomparable spirituality? The fact is, that in today's Russia they build churches at a fantastic speed²⁴ of 2 churches per day, and it does not contribute to the improvement of morals, as many people are bemoaning the spirituality of the modernist and atheist Soviet Union. Below I am showing two different types of nostalgia: the first type is purely atheist, modernist, science-oriented with the spirituality whose quintessence was the greatness of ambitions, when people were not "down to earth", but rather were aspiring to the stars; and secondly, nostalgia for the USSR with religious accent, stating that the spirituality of the USSR was non-alien to Christianity, was rooted in the latter, and was coherent to Christian principles, and probably the USSR was the only place where this Christian spirituality was realized in full.

Susan Buck-Morris in her famous book *The Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) writes that the project of modernity failed both in the East and in the West. If it was a catastrophe for

²⁴ <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8388893> - Access: 2020-07-26.

the East, for the West this collapse is a bad sign too because this project was conceived in the West, and was a logical consequence of the entire civilizational development of the West. Nostalgia for the USSR as a project of modernity is evoked by main achievements of the Soviet Union such as technological progress, space exploration, atomic energy taming, scientific mindset imposed on the entire population of the USSR. This time was poetically called by the physicist and poet Alexey Guskov “The Time of Giants” (2009)²⁵. Modernism as a whole is a Western project. Therefore, we can assume that this type of nostalgia can be found among a particular kind of non-liberal Westernizers because liberal Westernizers are usually not nostalgic for socialism (for sure, we do not conflate the Soviet Union with socialism; however, the research subjects often do this).

Simultaneously, there is also nostalgia for the USSR as an embodiment of spirituality and soulfulness, which is opposed to consumerism and is strongly associated with the principles of genuine Christianity. In this second sense, the modern Russia where the Orthodox church reveals itself as a most influential and greedy oligarch falls behind those high principles of morality that were a norm under Soviet rule. This second form of nostalgia is typical of the Slavophiles. Both nostalgic visions of the USSR depict the dissolved country as having greatness, but this greatness is of different sorts. One kind of “greatness” is associated with technological advancement, and another form of “greatness” is linked to moral superiority of the USSR not only over the consumerist West, but primarily over the modern decadent Russia.

It may seem that the memories of the USSR as a country which is characterized by technological advancement and promotion of atheism, on the one hand, and spirituality, on the

²⁵ <https://www.stihi.ru/2009/12/09/3502> - “The Time of Giants” (2009) was used in its shortened version without indication of the authorship, on the “Atheist”, and later was found by me on this site dedicated to poetry. Accessed: 2019-03-11.

other, are incompatible. However, we can try to understand on a deeper level what kind of spirituality is mourned over by those who claim its presence in Soviet everyday life, and how it relates to atheism.

While the first type of nostalgia for the USSR as a project of modernity depicts religion as a bastion of obscurantism, that is, as one of the main obstacles that prevent the modern Russia from technological and scientific success, and the bearers of this nostalgia perceive the Orthodox Church as a part of establishment which deserves disdain for its parasitism; the second type of nostalgia sees the Christian principles of equality, justice, non-covetous (modest, non-greedy) behaviour, and communal well-being as a source, where the socialist ideas were originally taken from, and the USSR is seen as a period in Russian history, where these Christian ideals of justice and equality were realized best of all.

4.1. Nostalgia for the USSR as a Project of Modernity

The Russian-speaking Internet is the platform where we can find multiple illustrations of these two versions of nostalgia: the first version, where the rise of religion is blamed for Russia's lag behind the civilized world, and the second version, where religion is praised for its consolidating role in the Soviet society, and the clear analogies are seen between Christianity and socialism / Communism.

The online communities that I observed, and the interviews with my interlocutors give me a clue in understanding the complex role of religion in the emergence of these two versions of nostalgia for the USSR.

On the Russian-speaking Internet, there are multiple communities which cannot be called strictly nostalgic for the USSR, yet nevertheless they bring the idea of technological and

scientific superiority of the Soviet civilization²⁶ in comparison to modern Russia. They mock the failures that Russia currently experiences in space exploration, and they link these failures to the prominent position of religion which intervenes in all the spheres that are prioritized by the Russian state. These communities ridicule the Orthodox priests who sanctify Russian spaceships and rockets which fall down without fulfilling their missions²⁷, and simultaneously they mourn the lost technological superiority which the USSR once had in the space exploration rally. They explain this loss of superiority by a decreased role of science and an increased role of religion in Russia (“[we] have exchanged space suits for cassocks”)²⁸ .

²⁶ “The Soviet Civilization” is a book of the prominent Russian philosopher and intellectual influencer Sergei Kara-Murza.

²⁷ For the period between 2010 and 2015, 12 launch vehicles launched by Russians, fell without completing their missions: [Аварийный космос: крупнейшие неудачи России в космосе с 2010 года :: Бизнес :: РБК \(rbc.ru\)](#) (in Russian; access: 2021-12-14).

²⁸ *Farewell to the Space* authored by a physicist and poet Alexey Guskov (2017) who is cited by the “Atheist”:

"Protons" carry away,
 "Unions" take away
 The last tons,
 The last loads
 To formerly
 native orbits,
 Which are
 just about to be forgotten.
 There will be no greetings
 To Venus and Mars
 From us who have exchanged
 space suits for cassocks,
 Overalls for jeans,
 factories for the stock exchange.
 And the space
 is getting further away
 And the stars
 are getting higher and higher...
 With what a pleasure
 Yura Gagarin
 Would spit in the mugs of
 Today's scoundrels
 [Being outraged with] stupidity
 With which
 We brainlessly squandered*
 The winning
 In the space rally.

*The author uses a low register word here.

This form of nostalgia exploits a few leading expressive images (memes), that are being rotated over and over in the online communities dedicated to science and technology, for example, in the group of humour “Atheist” on VKontakte (https://vk.com/atheist__blog). When I conducted my observations (September 2017-March 2018), the “Atheist” was a closed group where the participants could not comment on the posts: they could only approve and share them. When I finished my observations, the opportunity to comment on the posts was open, and then the participants ironically observed that, probably, it was open exactly with the purpose of making it easier for the Russian state to detect dissidents and punish them. By March 2019, the opportunity to comment on the posts was closed in this group; in November 2020 it was open again. The absence of the comments during the official period of observation in combination with the huge membership (then, over 600,000 members, and in November 2020, over 755,000 members) limited my research tools to observation of the posts without conducting interviews with the participants of this community because it was impossible to trace their opinions on the posts, except for their general approval. The administrator of this community rotates the memes (units of cultural content which replicate themselves with slight changes from an individual to another individual, or from a group to another group) in accordance to how Richard Dawkins (1976) defined them, that is, in clusters of a few categories. Unfortunately, he posts them without attributing their authorship. Moreover, I have realized that it is a common practice for the Russian Internet to refer to someone’s work without indication of its authorship, and many internavts face the same problem: they invest a lot of time trying to identify an author of their favourite image or a poem which has become viral. For example, I have seen at least five enthusiastic posts of different internavts on VKontakte who were excited that they discovered the

The poem in Russian can be viewed here: <https://www.stihi.ru/2017/04/11/3427> - Access: 2019-03-09.

author of a famous poem dedicated to the USSR *Do Not Lie That the Fallen Country Was an Abode of Evil and Falsehood*²⁹. The author is Marat Akhtyamov from Yelabuga, born in 1972, whose other poem I cite in my thesis. Thus, whenever I would find something interesting (an interesting meme, or a poem), I was tracing the “career” of this meme or a poem via other online sources. I found all the pictures used in this **Chapter** on VKontakte, mostly on the “Atheist”, and then I investigated their “paths” via other Internet resources. As I mentioned earlier, such groups as the “Atheist” are not purely nostalgic, however, even in them we can find posts dedicated to “300 sorts of sausage that you have in exchange for the absence of free medicine, education and housing”³⁰.

The administrator of the group postulates the existence of the Soviet civilization as an advanced stage of humankind’s development which was destroyed, and this ruination led to barbarism. In this respect, the painting of the Moldovan artist Gennady Zykov “The Year 1991”(Figure 6) which was used by the administrator of the “Atheist” twice in his posts is very instructive: it depicts the ruination of the USSR that converted civilized people shown on the walls of the ruins into the hominids of the lower order. However, the same painting published in another VKontakte forum evoked controversial reactions. For example, one of the participants states that the hominids in the front are “we ourselves”, while another participant contends that “in the front are those who are nostalgic for the ‘scoop’³¹ (the USSR)”, and these interpretations received equal number of approvals from other participants³².

²⁹ <https://stihi.ru/2007/12/30/1027> - Access: 2020-12-11.

³⁰ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_456337460%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev. – 300 sorts of sausage. Access: 2020-08-01.

³¹ ‘Scoop’ (sovok in Russian) is a pejorative word for the USSR, because it sounds similar to “sovetskii” (Soviet).

³² https://vk.com/wall-72326580_792746 - “Rodina: Ona Razvalilas”/ “Motherland: It has fallen apart” - Access: 2020-07-26.



Figure 6. “The Year 1991”, artist Gennady Zykov,³³

The “Atheist” on VKontakte (https://vk.com/atheist__blog) develops the idea of the ruined advanced Soviet civilization further. I have chosen a set of the most typical memes published in this group, which elaborate a popular demotivator “There still remnants of the advanced civilization can be found here...”³⁴ The first image depicts an astronaut with the inscription “The USSR” on his helmet and the launched space rocket, among the debris (“Ruins of the ancient civilization”, below, left). The accompanying text says: “Do you know that there is evidence that proves the existence of the highly developed civilization on the territory of Russia

³³ [https://arthive.com/artists/20178~Gennady Mikhailovich Zykov/works/379832~1991](https://arthive.com/artists/20178~Gennady_Mikhailovich_Zykov/works/379832~1991) - The painting with the confirmation of the authorship can be found on this site. – Access: 2020-12-12.

³⁴ https://vk.com/wall-29369324?q=%D0%97%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%20%D0%BB%D0%B8%20%D0%B2%D1%8B%2C%20%D1%87%D1%82%D0%BE%20%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8%20%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8&w=wall-29369324_8404276 – Demotivator on the ruins of advanced civilization. – Access: 2020-07-26.

in the non-remote past, which was much superior towards us technologically? – Are you talking about the USSR?” (Figure 7).

The image below from the right calls the USSR “the ancient, more developed civilization” with bitter irony, referring to the “abandoned space ships” of this ancient civilization (the image features the Soviet orbital rocket ship “Buran”, Figure 8)³⁵.

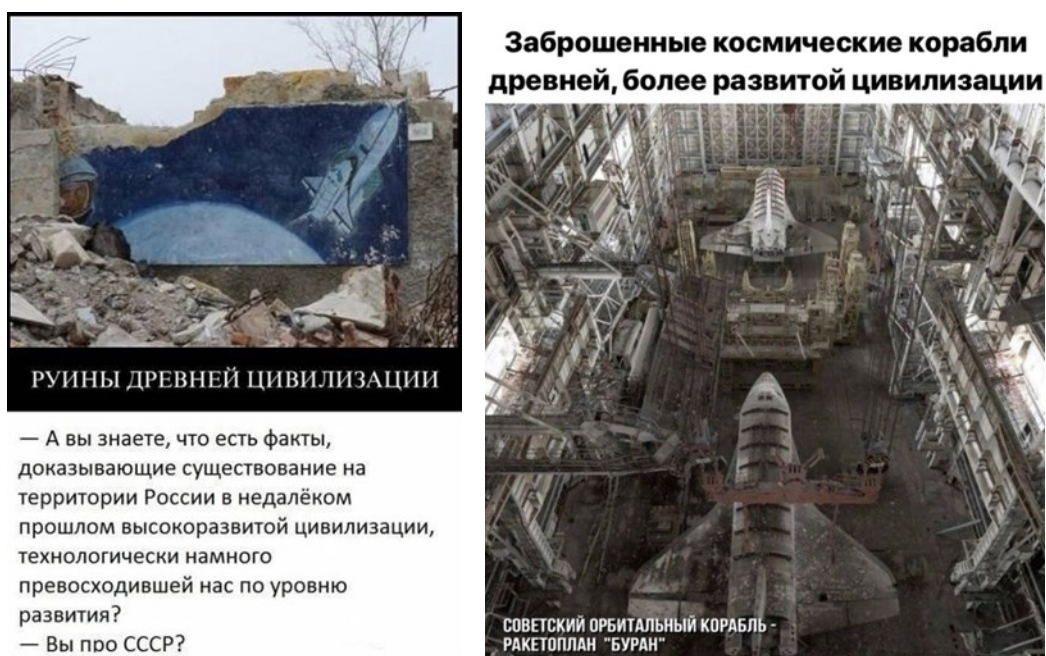


Figure 7. Debris of the Soviet Settlement. The inscription on the photo above (left) reads: “Do you know that there are facts proving the existence, on the territory of Russia, in the recent past, a highly developed civilization that greatly surpassed us in terms of technological development?” – “Are you talking about the USSR?”

Figure 8. “Buran”

³⁵ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?w=wall-29369324_10022500 – Post on “Buran”, Access: 2020-07-26.



Figure 9. “More developed civilization”. The inscription on the photo above is read: “In Russia, they increasingly find remnants of the more developed civilization”³⁶.

There are a lot of similar memes on the Russian Internet which repeat the idea of the meme shown above (**Figure 9**).

The mourning over the lost greatness related to space exploration and the abandoned space ships is so acute in Russia, that many poetical works sound in unison with Alexey Guskov’s poem *Farewell to the Space* (cited above). For example, I have found a poem of Marat Akhtyamov on YouTube³⁷, which was written in 2008³⁸, well before Guskov's poem *Farewell to*

³⁶ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_456336695%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev. – This is a link to the identical meme on ‘the remnants of the more advanced civilization’, but with a Lenin’s monument in debris. – Access: 2020-07-29.

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qt1QWXXK-IA0> – Accessed: 2018-09-27; the poem was published on YouTube 2 years before this date.

³⁸ <https://stihi.ru/2008/04/15/844> - This is Marat Akhtyamov’s poem *To the Cosmonautics Day* published on a special site for Russian-speaking poets. – Access: 2020-12-10. Marat Akhtyamov was born in Yelabuga in 1972. On his profile at LiveJournal he characterizes himself as SOVOK (scoop – a pejorative term for the Soviet Union and its admirers), but he deciphers SOVOK as Sovest’.Otvetstvennost’.Vernost’.Obrazovaniye.Kul’tura which means

the Space (2017). They literally repeat one another verbatim, although given rather different poetic styles of the authors, it is difficult to suspect them of direct borrowings from each other's works:

Once, a long time ago, so long time ago, that I don't believe
That it was true, and do you remember that?
Once we were kinder and wiser,
And we shared our dreams.

Once, a long time ago... Was it really on the Earth?
Everything was not like today, and though the time was harsh,
Children did not swear,
While playing in Gagarin, and not in thieves.

Once, a long time ago, until we sold
Our motherland for *a handful of lentils*³⁹
Once, - do you hear? We were dreaming, indeed,
To conquer Mars and Venus.

Once... (and if to think, not so long time
Passed since those great and memorable days),
The station "Mir" was flying around the Earth,
And "Buran" was not converted to a museum.

And now – we are pigs, we are well-fed creatures,
We won't raise our heads to the sky,

Conscience.Responsibility.Fidelity.Education.Culture. In one of his poems on stihi.ru titled "Facebook" and dated August 5th, 2020, he hints that his FB profile was closed due to his intolerant attitudes towards gays.

³⁹ The biblical symbol of unequal exchange (a handful of lentils/a bowl of lentil stew for the birthright, an exchange between the two sons of Isaac – Esau and Jacob) is a very powerful meme which is frequently used by the nostalgic people, who also often compare surrender of socialism for the advantages of the market economy to this meme.

Please, forgive us, Yuri Gagarin,
For the star fairy-tale failed to come true, alas...

The famous smile and expression “Poyekhali!” (“Let’s go!” assuming a landed vehicle) of the first world’s astronaut Yuri Gagarin became a meme a long time ago, as he turned into an icon after his legendary first flight to space. The well-known Russian writer Alexandr Prokhanov (2011) in his essay “Gagarin is the Russian Icon” states: “Yuri Gagarin with his snow-white smile, surrounded by a wondrous radiance, in the glitter of stars among radiant luminaries - this is a Russian icon, in front of which we purify ourselves, pray for our beloved immortal Russia”⁴⁰. The Swiss Museum of icons in Lenzburg dedicated a unique exhibition to Gagarin’s iconic images (“Gagarin is an Icon of Cosmonautics”) in April, 2019⁴¹, and now Gagarin plays a crucial role as a strong signifier of the lost technological superiority and civilizational greatness of the USSR. On the Russian Internet, we find images of Gagarin which are accompanied by the text: “Hello, descendants, how are you doing? Have you already been to Mars? Are you sanctifying rockets?”

⁴⁰ <https://maxpark.com/user/alexandrprohanov/content/709950> - Access: 2020-07-27.

⁴¹ <https://schwingen.net/2019/kosmonavt-gagarin-i-russkie-ikony-v-shvejcarskom-lencburge/> - Access: 2020-07-26.

**12 апреля
Вознесение Юрия Первопроходца**



В этот день принято просить прощения у Юры за то что мы всё проебали, и ходить в музей космонавтики на покаянную литургию у макета "Востока"

Figure 10. Yuri Gagarin as an icon

The image above (**Figure 10**) is a part of a famous triptych representing also Tesla⁴² and Einstein, which can be found on the Russian Internet. As a matter of fact, I have seen it on the “Atheist”⁴³. A closer look at the triptych gives an idea that there were three separate images produced by the same artist (or like-minded artists) which were united in a triptych. Unfortunately, I was unable to identify the artist. I have copied the poster representing exclusively Gagarin from the article in LiveJournal on the alleged cosmonauts’ religiosity⁴⁴. The poster contains profanity which is a common practice for those outraged with the intrusion of religion in space exploration; it mocks the Orthodox icons and the Orthodox tradition of honoring certain saints on certain days, and reads as follows: “April the 12th, The Ascension of Yuri the Pioneer: On this day it is customary to ask Yura (diminutive from Yuri) for forgiveness for fucking everything up⁴⁵, and to go to the museum of cosmonautics for a penitential liturgy near the model of “Vostok””.

I see in these “icons” an obvious irony in relation to the Orthodox church, however, Dima Vorobiev (2018) sees in these transparently anti-religious (it could even be considered as blasphemous because none of these people are canonized, but they are all depicted with halos) images of Tesla, Einstein, and Gagarin “one of the occasional modern attempts to extend the Russian metaphysical tradition of Orthodox mysticism to the realities of the space age. Yuri

⁴²https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_456334448%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev - In the Orthodox church in Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina) there is a fresco of Tesla without a halo on the wall, along with other outstanding scientists and writers. The Serbian church tries to associate itself with the achievements of science. A little more, - and it recognizes Tesla as a saint. It is obvious that Russian images of Tesla, Einstein and Gagarin have nothing to do with religiosity: on the contrary, it is an irony in relation to the church. – Access: 2020-12-12.

⁴³ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_456335840%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev – Tesla, Einstein and Gagarin. - Access: 2020-07-28.

⁴⁴ <https://gala-gala15.livejournal.com/1147803.html> - Access: 2020-07-26.

⁴⁵ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_456335658%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev – It is another post on the “Atheist” with the same inscription, thus, “Forgive us, Yura, for fucking everything off” is a meme. – Access: 2020-07-28.

Gagarin, the first man in space, is painted as a Christian saint looking after us from his heavenly abode”.⁴⁶

A well-known Russian artist Vasya Lozhkin whose artistic works’ images can be found on the “Atheist” plays with this symbolism of Gagarin’s personality in his painting “Non-gagarin (Negagarin) is attacking the firmament”⁴⁷ (**Figure 8**), thus mocking the religious representation of the sky as something firm, even rocky, and depicting Non-gagarin as an Orthodox (bearded) miner who has to break through the rock of the empyrean. This artist and this particular painting are so popular that there is a poetic group on VKontakte dedicated to the criticism of modern Russia in poems which is named after this masterpiece⁴⁸. The inscription on Lozhkin's painting is parodying the Slavonic language used by the Orthodox church. In this sense, Gagarin as a meme is one of the most noticeable representations of the Soviet technological and scientific advancement that can be found on the Russian Internet.

⁴⁶ <https://www.quora.com/Why-does-Russia-not-have-a-big-philosophical-tradition> - Access: 2020-12-12.

⁴⁷ <https://www.ridus.ru/news/175296> - In this article dedicated to Lozhkin’s art “Negagarin” corresponds to image #12, where the copyright owner is clearly indicated: © Вася Ложкин. Under the Canadian Copyright Act, Section 29.1 (<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-42/page-6.html#docCont>), my use of Lozhkin’s works constitutes fair dealing (criticism or review). According to Serena Henderson, Rory McGreal and Viviane Vladimirschi (2018), six factors are used in Canada to decide whether the dealing was fair or not: the purpose of the dealing (commercial or non-commercial use), the character of the dealing (has a single copy or multiple copies been made?), the amount of the dealing, alternatives to the dealing (was a “non-copyrighted equivalent of the work” available?), the nature of the work (confidential or not), effect of the dealing of the work (will copying the work affect the market of the original work?) My use of art in the dissertation is non-commercial, I used one copy of each piece only, my use has not affected the market of the original work, and the pictures are not confidential.

⁴⁸ <https://vk.com/negagarin> - Access: 2020-07-26.



Figure 11. Yuri Gagarin is talking on the phone, and “Ne-gagarin”, artist Vasya Lozhkin. Above left: Gagarin’s photos accompanied by his words: “Hello, descendants, how are you doing? Have you already landed on Mars? Are you sanctifying the space ships? Right: “Non-gagarin is attacking the firmament”, by Vasya Lozhkin

After the downfall of the USSR, the Russian Orthodox church intruded on all the space exploration programmes and the Orthodox priests became employed as regular employees on Baikonur, having the official titles of honorable space testers. Despite their efforts, Russia has been experiencing multiple failures in space exploration. The author of an article on LiveJournal who writes on the alleged religiosity of the Soviet cosmonauts, states: “Priests are like our notorious “effective managers”: the former privatized the industry, the latter are trying to privatize Cosmos and Victory (in Great Patriotic war)”⁴⁹.

Another meme that contributes to the representation of current Russia as a country which is lagging behind not only the West, but the technologically more developed USSR, is a meme

⁴⁹ <https://gala-gala15.livejournal.com/1147803.html> - Access: 2020-07-26.

with an astronaut killed or tortured by barbarians⁵⁰. The modifications of this meme are multiple; however, I would like to provide as an example the “Crucified Gagarin” graffiti (**Figure 12**) by the artist from Perm, Alexandr Zhunev, posted on the “Atheist”⁵¹. Although the image is significantly damaged, we still can recognise the letters “CCC...” on the helmet of the space suit which stand for “the USSR”. The Orthodox believers demanded that the artist be punished for vandalism and for insulting the feelings of believers (there is such an article in the Criminal Code of Russia), while the Perm court considered this case as hooliganism⁵². The erasing of the graffiti can be symbolically perceived as the reiterated and fatal destruction of the project of modernity in Russia.

⁵⁰ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_457435171%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev – Savages kill an astronaut. – Access: 2020-07-29.

⁵¹ https://forbes.kz/news/2015/04/14/newsid_84519 - The graffiti artist from Perm Alexander Zhunev was arrested for having painted crucified Gagarin on the 12th of April, 2015, because in that year The Easter coincided with the Cosmonautic Day. For his graffiti, he chose a façade of the multistory building in Perm that faces both the former rocket school and cathedral. If you follow this link, it is possible to see the graffiti before its destruction. – Access: 2020-07-26.

⁵² <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27059181.html> - Access: 2020-07-26.



Figure 12. “Crucified Gagarin” by Alexandr Zhunev, Perm, April 12th, 2015

The second image of this kind shows an astronaut being burned by the medieval crowd (Figure 13). The idea of science and progress as being annihilated by obscurantism, ignorance and barbarism, and represented through the figure of a tortured astronaut widely circulates on the Russian-speaking internet.



Figure 13. The Burned Cosmonaut, a popular meme, found in the group “Atheist” on VKontakte⁵³

Thus, as we can notice, nostalgia for the USSR as a project of modernity finds its expression in multiple memes many of which are centered on the rejection of socialism in favour of capitalism, which is seen as ruination of the developed, technologically advanced civilization, and a rollback to barbarism, while another set of memes is grounded on active exploitation of the space exploration theme. Through the lens of this form of nostalgia for the USSR, religion is understood as an obstacle to progress and greatness of Russia, as an archaic phenomenon whose dogmas deserve to be mocked at, and are absolutely incompatible with science and a civilized (Westernized?) way of social development.

⁵³ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_456334735%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev – Access: 2020-07-29

4.2. Nostalgia for the USSR as a Just Society Inspired by Christianity, and Ideological Compatibility of Religion and Socialism

The Communist Party headed by Gennady Zyuganov, re-evaluated its relations with the Orthodox church, and now the leaders of the Communist party can often be seen at religious events, in the Orthodox churches accompanied by the priests of the church, which is an additional marker of the entrance of the Communist party to the establishment, the current ruling elite.

The pictures below posted in the community “Atheist” on VKontakte show Gennady Zyuganov attending a service in the church, and the supporters of the Communist party headed by Zyuganov which carry the banner that is read: “Communism is the immortal teaching of Christ” (**Figure 13**, photo credit: A. Aratov) which is accompanied by the comment that this picture is a brilliant illustration of the concept “Cognitive dissonance”⁵⁴. It is worth mentioning that Zyuganov maintains warm relations with other confessions, too; for example, mufti of Syria congratulated him on the 98th anniversary of the Great October revolution saying that they are “comrades”⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ https://vk.com/atheist__blog?z=photo-29369324_457436915%2Falbum-29369324_00%2Frev – This is a similar post, showing that some people combine communism as their political preference, Orthodoxy as their religion, and career and money as their main life goals. – Access: 2020-07-29.

⁵⁵ <https://informburo.kz/novosti/muftiy-sirii-pozdravil-zyuganova-s-godovshchinoy-oktyabrskoy-revolyucii.html> - Access: 2020-07-29.



Figure 14. Zyuganov in the Orthodox church and “Cognitive dissonance”



Figure 15. Zyuganov “praying for Communist movement”, and Lenin in despair (the “Lenin in Despair” meme is a variation of the “Captain Jean-Luc Picard Facepalm” meme from “Star Trek”)

The post above (**Figure 15**) found on the “Atheist” depicts Gennady Zyuganov looking at an icon and allegedly saying: “My Lord, help the Communist movement because Communism is non-separable from faith in God!” while Lenin below expresses his despair⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ https://vk.com/atheist_blog?z=photo-29369324_456334625%2Falbum-29369324_00 – «Lord, help the communist movement!»- Access: 2020-07-29.

Nowadays, in the post-Soviet space it is rather easy to find a person who would claim that he or she is a Communist and an Orthodox Christian simultaneously. This phenomenon is so wide-spread that in the online community 'Atheist' on VK mentioned above, we can find posts with the following content: 'Cognitive dissonance looks approximately like that: life position - political preferences: Communist, religion - Orthodox Christianity'. This phenomenon is mocked in popular culture. Here is an illustration which is a derivative work obtained as a modification of Vasya Lozhkin's original painting. The original shows an old woman holding a red banner, and an old man holding Stalin's portrait. An unknown author has created a meme from this work: he added a Christian cross to the banner and replaced Stalin's face with a picture of Jesus (**Figure 16**). This modified painting was published on "Atheist". This piece depicts one of the most controversial phenomena of Russia's modern life: it shows that the symbols of Communism (red banner) and symbols of Christianity (an icon and a cross) are conflated in the minds of some people. An inscription on both the original and the derivative paintings says: "Let's return everything back". The original artwork by Lozhkin shows the desire of some Russian people to return to Communism, while the modified meme represents the idea of religion's inclusion into a restored Communist society. The works of Lozhkin are highly recognizable on the Russian Internet; therefore, replacing the image of Stalin with Jesus is a strong statement. It is important to understand the background of this unusual alloy of Communist ideology and Christianity which is growing popular and simultaneously gaining its critics (and even haters).



Figure 16. “Let’s return everything back”, a meme referencing artist Vasya Lozhkin’s original work⁵⁷

My first personal encounter with this amalgamation of Communist and Christian worldviews happened when I interviewed Igor Shapovalenko (born in 1973) from Lugansk, via Skype (Lugansk is a capital of Lugansk People’s Republic separated from Ukraine in 2014). I should emphasize that I have changed the names of my informants, but some of them like Igor, insisted on keeping their real names in my publications because they take full responsibility for their views and opinions and are eager to share them.

⁵⁷ [Downward spiral: Russia now has more HIV/AIDS cases than all of Europe -- EUROMAIDAN PRESSEuromaidan Press | News and views from Ukraine](#) - This is the link to the publication that contains the modified version of Vasya Lozhkin’s “Let’s return everything back!” which is already popular on the Russian internet as a meme. – Access: 2021-12-06.

Igor introduced himself as a member of the Communist party of Ukraine headed by Pyotr Simonenko; At that moment, he made a pause for a while because now he lives in a political entity different from Ukraine. The fact is that many Communist parties of the former Soviet republics are unified under the aegis of the Communist Party of Russia headed by Gennady Zyuganov, as if the USSR still exists. They are perceived as the regional parties of the Russian Communist party, they have common events, common leadership, and are attested by the radical leftists as revisionists, conformists, non-revolutionaries, and the parties of establishment well-embedded into the modern Russian and pro-Russian political conjuncture. I have noticed the cross with Jesus Christ on Igor's chest and this provoked my questions:

T. Amosava: - I see that you have a cross on your chest. It does not relate to our main topic, but it means that you combine Orthodoxy and Communism.

Igor Shapovalenko: - Yes, for sure! I believe that they are not mutually exclusive, no... I am an Orthodox Christian, I am not a member of a sect, I was baptized in my childhood [Igor is 45, he was baptized in the USSR]. And I believe that it's in vain that people think that Communists... It's to the contrary! Of course, there were excesses, it was not correct to treat [the Church] like that, but Lenin, I believe, he is not to blame for this. Lenin just said that [it is necessary] "to separate school from the Church, and the Church - from the state." He did not mean any repressions.

T. Amosava: - I see, no repressions!

Igor Shapovalenko: - ...neither clergy, nor the Church - he did not want any of that.

T. Amosava: - Aha, understood! What do you think about the statement that the Code of the Builders of Communism was written off from the Bible, because there is such a common opinion - I have seen it in many places... Do you agree with this, or not?

Igor Shapovalenko: - Yes, because I believe that the Bible, Orthodoxy teaches good, justice, it teaches to help people, to help disinterestedly, and the Communists do the same. So many things were built on enthusiasm! Of course, people received monetary salaries, because they had to feed themselves somehow, but anyway everything was based on enthusiasm, of course, everybody helped [those in need]! A human being to a human being is a friend, a comrade, and a brother.

T. Amosava: - I see, it's clear, it means that you agree with this statement. It is very likely that yes, that it really was like that, I am just, indeed, looking for as much proof of this idea as possible, that they, indeed, coincide...

Igor Shapovalenko: - I, for sure, do not remember everything word by word. I, for sure, have read the Bible and the Code of the Builders of Communism. I do not say that the latter was written off [from the former], but these qualities are just common [foundations] for humanity, these are [the grounds] that were laid, which... Yes, therefore... I do not say, that they [the principles of the Code] were written off, no! But it is true that, indeed... they are... for justice, for the good, for... and so on... Therefore, I do not just say that it was written off, but just that there is unity...

T. Amosava: - They coincide in their essence?

Igor Shapovalenko:- They do coincide, for sure, yes! Because everything was creation, and not ruination, [the goal was] namely to create, to produce, namely to make - like this!

The issue of spirituality in the USSR under officially proclaimed atheism becomes one of the most interesting for analysis. It became commonplace that the current situation in Russia and in the post-Soviet space is characterized as the absence of spirituality, as the situation of the deficit of moral values. How did spirituality coexist with atheism, then? My next informant unfolds these themes in her interview, continuing to develop the idea of Christian influence on the Communist ideology. Sova (a pseudonym) is from Saint-Petersburg (a lawyer who was born in 1968 in Donetsk). She self-identifies as a monarchist, saying that she regrets the disintegration of the Russian empire. She also stated that the restoration of the empire would take a lot of time and the society is not ready for this now. Moreover, the monarch is supposed to be anointed by God. The restoration of the empire and monarchy will not happen without God. I asked her about desirable candidates who could occupy the throne. Below, I am providing a fragment of our conversation:

Sova: - Yes, it is possible, and the Romanovs [as emperors are possible], perhaps somehow [the right candidate] will be elected, although, you see, our USSR - well, it was all the same [it was an empire]. There was the same religion - Communism, the Code of the Communist is purely written off from the Commandments.

T. Amosava:- But when you say “written off” - what does that mean? That they worked on this text [the Commandments] directly, or that they [the Commandments and the Code of Communist] are just consonant?

Sova: - I admit, I admit, that they worked on this text directly, because all of them [Bolsheviks, Communists] were baptized. We know that Stalin graduated from a theological seminary, right? Of course, they knew all this... Let's remember our demonstrations: people went out with flags, and so on, - well, it's *khorugvi* [gonfalons - religious banners used during the Holy Cross processions]!

T. Amosava: - So it was religion, wasn't it? Communism is a religion, in your opinion, yes?

Sova: - Of course! It's just a replacement! And what did happen in the nineties [the 1990s], when this vacuum was formed, and all sorts of things poured into the territory of the post-Soviet space?..

T. Amosava:- Baptists.

Sova:- Yes, as my daughter says, it is inappropriate and wrong to call them sects, these are "religious entities" - it is correct to say so, to call [them like that] .

Then Sova talks about 'spirituality' in times of the Soviet Union which does not exist anymore:

Sova: - ...besides, something else relates to nostalgia for the USSR: spirituality, this thing, as well! I think that if to describe my personal nostalgia for the collapsed USSR, it would relate to the fact that this very spirituality is lost. This is what I am longing for, and it really existed!

T. Amosava: - You are a monarchist, and there was atheism in the Soviet Union. What kind of spirituality are you talking about?

Sova: - I am talking about the personal, right? Well, you never know with those atheists: those atheists - they came and taught us atheism, and baptized their own children. It means, it [their real attitude to atheism] was half-truth. I don't want to touch this. And spirituality was like that: from the very kindergarten [in the USSR] they were at least trying (well, maybe I was so lucky) to bring up an INDIVIDUAL. There was no this equal/indifferent [approach].

In this fragment, Sova means that every person in Soviet society enjoyed a very personal, interested, differentiating approach from the side of educational institutions and authorities who took into account the person's needs, talents, and challenges faced. Her idea is close to the famous Marxian "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" that he formulated in his *Critic of the Gotha Program* (1875). It seems to me that when people speak about spirituality in such a context, they mean a mostly humanist and deeply interested attitude

toward other people rather than deep involvement with non-human entities. In such a discourse ‘spirituality’ means ‘humanism.’ Humane attitudes towards fellow brethren are shared both by the Communist ideology and by Christianity.

Another informant of mine, Alena from Minsk, born in 1981, and translator from Polish, unfolds the idea of unanimity of the Communist, traditional Slavic (Russian) values, such as sobornost’ (orientation at communal well-being), and traditional Orthodox values:

Alena from Minsk: - So, it is only natural that the Soviet ideology inherited... was supposed to inherit multiple features of what it was superseding. And, so to say, if to be prone to dramatic exaggerations, then [it is possible to say that] those who today denigrate the Soviet ideology, at the same time denigrate many of the postulates of the Christian faith... the Orthodox faith, in particular... in its Orthodox version... Because, from my point of view, this Communism - why did it get so well with us and, for example, with a well-developed and organized Communist movement in Germany, it had absolutely not been established there? Because there were the traditions of sobornost’ in Russia [Serguei Oushakine (2009: 100) translates this notion as ‘universal communion’; there are other possible translations: ‘conciliarity’ and ‘catholicity’]. This obsession with universality, catholicity, compatibility with everybody. In the Belarusian tradition, this idea, by the way, is also present, but it is more pragmatic: the idea of toloka. That is, our conciliarity does not extend to spheres of leisure, anything else, but only to the sphere of work, as objectively, we can do more together, and if some kinds of work are complex or urgent, then it's real to complete them collectively much faster and better than individually. But, in any case, from my point of view, this is, too, a variety of ideology of sobornost’.

T. Amosava - Of sobornost’...

Alena from Minsk: - That is why the Communist ideology took root and it was very harmoniously blended with the worldview of most people, even those who in due course became, for objective reasons, very far from religion. But you and I understood that Communism could not be on our territory, let’s say, a movement that promoted the development of religious beliefs for one simple reason: it rivaled religion from the very beginning. On the strength of their, so to speak, appeal [the strong requirement towards the adepts to devote all their time either to religious practices, or to building Communism it was impossible to be both a Communist and go to church purely because it would not be enough time.

My respondents are unanimous in their evaluation of the basic affinity of Christian and Communist values. This begs the question of how this affinity can be compatible with those

repressions that the Orthodox church experienced under Communists? In this respect I would like to cite my informant from Riga, Igors Ivanovs, born in 1961, who rejects the repressions against the church under socialism, and draws on his own life experience when we discuss the possibility of spirituality under proclaimed atheism:

T. Amosava: - It means that it seems to you, that the USSR was such a country, where the moral values were very high. It means that the most essential, probably, the most valuable is not only the protection of labour, not only medicine, but additionally, that there were some spiritual values despite atheism, which was the dominant ideology; with all that, spirituality, kindness, humanism - all these, probably, the most serious human qualities, they were highly valued, right? Or what?

Igors Ivanovs:- Yes, I believe that. Also, I can say about atheism, as you call it. There was no such a thing that [religion] was prohibited. The churches were considered separate from the state, they were open. Any person could enter the temple, as they say, for example, my granny used to bring me there. My mother - the police officer - also, as they say, went to church. There was no [such a practice] to persecute someone, to harass, and my mom had a cross on her neck, as I remember. It was nothing wrong with that. No one pursued for this, while now they are trying to denigrate everything. I do not know why this is being done.

Commenting on compatibility of religion and socialism in terms of state policy toward the church, Alena from Minsk rightly stated that Communism and Christianity were rivals in terms of competing for the same “audience” (“congregation”) and therefore their peaceful co-existence was not possible. In this regard, there exists a huge corpus of literature on repressions against the religious institutions and the clergy under socialism. My informant from Latvia claims that there were not any repressions. His statements can be explained by the fact that Igors experienced a particular stage of the Soviet history (Brezhnev era), while during other historical periods, there was significant tension between the state and the church.

In contrast to what Igors Ivanovs from Riga said above, Anita Stasulane (2017, p. 13), an expert on religion from Latvia, states the following:

...in Latvia, the communists desacralized mainly Protestant (Lutheran, Baptist, Adventist and Methodist) churches, setting up clubs, sports halls, warehouses, grain drying-kilns and shops within them, whereas services continued to be held in the majority of the Roman Catholic and Christian Orthodox churches. The church was the only place where the clergy was allowed to preach, and only during services. Religious education in schools was not allowed: in Soviet Latvia, the Criminal Code (1945-1990) prescribed criminal liability for teaching religion to people under 18. On Sundays, during church services, local Communist activists often arrived to check who was attending church. If a minor was observing the mass, the school was informed and teachers had to undertake further measures on atheist education.

Latvia became a Soviet republic comparatively lately and those measures that are described as “repressions” by Stasulane (2017) can be a part of the public policies in some developed countries today. For example, non-attended churches are converted into centers of recreation even in the USA and Canada. At this point it is important to mention the bloodiest repressions against the clergy, which took place in the 1920s-1930s.

Ivan Yanushevich (2008), a historian from Belarus, analyzes the forms of repressions against religion and their scale during the first decades of Soviet rule. In one of his papers, he states that the Great October socialist revolution built its policy toward the Church taking as an example the bloody Great French revolution. According to the researcher, there were a lot of similarities in the strategies applied to the Church and clergy in both revolutionary countries. Yanushevich points out that under the pretext of fighting famine in the Volga region in 1922, all the temples were looted. In addition to that, the Bolsheviks organized mass murders of the Orthodox clergy. For example, in Belarus 201 clergymen were killed that year.

However, there is an opposite viewpoint on the Soviet anti-religious repressions among academics. According to this alternative opinion, the scope of repressions against the Church was and has been intentionally exaggerated by the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church Overseas/Abroad. The stance of ‘martyr’ is extremely desirable for the clergy abroad and that is why the myths about sufferings of the Orthodox martyrs tortured by Bolsheviks were

industriously cultivated. This idea was expressed by the Russian historian Alexandr Kolpakidi in his interview to Leonid Volodarsky during the Radio broadcasting “Moscow speaks” on November 5th, 2017. In this interview, Kolpakidi explains that the numbers of the clergy victims of Bolshevism are falsified. Speaking about the atheist websites, Kolpakidi emphasizes the negative reaction of the Russian society against this data fabrication and against the denigration of Bolshevism which brought a lot of advancements to the Russian society (such as universal literacy, universal access to free medicine, a dramatic increase in life expectancy and a decrease in child and maternal mortality since the days of the Russian empire, an eight-hour working day, guaranteed work, and therefore, guaranteed income). Today, the demonization of Bolshevism does not cause enthusiasm among the Russian public⁵⁸.

Given that the approaches to the socialist state policies towards the church are so different, it is more productive to turn to the most recent period of Soviet history before perestroika. This latest Soviet period, the Brezhnev era, can be seen as a result of the development of relations between the state and the church, and as we realize, it is reconstructed in my informants’ memories as a more or less benign symbiosis. Moreover, according to them, this symbiosis would be possible even under restored socialism. The Russian Orthodoxy enjoyed a status of an ‘almost state religion’ under socialism. Below is a fragment of the interview with Alexei from Cyprus (originally from Ukraine, born in 1973) who develops this theme of mutual reliance of state and religion on each other as the institutions of power. Also, he describes religion as a part of national identity, and as a factor of social solidarity. Like my other informants, he states that the Brezhnev era was not a time of repressions against religion:

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVD6TQ9MDGE> - Alexandr Kolpakidi on the Hundredth Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution in the programme of Leonid Volodarsky on the radio ‘Moscow speaks’ on 2017-11-05. Accessed: 2018-01-22.

T. Amosava: - Well, and then, Alexei, I have the last question: tell me, please... In general, I have formulated this question in such a manner, as if we could imagine to ourselves, that Soviet socialist society were re-birthed, then what would be the role of religion in that society? And if, for example, it were not re-birthed: what are your attitudes towards religion? What is the role of religion in society in general? I am asking because the Soviet society was atheist, is that correct?

Alexei from Cyprus: - Yes, yes, on the whole - yes... Let's consider the following: in all the European countries - it looks allegedly like yes, you are welcome [to practice] any religion: you may be a Muslim, you may be a Christian, but with all that, Christmas is marked as an official holiday in the calendar [when people do not work], and Ramadan is not an official holiday. This is a very simple example for the European countries. Here it is. It turns out as if the state is already bound with religion, and here we see that these things, let's say, "go in step." The state realizes this bond [with religion] at the legislative level. Cyprus is very religious, on the whole, however, it does not impact me negatively - no way.

T. Amosava: - Pardon me, who is religious? I did not understand! Who is religious?

Alexei from Cyprus: - Cyprus!

T. Amosava: - Ah, Cyprus! I've just not heard it well. Cyprus is religious, and likely it is Orthodox, right?

Alexei from Cyprus: - Yes, Orthodox, right. And going to church here - well, it is, so to speak, regular, it is massive, and so on. All the religious celebrations here are massive. And I would like to emphasize one more time that for me it's rather a 'plus,' because in this respect I see that they go there as an entire family, with grandmothers, grandfathers, they intentionally go to a particular mountain settlement, bring grannies and grandpas from there in order to go to the church together with them, I mean that this is the real unity, this is the maintenance of the family values. And to imagine hypothetically, that the Soviet Union were restored... then what to do with religion? And what shall we do? - This is the very case when nothing can be done. There are believers - let them be believers. This is exactly what happened during the Soviet Union, let's say, in the Brezhnev era: if I had a cross, they probably would not have done anything to me. Maybe, a particularly zealous chairman of the council of an organization [Alexey Yurchak (2006) writes extensively on such activists] - the pioneer [organization] or another one - would say: "How is it that you have a cross and a badge of the Komsomol there? Probably, they are incompatible!" Although I hardly believe that he could prove it to me. Like that. However, I do not, probably, [anticipate] the restoration of the Soviet Union in that form, in which it existed at the moment of its collapse, probably... some changes must happen, because the people nowadays... it is much more comfortable for the people to affiliate themselves with Christians, maybe with Muslims, it is comfortable now to be believers, because it is a particular social moment [the moment of social solidarity], because people dress themselves identically, they greet each other identically - greet each other during the holidays, well, they prepare, maybe, particular dishes: among them the dyed Easter eggs, and some other traditions. I [do not see] anything bad... I am trying to understand, whether I see anything bad in this: no, I don't see anything bad in this. Here [on Cyprus] I don't see anything [bad in religion]. And during

the Soviet Union I did not see [anything bad in this]. I used to beat Easter eggs with others during the Soviet Union [it is a folk ritual when those who celebrate Easter test whose egg is harder to break]. In the cities it was not so [widespread], in the rural areas it was more common. But anyway, it existed... Nobody thought a lot: why this [Easter] cake is cut like that, right? I mean nobody told me about that, but everybody visited each other with those cakes. I mean the Americans visit each other with the apple pies, and in the Soviet Union there was a special Easter cake on special days. Well. I mean I did not know anything about that, like my children know not very much about the Soviet Union. Although I try to tell them something. Probably, religion - it would exist under the [restored] Soviet Union, - it would be silly to begin oppressing it.

4.3. Online Humour about Compatibility of Religion and Socialism/Communism and Political Role of the Church

On the basis of evidence available online, it is possible to conclude that many believe in the ideological and “infrastructural” compatibility of socialism and religion, especially Orthodox Christianity. This is absolutely not true for the radical leftists and communists who do not affiliate themselves with “the Communist party of establishment” headed by Gennady Zyuganov. My informants of the leftist (socialist, Communist) worldview (except for Igor Shapovalenko) were against the symbiosis of religion and socialism or expressed disbelief in the likelihood of this co-existence. For instance, Alexey Homo Sovieticus stressed that the most valuable [things in the USSR] were “the absence of exploitation of man by man, internationalism and atheism.” Alexey believes that religion is an instrument of exploitation and declares that “there is no place for religion in a socialist society.” Dmitry Ustinov, a Marxist who condemns nostalgia for the USSR, agrees with Alexey Homo Sovieticus Ladyshkin in his evaluations of religion’s future in a socialist society:

Religion is in no way compatible with socialism, and dialectical materialism and historical materialism explain this well. Yes, it may exist for some time, but the outcome for it, as well as for the state, is that it will wither away.

Vladimir Sidorov on my question about compatibility of religion (Orthodoxy) and socialism responds by stating the following:

Ideological combination is unacceptable! But the specific policy depends on the situation. It is necessary to uproot the epistemological roots of religion - but they are deeper than the boundaries of our knowledge. That is, this is a task for a very long period. And there are also psychological roots. Many people need religion, as a lame needs a crutch, as an alcoholic needs an expert in narcology. And there are situations (I saw this) when a person needs to pray before a fight. You need to be careful with this!

However, some of socialists believe in God, but admit that Communist ideology and religion are competitors, as it was stated by Andrey from Germany:

Let's start with the fact that God exists, but no religion adequately describes him. Therefore, Orthodoxy can exist in the renewed USSR as a marginal sect. And, most likely, it will not exist at all. Because a Communist society requires the formulation of its ideology in fairly simple and accessible forms, which will compete with religion and, presumably, supplant it.

Ilya from Ufa formulates his vision of religion in a socialist society as follows:

Since the USSR is a progressive project, a project of Modernity, the place of religion in it - as EVERYONE agreed at the beginning of the twentieth century - is "everyone's personal business." Another thing is that I agree with Kozhinov⁵⁹ that in the modern world religion is not a religion, but a subculture with specific markers and, in fact, it has little to do with religion.

The socialists perceive the behaviour of the leaders of "the Communist party of establishment" as extremely inconsistent and not related to Marxist ideology. These warm relations of "the Communist party of establishment" and the Orthodox church have become a subject of humourous and sometimes sarcastic reflection on the Russian-speaking Internet. To develop a theme of repression against the church carried out by the Communists, I would like to cite a sarcastic joke found in "The Atheist" on VKontakte (**Figure 17**). The inscription to the

⁵⁹ Vadim Kozhinov (1930-2001) was a Russian philosopher and historian.

photo, featuring the Communist party leader Gennady Zyuganov and the head of the Russian Orthodox church Patriarch Kirill reads as such: “We were hanging you up, guys... - Never mind! Forget it!”



Figure 17. “We were hanging you up...” (Gennady Zyuganov and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow)

In addition to the topic of collaboration between “the Communist party of establishment” and the Orthodox church which is actively mocked on the Russian-speaking Internet, there is a corpus of anecdotes about the incompatibility of religion and Communism. Below is one good example found on VKontakte:

Lenin died. God and Devil negotiated where to send him, and decided that Hell must accept him. In a month, Devil comes to God and says:

-Take Lenin to yourself, to Paradise! Devils under my control revolted: they demand heavenly life for their hellish work. Everything is good in Paradise, and for promotion of his ideas he won't have appropriate social conditions.

God agreed. In a month Devil comes to God again and asks:

- Well, God, how is Lenin doing in Paradise?
- First of all, not just God, but comrade God, and second, God does not exist...

Understanding the alliance of the state and the church as an anti-people elitist conspiracy, the Russian-speaking internauts joke on those pseudo-values, as they perceive them as imposed on them by the state and the church. The most commonly joked about concepts are “spirituality”, “spiritual braces”, and “the unique/third way for Russia” (**Figure 18**). All the Slavophile values have been profaned by the modern Russian state in collaboration with the church and that is why these values evoke such a painful reaction, which is depicted below (the spoons “contain” one of the values mentioned above, and the cat stands for “I”:



Figure 18. Spirituality, spiritual braces, the third/unique way for Russia

We can notice the same topic of the elitist conspiracy of the state and the church against the people in the humorous painting of Nikolai Kopeikin “The Orthodox Devils” (**Figure 19**), which I found on the “Atheist” (VKontakte) and then I investigated its “career” via other Internet resources. The artist presented this painting on the 60th anniversary of the famous Russian journalist and promoter of atheism, Alexandr Nevzorov, via his Facebook profile on the 3rd of August, 2018.⁶⁰ It is clear that the three characters on the painting are the Patriarch Kirill, Putin and a generalized Cossack; however, politically correct journalists pointed at a “state functionary”, or a “deputy” instead of Putin.

⁶⁰ <https://mr-7.ru/articles/187286/> - Access: 2020-07-26.



Figure 19. “Orthodox Devils”, artist Nikolai Kopeikin⁶¹

Nikolai Kopeikin and Vasya Lozhkin (referred to as "banter geniuses") who became famous thanks to the Internet, belong to the same artistic group and work in the artistic style of “multrealism” (animation realism).

4.4 Summary of Chapter 4

On the basis of materials I collected online, I can suggest that there are two types of nostalgia for the USSR where religion plays a significant role: the first is nostalgia for the USSR as a project of modernity, and from this perspective religion is seen as an antipode to everything good that was embodied by that project of modernity; On the other hand, there is nostalgia for the USSR as the bastion of high moral principles, spirituality, humanism, and everything good

⁶¹ Under the Canadian Copyright Act, Section 29.1, my use of Kopeikin’s work constitutes fair dealing (criticism or review).

that can be associated with genuine Christianity. Here we inevitably face a dilemma because the USSR was proclaimed an atheist society, and it is not clear how spirituality could co-exist with atheism. Moreover, the USSR has a history of repression against the church, and from this point of view, it is controversial that the USSR could promote the principles of Christianity.

However, as many of my respondents pointed out, religion was not oppressed under socialism (here, I believe, they talk about the Brezhnev era, when, indeed, between the state and the church a more or less benign symbiosis was reached, and the Orthodox Christianity became ‘an almost official religion’ of the USSR). Also, spirituality is seen by my informants not as the relation between a human and God, but as humanism, where personal relations with non-human entities are not considered as relevant, so spirituality is seen by my interlocutors as a humanistic value.

Except for the radical leftists (socialists and Communists) my interlocutors admit the possibility of religion under socialism. However, the behaviour of the leaders of the Communist party and their conversion into the Orthodox Christianity are seen by many as opportunism, while the cooperation of the church and the state is perceived as the elitist conspiracy against the people.

Finally, in order to summarize this topic, I would like to provide my translation of Alexey Guskov’s poem “The Time of Giants” (2009) which illustrates nostalgia of the first type (where the USSR is seen as a project of modernity) and demonstrates that spirituality understood as greatness of human ambitions and dreams is lost in the modern Russia:

The Time of Giants

Alexey Guskov (2009)

I heard a legend
That allegedly once
This country was inhabited by giants.
As if they were living
A strange fate:
They were ready to work and to fight,
Due to lack of
Bread and meat
They were obsessed with Marx, Victory and Mars,
With snowy taiga
And gloomy Arctic,
With bright stars above Baikonur
Hot flame,
And the bottomless abyss...
They built mines, dams and blast furnaces.
They were mistaken,
And they won.
They were waiting for guests from an unthinkable distance.
Through the cannonade
Of bloody slaughter
They rushed to crash into tall grasses,
Into the blackened snow
Into the water and into the clay...
They raised their scarlet flag over Berlin.
They went from the collective farm
Onion beds

To the Olympics, Afghanistan, and detente.
They walked through the patterns
And stencils,
They walked, calling the planet to follow them.
They wrote with their blood
A good fairy-tale.
Even their mistakes were gigantic.
They believed,
Cherishing their faith in the heart,
In the infallibility of speeches from the Mausoleum,
They knew that
Their sickle and hammer were righteous,
They knew that the world was split only for a time,
And that pain and sorrow
Were not forever...

But they degenerated. Alas, they degenerated...
Their descendants
Are hiding shyly
In the musty quietness of the office boxes,
They think in a standard way
They do not rave about the remote unknown,
They debit credit lifelessly,
They dream flatly,
They think rarely...
They have nothing left of their ancestors.

Chapter 5. Different Platforms, Different Communities, Different Nostalgia

5.1. Three Online Platforms I Approached

Initially, I anticipated that some difference of views on the Soviet past would be embedded into the character of the discussion platforms themselves (Facebook, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki), and I was interested in discovering this difference. I thus asked my interviewees why they made a decision to join one or another platform/network. My informant, Alexei from Cyprus, explained to me that he has profiles on all the popular Russian-speaking platforms, but they are rather “abandoned”: for instance, he has not been to Odnoklassniki (“Classmates”) for five years. When asked what was the principle that underlies his preference for Facebook towards Odnoklassniki (“Classmates”) and VKontakte, Alexei answered as follows:

According to what principle... Well, probably, by mass character... Plus, well, let’s say, there was a time when “Classmates” – they only developed, and then suddenly there appeared an advertisement, some kind of commercial component appeared, different emoticons, well, or some additional things, in a word, some kind of obtrusive commerce appeared, which instantly, for example, pushed me away. Here it is. “VKontakte” seems to have not sinned like this, but, on the other hand, “VKontakte” for me is such a Russian segment, and not, say, an international segment. For example, it’s easier for me to communicate on Facebook, because there I’m more likely to find those people who are scattered around the world, but by the will of some circumstances we ended up in Cyprus, or we, for example, somehow messed up with them.

Alexei from Cyprus added that he treats all the communities on Facebook as entertaining, while my interviewees found on VKontakte, emphasized the initial political potential of this last platform which is currently lost, according to them. For example, Ilya from Ufa explained to me that technological innovation in design of the platform changed the character and quality of the communication in the forum “Our Motherland is the USSR” (and in other fora on VKontakte) to the worse: the design of the VKontakte platform was changed in such a way that the activity of

the communities became concentrated on their walls, turning them from the discussion groups into “publics”, and “discussions in the ‘themes’ lost their heat, and then - the meaning”. In agreement with Ilya from Ufa, Alexey Homo Sovieticus believes that “there are no capable [net deyesposobnykh] discussion groups on VKontakte” (meaning here, the politically oriented, socialist groups).

At this point, I would like to provide an opinion of my Facebook friend Viktor Malakhov (who asked his friends to share his opinion!) concerning the platform “Odnoklassniki” which is traditionally considered “parochial”. His post on Facebook, dated August 5, 2020, states the following:

I do not understand those who swear at Odnoklassniki, saying that this is a social network for morons. Not at all. When it seems to me that the whole world is against me, and I am a stupid nonentity who has not earned anything today, then I go to OK [Odnoklassniki – T. Amosava].

[Here], you will accept 20 gifts from unknown people, flip through the sent postcards [congratulating you on] "The Day of Concrete!", look at the icons that protect your profile with 100% guarantee, look through the recipes of pickles like in your granny's recipe book, through the recipes of carrot rissoles which were highly appreciated by the kids, admire the grandson of Tamara Nikolaevna, who made a birdhouse out of empty bottles and some kind of garbage, and then "may-god-save-Putin" will arrive in time.

And when the "Kitty from Vorkuta", born in 1947, sells galoshes in Vladikavkaz worn only twice, and "Vadim pumping out the sewage system" demands to give him a "class" ["to like" – T. Amosava] under the photo of a carbonated machine from the times of the USSR, then you understand that your brain still works not too badly. Well, you haven't earned it today, - you will earn it tomorrow.

Everyone should have an account on Odnoklassniki, at least in order to go there, descending from the heavens of a pretentious Facebook and a glamorous Insta[gram], and from a sublime attitude to life.

If you agree, like and repost, let's see how many of us there are!⁶²

⁶² <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100001756077837> – Access: 2020-08-05.

One of his friends, Andrey Dementyev, asks Viktor's opinion with regards to the social network "VKontakte", and my Facebook friend replies that "VKontakte" is dying, unfortunately; he admits this with regret because "VKontakte" was his first social network. The collective opinion of these two gentlemen was that "VKontakte" is losing its clientele because of the two new competitors: the social networks for the youth "Like" and "TikTok" which attracted the majority of the advertisers.

Although I have not studied the phenomenon of "social network dying and death", I must underscore that the Russian Internet is losing its second social network. A decade ago, or even 5 years ago, LiveJournal was the cornerstone of the Russian Internet, as it was said in the "Literature Review". Now LiveJournal is "dead" (it is much less popular than before). I have not seen any research on LiveJournal's death although it is widely admitted⁶³; however, I can guess that the reason for its death is the competitive power of YouTube: LiveJournal was a platform for mature intellectuals who can "digest" long philosophical and political texts of opinion-makers and influencers. Now, the youth have clip-consciousness. It is much easier for them to listen to a two-hour-long interview with the same opinion-maker on YouTube than to read his essays investing tons of hours in this.

⁶³ In his interview dated the 1st of July, 2019, a famous Russian showman Alexandr Pushnoi stated that LiveJournal was dead: "For example, there used to be LJ. It had its own hierarchy of people, there were stars: those who had thousands of subscribers, twenty thousand of subscribers, and hundreds of thousands of subscribers. And the people who wrote in LJ formed an opinion around them. They were called "opinion makers". You had people who could write something in LJ - and everyone would read it: the entire surroundings, the entire surroundings of those surroundings, and so on. And then the social network itself - I don't know: due to the fact that the time has changed, or because the network behaved incorrectly - it doesn't matter - it died, and with this, this social structure which had been created for many years, was completely buried".

My Facebook friend Viktor Malakhov, in being a specialist in advertising and thus interested in social networks' "careers", explained its downfall a bit differently:

LiveJournal died due to the abundance of large texts and negativity towards new authors from old-timers. However, it was successfully replaced by the sites Proza.ru, Stihi.ru⁶⁴. With VK, the situation is more complicated: after Durov, it really became different, and the issuance of account information, even on a call, did not add popularity to it. And the first wave of its users has already grown, they switched to the politicized FB, and the new ones went to Instagram. As for TikTok... Well, when a billion is invested at the state level, and then a couple more, even my cat would be a world star here⁶⁵.

When I asked what Viktor meant by "on a call", that is, whether this means providing users' personal information to special services, and whether investors paid billions of dollars or rubles, he responded: "There are quite a few examples when an ordinary investigator was given all the data on a user without a court decision... Dollars. By the way, Microsoft wants to buy TikTok for three billion [dollars], and they still resist⁶⁶."

There is no doubt that three selected platforms (Facebook, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki) differ in many respects, including the audiences that they attract. But nevertheless, all of them are versatile to such an extent that it would be difficult to make generalizations concerning the character of their audiences. However, the pro-Soviet and nostalgic communities can be divided into two broad categories whose characteristics are easily recognizable: the socialist communities and communities for the general public. The students of the Russian Internet mentioned above (Abramov, 2011; Morenkova-Perrier, 2012; Alexanyan, 2013) argue that the

⁶⁴ One of my acquaintances, an IT specialist, pointed at the emergence of the platform "Medium" with a very beautiful design, as a competitor of LiveJournal whose owners and developers did not care about the aesthetics aspect too much. As for Proza.ru (Prose) and Stihi.ru (Poems), the authors can publish here long texts in diverse genres including philosophy, political science, religious studies, and so on.

⁶⁵ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3211987038869800&id=100001756077837 (August 6th, 2020). – Access: 2020-08-16.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

most politicized platform of the RuNet is LiveJournal (may it rest in peace!). In my research, it actually turned out to be that the socialist (politically-oriented) communities are located on VKontakte, while the nostalgic pro-Soviet communities for the general public are located on Facebook and on Odnoklassniki.

In order to compare the views on the Soviet past of the socialists and the nostalgic general public active online, we need to keep in mind “a portrait” of a “classical online community” that was discussed in the **Chapter 2**. As mentioned, “classical online communities” share space, practice, resources and support, identities, and establish interpersonal relationships. Further, we also know that an online community can be seen as a group of people whose sociality is technologically mediated, or as an audience organized around a text, or as a community of practice where the community is re-established due to everyday practices of its members. However, the majority of those nostalgic groups which I dealt with trespassed this image, they are not so “intimate” any more, they are getting a global scale, their unity is symbolic, which is more and more corresponding to the idea of the “imagined community”.

5.2. How People Get to Nostalgic and Pro-Soviet Online Groups

In the process of undertaking this study, I was always thinking about the difference between the grass-roots versus the guided character of the nostalgic sentiments. It was important to me to understand to what extent the people who join the nostalgic fora make an effort to seek a particular group with such a content, how this search happens, and whether joining such groups is a deliberate event that happens according to a participant’s intentions, or something incidental. It is very difficult to debate the question of “authenticity” of this nostalgia that can be seen on the nostalgic fora, but very often I had a feeling that it would be more fruitful to study nostalgia for the USSR, not on the social networking platforms, but on YouTube, where people come to watch

the Soviet movies and listen to the Soviet music. The nostalgia experienced by these audiences seems to me definitely sincere and authentic, but it is difficult to speak about any type of sociality there. That is, people do not declare their collective values and they do not have their shared ethics, like for example, this pro-Soviet group on Facebook, Velikaja.strana.SSSR (Great Country of the USSR) (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Velikaja.strana.SSSR/>). Below, I am presenting the motto and the rules of this group:

"What a beautiful country we have lost! And what wonderful people lived and worked in that country. What can I say, if even the fragments from the ruined country are beautiful..." (N. Morozova)

!!! RULES OF THE GROUP!!!

In the group "Great Country of the USSR" there is a discussion of the history of our country, news of public life in one way or another, related to the USSR. On the Internet, everyone can find a platform for their own interests, here are those who remember and love the USSR, who want to tell about it, share something, compare it with other times and countries.

The Group prohibits:

1. Offensive and deceitful publications about V.I. Lenin and I.V. Stalin.
2. Offensive and boorish statements, disrespect and inappropriate discussion of the personalities of the Group members.
3. Insult on the basis of nationality.
4. Use of profanity and swearing words, including its indirect mention with the replacement of parts of the words with special symbols.
5. Discussion in the Group of topics that does not address the group's theme, including V.V. Putin's praise. There are many other Groups to do this.
6. Posts about anti-Soviet actors (e.g. Leonid Bronevoi, Alexey Batalov, Oleg Basilashvili, etc.).

For the news of cinema there are groups of the relevant subjects, and therefore posts such as: "Today is the birthday of the actor" or "Today the film was released" - will be removed.

7. To accuse the whole generation of Soviet people of betraying the Great USSR is dishonest and since now means BAN, because we are not on the way with THE TRAITORS!

Our homeland is the USSR, our goal is socialism, our future is Communism!

As I mentioned, according to my understanding, grass-roots nostalgia can be found on YouTube (I make this conclusion on the basis of quality of comments, whose emotional load is very difficult to imitate, and whose frequency is extraordinary: “I’m 20 and I’m listening to this song, and I haven’t lived a day in the USSR, but I am thrown into some kind of nostalgia))...”⁶⁷, while nostalgia on the social networking platforms looks “guided”. In particular, this “guided” character of nostalgia is expressed in the way my respondents get to those nostalgic fora. The majority of them just clicked by accident on the invitation to join a forum that appeared in their Facebook timeline as an advertisement. For example, my informant Yevgeniya from Sydney answered my question about her choice of a particular nostalgic forum as follows: “This forum was found by accident. I don’t know anything about this forum” (The fact is I found her among the people who liked some content on the forum “We Are Made in the USSR”, but as I understand now, there are many similar fora which are joined by people like Yevgeniya as a result of automatically exercised promotion). I have received a very similar response from Alena from Minsk who said that she found the same forum as a result of automatic promotion and joined it because the content seemed “pleasing, being without nudity and other disgusting things”. Maria Gennadievna from Donetsk (Kiev/Canada) joined the same forum “We Are Made in the USSR” in the exact same manner. Here therefore we can see that technology promotes nostalgia, people do not make a special effort, they are invited by technology to join a community that presumably shares their values.

⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwKPjVHoLrE> – Comment of Yuly Metkevich on Alla Pugacheva’s song released in 1986, which was published in March, 2020. Access: 2020-07-24.

The stories of two individuals from my sample significantly differ from the stories of the rest of my informants on Facebook: it is the story of Igors Ivanovs from Riga and the story of Artyom from Melbourne (Kharkov). Being fluent in Latvian, Igors initially was looking for friendly communication on the Latvian-language platforms, such as draugiem.lv (<https://www.draugiem.lv>) which is a Latvian social networking website, but then he realized that he was in need of the “humane” communication with the Russian-speaking people, and started looking for the nostalgic fora on Facebook. As for Artyom, it was a case of hooliganism: being a sincere Ukrainian nationalist, he joined the forum “We Are Made in the USSR” as a curious hooligan:

T. Amosava: - That's how democratic it is, this group! Accepts even people with "Heavenly Hundred" on the splash screen!

Artyom: - When I answered questions, the application was rejected. I filed a second application – without answers. And, I think the admin did not pay attention to the screen saver. The question was: “Are you nostalgic for the USSR, and if not, why do you want to join our group?”

T. Amosava: - I did not know that they pose such questions! It looks like an innovation! What did you respond?

Artyom: - I am sure that this is the part of Russian propaganda. This group is most likely funded. The first time I answered the question: “No, I just want to look at people who are longing for the long-dead wretched state”.

The case of Artyom from Melbourne (Kharkov) demonstrates that the nostalgic online groups are defending themselves against hooliganism which acquires a bigger scale. Here, I would like to mention that the “sponsored” character of this particular group (“We Are Made in the USSR”) was emphasized by my other two informants: Alena from Minsk who is a nostalgic person and Maria Gennadijevna from Donetsk-Kiev/Canada who is a USSR hater. I believe that it is a funded enterprise because at some point this group had 55 administrators and moderators, while for an average online group that counts hundreds of thousands of members, 4-5 moderators are

sufficient. For instance, the group “Born in the USSR” on Facebook has exactly 4 administrators and moderators, although the number of participants of this group has been significantly higher at all stages of these two groups’ evolutions, according to what is registered in my ethnographic diary.

The situation with the nostalgic groups on “Odnoklassniki” is similar to the situation on Facebook. Responding to my question about their search for the nostalgic groups, Sova and her husband told me that they joined the group “Born in the USSR” on “Odnoklassniki” because it was advertised. Thus, again, technology imposes the choice of communities on people. As for the participants of the pro-Soviet fora on VKontakte, like in the case with Facebook, not many of them were looking for the groups intentionally. Only an amateur historian and businessman from Saint-Petersburg named Denis told me that he was seeking such groups and was making a choice among a few of them, and finally decided to join the group “Our Motherland is the USSR” because he writes articles on history of the Great Patriotic War, and has published a book about tank battles near Leningrad, while this latter group self-identifies as a “historical” group. Among interesting things from his interview is Denis’s confession that he learned German to be able to familiarize himself with the German archives which are the most trusted sources of information about the Great Patriotic War, while the Russian sources are not so reliable. As for Ilya from Ufa, he came to the group “Our Motherland is the USSR” on VKontakte by invitation; he was invited by my potential informant who cancelled our interview at the end. Many respondents from “Our Motherland is the USSR” informed me that they were looking for an advertising platform. In fact, the poet Igor Shapovalenko from Lugansk was looking for a platform to publish his nostalgic poems about the USSR, Vladimir Sidorov, the former KGB major, and his comrades were in search of a platform where they could advertise their newly created

Communist party which does not relate to Zyuganov's Communist party, and Vyacheslav from Chisinau was looking for a place to attract new followers to his community dedicated to education in Marxism. To put in one phrase, socialists have more active positions than "laymen" in making their choice of nostalgic and pro-Soviet communities, but this position is not as ardent as it could be imagined.

I would like to emphasize the idea that accidental character of getting into such groups undermines those principles of the classical online community which I discussed above in Chapter 2. Stated otherwise, it is difficult to talk about shared practices, shared humour, shared space, not to say about exchange of resources, and so on, if people do not seek membership in such groups intentionally as it worked with the fans of soap operas. Let us also not forget about the large membership of the online groups under investigation: their membership vacillates from tens of thousands ("Our Motherland is the USSR") to three quarters of a million ("Atheist") participants, while the soap opera fans in Baym's research (2000) did not exceed five thousand persons. The common thing which stays relevant from the listed above is the shared identity: "Born in the USSR", or "Made in the USSR", or "Our Motherland is the USSR" is a self-evident referral to common identity.

5.3. How Socialists See the Most Valuable Achievements of the USSR

In Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I have demonstrated that there are online groups on the Russian Internet that bemoan the lost technological superiority of the fallen USSR and their members regret that the project of modernity in the USSR failed. However, it was difficult to detect their political preferences. In this section, I am showing that it is typical of socialists to regret the loss of technological superiority of the Soviet Union, although it is not the only thing mourned by them.

The nostalgic thoughts expressed by Alexey Guskov and Marat Akhtyamov in their poems cited in Chapter 4, sound in unison with the thoughts of my socialist informants who agreed on a few positions: they contend that the main achievements of socialism include aspiration for the future, social justice, the ambitious character of society, elevated dreams, exploration of the space, atheism, and all the features of technologically advanced modernity based on planned economy and socialist mode of production.

For instance, Vladimir Matveevich Sidorov, in response to my question on what was the most valuable in the USSR, answered the following:

The most valuable thing in the USSR was aspiration for the future. And this is not only and not so much the slogan "All the best is for children." This aspiration for the future [ustremlyonnost' v budushchee] is immanently, internally inherent in socialism, which is "nothing more than a state-capitalist monopoly, turned to the benefit of the whole people and so far, ceased to be a capitalist monopoly" (Lenin). But what, in fact, is the "benefit of the whole people"? - Any society, if we consider it as a subject, has a main goal and main value - the continuation of itself, children. Until the summer of 1987, in the USSR, the benefit of the whole nation was a categorical imperative, an absolute value. And this was the most beautiful [thing].

This mood is shared by his much younger colleague, Ilya from Ufa, who replied to this question in a similar way: the most valuable things in the USSR were social justice and aspiration for the future. I pointed out to Ilya that a few respondents from the socialist camp (including Vladimir Sidorov, Alexey Travnikov who highlighted social justice, peace and confidence in the future [uverennost' v budushchem], and others) replied to me in exactly the same way. Ilya responded that if my interviewees were from "Our Motherland is the USSR" [on VKontakte] this is, probably, a shared opinion. But, in his mind, these two traits of socialism (aspiration for the future and social justice) were, indeed, the most valuable achievements.

Furthermore, the socialists emphasize that all the positive and humanistic features of the former Soviet society are immanent to socialism and they are the consequences of the socialist

mode of production. The socialists underscore the economic basis of the high morality inherent of the socialist society, and not, for example, the eternal longing of Russians for justice and truth as an immanent feature of the Russian national soul, as it is often underlined by the Russian nationalists. Justice and other high moral achievements of the USSR, like internationalism, were the result of absence of the private ownership of the means of production, and private business. Moreover, corruption was not possible under socialism on that gigantic scale on which it is possible under capitalism. Below Vyacheslav from Chisinau explains his position on the highest achievements of the USSR:

That is, they say that there was a friendship of peoples, that there was humaneness, and why it was like that - no one says; [no one says] that the main reason for this was that there was no private ownership of the means of production. This is the very essence of the Soviet Union - most importantly - that there was no business. They say that there was no corruption. So, what is corruption? It is possible to the extent that we have it now, it is possible only thanks to business, because you give a bribe to a traffic policeman there, it's not corruption, it's all garbage, but [real] corruption - it's in the ministerial offices and in parliaments at the moment of budget formation, because any hospital that is being built, any bridge and road is always [being built by] a private company. And this private company - it is not randomly chosen. It is someone who, as a result, will put this profit in his pocket. And all these schemes - they are one way or another - for cutting the budget, for real corruption, and [corruption is] not a bribe to the doctor in the form of sweets or a hundred rubles there - it is always tied to business, it is always tied to companies that are owned by a private owner. Under the Soviet Union, this could not have happened on such a scale - because there was no private business. There was some kind of corruption, especially already at the time of Khrushchev, when they began to rebuild the economy there⁶⁸, but even [then], let's say, it didn't lie near there [it could not be compared to today's level of embezzlement]: it's just that the scales are tens and hundreds of times different from what is possible under capitalism when there is private ownership of the means of production.

In accordance with what is said above by Vyacheslav from Chisinau, Alexey Homo Sovieticus Ladyshkin points to the absence of exploitation of a man by another man,

⁶⁸ Alexey Travnikov contends in his interview that Khrushchev turned the Soviet economy towards capitalism, and many other socialists agree with him.

internationalism, and atheism among the highest achievements of the USSR. He believes that religion was exhumated during perestroika as an additional instrument of exploitation. Further, characterizing the period between 1945 and 1968 as the time of the most impressive progress of the USSR, Alexey Homo Sovieticus Ladyshkin stresses technological advancement of socialism saying that he appreciates this particular period due to the following reasons:

Because the USSR came out of World War II as the second power of the world, because the atomic bomb is the defense of socialism, because [there were] the satellite [Sputnik] and Gagarin. Although Khrushchev, of course, ruined everything. With him, in fact, began the creeping restoration of capitalism.

It is very essential to point out that all the socialists agree that the reforms initiated by Khrushchev and continued by Kosygin became the turning point in the destiny of Soviet socialism. Here I want to make a clarification: earlier I mentioned that nostalgia is mainly associated with the Brezhnev era, with the so-called era of stagnation, which is perceived by nostalgic subjects as the “Golden Age” of socialism. For the era of stagnation, it is mainly people who experienced it that yearn, and not young socialists who are inclined to study literature on socialism and literature published in the USSR. For example, the leader of our Marxist circle, being a 30-year-old doctor-pathologist from Tomsk, knew the housing legislation of the Soviet Union, was fond of rare and old books that were published in the USSR. In particular, we began to study statistics in our Marxist circle using a Soviet book published in 1958 (in fact, it was a reprinted American textbook *Statistical Methods* written by Frederick C. Mills in the 1940s). That is, young socialists tend to know the Stalinist era from books and other artefacts, they devote time to familiarizing themselves with Soviet primary sources, so they often mention with admiration the Stalinist era, not the Brezhnev era.

It is important to emphasize that young socialists today are mostly men in their teens to their early thirties. Here we see some similarity with the right-wing populist movements which also attract mostly young men dissatisfied with social reality. Why primarily young men, namely, and not women? Involvement in political activism often requires risk and daring, and men are more prone to risk than women. In one of his interviews, a demographer Dr. Daniel Staetsky explained that in all regions of the world any protests and unrest take place with the prevailing participation of young men.⁶⁹

In contrast, Soviet propaganda suggested a particular gender composition of the participants in revolutionary and crucial historical events (let's recollect the movie about the Arctic expedition *The Seven Brave Ones* (1936) where it was one woman per six men). The Soviet regime was preoccupied with gender equality, that is why a female character would be present as an active political and social agent in all the domains of Soviet life. "Gender equality" in this context does not mean that women should have represented 50% of participants in all of the crucial domains of life, but rather the idea that if a woman wanted to apply her energy to any kind of socially valuable enterprise, she should not have been faced with socially-constructed barriers. Also, the Soviet regime encouraged more roles for women, but the result of this encouragement did not necessarily mean equal proportions in every situation. This social legacy continues to this day. In their article "What Socialism Has Ever Done for Women?" Kristen Ghodsee and Julia Mead (2018) discuss women's emancipation not only in the USSR, but in all of Eastern Europe under socialism. They provide multiple examples of women's emancipation in

⁶⁹ Interview with Dr. Daniel Staetsky on demography of the Arab riots in Israel, May 2021. - [מלחמה ושלוה בראיה](#) - [הדמוגרפיה עם דניאל סטייטסקי](#) - YouTube. (In Hebrew. Access: 2021-12-11).

Eastern Europe under Communist rule: this was achieved in a bureaucratic way. Even now, the feminist movements in the West have not attained these results. In particular, they write:

When examining the European data, it turned out that eight of the ten countries with the highest percentages of women working in technology were former state-socialist countries where “the Soviet legacy” of promoting women in math, science, and engineering had created a social environment conducive to women’s success in these fields, even three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Back in 2015, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) health report revealed that six of the top ten countries with the highest percentage of female doctors were also on the other side of the former Iron Curtain. An astounding three-fourths of all doctors in Estonia were women, compared to only one-third of the doctors in the United States. Yet another report from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that, as compared to Western Europe, Eastern European countries had much higher percentages of women working in the fields of scientific research and development. As recently as 2012, two-thirds of judges in Russia were women. In all cases, the explanation for the disparity was the long history of state-socialist commitments to women’s education and employment. Despite decades of feminist activism in the West, women in the former socialist countries still enjoy greater access to jobs in prestigious economic sectors (Ghodsee & Mead, 2018, p. 101-102).

Ghodsee and Mead (2018) provide a lot of examples of women’s full-fledged representation in all the domains of life in the USSR, and one of the most impressive achievements was women’s prevalence in science:

State-socialist governments also actively encouraged women and girls to study science and engineering. The Soviets were so successful at identifying and training their brightest women in technical fields that the United States felt compelled to do the same. After the 1957 launch of Sputnik, the United States Congress passed the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which specifically included funds for the encouragement of women’s education in math and science. In 1961, John F. Kennedy established the first Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, citing national security concerns; American leaders feared that the Reds were winning the space race because they had double the brain power (Ghodsee & Mead, 2018, p. 118-119).

Under socialism, women took full responsibility for protecting the motherland from external enemies. Many women were heroes of the Great Patriotic War, like the “White Lily of Stalingrad”⁷⁰. The participation of women in war was expected, but in a much smaller proportion than men. In many Soviet movies there is a female character who is dying or ready to die for the people, motherland, and revolution as a warrior and soldier, as a hero, and not just as a victim of circumstances. For determining the exact proportion of heroic women to heroic men, it would be useful to conduct a content-analysis of the Soviet films and literature, but I would like to limit myself to just a few popular Soviet movie references such as: the film about heroes of the Civil War (1918-1920) *Chapaev*⁷¹ (1934) with its unforgettable female character Anka machine gunner; *Elusive Avengers*⁷² (1966) which depicts adventures of four revolutionary teenagers, with one girl among them; and *The Officers*⁷³ (1971) where the protagonists’ daughter-in-law is heroically dying for her motherland as a soldier and warrior during WWII. In the Soviet movies, especially after WWII, many actors and actresses were real heroes of war decorated with multiple orders and medals. For example, in the Uzbek movie *Tahir and Zukhra*⁷⁴ (1945), the role of the Khorezm princess is performed by an outstanding warrior, radio operator, sniper and scout, Zebo Ganieva⁷⁵, who, according to her own words, killed 129 enemy soldiers during the war, while officially she is credited with 21 kills. I found out about this woman on one of the

⁷⁰ [«Белая лилия Сталинграда» Лидия Литвяк \(histrf.ru\)](http://histrf.ru) - It is the story of the female Soviet hero pilot Lidia Litviak (Access: 2021-12-10).

⁷¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmjJ7YaSpYc> – Access : 2020-12-13.

⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V0g1gM2P6o&t=402s> – Access: 2020-12-13.

⁷³

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=%d1%84%d0%b8%d0%bb%d1%8c%d0%bc+%d0%be%d1%84%d0%b8%d1%86%d0%b5%d1%80%d1%8b&docid=608029178972865187&mid=CEE84D504C1414510B23CEE84D504C1414510B23&view=detail&FORM=VIRE> – Access: 2020-12-13.

⁷⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0AwKXiC5ql> – Access: 2020-12-13.

⁷⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziba_Ganiyeva - In the Russian-language article it is mentioned that according to her own words she killed 129 Nazis. – Access: 2020-12-13.

nostalgic fora on Facebook, and watched this movie immediately. Overall, according to Soviet propaganda, there should not be many women among revolutionaries, warriors or political functionaries, but their presence is mandatory.

With the exception of one girl from Novosibirsk who was the member of the Marxist circle where I studied “The Capital”, and that extravagant woman, a tram-driver and kindergarten teacher from VKontakte, the only other woman who identified herself as a Communist among those whom I encountered during my research, and who was involved in politics seriously was Galina Makeeva (presumably, in her seventies), a comrade of Vladimir Sidorov, who kindly became my informant instead of Makeeva who was busy (initially, I contacted her, and she delegated her opportunity to be my interlocutor to him, this is how they solve these issues in their non-registered Communist party of Laborers. Apparently, Sidorov was their public relations agent).

Vladimir Sidorov, who died in October 2020, (as I conclude from the words of commemoration on his LiveJournal profile), loved to tell the story about their shared extreme adventure in Novgorod in 1989, where Galina Makeeva, Viktor Kukushin and Vladimir Sidorov himself, “made History”. During our interview, he told me exactly the same story about their revolutionary deeds in 1989, but with more artistic digressions, which I have found on his LiveJournal profile. For instance, he mentioned to me that he resigned from the KGB, pretending that he fell in love with a woman, and ostensibly he dropped everything for her sake and got lost somewhere so that his former “colleagues in the shop” would not attempt to surveil him and would not interfere with him and his comrades in the implementation of this daring plan to disrupt the signing of the contract by Soros (an American billionaire investor) and Nikolai

Ryzhkov (a high-ranked Soviet functionary). I provide an excerpt of this story from his LiveJournal profile⁷⁶ where it is better structured:

In the summer of 1989, the project was signed by the chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers Ryzhkov, about which the world was informed through TASS. It is possible that on the evening of that day at the Soros Foundation, someone did not fail to celebrate such an outstanding success with champagne. A new era began, and the prospects for Western countries were simply dizzying...

However, the very next day, the same TASS brought incredible news: The Soviet prime minister canceled his own decision!

A couple of days later, Moscow Radio in many languages of the world gave the following explanation about such a strange behavior of the Soviet prime minister: "The progressive radical project of integrating the USSR into the world economy by creating an open sector was thwarted as a result of active actions of mass organizations of the pro-communist persuasion."

These "mass organizations" were really "pro-communist" and consisted of as many as three persons! None of the three worked in positions at least at the municipal level. All three acted exclusively on their own initiative and on their own. This "understanding" boiled down to the following:

First: The Soviet Union, socialism, Russia and the Russian people are DYING.

Second: Death will occur most rapidly in the event of the practical implementation of the "open sector" project.

Third: Only the people themselves, that is, the mass movement of the so-called "lower classes", can disrupt this project.

Fourth: This means that we must try to initiate such a movement.

This adventurous story is remarkable in the respect that, although Sidorov was a Marxist, and Marxism insists on the decisive role of masses in history, he nevertheless demonstrates by this story a clear example of the "role of personality in history". I admit that I am confused with the fact that I do not find any mention of this episode in other sources except for Sidorov's profiles in social media, and our interview. Some critics asked Sidorov on LiveJournal, why these three

⁷⁶ <https://valentin-aleksy.livejournal.com/15121.html> - Profile of Vladimir Sidorov on LiveJournal. Access: 2020-12-12.

persons, Makeeva, Kukushin, and Sidorov himself did not prevent the downfall of the USSR and did not make other 16 cities to revolt against its demise, if it was so easy for the three of them to organize a revolt against Soros in Novgorod, to which Sidorov ironically replied that they wanted to leave some laurels of revolutionaries to others.

Now I would like to return to my idea that the Stalin era and the Brezhnev era both evoke nostalgia, but the Brezhnev era is bemoaned by those who lived in it, while Stalin's era evokes admiration in the young socialists because they approach it theoretically and they read a lot about it. While the general public at the non-socialist nostalgic fora I observed accuses Mikhail Gorbachev, Alexandr Yakovlev and Boris Yeltsin for their betrayal of socialism, the socialists see the roots of its demise as much deeper, at the earlier stage of the existence of the Soviet civilization. The role of a person in history may be significant; however, the socialists remain structuralists in their analysis of social systems. The socialists do not only mourn the perished socialism but study the case of the USSR in order to learn lessons for the future building of socialism.

Natalya Chernyshova (2013) in her book on Soviet consumerism during the Brezhnev era conducts a detailed analysis of the impact of Kosygin's reforms on the Soviet economy. Under Stalin, the Soviet enterprises aimed to fulfill the socialist plan in units of production. The new reforms introduced by Khrushchev, and later by Kosygin, allowed more freedom for the Soviet enterprises in forms of report of fulfillment of the socialist plan: it was possible now to submit reports about the plan fulfillment not in units of production, but in money, which created the room for corruption. For the enterprises, it became more profitable to release a lot of "garbage", but to fulfill the plan based on the price of their products rather than to release quality products and meet the quantity requirements. The Soviet enterprises were not concerned that their

products of poor quality would not be in demand because the system of the Soviet trade had to take care of their delivery to the customers. Among my respondents, Alexey Travnikov formulated clearly that the rejection of the planned economy of the Stalin type by Khrushchev, and continued by Kosygin's reforms, began to undermine socialism, because such a strategy caused shortages of products. Characterizing the role of Khrushchev and providing me with the reasons of the demise of socialism, Alexey Travnikov said the following:

Khrushchev's reforms led to the beginning of a reversal towards capitalism, laid the foundation for the restoration of this reaction... But further inertia led to Brezhnev, who brought the standard of living of Soviet citizens to a completely acceptable level... and... Brezhnev's time, from the point of view of the standard of living of citizens, is probably the best time in the Soviet Union, in my opinion... It was during his [Khrushchev's] rule that the production plan was changed from the volume of production to the price of production... Factories began to fulfill the plan based not on the number of products, but the plan began to be executed based on the price of products. The leadership of the country, who decided to plunder everything created by the people, for themselves, was guilty of undermining socialism, and for this they deceived the people, who by that time were used to believing in leadership, because earlier the leadership [Lenin and Stalin?] was pursuing a policy precisely to satisfy all the aspirations of the people, and the people won in the hardest war believing the leadership, the people used to believe the leadership... And the new leadership... first Khrushchev, and then Gorbachev... deftly took advantage of this, deceived the people and plundered everything. And the Soviet Union "rested in God" thanks to the leadership and the people who believed in the leadership.

As seen from this fragment of the interview, although socialists call the corrupt or erring leaders by their names, they allot the main role in the ruination of socialism to the structural changes of the system, and not to personal betrayal of socialism by a particular leader. In order to demise socialism, one needs to undermine its foundations for decades, introducing different harmful policies step by step. Socialism cannot be destroyed in a night like the Berlin Wall.

There is a particular tension between the socialist identity and nostalgia for socialism and the Soviet past because among the socialists, nostalgia is sometimes associated with apathy for

the present, desperation, experiencing the irreversibility of loss, disbelief that socialism can be re-established, while socialists are the bearers of political activism. Thus, some may think that they do not have a moral right for nostalgia. For example, Dmitry Ustinov is a progressive Marxist. He believes that the Soviet Union was an unsuccessful attempt to build socialism. He is not nostalgic, and he attracted my attention due to publishing a text on his page on VKontakte that states that nostalgia for the USSR is retrograde, and if one were to create a new socialist society, it could be done much better than the USSR.

However, not all the socialists believe that nostalgia is harmful. Some of them confess that they have evolved through different stages: from being more nostalgic to being less nostalgic. Vyacheslav from Chisinau explained to me that he became less nostalgic when he started studying Marxism in depth. Once, he was under the influence of Alexandr Zinoviev, the author of the famous *Homo Sovieticus* (1986), the Soviet philosopher who was expelled from the USSR due to his dissident views and lived for a long time in Germany in exile. The close acquaintance with the Western world turned Zinoviev into an ardent admirer of socialism, the demise of which he bemoaned in his later works. Thus, Vyacheslav explains in what way he was under the influence of Zinoviev:

Yes, and, probably, I still have nostalgia under his influence, because such a depressing picture is drawn in some of his works that Communism and socialism are already buried, and it's almost never coming back, and... But he - the fact is that he is, as it were, a formal logician, that is, it must be understood that he is not a dialectician - he is a metaphysician. He has a slightly different methodology. Because of this, there are some moments that at that time seemed very logical to me, especially since many of his predictions came true. Well, then it seemed to turn out that the world was nevertheless arranged dialectically, not metaphysically, and much of what he was saying, now I understand that he was mistaken.

When I asked Vyacheslav what part of Zinoviev's predictions he saw as a mistake, he mentioned Zinoviev's idea of super-imperialism once criticized by Lenin. According to this idea, the world should be united under the power of the only capitalist hegemon (presumably, the United States); however, according to Vyacheslav, now we observe the fragmentation of this capitalist world, and even conflicts between its parts, and this process of fragmentation is only growing.

I then requested from Vyacheslav to clarify his position on nostalgia as dependent on irreversibility of the past. He responded as follows:

Well, in my case, it was probably just that, because it was under the influence of Zinoviev's work that I had a picture that all this was irretrievably lost. And in the future... he has a book about such a future - how it will be in the future.

[I reminded him that it is probably *The Global Humant Hill*⁷⁷]

Something like that, yes. In that spirit. That is, he describes it there, that is why I thought that - that's all, so to speak, the end of the history [has arrived]. And all of this will be like that. When I began to be interested in Marxism, I realized that it was all a little different. That everything is still reversible.

The nostalgic moods of my socialist respondents can be represented in the form of scale: from acutely negative reactions to nostalgia, through moderate position, to absolute acceptance of nostalgia which is not associated with passivity or desperation, when a person, although intellectually and politically vigilant, would prefer to live another life, as it is expressed by Alexey Homo Sovieticus Ladyshkin. Replying to the question on whether he is a nostalgic person or not, Alexey answered "yes":

I am nostalgic because it would be my time. I had to be born one hundred years earlier, to struggle during the Civil war, during the Great Patriotic war, to have seen the flight of Gagarin into space, and to die. Now it's not my time.

⁷⁷ Zinoviev compares a human society with an anthill, that is why Zinoviev's neologism "cheloveinik" in the title of his book is translated as "humant hill" (a combination of human and ant).

In his 2-hours long interview to Konstantin Podstreshny (53:00)⁷⁸⁷⁹, the prominent Russian public intellectual, political consultant and programmer Anatoly Wasserman, said approximately the same when asked about his preferable epoch of being born: he would prefer to fight for the Motherland in the Great Patriotic war, or to contribute to the technological progress of the USSR during the 1960s given that he is a programmer.

As it is seen from the multiple quotations from the interviews with my research participants, self-identified socialists, when they refer to the Soviet civilization, its technological advancement dominates as the source of their inspiration and pride. However, the USSR was not equally advanced in all the spheres of the technology. Manuel Castells (2010) indicates backwardness of the Soviet Union in the field of information technologies, which, according to him, was largely the reason for its collapse. Ilya from Ufa shares his opinion and points at the difficulties of introducing a scientific and technological revolution as one of the reasons that led to the demise of socialism, although the programme of informatization of the USSR (OGAS) existed since the 1970s; it was just underfunded, because the USSR had other priorities.

To summarize this section I can say the following: my research participants who identify themselves with socialism, Marxism and Communism, see as the most valuable achievements of the USSR its modernist character, the availability of the strategies and plans of further social development (aspiration for the future and confidence in the future), social justice, and humanness based on the socialist mode of production, absence of the private ownership of the means of

⁷⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9CrQwr_SKA (First part of the interview with Wasserman) – Access: 2020-08-01.

⁷⁹ [Вассерман про нефть, Илона Маска, биткоин, нейросети и глобальное потепление | 100 вопросов - YouTube](#) - Continuation of the interview with Wasserman (Access: 2021-12-15).

production and private business, atheism, and technological superiority expressed, first of all, in the space exploration. However, the socialists are not equally nostalgic for the USSR because the socialist camp is very diverse and not everybody sees the USSR as a successful project of building socialism.

5.4. How Nostalgic Non-socialists See the Most Valuable Achievements of the USSR

Recently, my friend on Facebook whom I graduated from Belarusian State University with, posted a photo of a designer necklace which was, in fact, a regular key on the silver chain. This necklace designed by Maison Margiela costs more than 300 euros. This post received 236 comments from my university classmate's friends, who, in unison with the author of the post, contended that "they wore such a necklace for free for their entire childhood". The fact is, that any Soviet child being released from kindergarten at the age of six years was becoming a master of his or her destiny: the parents were hanging a key on his neck, and since that time he received unprecedented freedom, because nobody watched him or her anymore. After school, he or she spent their time mostly with friends on the playgrounds, having access to their apartment at any desired time, while the parents were at work. This was the common Soviet practice – to let children go anywhere they desired – because the Soviet Union was the zone of absolute security and safety for children, as well as for adults. Alternatively, the key from the apartment could be left under the rug in front of the apartment's entrance door. Answering the question about the greatest achievements of socialism, my informant Alena from Minsk generalizes this Soviet experience as follows:

The most valuable thing in the USSR was the way of life, I think, in all its various aspects, starting with those which, in fact, people are nostalgic for: that it was possible to leave the key under the rug, and all the neighbors knew [about that]; that the door could be unlocked even in large cities, not to mention the fact that people left their shoes in a common hallway, into which any person, in principle, could enter, and the general

corridors did not close, as they do today. We lived on the ground floor at the time, as now, but in a different house, and we had a common entrance hall for two apartments there, that is, in principle, this is a passage yard in fact. Today people would be horrified to learn that the door was open there, it... there was no lock, it never closed, we kept it unlocked, naturally, and that's all. And, in fact, the only door that closed was the door to the apartment. And then - there were moments when the doors of the apartments did not close, this is when there were some holidays, some common events in which the neighbors participated, and usually it didn't lead... did not entail any consequences in kind of... there... someone stole something, someone defecated there, - and so on. I recall that for all my childhood, oddly enough, despite the fact that there was no intercom, for example, I saw that people urinated or defecated in the common hallway maybe two times, and it was some kind of universal shock. They talked a lot about that. Here it is... For comparison, now there are intercoms everywhere, and they urinate and shit in the common hallways much more often, everyone closes the common corridor leading to the apartment, and this does not really help, by the way.

Another informant of mine, Natalya from Toronto, emphasized peace, security and safety as the most valuable achievements of the USSR among what was experienced by her. The fact is that Natalya emigrated from Donetsk to Israel where she lived in the city of Ashdod. Taking into account the political instability and precarity of the Middle East, she appreciated her Soviet childhood exactly from the perspective of its peacefulness and security, because her children, even now, living in Canada, every time when they hear the siren produced by a firefighters' car, think that they must go down to the bomb shelter.

I would like to emphasize that the composition of my research participants according to their views of the USSR is as follows: 10 socialists and Communists, 10 non-socialists, 2 USSR haters. Although my informants who associate themselves with the socialist ideas often recalled the same strong points of life in the USSR (4 out of 10), as my non-socialist informants did, I have seen a very clear trend in the answers of my non-socialist participants (10 out of 10). These participants were prone to emphasize all those features of socialism that can be generalized under the term "the welfare state" which closely relates to "the comfort of life in the USSR". In addition to safety and absence of criminality mentioned above, the nostalgic persons from the

general public (7 out of 10) recalled free medicine, free education, guaranteed job, high quality of food, and high purchase power of the Soviet currency among the best achievements of socialism.

My Lithuanian informant was a university instructor of a course on how to survive in extreme situations and that is why the question of the quality of education in the USSR and in the modern Lithuania is very essential to him, because he himself was a university lecturer and according to him, he has a degree in pedagogy. That is why the degradation of the current education system in comparison to how it was under the USSR causes his pain. Answering my question about whether modern youth know anything about the USSR, my Lithuanian interlocutor felt indignant:

No! Not at all! They are now on purpose... I went into the gymnasium to the washroom and there I found all the classics - in the washroom... Do you understand? I found all the classics in the toilet. [Apparently books are being used like toilet paper]. Clear? Why is this being done? Very simple: a monkey... it is much easier to control a monkey than a human being. And therefore, it is necessary to make a monkey out of a man. And then the Americans, who say: "We must bomb Korea," do not know where this Korea is. We do the same thing, the same thing: they make monkeys out of people. And then they are easy to control: the monkey thinks nothing! Very easy to manage. There is nothing in [school textbooks] about the USSR. Only it is written that in the Great Patriotic War [in the Second World War] it was not Russia that won, but the Yankees - the United States.

When we turn to the issue of free medicine under socialism, the most emotional recollection I have received was from the same Lithuanian participant who shared his personal experience of being successfully treated for cancer for free, approximately between 1965-1970:

In the Soviet Union, as I now think all the time, many things were good. The main bad thing was the bad leaders, especially the last ones: Yeltsin and Gorbachev. These are the worst leaders. And so, I think that free education (was among the best things)... Also, when I was little, I got leg bone cancer and was lying in a hospital in Kaunas, Kaunas - there is such a city... I was lying there for three years - I was treated there. If I had been in America for three years [in a hospital] with cancer, I would have paid millions of dollars,

right? And here I was lying for free: here's the difference! Millions of dollars are in the USA, and here, in Lithuania, I was lying for free. And I was treated by a professor from Moscow - Tatyana, I only remember the name, because I was still a child, but I remember the name: Tatyana from Moscow.

Continuing this theme of the USSR as a welfare state, I refer to the words of my informant from Latvia, Igors Ivanovs, who touched the topics of guaranteed employment, oppression of parasitism, free medicine, and protection of labour:

The most valuable [thing] was that people always had work. You could always work. I even laughed, as they say: my mother worked in the militia [the name for the police in the USSR] — there was such an article — [...] — the 211th, in my opinion — I don't remember — of the Criminal Code — up to two years [of imprisonment] — even if you were parasitizing, [if] you didn't work. The medicine was free. Salaries? Well, if you worked, you could, as they say, earn money for food, and for living, and for everything. There was no problem with this. Well, there was labor protection, well... people watched... as they say, worked eight hours, everything was fine. And now - only toil, toil, overstrain yourself, even though you die, but toil. And if you fall ill – no one needs you anymore. Truth is known in comparison. Here is my opinion.

The quality of food in the Soviet Union is the favourite topic of many of the nostalgic online fora (except for socialist ones). We can pose a question on whether the quality of food relates to the welfare state. The answer is that it does, because the quality of food was the result of special state policy focusing on the safety of food and the impossibility of manipulation with the ingredients used in the food industry, which could lower the quality of the products (Tverdiukova, 2016). For the Soviet food industry, the main priorities were safety, health and satisfaction of the consumers, and not the profit of the producers. This policy was crystallized in the well-known system of GOSTs (the State Standards of producing all types of goods, including food products) which is now replaced by very flexible and vague “technical specifications”, and which makes up an object of an acute nostalgia for the consumers. My informants have invested

a lot of energy during their interviews describing the outstanding quality of the goods produced by the Soviet food industry. Alena from Minsk particularly emphasizes the importance of GOSTs and food safety in the USSR:

Regarding the quality of food products - in our country today, this nostalgia is less relevant than, for example, in Russia, where my mother lives, because we have preserved many GOSTs, and new products, the recipe of which is being developed, most often are made either according to the so-called technical conditions, or also according to GOSTs. That is, there is some order, there are some rules, there are certain prohibitions. As for Russia, for example, in the nineties and two thousandths, this was not there at all. The daughter of our acquaintances lost a child - she had a miscarriage due to food poisoning... But in the Soviet times, it was precisely this food safety, although maybe many people complain: “Well, there was nothing [available from the food stuff], but what was available, of course, it was safe! It is hard to get poisoned with bread and vinegar!” That is, they usually say: “Well, there was bread on the shelves, there was vinegar, sugar - sometimes! When the moonshiners didn’t buy it, it all ended there”. Not true. There were a lot of things, at least in my childhood, and by the way, when they started - this deficit started in the nineties, I don’t remember that we were really starving so badly. That is, there was no abundance - yes, something was available for the coupons, but I remember that there were even moments when we did not use all the coupons. That is, for some products, for example, there were vouchers for vodka - it made sense to buy vodka if you had to pay for some plumbing work⁸⁰, for something else, but we did not always even use this unit of coupons completely. By the way, we even still have unused coupons for some cereals...

Alena’s reference to deficit (and this is exactly that word which is used in Russian to refer to a highly desired, but a scarce commodity – *defitsit*, so it was possible ‘to buy a defitsit’) was very important because she vividly presents the arguments of the USSR haters, which I will discuss later in this Chapter. Later in her interview she lists the most “iconic” Soviet products:

Well, from what I recall from my childhood, this is, of course, - everyone usually talks about it - a completely different taste of ice cream. Today, such ice cream is generally impossible to find for various reasons. Technologies have changed, preservatives have appeared in general, all sorts of different ones that seriously affect the taste...[...]... Even such products, to put it mildly, not of very good quality, like sausages [like in hot-dogs – remark by Amosava], that is, pseudo-meat products, despite the fact that they were

⁸⁰ During perestroika vodka was a universal currency.

described as containing a half of toilet paper, a half of sinews, and one spoonful of meat for a whole vat of this rubbish, but, nevertheless, Soviet sausages at least had some meat signs... particular... There was a percentage rate of meat investment that... could not, say, be violated. Now, for example, it does not apply to Russian sausages at all. Here [in Belarus], if the sausages are made not according to GOST, but according to the so-called technical specifications, as far as I remember, there are also many interesting things to discover [among the ingredients]... I also remember Soviet chocolate and bread with great reverence. Despite the fact that many Soviet recipes were restored in our country, they were spoiled by preservatives, because Soviet bread was not stored in principle for more than three days. Now bread can lie a week and a half, and nothing will grow on it: this is already suspicious! If even mold does not want to eat such bread, then why should I want to eat it?!.. Now many people are trying to revive these Soviet soda pops to the peak of Pepsi-Cola, but, of course, they will not be fully Soviet anymore - these “Tarkhuns”, “Duchesses”, “Buratino”... that is, the Soviet taste is imitated, but the Soviet recipe is not used, because, again, all this is very unprofitable. The Soviet food industry “squandered” useful products too much. It put too much meat, too much milk, too much sugar in everything, and then it turned out that it was possible to replace all this with starch, gelatin, and so on...

The importance of the fragment from Alena’s interview quoted above rests on the fact that she provides the arguments from both sides: from the side of the nostalgics and from the side of the critics of the USSR. All the arguments are more or less typical. An extremely ardent debate on the quality of the Soviet food products took place on Facebook in 2016 when I did not start my online ethnography yet, but I participated in this discussion⁸¹. This post titled “15 legendary products from our childhood”, published on the 3rd of September in 2016, was liked by 11,000 internauts, the members of the community Adme.ru. This heated debate revealed a rather anticipated tendency: all the Ukrainians expressed their disgust with all the Soviet brands (this discussion took place 2 years after Russia invaded Eastern Ukraine in 2014), while non-Ukrainians invited them to be honest and to acknowledge that the quality of the Soviet products was very high, while safety and naturalness were their unalienable features. One of the Ukrainian

81

https://www.facebook.com/www.adme.ru/posts/10153897817180172?comment_id=10153906347590172¬if_t=like¬if_id=1472927344540595 – Accessed: 2020-01-28.

participants objected saying that the carcinogenic preservatives widely used by the Western food stuff producers were just not available to the Soviets due to technological backwardness of the latter. His idea was that the Soviet products' safety and naturalness was the latent function of the Soviet technological backwardness. Although the majority of the participants with anti-nostalgic sentiments were from Ukraine in this debate, the most ardent critic of the USSR turned out to be a woman from Moldova, born in 1978, and now living in Germany.

This discussion on the post-Soviet food nostalgia on Facebook proves the fact which has been noticed by those researchers who explore post-Soviet consumerism: they point out that very often a consumer choice is a political choice. To put this differently, post-Soviet food nostalgia is the representation of political views. Melissa Caldwell (2002) studied Russian nationalism through the prism of brand preference. In her article on consumer choices of Muscovites in the 1990s-early 2000s, Caldwell explains the notion of "svoy"/ "nash" as an important criterion of products' evaluation and identification. Alexey Yurchak (2006) has given a broad analysis of the analogous notion "svoy" in his book *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* where he explains that "svoy" refers to the circle of inclusiveness. Caldwell also emphasizes the importance of this (or very close) notion of "nash" (ours) for the Russian self-identification and for the consumer choice when it relates to domestic production of foodstuffs. Russians usually point at higher quality, naturalness and healthier character of "nash" products: "Muscovites explain that 'nash' products are superior to foreign goods in terms of taste, quality, and healthfulness. Elena Viktorovna, an English professor in Moscow, reports that the first question she poses to food vendors at the market is whether the products are 'nash' or 'ne nash.' Elena Viktorovna claims that she buys only 'nash' foods because she knows that they have been packaged very shortly before and have not been lying in shipping containers and on store shelves

for months – or even years – as American and other imported goods are often rumored to be” (Caldwell, 2002, p. 310).

Further, Caldwell presents a detailed discussion on “naturalness” and “healthfulness” of Russian products in comparison to their foreign counterparts that was noticed by other researchers earlier: “More importantly, shoppers maintain that ‘nash’ foods are healthier than imported products. Many Muscovites share the opinion that foreign products are artificial and contain harmful preservatives and additives, a perception that Nelson Hancock encountered when his informants in Siberia discussed American hot dogs and chicken products (Hancock 1998)” (Caldwell, 2002, p. 311-312). Those qualities that Russians ascribe to the foods produced in Russia relate to the Soviet products even to a higher degree.

Neringa Klumbitė (2010) draws our attention to the fact that those Lithuanians who prefer “Soviet” brands of sausage, also take a political position: they demonstrate their disappointment and disapproval of neoliberalism. The Lithuanian anthropologist clearly states that this food nostalgia is understood by Lithuanian authorities as a political action: “Some intellectuals and politicians were convinced that consumers of “Soviet” sausages and their commodified Soviet nostalgia vote populist and think communist (see Jonu̇sys, 2004) and thus were a real threat to independence and democracy. They called those nostalgic for the Soviet past “victims” longing for the “torturer” and the Soviet state (see Donskis, 2005) backward people delaying social and political progress, or “turnips” (derogatory) attempting to stop the country’s integration with Europe. Vytautas Landsbergis, a member of the European Union Parliament and a leader of the national movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, argued that nostalgic people long for oppression: “They do not understand or remember that they weren’t free... That their lives were limited, controlled, and threatened” (Landsbergis, 2007). Landsbergis maintained that

nostalgic thoughts are infantile and suggested that business people should display “Soviet” pig’s feet, which would better represent Soviet times” (Klumbité, 2010, p. 23-24).

However, average Lithuanians disagree with the politicians on this account. The Lithuanian anthropologist provides a few examples of how people recall the Soviet past nostalgically. For instance, one of her respondents’ replies sounds like an answer to Landsbergis who associated the Soviet time with eating “pig’s feet”: “As if engaging in a dialogue with others who have a different opinion, Dalia then added: “They say we ate bones. No, we ate meat all the time. We didn’t eat bones. Really” (interview, July 17, 2004)” (Klumbité, 2010, p. 31).

Klumbité explains that for many Lithuanians the “Soviet” sausage is a symbol of inclusive citizenship. People do not want to return to the USSR, they do not oppose democracy. Moreover, their attitudes toward Russians remain negative, but during the Soviet rule everybody felt equal dignity and value, and social stratification was not so stunning and did not have such painful consequences (Klumbité, 2010, p. 31).

As it is clear from the research discussed above, the choice of brand can reflect nationalism, or a need for social justice. In the case of debates on the quality of the Soviet products on Facebook (that particular one in which I participated in 2016, and many others), two camps take implacable positions: for Ukrainians, all the Soviet food brands symbolize degradation, stagnation, the embodiment of everything bad, while non-Ukrainians mostly praise the Soviet products like my research participant Alena did in her interview. The Ukrainians demonstrate anti-imperial moods in this manner.

The next topic which competes in popularity with the post-Soviet food nostalgia in the nostalgic online non-socialist fora is the purchasing power of the Soviet ruble. I would like to

look at this topic using as an example a concrete post “Food basket in the USSR for 10 rubles” published in the forum “We are made in the USSR” on Facebook on October 17th, 2017⁸². The fact is, I recruited one of my informants, Maria Gennadievna, having seen that she was banned from the forum “We Are Made in the USSR” exactly due to her negative remarks concerning the food stuff shortages in the USSR when she commented on this particular post. I have realized that Maria Gennadievna lives in Canada, and the fact that we share the country had to facilitate my approaching her (and it did!). Maria Gennadievna is originally from Ukraine, and, as I mentioned earlier, this hooliganism at the post-Soviet nostalgic fora is typical of Ukrainians.

Below I am reproducing the picture of the post (**Figure 20**):

[Алсу Васильева](#)

[Admin](#) · Yesterday at 12:55am

ПРОДУКТОВАЯ КОРЗИНА В СССР НА 10 Рублей!



Figure 20. Grocery basket in the USSR equal to 10 Soviet rubles

⁸² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1615378045168531/permalink/1744233188949682/> - Accessed: 2020-01-28.

Alsu⁸³ Vasilyeva, the Admin of the forum, published this picture which allegedly demonstrates an enormous purchasing power of the Soviet ruble in an indefinite period of Soviet history, although some participants in the forum have contended that the picture corresponds to the entire decade of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. According to this picture, a Soviet citizen could buy half a liter of milk, a loaf of bread, 10 eggs, 2 kilos of onions, 2 kilos of potatoes, 1 kilo of processed-meat sausage, 2 kilos of beef or pork, half a kilo of sugar, and a bottle of vodka for 10 rubles.

One of the participants of the discussion reveals that 10 rubles were equal to “10 dinners in our regional dining room, a full meal at 1-ruble cost! And I had a wage of 230 rubles”. It is important to stress that some people had pensions at the level of 60 rubles per month. Given that Soviet citizens paid very little money for their housing which was almost for free (electricity and housing bills did not exceed 3 rubles per month on average), all the people could afford to be well-fed and be sheltered, but house utensils, electronics, clothing, TV sets and cars needed intensive savings. Therefore, another participant of the discussion asks: “How much was a TV, fridge, washing machine, car?” (This participant was later deleted by the Admin for such a provocative question), and gets a response from another internaut: “The TV set “Rubin” cost 700 rubles in 1982”. Thus, for that optimistic forum participant whose wage was 230 rubles per month during the Soviet times, it would take 3 months without eating and paying for other essentials in order to accumulate money for “Rubin”.

⁸³ It's a Tatar female name. There is a very famous Russian singer Alsu Safina who uses her first name Alsu as a stage name, and many people who come to this nostalgic forum think that this Admin is really that popular singer. She misleads them on purpose, publishing photos of the singer as her own.

According to my calculations, this product basket cost 45 CAD in the beginning of 2020⁸⁴. Given that the wage of one of the participants was 23 times more than this basket, we can multiply 45 CAD by 23, and receive 1,035 CAD. In 2018-2019 years, an average wage in Russia was equal to 38,400 rubles, or 794.35 CAD. It means that in the USSR the salaries were higher than in modern Russia, at least for those who spend their time on the nostalgic fora.

Traditionally, such posts about the purchasing power of the Soviet ruble were extremely frequent in the nostalgic fora and are being published to provoke nostalgia for the stability of the Soviet past and affordability of the essentials for the entire Soviet population; in reality, however, they often reveal such “black spots” on the face of Soviet socialism, like inability for the majority of the Soviet people to buy a car and the necessity to accumulate money for an expensive purchase like a fridge or a TV set, for years. The authors of such posts use a psychological trick: they play on the devaluation of the Russian ruble, as in the beginning of the year 2020, 1 USD was almost equal to 64 Russian rubles, while during the USSR 1 ruble was equal to 61 US cents.

Despite the outrageous swearing and personal insults that some commentators of this post engaged in, it is Maria Gennadievna, my informant, who was banned from the forum immediately, while the rude and aggressive participants who were in the coalition with the Admin, were not banned. She explains the situation for us:

I wrote questions to some publications that I came across in my stream, quite often: “Do you remember the deficit or the existent nomenclature (Mikhail Voslenskii described nomenclature as a privileged social class in the classless Soviet society in his book of 1984. – Remark by Amosava), or something else of this kind? ”- not even entering into much debate. But somehow I saw a post - there was a photo: in the picture ten rubles were painted... and what you could buy for this money: it’s just as if there was such a huge food basket - there are twenty-eight loaves of bread, a hundred and five hundred* (a

⁸⁴ <https://www.globalprice.info/en/?p=canada/grocery-food-prices#0> – Accessed: 2020-02-04.

stylized joke, a new colloquial fashion) liters of milk there, meat, matches, salt, sugar - well, in general, in short, a lot of everything was listed - that's how good it was in the Soviet Union that we could buy for some ten rubles an unthinkable bunch of products. Having my own memories of this wonderful country, I asked: "But what: was it physically possible to buy all this at all without having stood a hundred and five hundred hours in a line? A week would not be enough for you to buy all these products." Well, a lot of mud was flung at me, [the forum participants said] that all the cities were well supplied by the food, there was good supply, they asked me in which city I personally lived. - I personally lived in Donetsk... I lived in Donetsk with my family, my childhood passed until the mid-eighties in Donetsk; in fact, I have no complaints about my childhood, everything was wonderful in my childhood, because when you are a child, you don't understand where the money comes from, how parents get the money, where this food or non-food comes from, and the furniture in the apartment at that moment — the realization of all this comes later, when you are a little older — and the feeling of life changes. And then at that moment I even understood that we lived a little better than some (Olga Shevchenko (2009), points out that during the crisis time many think that they live better than their neighbors. – Remark by Amosava). Well, actually, I began to enter into a completely peaceful and calm dialogue with these people, without using - God forbid – non-decent words, but here a flock of just some activists, apparently, of this forum, attacked me and they began to systematically bully me and say that I was telling a lie.

Even after Maria Gennadievna was banned from the forum, the phrases of other participants addressed to her and containing her name, are still among the comments. That is, despite being banned, Maria Gennadievna left her trace in this nostalgic community. Despite protesting people like my informant, the majority of the participants in the nostalgic fora agree that the purchasing power of the Soviet ruble was impressive. A recent publication on the Internet⁸⁵ states that indeed due to the higher purchasing power of the US dollar in the 1970s-1980s, the real wages of the Soviet citizens were a bit higher than the real wages of Russians at present, but overall, the salaries in the USSR and Russia today are close. The authors of the article achieved the following results by recalculating Soviet prices in today's amounts:

From January 1980 to December 2018, the dollar depreciated 3.27 times. In this way:

⁸⁵ <https://hiterbober.ru/personal-money/ceny-v-sssr-i-seychas.html> - How to recalculate the prices of goods and services in the USSR for modern Russian money. - Access: 2020-12-13.

$272 \times 3.27 = \$ 889.44$ - the amount of currency (adjusted for inflation) that could be bought with an average wage in 1980;

889.44×63.82 (the dollar / ruble exchange rate as of 09/20/2019) = 56,764 rubles (this should be the average wage corresponding to the purchasing power of the wages of that time);

$56\,764/174 = 326.23$ (that is, the Soviet ruble of 1980 is equivalent to 326.23 current Russian rubles, which is also not far from the truth judging by the cost of some goods).

This index can be used to compare prices, however, these calculations are far from ideal, since: the state did not sell currency to ordinary citizens, except for targeted trips abroad; the official exchange rate of the ruble against the dollar is taken into account, although on the black market at that time the value of the dollar was much higher.

Using three systems for converting Soviet money into modern Russian rubles, we obtained various coefficients:

- * by the level of average wages - 1 to 265.31;
- * for food products from the consumer basket - 1 to 103.54;
- * at the US dollar rate - 1 to 326.23.

Since each model has its own shortcomings and cannot be considered absolutely acceptable, it is rational to take the average indicator $\rightarrow (265.31 + 103.54 + 326.23) / 3 = 231.69$ as the standard.

Thus, the extremely close value of the cost of one Soviet ruble today will be at 232 rubles, which, judging by the average wage for the 1st half of 2019, does not contradict reality (174 Soviet rubles $\times 232 = 40,368$ rubles⁸⁶).

In addition to this, the authors of this article show that the prices on the goods in the USSR in 1980 and Russia in 2019 were comparable. For example, 1 kg of potatoes in the USSR would cost 37 Russian rubles, while today it costs between 21 and 42 Russian rubles. Nevertheless, the authors of this article admit that the living standards in the USSR were higher than in today's Russia:

Of course, it is not entirely correct to compare prices from different eras. In the Soviet Union, everything was regulated by the state, down to the manufacturing technology,

⁸⁶ This is the amount of money which is close to what the official Russian statistics declared "an average salary in Russia in 2019). However, I see that the Russian internaunts do not agree with this declaration, and consider that in reality it is much lower.

which was followed everywhere. That is why the prices were stable and practically the same. They varied only slightly across price bands, which made it possible to maintain a single purchasing power for the ruble.

As you can see, the ratio of prices and wages then and now is not very different, but the standard of living in the Union was higher, although disputes about this are still ongoing. Nevertheless, the citizens of the USSR had a lot of advantages - free housing, even if they had been waiting for it for several years, medicine, education, permanent work, affordable rest.

The head did not ache about the future, the tariff issue was not the main agenda. In addition, there was not a very high diversification of income - the difference in the salaries of officials and ordinary people was not so huge as it is now. Everything was clear and precise, stable and calm. Most likely, this is why many call the Soviet era a “golden” age.

Thus, the grounds for nostalgia are not imaginary.

To summarize section 5.4, I argue that the nostalgic content of non-socialist fora differs from the content of the socialist fora drastically: non-socialists mostly remember everything positive which is associated with the welfare state and comfort of life under socialism, while the USSR haters, on the contrary, remember discomfort. However, as we see from the interview with Maria Gennadievna, in her childhood she did not feel this discomfort at all⁸⁷. It is likely, then, that due to the later knowledge or propaganda, she changed her mind and opinion about the USSR. To explain further, non-socialists never analyze the reasons of the USSR’s demise like the socialists do in terms of effectiveness or ineffectiveness of particular economic reforms; non-socialists almost never mention the importance of the socialist mode of production or the planned economy. They are not focused on the technological superiority of the USSR, although

⁸⁷ Children in general are not in a position to compare and critique social systems. Except in circumstances of considerable deprivation and hardship, they experience whatever their life is as normal... until they are shown something markedly different. This characteristic of childhood would have an impact on the adult’s later life and feelings of nostalgia: (almost by definition) everything was just fine back then, whereas now...

everybody is proud of the space exploration achievements. In contrast, socialists never discuss the quality of the Soviet food and the taste of the Soviet ice cream.

5.5 Summary of Chapter 5

In this Chapter I have demonstrated that there are two different major types of pro-Soviet communities on the Russian Internet: the socialist fora and the nostalgic communities of the general public. Their evaluations of the Soviet past are rather different due to the fact that socialists are mostly young men—which was discussed above—who have not experienced socialism first-hand; however, they are experiencing injustices of capitalism directly, and this first-hand experience has made them immerse themselves into the studies of the classics of Marxism and Leninism. This socialist position is often a result of their personal intellectual growth and individual search for truth. Being advanced in Internet technologies, they spend a lot of time online, they are involved in self-education, and they use the Internet as a huge depository of the remnants of Soviet civilization (music, movies, and so on). They feel and appreciate its greatness. Moreover, the quality of the cultural products made in the USSR is incomparable to what is produced in modern Russia, and young people feel that such beautiful music and movies could not be made in the “Empire of Evil”. They just infer on the basis of the quality of the Soviet culture that the USSR was the “Empire of Truth and Humaneness”.

As I indicated earlier, according to socialists the main value of Soviet society was its aspiration for the future. In this respect, I cannot help but refer to the USSR hater, Maria Gennadievna, who answered me about the greatest achievements of the USSR exactly in the same way: the greatest strength of the USSR was the availability of an ideology (we can debate about its righteousness) that suggested a plan for the future. Modern Ukraine does not have any

kind of ideology. Overall, the main inspiration for societal development is an existent project of the future. The USSR had it.

The second type of pro-Soviet nostalgic fora is made up of communities where the general public, mostly older in age, remembers their real experience in the USSR. These fora can be qualified as “entertaining” as Alexei from Cyprus called them. Here, people do not think about the reasons for the downfall of socialism from the scientific perspective; rather, they accept the idea that it fell due to betrayal of a few individuals who are still alive and deserve the death penalty. The participants of these fora exchange their memories of their youth: for example, what the rations of a soldier consisted of in the Soviet army, how many bottles of vodka could be bought for the Soviet salary, how the holidays were celebrated in the USSR, what a wonderful leader of the country was “dear Leonid Ilyich”, and that a beautiful country was sold “for democracy and freedom” but in fact for glass beads, like the Amerindians sold America to the Europeans. According to non-socialists, the main value of the USSR was its welfare state, free medicine, free education, free housing; however, like socialists they emphasize social justice and humaneness of the Soviet society.

Chapter 6. Different Circumstances, Different Nostalgia (Inequality and Nationalism That Influence Nostalgia)

Being a Belarusian who voted against Alexandr Lukashenka in the elections of August 9th, 2020, I cannot but mention one significant aspect which evokes nostalgia in many people of the post-Soviet space, and which gave Lukashenka a chance to rise to power in Belarus 26 years ago, and to play, in the words of my informant Alena from Minsk, the "island of socialism and political stability" card against the backdrop of the general post-Soviet turmoil for two and a half

decades. This aspect is the responsibility of the state toward its citizens which was lost after the USSR's demise.

Nostalgia for the responsibility of the state toward its citizens, which is perceived by the internauts as a crucial element of the Soviet system, is a commonly found trope. The theme of betrayal and irresponsibility of the state and the elites toward the citizens since perestroika onwards is discussed by many scholars. For example, Nancy Ries (1997) indicates that during perestroika, Russians lamented the absence of the genuine leader who could take control over that chaos that was disseminated by Gorbachev and his confederates. According to Ries (1997), at that time many saw Academician Sakharov as a person with an untarnished reputation, but he died before the downfall of the USSR. As Ries (1997) shows, Russians were hoping for “the Saviour” who would sort out all their problems.

In addition to irresponsibility (disinterest in people's problems and concentration only on their personal well-being), the deceit of the people by the elite took place during perestroika, as Olga Baysha (2014) explains in her monograph. According to Baysha, who conducted discourse-analysis of the press published in Ukraine during perestroika, the Soviet elites and the common people understood reforms, introduced by Gorbachev, differently: while the elites recognized in these reforms the introduction of the market and capitalism, and welcomed all this, ordinary people believed that reforms were aimed at upgrading socialism and could not imagine that all these innovations would demolish socialism and their habitual way of life.

As Morenkova-Perrier (2017) demonstrates, this perceived abandonment of people by the state led to the retrospective popularity of such political figures as Joseph Stalin. However, Stalin as a strong statesman, was not the only figure elevated in the former Soviet republics during the post-perestroika crisis. Hitler was also mentioned as a person who raised Germany from its knees

thanks to his powerful sole authority. In the beginning of his career, Lukashenka expressed his admiration of Hitler:

The history of Germany follows the history of Belarus at certain stages. At one time, Germany was raised from the ruins thanks to a very tough power. And not only the bad was associated in Germany with the famous Adolf Hitler. I emphasize that it cannot be in any process or in any person everything black or everything white. There is a positive: Hitler formed a powerful Germany thanks to a strong presidential power. After all, the German order has been forming for centuries, but under Hitler this formation reached its highest point. This is what corresponds to our understanding of the presidential republic and the role of the president in it.⁸⁸

Thus, the chaos created by perestroika and the post-perestroika crisis made people feel a sense of longing for the responsible state and for strong statehood. This longing led to the emergence of the cult of dictators such as Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler among the former Soviet population. This trend finds its proof in the testimony of my informant Vladimir Sidorov, the former KGB major, who was proud of being fluent in German and having German friends: in 1998, Sidorov accompanied a German lady on her trip across Russia. In all her conversations with Russians, they praised Hitler saying that he was a good person. She began crying. According to Sidorov, any statesman was praised at that time, it was just “the primitive respect” to the person who was interested in the state, and not just pursued his own purposes and goals.

The current revolutionary events in Belarus have forced me to rethink the relevance of nostalgia for the USSR, since the main political battles are unfolding around the existing union state of Belarus and Russia (supranationality of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, which has existed on paper since 1996). In December 2019, Belarus witnessed protests

⁸⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE5XbwjE-6w> – This link refers to two interviews with Lukashenka where he praises Hitler. – Access: 2020-08-16.

against the deeper integration with Russia. The forces opposing each other in the political conflict in Belarus now accuse each other of the fact that each of them allegedly intends to destroy relations with the Eastern neighbor. This union state of Belarus and Russia is, in fact, an attempt to revive the Soviet Union, but it is important to understand how the peoples of the two countries relate to this state. As the famous Russian political scientist Yekaterina Shulman said in her interview to the channel “Dozhd”, according to the recently published research of the Russian sociologist Sergei Bilanovsky, who conducted multiple focus groups both in Russia and in Belarus, Russians are indifferent to this union state, while Belarusians are strictly against it. The Russian euphoria of the annexation of the Crimea will never be repeated with any other annexed or integrated region⁸⁹. We see that political unity similar to the former USSR is not something that attracts both Russians and Belarusians. Some other republics of the former Soviet Union (the Baltic States, Georgia, Ukraine) are attracted by this unity even to a lesser degree. Is it still possible that nostalgia for the USSR has power and influence under such conditions?

As Silitski (2010) rightly emphasizes, the authoritarian International (a coalition of authoritarian regimes, analogous to the Communist International) works well: the first leaders who congratulated the self-proclaimed or self-appointed leader of Belarus Lukashenka after August 9th, 2020, were the leaders of China, Kazakhstan and Russia.

In each country of the former Soviet Union the circumstances after its demise were rather different. This Chapter is dedicated to the factors that contribute to post-Soviet nostalgia of different internet users depending on the place of their origin. They may live in different regions of the planet now, rather distant from their countries of birth, but their nostalgic visions of the

⁸⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iJa3keJ0Xs> (7:55-8:47, August 17th, 2020) – This is Shulman’s interview to “Dozhd”. – Accessed: 2020-08-22.

Soviet Union are associated with that post-perestroika experience which they lived in their native countries. In this Chapter, I cover the following topics: the association of nostalgia for the USSR with social inequality; the association of nostalgia for the USSR with a special way of living (inspired by the mode of life typical of the *pre-revolutionary Russian aristocracy*) and a high quality of cultural products in the Soviet Union; nostalgia for the USSR through the prism of nationalism and friendship of peoples, and how its possible restoration is seen by the nationalists and internationalists.

6.1. Inequality Contributes to Nostalgia

The analysis of the 22 interviews I conducted during my research with the participants of different nostalgic online groups allowed me to see a few patterns in how the representatives of different former Soviet republics evaluate some positive aspects of Soviet life. The difference can be seen not only between the young male socialists and more mature general public of the “laymen” nostalgic fora, where the former are inclined to what they see as scientific analysis of the Soviet realities, while the latter rely on their own living experience of the real socialism. A difference is also seen between the representatives of Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia, from one side, and Belarus and Ukraine, from another side. To explain, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Russians underscore the positive aspects of the USSR, which can be generalized as ‘the welfare state’, while Belarusians and Ukrainians mostly emphasize the specific lifestyle of the Soviet people which assumed personal growth and elevated ambitions, and also the high quality of cultural products such as movies and music produced in the USSR.

The analysis of the socio-economic processes in the countries under investigation presented in **Chapter 3 (The Post-Soviet World and Internet)** of this dissertation, allows me to cluster Latvia, Lithuania and Russia in one group on the basis of the neoliberal regimes that are

formed there, while Belarus and Ukraine, as well as Moldova, can be characterized as equal, but poor societies, where this neoliberal pressure is not so acute. That is why the best memories of the Soviet Union in the latter countries are related not to the quality of sausage, and availability of cheap central heating and electricity as it was demonstrated by Neringa Klumbitė in her articles on post-Soviet nostalgia in Lithuania (2009, 2010), but to some sentimental moments like a personal meeting with the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (told by Alexei from Cyprus), or to different stories describing leisure and spare time, hobbies, and greatness of the Soviet culture.

Supporting my argument on the association of nostalgia for the Soviet Union with rising inequality, I am providing citation of an interview with my Latvian informant Igors Ivanovs from Riga, who, answering my question on the most nostalgic segment of Latvian society, states that neoliberalism in Latvia eliminated the middle class which was a reality in the Soviet Union, and now there are only the rich and the poor in Latvia:

Well, I think that ordinary people are [nostalgic], namely the middle class itself. Already now we practically do not have such a “middle class”: we have rich and poor. Most, I think, it is the working people who remember, as they say, and regret this [the USSR demise], of course.

Then I ask Igors to evaluate what the percentages of the rich and the poor are in Latvia, and how an average family uses its income given that the average salary in Latvia according to Igors (and to my checking online) is around 450 euros per month, and he responds the following:

Well, I think: 20 percent are rich, I mean - from the entire population, and the rest [poor] - well, if only so [Igors assumes that the number of the poor may be higher than 80 percent]. We have a lot of these [rich] people who work in the public sector. They receive the highest salaries: well, somewhere, starting from two thousand euros and above, and for an ordinary person - four hundred and fifty - it's good if this minimum wage is considered. Well. So that's it... A lot goes to pay for these same utilities. The food is also expensive. So, if you say - here's to pay for electricity, there, for the Internet, all these so-called utilities - and practically nothing remains from one salary. My wife gets this kind of salary [around 450 euros], then her entire salary goes [to pay utility bills]. I'm a

construction worker, I get a little more. And then somehow you can already live. And I also have a little son.

In addition to the impoverishment that befell the Latvian population due to the realities of neoliberalism, Igors emphasizes on the absence of free time that could be used for self-development because now labour is unprotected and an employer requires from a worker as many hours of work as possible:

Well, there was labor protection, well... people... worked eight hours, everything was fine. And now - only toil, toil, overstrain yourself, even though you die, but toil. And if you fall ill – no one needs you anymore. Truth is known in comparison. Here is my opinion. (I cited this fragment of the interview earlier).

Given that Igors pointed at absolute indifference of Latvian employers to the needs of workers, especially when an employee becomes ill, I asked Igors about the healthcare system in Latvia, and he explained to me that the healthcare system is so poor, that Latvians have to rely on charity of their compatriots in order to solve grave health problems:

Well, so far nothing [no medical insurance] works for us, but everything is very expensive. In general, there is a state free [medicine]... well, how - free: you have to pay the patient's contribution - well, the patient's contribution must be paid, well, let's say, some three or four euros, or eighty to one hundred euros, as they say, pay and receive [medical services] right away, but for these three or four euros you can, as they say, wait three or four months, or even six months, and by paying one hundred or eighty euros, you can get an appointment with this doctor right now. This is our medicine.

Then I asked Igors about the possibilities to pay for a serious surgery, and he answered that people turn to charitable organizations such as Ziedot.lv (Ziedot šanai) which collect donations because, according to Igors, “people somehow cooperate, while the state does not help in any way”.

The picture of the neoliberal Latvia drawn by Igors Ivanovs totally contradicts the picture of the welfare state in the Soviet Union drawn by another informant of mine, the Scientist from Lithuania, who described how he was successfully treated from bone cancer under socialism. Pointing at expensive health care in Lithuania, the Scientist states:

My daughter was in the hospital. I'm just saying that I spent three years [in the hospital] in the USSR - I didn't pay a cent, right? Didn't pay a single penny! And my daughter, when she went to the hospital, I paid - my father just had several [thousand] dollars - he gave me everything: I paid there in thousands of dollars. And she was ill for a month or two - I don't remember exactly. But I paid in thousands of dollars! Here's the difference: socialism and capitalism!

The Scientist from Lithuania contends about Lithuania what Igors states about Latvia:

Living conditions in Lithuania are very bad, very bad... Very high prices, very low salaries; the smallest salaries in Europe and the highest prices in Europe are in Lithuania. Here. But people are all so scared that no one does anything. **NOBODY DOES ANYTHING.** There are only a few people like me here in Lithuania. Most people in Lithuania are slaves... What can I say: all the best jobs and almost all the normal jobs are only in Vilnius... A little more - in Kaunas, and a little bit more - in Klaipeda. All jobs are in **VILNIUS**, as if there is no other Lithuania at all. Only Vilnius. These are also big mistakes of our Seim (Parliament), big mistakes of our state... Now Lithuania lives like African states. **AFRICAN!** My friend's cousin came from America, when she saw what was going on in Lithuania, she flew back the next day. Immediately. She came with outstretched arms, saying: "In Lithuania, people live best of all in Europe!" I say: "How, how ?!" - "Best of all!" Well, I say: "Then you don't know a lot!" And when she found out, - the next morning she flew back.

It should be noted that both Igors Ivanovs from Riga and the Scientist from Lithuania express their indignation at the presence of NATO on the territory of the Baltic countries. NATO is a symbol of the West, and consequently a hatred of NATO manifests as anti-American sentiments. The Scientist from Lithuania explains that Lithuanians protested against the NATO presence in

the late 1990s-early 2000s, but those protests⁹⁰ were harshly suppressed, and overall, he characterizes democratic leaders of the country as bandits. He states that the majority of Lithuanians would support the Russian presence in Lithuania, in fact, approving its annexation:

[Now there are] Americans, NATO [in the military air base of Šiauliai]. In general, the Americans could not get to Lithuania under the constitution, because such a decision is made by the entire people. Our government did not give a damn about the whole people and invited the Americans to come. It didn't give a damn about the whole people and the Lithuanian constitution. It didn't give a damn. What else can you do? Our people went to protest - they were shot with rubber bullets. And then they were convicted and sentenced to heavy fines and imprisonment. This happened when the Conservatives were in power. In the year 2000, something like that. Or a little earlier: in 1998. I do not remember exactly. When the Conservatives came to power. [In Lithuania they] manipulate all election documents. They are being manipulated. Whoever orders something gets it. Some people say: "What you have chosen is what you have". I say: "In Lithuania, the authorities are not those whom you elected, but those who want [to get the power] and who can [get it]". This is our situation in Lithuania. It's such a gang of thugs. I will only express the opinion that I know. I am on Skype and Facebook all the time, and I know the opinion of many [people]... Well, I looked at all sorts of opinions, and came to the conclusion that if the Russian army entered [Lithuania], it would be greeted with flowers, and not with tanks. And if it were necessary to defend our authorities - the bandits - not a single person would defend [them].

A significant portion of my interview with the Scientist was dedicated to high rates of suicides in Lithuania. I asked him what he considers the main reason for such a high rate of self-harm in his country. He responded with the following:

I was at the doctor's in the evening, someone called... one-one-two (1-1-2), in America - 911, right? Nine-nine-one... and in Lithuania - one-one-two... So, I was sitting at the doctor's office... some man called him and said: "I have been without work for three years, my wife has been without work for three years, three children are starving. What do you suggest?" - to this doctor. "I," the doctor says, "am not a labor exchange, why are you contacting me?" Well, the conversation ended. "I - he says, - now I'm standing..."... well... how is that in Russian? "Now I, - he says, - I'm standing in a noose, what do you

⁹⁰ When I conducted the interview, the Scientist was not sure of exactly when the protest of Lithuanians against NATO took place. There is a high likelihood that he was talking about the events of 1998, when the Lithuanians protested against the signing of agreements with NATO. Lithuania became a NATO member on March 29, 2004, but in January 1998 the presidents of the United States, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia signed the US-Baltic Charter in Washington. The main purpose of this document is to provide all-round support to the process of integration of the Baltic states into the alliance.

suggest?" What could we offer? If Lithuania is a country of unemployment. What could we offer him? What? - Nothing! Well, if nothing - and the conversation ended. Just "pip-pip-pip-pip..." The conversation is over, okay? Because the authorities of Lithuania work because of money, both in America - and in Lithuania: money – is the first priority. And the person is in the background.

The second painful issue is the missing people who are kidnapped, according to the Scientist, for the sake of their organs. As he contends, around 1,500 persons are missing in Lithuania annually which is a dramatic number given that the population of the country is around 2 million, and the main reason for that is the illegal organs trade:

And every year, as a rule, one and a half thousand people disappear. WITHOUT A TRACE. Thus, two thousand disappear, but five hundred are found, and one thousand five hundred are not found. Annually! They are looking for the killed or find those prepared for export... In Lithuania - how [it happens]: three days are given in order to start seeking for a person, because in three days he may show up himself/herself. And these kidnapers prepare documents in a day. And they don't look for a person for three days. Enough time? Clear, huh? So, I asked the police - I also taught there - in the police: "Why do you allow this to do nothing for three days?" They say: "Such a law!" I say: "Is the law written for people or for bandits? For what?" And here in Lithuania - for bandits!

When answering the question whether the main reason for the abductions is to use them as organs donors, the Scientist answered in the affirmative:

Yes! (Long pause) For the organs! So, death is inevitable! Even in Lithuania, as far as I know, for one person who is kidnapped for organs in Lithuania, they receive about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Try it - stop this business as you say! Businessmen, right? Try it - stop it! And the main countries that expect this "product" are Europe - the rich countries Germany, England, France...

The Scientist from Lithuania was an instructor on civil defense. This is a discipline which teaches how to rescue people from difficult situation, including kidnapping, so he was trying to conduct his own investigation in relation to some cases, he talked to the policemen:

“Civilinė gynyba” - “civil defense” in Russian - it rescues people from all misfortunes, from all! Even kidnapping when it also happens. Even from kidnapping, but we have a bandit state, there are gangs, and they do not allow you to stick your nose where you don't need to. I have a lot... More than once I was also threatened: "Stay out of the way!" I spoke with the police commissioner - he also says: “I tried to watch this case, how people are kidnapped”, then they called him and said: “Where are your children - daughter and son?” He says: "In the gymnasium." “No,” he says, “we have them with us in the car. Do you want to see them or not?”

Overall, my Lithuanian informant condemns democracy because “Democracy is the worst thing in the world, because people turn into slaves of money. I think that people should live for the happiness of other people, and they think that people should live for money”.

The alleged democratization of the Baltic countries was achieved by harsh measures: just as the Scientist talks about repressions against Lithuanians who protested against NATO presence, Igors from Riga mentions Latvian laws, according to which anyone who does not recognize the period of Soviet rule as an occupation should be prosecuted. On the basis of our interview, Igors can be prosecuted. We discussed this with him, and he said that he was not afraid.

Now, re-reading these interviews, I have mixed feelings because the demonstrators in Belarus aspiring for the democratic elections have significant support personalized in our Baltic neighbours, namely Lithuania and Latvia, while what is horrifying Belarusians is a potential annexation by Russia. While my informants from the Baltic states, on the contrary, after a third of a century under democracy and NATO, aspire for the Russian annexation!

Being nostalgic for the USSR, my informants from the Baltic countries are critical of their current regimes, and that is why they depict their current situation as if they live under the rule of gangsters, as it was with Russia in the 1990s and later. One of my Russian research

participants, Andrey from Nuremberg who is originally from Saint-Petersburg, answering my question about his life achievements, responded the following: “I achieved success only in the sense of leaving Russia and saving me and my family from the rule of bandits”. Andrey left Russia in 1998; however, gangsterism, as the situation with Alexey Navalny shows, remains to be a signature style of the Russian state.

In his interview, Alexey Travnikov from Saint Petersburg allotted much time to the problems of gangsterism and corruption of the Russian authorities in the 1990s and today in the 2010s-2020s. Alexey called the time of the 1990s “banditskii bespredel” (no-limited-zone controlled by gangsters). Olga Shevchenko (2009) refers to this period in the Russian history in her book on the post-perestroika crisis in Russia (Shevchenko’s book is on the post-perestroika period, but the term “bespredel” emerged in the late-perestroika period):

The few official designations for the period - “time of transition” (perekhodnyi period) and “changes” (peremeny) did not take root in popular discourse. In far greater abundance one could encounter pejorative names for designating the post-1985 period”. In her perceptive study of late-perestroika-era discourse, Nancy Ries (1997, p. 44,46) enumerated several, such as “complete disintegration” and “collapse.” They co-existed with others: brothel (bardak), no-limit-zone (bespredel), and of course, crisis (krizis) come to mind. But one would be “hard pressed” to come up with a widely accepted but relatively neutral term. It was this world view which was described in the early 1990s by Russian critics as “clinical alarmism” (Rubtsov, 1992, p. 16), that allowed the term catastrophe (katastrofa) to emerge as “run-of-the-mill for describing both the entirety and components, however minor, of public life” (Guseinov, 1996) (Shevchenko, 2009, p. 19).

Alexey told me that he was a witness of multiple shootings in the centre of Saint-Petersburg when he was young in the 1990s. Although having become significantly milder, this gangsterism has not disappeared from Russian life. Alexey emphasized that the state authorities are often allied with gangsters, as it became clear from the situation around the village Kushchevskaya. Alexey asked me whether I had heard about the village of Kushchevskaya, in

Krasnodar Territory, where the local criminal Tsapok merged with the authorities at the regional level⁹¹ and where the mass killing of innocent people (including 3 children) took place on November 3rd, 2010. Comparing gangsterism in Russia of the 1990s and today, with what was under the Soviet rule, Alexey said:

In the Soviet Union, there was crime, and in the same way people were robbed, raped and killed, but this was negligible. This can also be said by the fact that the militia walked unarmed: no clubs, no machine guns, even MSM pistol... 14.00 - not everyone was carrying it, but now everyone is walking around - all militia overall - armored to the teeth. What does this say? The fact is that crime has increased significantly. It is better not to cross with such "uncles" [armed policemen] by a lucky chance. And in the Soviet Union, the police were absolutely peace-loving. The policeman was mainly used [by the public] to ask: "Uncle policeman, how to get there and there?..." And not that: "Help, they rob, kill!" That's all.

To summarize, the main features of discourse of those who experienced neoliberalism in its harshest manifestations in the Baltic countries and Russia (I remind the reader that these countries are very similar to the United States in terms of inequality), I can conclude that Latvians, Lithuanians and Russians describe their neoliberal countries as penetrated with poverty, gangsterism, and fear of repressions from the side of the criminal state, while the Soviet time is described as the period of prosperity, justice, peace, security and stability.

6.2. Spare Time Under Socialism, Soviet Lifestyle and Culture

In her book on post-perestroika crisis in Russia, Olga Shevchenko (2009) points at a very significant shift that happened in the structure of time and the organization of leisure in Russian

⁹¹ I have watched one of the films of Alexey Navalny, and it proved that Tsapok was under the protection of Yuri Chaika, the Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation. According to Navalny and his team, the family of Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika through intermediaries has a common business with people from the environment of the bandits, including their wives. This was the reason why this gangster was so arrogant: he was confident in his impunity.

people: first of all, people fenced off from the world, began to perceive their own home as a citadel, saving them from the storms of public life, they stopped going out into nature and visiting friends. If earlier the holidays were celebrated by large groups of neighbors and friends, then after perestroika, people embarked on a course of self-isolation and preferred to spend their time at home while under socialism the weekends were usually spent in camping. Moreover, people began experiencing intellectual degradation that befell them after the demise of the Soviet Union. In many cases it was caused by the downshifting experienced by many, when, for example, a former engineer had to earn his living as a retail salesperson; they tried to maintain the level of the previous intellectual activity through intensive solving of crosswords which became a very popular pastime.

Characterizing the Soviet lifestyle, we should stress that the main principle of it was introduced during Stalin's life and was called *culturnost'* (culturedness). The ideal of *culturnost'* is very close to the aristocratic lifestyle. It is important to understand that unlike the bourgeoisie which was assumed a class enemy of the proletarians in the Soviet Union, the aristocracy was often idealized and romanticized. For example, the cult of Decembrists⁹² existed in the USSR, and drew a collective portrait of the rebels who wanted to overthrow the Russian monarchy in 1825 as the fighters for the people's happiness, although their political ambitions were far from the people's emancipation.

Jukka Gronow (2003) wrote a very informative book about the beginning of mass production of luxury goods such as caviar, champagne, chocolate, and parfums in crystal containers in the mid-1930s, in order to create an impression in the people's masses that as Stalin

⁹² In particular, the famous film "The Star of Fascinating Happiness" dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the Decembrist revolt was screened in 1975.

put it, “life has become better, life has become more fun”. The simple proletarians were supposed to have an impression of reaching the life standards of aristocracy given that they could afford champagne, caviar, chocolate, and parfums in crystal containers. In addition to these material aspects of prosperity, the *culturnost*’ concept assumed playing musical instruments, chess, reading literature, visiting museums and attending theatrical performances. Further, women having spare time due to socialist principles of labour protection could afford to be involved in crafts such as knitting, embroidering, and so on, exactly like aristocratic women whose main activities were music and crafts. Also, both men and women were actively involved in sports. The ideal of the Soviet person was supposed to combine a proletarian (strong, physically developed, productive) and an aristocrat (spiritual, intellectual, well-educated, with good manners). Imposition of this ideal in Soviet society had noticeable success.

As evidence of this success, but not representative, I want to point to the biography of the already mentioned philosopher Alexandr Zinoviev. Zinoviev grew up in a large peasant family. However, later in life all his brothers had very high administrative positions including directors of big enterprises, one of them was a general in the army, and Zinoviev himself not only became a philosopher, sociologist, and famous writer, he also served as a military pilot during the WWII. Moreover, he was an artist: all his books are illustrated with his paintings. He, who came from a peasant family, became a warrior, philosopher and artist.

Earlier, in my dissertation I mentioned Zebo Ganieva, an outstanding warrior who killed 129 Nazis during WWII. She not only studied in the most prestigious school for actors in the USSR - GITIS, from where she volunteered for the front at age 18, but after the war she became a doctor of philological sciences and was the author of many books of literary criticism. She became a warrior, actress, and scientist. This happened despite the fact that her father was put in

prison before the war. On the one hand, these are isolated cases, and on the other, these are very typical cases of the Soviet Union, where the universalism of the individual was promoted, almost like during the Renaissance.

Imposition of the ideal of *culturnost'* promoted the development of culture as such. It is understood that the Soviet culture was based on the Russian culture and on the national cultures of other peoples of the USSR; however, the specific political circumstances and the existence of strict censorship in the USSR led to the situation when the public received access only to the cultural products of the highest quality⁹³. The idea that censorship allows for higher quality of cultural products or allows the development of new expressive artistic language does not belong to me: Alexanyan (2013) in the Introduction to her thesis informs us that she dedicated some time of her life to theater studies. She studied the expressive language of the Soviet theater. When, after the downfall of the USSR, she came to Russia and talked to many Russian stage directors they shared with her that when artistic freedom was introduced, they got totally lost because under the influence of censorship an absolutely unique expressive language emerged in the Soviet theatre, when the spectators would understand hints and semi-words and there was an intimate connection between the actors and the audience. With the new free era, this expressive language became useless, and the new stage directors did not know what it is possible to offer to the public.

Answering my question concerning the period that she calls “The Golden Age of the USSR”, Yekaterina from the Arab Emirates (originally, from Odessa, Ukraine) replied:

I would attribute the sixties and seventies to the “Golden Age” of Soviet history. Because enough time has passed after the war, the economy has already somehow risen, people

⁹³ I have to admit that the acceptability of “cultural products” for censure was not just a matter of quality. There was a narrow range of politically acceptable style and content.

have come to their senses, various industries have already begun to develop rapidly, as well as a creative aspect, [let's mention] the [famous film directors] Gaidai, Ryazanov, musicians were also strong... music began developing because people - they still remembered wartime very well, many were children of war and were young [during the war]... that is, wartime was still very well remembered, and therefore it was possible... they appreciated a peaceful life, and knew how to enjoy what they attained: a calm and measured life. Here it is. Yuri Gagarin then flew into space, the aviation industry was developing very fast, the space industry, the construction of the Soviet fleet then proceeded at a rapid pace, the passenger fleet. Well, this, rather, can be attributed to the seventies. Here it is. The construction of large trucks, automobiles, trams, tractors, and the metro has begun. Well, that's why I would attribute the 1960s-1970s to the "Golden Age" of the history of the Soviet Union.

Yekaterina, being born in the port city of Odessa, was writing her PhD thesis on maritime trade, that is why she mentions construction of trade fleet and passenger fleet, as well as other kinds of transport as the main achievements of the USSR. However, we cannot help but notice that she pays special attention to the cultural aspect of life in the USSR: she mentions the outstanding Soviet film directors Gaidai and Ryazanov, and the fact that music was among the priorities in Soviet society. Music and cinema are among the most frequently mentioned topics that evoke nostalgia for the Soviet past. Even the USSR haters, such as Artyom from Melbourne (he is also a Ukrainian) pointed at the fact that the Soviet state invested a lot of money in the cinema because it was the instrument of propaganda.

My informant from Moldova, when asked about those who are nostalgic for the USSR in his country, responded that it is mostly those who are older than 35, and who somehow "encounter" the artefacts of the Soviet culture (I am not sure what is the cultural policy in Moldova, but my informant from Lithuania explained to me that, for example, a popular Russian animation movie "Masha and the Bear" is prohibited on the central TV station in Lithuania, being recognized as pro-Russian propaganda. Perhaps, then, there are some limitations on the Soviet/Russian cultural artefacts in Moldova, too):

Well, it seems to me, starting somewhere from thirty-five years old and up - the further, the more nostalgic, probably [people are]. That is, [these are the] people [who] still a little bit caught either some kind of *cultural remnants in the form of these films, cartoons, songs of the Soviet Union*, or people who witnessed a piece of the Soviet Union in a more or less conscious life, that is, and probably these are the most nostalgic because they have an opportunity to compare⁹⁴. Even despite the fact that the eighties were already the decline of the Soviet Union, there were still some moments that, well... evoke some positive associations. Well, plus it also plays a role that it was youth, childhood, and one way or another there are memories associated with the family, with parents, with the school, with the university - all this probably also plays some role.

We see that cultural artefacts play a significant role in immersing people to nostalgic memories about the USSR, and to some extent, as argued by Abramov (2013) these artefacts have their own agency which allows them to influence people.

Alena, my informant from Minsk, dedicated half an hour of our interview time to stress the idea that even a mediocre Soviet movie such as “The Most Charming and Attractive” (1985) looks like a masterpiece against today’s Russian cinema production. The transcript of Alena’s interview contains 52 pages (24,736 words). She expressed a lot of interesting ideas concerning the Soviet lifestyle and other themes, so I am conveying the main points of her interview in my own words because her ideas are essential to my argument about the Soviet lifestyle copied from the aristocracy, and as something which evokes nostalgia in the former Soviet republics not as much affected by neoliberalism as Lithuania, Latvia and Russia. Although as I mentioned earlier, now the Soviet Union is being denigrated in Belarus retrospectively due to its close association with the dictator Lukashenka who used Soviet symbols and best achievements of the USSR in self-promotion.

⁹⁴ In his interview, Igors from Riga points at comparison of life in the USSR with post-Soviet life as a reason for nostalgia, too.

Answering the question on why she is nostalgic, Alena replied that the Soviet mode of life was absolutely unique and the mode of thinking of the Soviet people was special in that respect that it was anti-consumerist. People were looking to improve their living conditions, but it was shameful to boast about property and luxury goods. Put otherwise, it created a bad tone, and for the majority of the Soviet people the main ambitions were in the sphere of personal development (education, work, ideology). The personal goals were higher than just to eat well.

Answering the question on what was the most precious in the USSR, Alena said that it was the unique Soviet lifestyle in all its aspects. It was trust among the people, especially among the neighbors: people easily left their keys (for other members of the family) under the rug near their entrance doors in the multistory buildings knowing that nobody would enter; people did not lock their doors especially during the holidays because many freely visited them, and the celebrations were shared. Nobody urinated and defecated in the public spaces of the multi-story houses, while now it's a common practice even given that the shared entrance door to the building is locked.

The same features of the Soviet life style were mentioned by my informant Evgeniya from Sydney (formerly – from Kiev) who repeats Alena's words almost verbatim:

I am very nostalgic for the USSR! In the Soviet Union: a Ukrainian, a Jew - they all lived side by side, everyone lived the same way, the doors were never locked. Well, some closed [the doors] if they lived in a [private] house. If you locked the door with a key, then the key was also not far away. No one stole, no one came in [even if the door was open]. Well, we lived poorly. But even under Stalin, a progressive decline in prices began. Small decline, but constant - I don't know - every month.

Then, I asked Alena whether post-perestroika changes in people's behaviour related to the collapse of morality. She answered that it is not about morality: it is a specific Soviet

ideology that cultivated a particular perception of an individual, that is, any individual is good according to their nature. If an individual makes a mistake, commits a crime (sin), they can be rehabilitated by society, “he may be washed if he is dirty”. Such an attitude toward a human being is relevant only for Christianity.

According to Alena, an extremely important element of the Soviet mode of life is how people spent their free time. People under socialism had huge amounts of free time because it was impossible to earn a lot (only illegal traders could earn, but it was risky). People did not die at their working places, as they worked exactly 8 hours per day. This free time was dedicated to self-development, vacation out in nature, pastimes with the family, all those values that are declared as the most essential by the Western society, but for the Western society it is an unachievable ideal because people spend their time earning money allegedly for the sake of their families. The phenomenon described by Alena is a facet of “commercialization of the intimate life” – the term coined by Arlie Hochschild which means that under capitalism people have no time for their dearest and prefer to give them money instead, justifying themselves that they are busy at work (Hochschild, 2003). Further, Alena continues that the Soviet people had minimal, but sufficient material goods to cover their primordial necessities, and a lot of free time. Today people in Belarus try to take all the possible jobs and they work 7 days a week, while all the acquaintances of Alena during socialism had 2 non-working days. Also, Alena mentioned in length that spending time in the forest was a favourite mode of relaxation. It took the whole day to go to the forest from the city, and according to today’s realities it is a very ineffective, wasteful and useless pastime, while it was a norm under socialism, and all those day-long trips to the forest were organized for the sake of children: to show them the river, the anthills, to teach them how to make a fire, or how to pick mushrooms.

Alena also talked about such an important element of the Soviet mode of life as dacha [it is a country cottage; Melissa L. Caldwell has a book on dacha in Russian culture (2011)]. Alena explains that the dacha was not a house for living: like everything in the USSR, it was a process. People could build their dachas for decades. It was not the result, but the process which entertained the owners. And, under socialism, dachas were used not in order to grow vegetables and fruits for living, but to cultivate rare plants (like vineyards), flowers. There was a spirit of competition in the sense of agricultural achievements of non-practical order.

Then Alena provided her analysis of the difference between Soviet pastimes and American ones. She highlighted that when she was a student (the year 2000), she went to the USA, worked at a restaurant, and was shocked by the way in which Americans spent their free time: after their working day they would go to a restaurant and would sit there for an hour with a glass of alcohol, then, during weekends they went to the same restaurant for a few hours. The Soviet pastime culture was really epic in comparison to that.

Alena continued that first of all, everybody read a lot, and spent a lot of time in the libraries. Many people were involved in tourism in the USSR. Alena's parents are big fans of mountain skiing and cross-country skiing. Many families had grandmas in the village with living animals such as a cow, a goat, a swine, hens, and children spent their summers mostly with the grandmothers having the opportunity to see real animals. She shared a story that recently she visited Germany, and in one of Berlin's public parks there is a place where people raise and take care of the domestic animals such as horses, donkeys, goats. This segment of the park is extremely popular with the children and their parents, while for the urban Soviet children it was not exotic—it was a seasonal part of their lives.

Secondly, Alena says that in Soviet times multiple theatrical associations were very popular at the workplace. People organized themselves to play in amateur theatre. Now it is a stigmatized practice, and it is considered as a waste of time. Alena believes that one of her colleagues was fired recently due to her involvement in such an amateur theatre. It was not the main reason for her being fired, but it was an indicator for the bosses, that she was an ineffective worker who wasted her time instead of investing it in professional achievements.

Third, according to Alena, Soviet time gave birth to the era of intellectual games like “What? Where? When?”. It was a real obsession for the entire Soviet population. The most famous players like Alexandr Druz and Feodor Dvinyatin were mega-stars of the national scale. These personalities were discussed by the Soviet people in the same way as today the most scandalous personalities of show-business are discussed. The idea of this game is as follows: a question on logic (not the exact factual knowledge) is posed to the team of “connoisseurs”. They are given a minute to solve the problem. This was the favourite TV show of the Soviet times. It was launched in 1976, and it is still popular, but now only extremely idle or wealthy people who want to gain the reputation of intellectuals can afford to play this game. In the Soviet times the prizes were good books and prestige, now they have converted it into a casino, and put huge amounts of money at stake. The pure spirit of the game is lost. In the USSR, it was a full-fledged leisure activity for 30-40% of the population.

Then Alena mentioned that until recently (the year 2011-2012) Belarus was called “the last haven/reservation of the Soviet lifestyle”; “now our enemies stopped praising us in this manner”. Then she remembered that there was another very prominent element of Soviet life: all the families made their own canned food, especially fruits. There was a huge industry of homemade food production. It was difficult to organize this process: it required special

containers, the knowledge of technology of sterilization, and the knowledge of recipes. People shared this knowledge with each other, gave their homemade canned products as gifts, whereas now this segment of the home culinary is totally dead in post-Soviet countries, and may interest perhaps only ‘hipsters’.

According to Alena, the next extremely important and highly-valued element of the Soviet lifestyle was the national obsession with chess. Everybody was fascinated with chess, and Alena regrets that she was not taught to play this game, while all her classmates did well in this sphere. TV shows dedicated to chess occupied the prime-time of Soviet TV during the weekends (now it’s hard to believe!). Every newspaper had an analysis of the chess games played by the famous grandmasters⁹⁵.

Then Alena mentions that the majority of the Soviet people had expansive home libraries. Many of them even read their books (because some people bought them in order to decorate the interior)⁹⁶. Everybody had access to the multiple free hobby clubs and could study music at a different level. She explained the difference between the musical schools where one had to take exams, and free musical studios; also, there were many amateur art clubs “which made us psychologically healthy, filled our lives with optimism, and it’s very regrettable that they’ve gone, because now all this is affordable only for big money, while during the Soviet times it was organically imbedded in the entire system of pastime and leisure”.

⁹⁵ Olga Shevchenko in her book on post-perestroika crisis in Russia pays special attention to the change of forms of the pastime and leisure from intellectual and active during the USSR to receptive and passive after the downfall of the USSR (2009).

⁹⁶ It is an irony. In the Soviet Union, it was necessary to have huge volumes of books on display showing that you are a well-educated person. Alena means that some people kept books not only for maintaining a status of an intelligent person, but in order to read them. Indeed, books were a fashionable element of the interior.

Furthermore, Alena points out that during the Soviet times it was very easy to become a professional from an amateur. If a person was fond of sports and made progress, they would be noticed by the coaches immediately and promoted at a professional level. The same happened in the arts. In this regard, Alena stresses the importance of the professional competitions. They were held just for prestige and maintenance of professionalism. (Basically, they were inspired by the law of socialist emulation formulated by Lenin: according to this law, a person who is better than others in a particular sphere, must gain public acknowledgement, and it will instigate a desire in him to share his professional experience and to help others to reach the same level of professionalism; the main idea of this principle was to compensate a person not materially, but psychologically through public recognition). Now the only stimulus to success and professional growth is money. Alena says that recently she saw a report on Belarusian TV that a team of Belarusian car mechanics went to China or Saudi Arabia to participate in such a professional competition (which was good). In the Soviet times, the level of one's professionalism was evaluated by professionals, now the most common way to find out about someone's professionalism is through reviews of the clients which are not always objective. She told me a sad story about a hair-stylist who was recommended to her, and she proved to be very bad.

Then she said that in Belarus business women are very active. Recently (the interview was taken in 2018), there was a congress with the representatives of the UN in Belarus, and they emphasized that Belarusian women are doing great as entrepreneurs. Alena explains this female promotion through the legacy of the Soviet times. That is, it was absolutely impossible for a woman in the USSR to be unemployed. It was possible only for one segment of the female population (which was disdained, as Alena believes): it was a destiny of the military officers' wives (there is a book by Timo Vihavainen and others (2015) on the Soviet consumerism, where

the Soviet officers' wives are qualified as the pure embodiment of philistinism which is practically a sin in accordance with the moral hierarchy of Russians). Overall, in the USSR to be a housewife was very shameful and suspicious⁹⁷ and there were a lot of negative stereotypes in relation to military officers' wives. Now, according to Alena, many women want to be housewives, and in such a way they drive themselves into a trap: as housewives, their situation will be vulnerable at old age when their husband dies and they do not have a pension.

Finally, Alena dedicates much time in telling me how the crafts such as sewing, knitting, and embroidering were important in the USSR, and how almost every woman knew how to sew, knit, and embroider which allowed her to produce unique and stylish homemade clothing in reaction to poor choices offered by the Soviet light industry (light industry is the industry that produces consumer goods, in opposition to heavy industry that produces machinery).

It is striking that very similar ideas concerning the Soviet lifestyle were expressed by Alexei from Cyprus (originally – from Kiev, Ukraine). As a Soviet child, Alexei himself was a person with multiple hobbies (tourism, alpinism, exploration of caves, diving, dancing, painting). All his hobbies were available to him for free in Soviet times. This is what he says about his nostalgia:

Yes, I am nostalgic - yes, probably, for some pleasantries that are associated with my childhood, yes, my childhood passed in the Soviet Union. Here it is... Well, I can dissect, in fact, in more detail this topic - to develop this topic. Well, this is, so to speak, quite a capacious topic, probably, to try to put it even in three paragraphs. Well, I would probably put it this way: for me those memories are pleasant... that "me" who I was, well, that is, I was quite carefree there, I studied quite a lot, I traveled a lot, I had quite extensive ties - a lot of friends, and in principle I was less concerned about security issues there... And vice versa: I read a lot, was fond of a lot, went to a huge number of circles, that's... enough... I can note that I was not fixated on money, because then, in fact,

⁹⁷ There is an old Soviet movie "The Hearts of the Four" released in 1941. The main female character, being a university math professor at the age of 25, threatens her younger sister that she would become a housewife if she fails exams at the university.

practically no one had it, and everything was determined not by money, but by some abilities, capacities, desires. And - yes, that's something nice to remember. [Then Alexei talks about his hobbies]. I drew - drew, well, let's say, at the local level - in my area, then I drew in the House of Pioneers and Schoolchildren - also such a more serious level, and it was this House of Pioneers and Schoolchildren that sent my works there... well, first my works were exhibited at home, and then I know that my works went to Vienna and Sofia, Bulgaria. I did folk dancing. I was engaged in aircraft modeling, went to the circle of astronomers and chemists. That is, these are two different circles. This is what I remember from the House of Pioneers. I went to the sambo section. I swam. There was an open-air pool - I did this. I spent a lot of time studying. For a very long time I was engaged in speleology. In general, tourism and speleology had been a long-lasting hobby for me for eleven years. Yes, this should be noted. Well, probably, I have named everything from what are called "circles".

As an excellent school student (he graduated from school with a silver medal), he was awarded with trips abroad and he travelled the entire Soviet Union as a tourist. The most touching recognition of his achievements was his personal meeting with the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev because only excellent students were selected to meet the Soviet leader and to hand him flowers in Kiev during the famous unveiling of the Motherland Monument on the 9th of May, 1981:

I personally shook hands with Leonid Ilyich at the unveiling of the monument - the Motherland Monument, dedicated to the Great Patriotic War... here... in Kiev- right on the slope of the Dnieper... a large monument... it is just the same made of stainless steel, like on Mamayev Kurgan [in Volgograd], here... and I was there... Yes, the "Motherland" with a shield in the left [hand] and with a sword in the right [hand], this is such a stern woman made of iron. And Brezhnev was at the unveiling, and I was among that hundred of pioneers⁹⁸, perhaps there were slightly fewer of us, who handed flowers to the presidium of [Politburo] that was there. And here I was giving him a carnation.

We see that both Alena from Minsk and Alexei from Kiev (Cyprus) agree in their depiction of the Soviet lifestyle. My informant Evgeniya from Sydney (born in Chernobyl), now a woman in her 70s, also expressed similar considerations regarding personality development in the Soviet

⁹⁸ He was a young Octobrist, according to his age.

Union, and the fact that the USSR paid special attention to physical education at the enterprise level. She was a rower and was responsible for the GTO norms at a Ukrainian plant. GTO (Ready for Labour and Defence of the USSR) is the physical training program introduced on the initiative of Komsomol in 1931. It was valid till 1991. Evgeniya's job was to train the workers of a particular plant in accordance with GTO standards. The pertinence of this programme became obvious during WWII. In many respects, the heroic resilience of the Soviet people during the war was possible due to their mass involvement in the pre-war organized physical training which presumed multiple tests.

To summarize the material of this section, I want to stress that in the former Soviet republics which are not affected by neoliberalism, as the Baltic states and Russia, people are nostalgic for a specific Soviet lifestyle which presumed a lot of spare time that people used for developing interpersonal relations and personal growth, both intellectual and physical. I admit that this chapter is based mostly on one interview, but this interview is panoramic and exemplary. While transcribing it, I recollected numerous testimonies of famous people born in the USSR, who in their interviews confirmed many facts mentioned by my Belarusian informant. For example, in a documentary biographic film, the prominent Kazakh vocalist Roza Rymbayeva⁹⁹, born at a remote railway station in the Eastern Kazakhstan in 1957, in a family of a railway worker with 8 children, says that she was noticed due to her talent and promoted to the highest ranks of Soviet show business. In the Soviet Union, it was enough to have talent in order to be promoted. Talented people were promoted for free. There are no informants from

⁹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe64Bt7Rhwo> – This is a documentary film about Roza Rymbayeva (2001). – Access: 2020-12-14.

Kazakhstan in my sample, but what my informant from Belarus said is relevant to any former Soviet republic in the times of the USSR.

6.3. Visions of the USSR Restoration Through the Lens of Nationalism and Internationalism

As it was mentioned earlier, sociologists and anthropologists, like Shevchenko and Nadkarni (2004) and many of their colleagues whose works they cite in their article on the political potential of nostalgia, insist that nostalgia always presumes acceptance and recognition of irreversibility of the past and therefore we cannot talk about any kind of restorative nostalgia, which was analyzed by Svetlana Boym (2001). However, as the fragment of the interview with Vyacheslav from Chisinau from **Chapter 5** of the present thesis shows, the attitudes towards irreversibility of the past may change with time. I would say that irreversibility of the past is non-verifiable. If, for example, a person preserves some hope for the possibility that the past will be restored, shall we consider him nostalgic or not? My research shows that among my nostalgic subjects there are many people who believe in reversibility of socialism; however, they have different images of this society that is to be reborn. Thus, the possible restoration of the USSR is among the noticeable nostalgic tropes.

Just as the questions of nationalism were an essential factor in the collapse of the USSR, they also play a significant role in its virtual restoration. "Whom to take and whom not to take in the renewed Union and on what conditions?" "Will all former members of the Union want to enter the revived USSR?" These are the topics that my non-socialist respondents discuss because for socialists this question is more or less resolved.

6.3.1. Visions of the USSR Restoration with a Focus on Nationalisms. There is dominant nationalism — Russian imperial, and there are nationalisms which were oppressed

under the USSR. For example, Ukraine and Belarus experienced two-dimensional Russification: Russian language was imposed on the people as the main language; in Belarus even the grammar of the Belarusian language was Russified. The Russified version of the Belarusian language taught in Belarusian schools received the name “narkomovka”¹⁰⁰. In Ukraine, starting from the 1930s, the same Russification of grammar and vocabulary of the Ukrainian language took place. As Laada Bilaniuk explains, “In addition to the modification of word forms to more resemble Russian, starting in the 1930s dictionaries were edited to prioritize or single out forms closer to Russian where earlier Ukrainian dictionaries had listed more than one variant or range of synonyms” (Bilaniuk, 2005, p. 88).

Siarhiej Zaprudski (2007) contends that starting from the 1930s until the 1980s, Belarusian language was under oppression. In the 1930s elimination of the Belarusian language was related to the elimination of *kulaks* (rich peasants) as a class, and the Belarusian language, which was associated with peasantry, was declared “inimical and harmful” (Zaprudski, 2007, p. 105). During World War II German authorities contributed to the revitalization of Belarusian language (1941-1944), because they relied on collaborators from the Belarusian nationalist circles. In the first post-war years this promotion of Belarusian by the Nazis was an unfavorable factor for the Belarusian language. Zaprudski continues:

In the late 1950s, the position of Belarusian was greatly undermined by an educational reform carried out in the USSR. A law passed in 1959 by the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR laid down a rule according to which Belarusian language classes in schools with Russian as the medium of instruction were to be conducted “in conformity with the wishes of students and their parents.” As a result, the practice of exemption from Belarusian language classes was extremely widespread in the 1960s–1970s. Thus, 30% of the students in the BSSR did not study the Belarusian language in 1969, while in Minsk this figure was about 90%.

¹⁰⁰ <https://justarrived.by/en/page/language> - Brief description of “narkomovka”, the Russified version of Belarusian. Access: 2022-01-06.

In the 1960s–1970s, Belarus experienced an unrelenting process of urbanization. While in 1959, the urban population amounted to 31% of the total, in 1970 it had risen to 43%, in 1979 to 55%, and in 1985 to 62%. A very high percentage of the new city dwellers came from Belarusian speaking villages. But the urban milieu was not adapted to satisfy the needs of Belarusian-speaking people, therefore migrants changed their language when moving from the countryside to towns. Mass urbanization in the 1960s–1980s (i.e. a simultaneous improvement in living conditions for a great number of people) was closely connected with the abandonment of the Belarusian language, which was “useless” in the urban environment. This nurtured contempt for it in many people. The ideology of that time contributed significantly to this process. It proclaimed rapid development in the direction of communism, the creation of a unified “Soviet” nation, propagated the theory of “the second native language,” etc.

From the postwar years until the very end of the 1980s, no legal measures to support the Belarusian language were taken in Belarus and the Soviet Union. Instead, there were decrees aimed at reinforcing the position of Russian. Information about regulations aimed at supporting Russian was not divulged. Several sophisticated strategies were devised to achieve an ultimate covert goal of Soviet society — assimilation or the shift to the Russian language as the second mother tongue (Haarmann 1998: 79) (Zaprudski, 2007, p.106).

We see that assimilation and unification of the Soviet population was the covert goal of Soviet authorities. Not everybody in Soviet society approved of the total assimilation and elimination of cultural uniqueness. With all this, the visions of the revived Soviet Union associate with the type of nationalism professed by nostalgic subjects.

The experts on nostalgia for the Soviet past such as Morenkova-Perrier (2017) and Vladislav Inozemtsev (2018)¹⁰¹ point out that for many Russians nostalgia for the USSR is the expression of Russian nationalism because the USSR was one of the most powerful embodiments of the Russian Empire. Among the participants of my research, I have also encountered this vision of the USSR (most ardently expressed by my lost informant Olga who

¹⁰¹ <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2018/12/25/5c20853f9a7947ab6edc0d43> - Inozemtsev comments on the growth of nostalgia for the USSR. – Access: 2020-12-15.

questioned the scientific character of my research methods), with even more interesting elaboration: my nostalgic subjects not only like the idea of empire in its figurative sense; they are the admirers of monarchy. For example, my informants found on “Odnoklassniki”, a married couple from Saint-Petersburg who are originally from Ukraine (Sova and her husband), declared that they would like to see the restoration of the Russian grandeur, and that they are monarchists. When asked whom they see as the best candidate for the Russian throne, they gave me a rather vague response; however, I was able to understand that the current president of Russia, Vladimir Putin is suited well for this role. They admire the USSR because it was a “very spiritual” (humane) society, but they like the Russian empire even better. They are big fans of Nikolai Starikov, the Russian nationalist writer who has championed a revisionist view of Joseph Stalin as an effective leader, and who is a leader of a few nationalist organizations, such as the Union of Russian Citizens and the conservative Great Fatherland Party.

Nostalgia for the Soviet past associated with Russian nationalism is a well-studied phenomenon and therefore I would like to focus on the “offended nationalisms”: In this section, I will present the visions of the to-be-restored USSR from the non-Russian point of view or with some amendments from those who feel that the national question is rather significant when we speak about the restoration of the USSR.

Later, in the section dedicated to the visions of the to-be-restored USSR typical of the socialists, I will argue that the majority of them do not care about the national issue because they are internationalists by default. However, my informant Igor Shapovalenko from the city of Lugansk, a member of the Communist party of Ukraine, an amateur poet who has written a lot of nostalgic poems dedicated to the USSR, when asked about his vision of potential restoration of

the Soviet Union, replied to me that he doubts that the Baltic countries would join the revived Soviet Union, while other republics are definitely eager to join.

I suppose that Igor, while speaking about “other republics” relies very much on the specific character of his own region (Lugansk People’s Republic) and the close regions like Transnistria, a neighbor of Ukraine which obtained its independence from the Republic of Moldova, and has been maintaining its independence for three decades (being an unrecognized republic). In 2017, the referendum was held in Transnistria, where the majority of the population voted for the incorporation of the region into the Russian Federation. In the beginning of the year 2020, I had a conversation with my close friend from Donetsk who recently visited Transnistria. She characterized the situation there as “total ruination”. The complicated situation in the region is depicted in detail in the article of Andrey Cusco and Alexandr Voronovici (2016) on the politics of memory in Moldova and Transnistria.

My informant from Moldova indicated that Russia acts as a metropolis not only in relation to Transnistria, but also in relation to Moldova itself, with the only amendment is that Russia does not plan to annex Moldova, but only plans to exploit it economically because Moldova is “a colony in its purest form”:

The same Russia – at the same time in relation to some countries and in some situations, it appears as a colony, and in other situations and in relation to other countries, for example, in relation to the same Moldova, it acts as a metropolis. And Moldova is a colony in its purest form, that is, we have such a struggle between European capital and Russian capital over who, roughly speaking, will remove the surplus value here if it wins. And now they are fighting among themselves – and this is very noticeable in politics. There is a European sector, and there is a Russian one. It can be seen even from the enterprises that are opening here. Everything that is possible is brought here: there are even some call centers, and even there are German, Japanese production facilities for these auto companies, because there is cheap labor... It's all such a small China in this regard. Well, of course, we don't have such industrialization as in China, but in the sense that everything that is possible is brought here. And there is such a moment that, I don't know whether you know or not, that in Moldova there is a population there - how many:

three and a half million approximately - and there, according to various estimates, from half a million to a million people work abroad: then there is Russia and Europe. And here we are constantly fighting in this regard. Even this problem is linguistic - opposition... opposition... division by language – it is also not just a coincidence. That is, you need to understand that if, for example, Russian is taught in schools, then there is a high probability that these people who graduated from school, when they go to work, they can go to Russia. And when the Russian language is excluded from schools, for example, - this has been done for a long time - and Italian and French are taught in schools, then, naturally, this person will go somewhere to Europe to work. That is, you need to understand that when our president speaks about Russian, he says it not because he loves Russian culture, but because he promotes the interests of Russian capital, which is beneficial for citizens to come from Moldova to work, because the salary they can be paid is less than those who live in Russia. That's how it is. This is called “materialistic explanation.”

My acquaintance from Quebec who loves to visit the former Soviet republics recently visited Moldova and called it a “Soviet oasis”. The newly elected President of Moldova Maia Sandu is likely to take a political course towards Europe.

Now I am returning to the words of my informant from Lugansk that other republics of the former USSR “are eager” to join the restored-to-be union. Igor Shapovalenko explained that congresses of the Communist parties of the former Soviet republics are regularly held under the auspices of the Communist party of the Russian Federation, which may also give the impression of restored unity. Apparently, only the Baltic Communist parties are not present there because they are banned by law in the Baltic countries. Hence the exclusion of the Baltic states from Igor's field of vision, although as I know from my research and from research of other scholars, there are nostalgic pro-Soviet moods in the Baltic countries, too. In fact, Igor presents the vision of the to-be-restored USSR which is typical of Russian nationalism: Russia subsidizes certain regions, and they, in turn, seek to become part of Russia.

Alexei from Cyprus believes that any kind of integration processes are possible only for the big countries with the strong central power (like Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus – in the

near past [remark by T. Amosava]) because smaller countries will be frightened by the total absorption. However, now Russia cannot boast of good relations even with the most loyal partners:

Well, let's say: we can think of something [restoration of the USSR] in the Facebook group, so to speak; now, some kind of attempt based on economic interests - to restore relations between the fraternal republics in the form of the Commonwealth of Independent States [took place] - but this, in fact, did not work. Well, plus, still, after all, I cannot help but inject, being a Ukrainian, I cannot help but inject Russia, which, being the legal successor of the Soviet Union, at the moment, probably cannot really boast of warm relations with its neighbors that surround it that were former fraternal republics. And, perhaps, even Belarus - it's always like that, such a sister, here it is... even it has (grins), so to speak, a number of questions, if we take the military-industrial complex, then even Belarus has, say, misunderstanding of the policy of the central authority of the Russian Federation.

I reminded Alexei of the tripartite alliance of Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia and asked whether he considered this integration the beginning of the revival of the USSR. He commented on this:

We are talking about fairly large territorial entities here. And yes, indeed, they have such a kindred line: it's pretty strong - well, at the moment - a very strong central authority. They are similar in this, and accordingly they can, well, probably even should try, well, let's say, play this trump card and unite, which, for example, is impossible with some smaller states, where the role of the central government is - well, it's not so significant. Plus, the economic effect of such a union is also for them [the smaller countries] - it will not be interesting. Well, that's how I'll answer: small states - territorially small states - are unlikely to seek to join such a formation.

Alexei emphasizes Russia's aggressive behaviour in respect to its neighbors and when he says that for small countries there will be no proper economic effect, he is apparently talking about the fear of absorption because the economic effect of Russia's subsidies to weak regions like Transnistria is always present. The smaller countries will face the necessity to choose between subsidies and independence. We can trace such a tendency that the restorative processes

associated with the former USSR are sometimes perceived as equivalent to joining Russia. That is, initially we are talking about an unequal partnership.

Anatoly from Bulgaria (originally – from Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine), recalling nostalgically internationalism and brotherhood of the peoples in the USSR, expressed the idea that the European Union model is that very ideal that the former republics of the USSR should follow, while my informant from Belarus believes that integrational processes which are very similar to those in Europe have been already taking place. Answering my question on whether she would like the restoration of the USSR, Alena from Minsk replied:

You know, it is impossible to want what has already happened. Since, from my point of view, the CIS and all these associations - the EAEU and something else - that is, what is happening now in the post-Soviet space, with a base in Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan with accession or demonstrative DISCONNECTION (ironic) of other states - this is the process of restoration of the Soviet Union. The fact that this is not called the Soviet Union does not change the essence. That is, this is a new association of the same members. It can be called differently: both economic spaces, and customs unions, and something else there, but, from my point of view, these are all these very recovery processes, and I think that it is not worth it and it makes no sense to want it to be more intensive. Why: because one of the key minuses, from my point of view, of the Soviet Union and what the Western "comrades" used in order to break it up, was national policy. What was its inferiority: its inferiority was that internationalism was declared, but Russian nationalism was practiced. And now, when local nationalisms have restored in full or in sufficient measure what they wanted to restore and what they could, from the national culture, there is no longer any danger of this very thing - in the Stalin language - of inflection... which was, in fact the main blunder [of the USSR] - when reproducing any associations in a given geopolitical territory. Russia will not be able to impose, let us say so, its national-cultural dominance, even if it really wants to do this. And thus, any restoration of any associations in our geopolitical region is thus doomed to success, from my point of view¹⁰².

¹⁰² After the revolutionary events that take place in Belarus right now, this statement of Alena is rather doubtful.

Alena believes that in this new “free alliance” the threat posed by Russian national chauvinism toward other members is eliminated, since local nationalisms are firmly on their feet. But she compared the European Union with a caricature of the USSR:

If you remember, it [the European Union] began from associations for economic interests. Then some “border” affairs joined in, now, what is most interesting, the European Union is, from my point of view, such a caricature of a certain stage of the Soviet Union. It’s a caricature, because when the European Union adopted a very interesting decision, - unfortunately, I won’t give you a number, but it was in the area, as it seems to me, of the two thousand and sixth, maybe the seventh year or in those environs, - this was such a very interesting internal decree-decision - that all EU members should coordinate their FOREIGN POLICY with the center, which, as you know, is formally in Brussels, and unofficially in Berlin... so from this moment the European Union, from my point of view, doused in the "Soviet abyss." And now it’s only a matter of time when it is finally Sovietized.

The last statement is very characteristic of nostalgic subjects who consider the object of their nostalgia a high standard, a classic, and similar objects as epigones.

To summarize this section, I would like to underscore that, according to my informants who see national policy as a significant issue in the former USSR and acknowledge its importance for the future associations of the former Soviet republics, the integrational processes have been already started; however, they are currently “affordable” for the strong countries with the revitalized national culture and dignity, while “smaller countries” may still experience some fear of annexation by Russia. Although, as I mentioned earlier, some small regions like Transnistria may count on joining Russia as their political choice.

6.3.2. Socialist Visions of the USSR Restoration. The imagination of socialists is rather diverse and rich: their visions of the USSR restoration range from images borrowed from science fiction to the classical models of building Communism on the planet proposed by Lenin. Most

importantly, socialists are not concerned about issues of nationalism. As an example of the general socialist approach to restoration of the USSR, I would like to quote Alexey Ixanov:

In fact, the difference is not so great – whether the restoration of the USSR will occur only within Russia or within all 15 republics. Yes, even if only in one of them. Yes, even if this happens somewhere, for example, in the same Catalonia or Canada =) The most important is the "accomplishment" itself, i.e. socialist revolution: the revolution precisely on the basis of Marxist-Leninist principles with the aim precisely at the construction of Communism.

Of course, it is highly desirable that it be some kind of large or at least just a strong country. Cuba or Vietnam are so small that if not for the big brothers, they would simply not have survived. The Paris Commune and the Bavarian Soviet Republic again [were weak].

To the question "what to do if the revolution is accomplished in Russia, but not accomplished in the other 14 republics," Lenin answered, though with an antithesis. He suggested that as soon as the peoples of other countries realize the full benefit of the socialist revolution for these peoples themselves, they will overthrow their bourgeoisie and join the world revolution. History has shown that it's easy enough for peoples to be fooled with promises like "let's attack our neighbor and profit from his good." That is what all European nations did, only Mongolia joined the revolution and I don't remember what part of either Hungary or Romania, which also crashed very quickly. And the BSR (Bavarian Socialist Republic) from the example above is there too. Therefore, as I believe, if peoples have prerequisites, if they have sufficiently strong leftist sentiments, they should be helped to make their socialist revolution, as we, for example, helped China.

To the second question, about the possibility of restoring socialism precisely in Russia and ignoring the rest of the republics [I would say]: this is a substitution of concepts, emancipation, which can turn into outright nationalism, which already has nothing to do with Communism. The reasons can be different: ignorance or misunderstanding of the theory and practice, up to and including open forgery and sabotage.

Alexey Ixanov formulates the main ideas shared by other socialists: the main goal of the restoration of the USSR should be Communism building, the principles of its restoration should be Marxist-Leninist, and internationalism should be prerequisite for this restoration, because, ideally, the socialist revolution will cover the entire planet.

I would like to emphasize that socialists speak more about the new socialist revolution with better results than the restoration of the USSR in its previous form because now there are much better circumstances in order to accomplish the revolution in accordance with the Marxist principles, than there were during the days of Lenin. Answering my question about the possible restoration of the USSR, Vyacheslav from Chisinau tried to clarify whether I meant the liquidation of private property of the means of production when I asked about the restoration of the USSR. I responded to him that I rather meant that unity of the former Soviet republics which was lost. Vyacheslav drew my attention to the fact that the historical prerequisites of the present differ significantly from the historical prerequisites of the past, and the restoration of the USSR in its original form is absolutely impossible:

Well, I don't know what it (the new socialist country) will be like, but it will be different, because the Russian Empire was a backward capitalist country; although it was a capitalist country, but there were probably about five percent of the proletariat, while the majority of the population were peasants. There was a completely different foundation on which [the USSR was built]... At that time Russia was not really at the capitalist stage, because there was a bourgeois revolution, and then immediately socialist [revolution happened] six months later. Now capitalism blooms and smells in Russia...

The USSR plays a role of the source of inspiration for the socialists, and not the sacred lost object which should be re-stored or re-found (like the holy Grail). Moreover, Vyacheslav shared with me his experience of a conversation with a critic of the USSR who was astounded that Marxists criticize the USSR. Vyacheslav tried to explain to him that a Marxist is first of all a researcher whose task is to understand the objective reality and not to worship the USSR as if it were a shrine.

The thoughts of Ilya from Ufa regarding what a revived USSR might be are of particular interest to me because Ilya is a professional in the field of sociocultural modeling and,

specifically, modeling of the future. I noticed that none of the socialists even considered the restoration of the USSR in geographical terms or in terms of membership of the former Soviet republics in it. These issues were characterized by the majority of the socialists as insignificant. The most important concern was the nature of the future society, not its geographical location, or its ethnic representation. Having agreed with other socialists, that the USSR cannot be restored in its original form and should be restored with improvements, Ilya from Ufa said:

This question relates to specific policies and conditions [and not to the membership of particular former Soviet republics] - as you know, the USSR was conceived as the core for a united humanity... Actually, I see three kinds of changes [that should be introduced]: technological (which is obvious: the OGAS for the 1970s seemed vague, but now it can very well be implemented without much stress); social - it is obvious that the previous forms of planning and distribution did not work even then, but now they will not work even more so: stratification, communications and community interests have changed dramatically, and must be taken into account; political: in spite of the need for a “unified government party”, its functions should be ideological and personnel, and ideology itself, under current conditions, is no longer science-like dogmatism, but creation and operation of “images of the future” (see, for example, Pereslegin; by the way, he is a good example of a “nostalgic Soviet hater”);¹⁰³. At the same time, the political organization of the councils, the type of “Soviet enterprise”, the nation-wide nature of property, social guarantees, etc., obviously, should remain. To summarize, it should be - I would like it to be - the image of “The World of Noon” by Strugatsky brothers or “The World of Relic” by early Golovachev.

Ilya underscores that the USSR was a modernist project, while now we are living in the era of postmodernism, and at present, the revival of the USSR or its analogue is not possible unless we break the deadlock of postmodernism.

6.3.3. Is the Chinese Model Socialist? Denis, my informant from Saint-Petersburg, whom I found on VKontakte in the forum “Our Motherland is the USSR”, is an entrepreneur and amateur historian who published his book about the Great Patriotic war not long before our

¹⁰³ Remark about Pereslegin and “smile” composed of a semicolon and a bracket are integral part of Ilya’s words.

interview in the fall of 2017. Denis shared his opinion on the future of socialism in Russia: the best model to follow, according to him, is China. After receiving this answer, I included the question about China in the plan of my interviews with other participants, and collected some valuable information on this topic because I myself was interested in understanding the Chinese phenomenon.

The forum “Our Motherland is the USSR”, where I found Denis, was administered by Aleksandr Sokolov, a political dissident who was imprisoned exactly at the time when I conducted my research there and I got a permission to conduct my online ethnography from his friend who answered the correspondence on behalf of Aleksandr. Sokolov has a PhD in economics; he wrote his thesis on corrupt money laundering schemes in the Russian economy under the supervision of Professor Ruslan Dzarasov. Several people from this forum pointed to Dzarasov as an authoritative source of information on China, and I watched two of his lectures on YouTube¹⁰⁴¹⁰⁵.

To summarize the main ideas of Dzarasov on China, this country cannot be a model for Russia and any other future socialist country because there is no socialism in China. China is deeply rooted in the world’s capitalist economy and highly dependent on it. According to Dzarasov, planned economy exists under capitalism (for example, Japan copied the Soviet experience and introduced five-year planning after WWII); in order for an economy to be considered a socialist planned economy, the planners must define the structure of its branches, while China cannot afford it because its economy is export-oriented and its structure is dictated

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6icpu7o2Gk> - This is Dzarasov’s lecture *The Trap of Chinese Development*. China 70 dated October 24th 2019. - Accessed 01-28-2020.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrGF4IfmDc> -This is Dzarasov’s lecture *China's Export Growth Model* dated October 20th 2016 – Accessed 01-28-2020.

from the outside. Moreover, there is an important condition that explains the success of China: it is the development by invitation; the United States opened their markets for China, which they would never do for Russia. In fact, China's economic growth is an initiative of the United States.

Professor Maslov¹⁰⁶ explained that a kind of “enclosure” like in England of the 15th -18th centuries, took place in China since the 1970s. That is, the rural population moved to the cities, and the vast agrarian lands were given over for urbanization and production development. At present, only 7% of China's land are for agrarian use. Half of this land will degrade very soon. This means that China cannot guarantee its own food security: it imports rice from Vietnam, and purchases 90% of cherries from the USA. In short, China depends on the world's market and is not self-sustainable.

However, China acts as an extremely aggressive colonist in “Soviet” Africa: 15% of the natural resources of this continent belong to China. China builds infrastructure in such former socialism-friendly countries like Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Angola, and uses the natural resources of these countries. In particular, the Chinese use African land for agricultural purposes almost for free and therefore the problem of their food security can be perceived as solved. When in 1991 the USSR collapsed and left Africa, it was immediately replaced by China.

Now, when we know the opinions of specialists on China and on socialism - Prof. Dzarasov and Prof. Maslov - concerning China's nature as non-socialist society, I would like to remind the reader that my research is field-driven: China appeared among the questions in my

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5AHTy7IKr4> – This is Maslov's lecture titled *The Chinese Economy: Evolution, Current Status and Prospects* dated February 10th, 2019 - Accessed 01-28-2020. Recently Prof. Maslov has become the Director of the Institute of Asia and Africa States affiliated with Moscow State University.

interview guide because one of my informants - Denis from Saint-Petersburg - has expressed an opinion which is not typical of socialists (he believes that China is a good model to emulate), but rather typical of the Russian general public, while his fellow socialists are usually very sceptical of the Chinese model as a guideline for further socialist development. For example, Andrey from Germany, answering my question about effectiveness of the Chinese model in restoration of the USSR, says the following:

I did not study the Chinese model very carefully, but it seems to me that this is something like NEP¹⁰⁷, that is, a mixed economy. This is hardly what is worth taking as a model during the restoration of the USSR.

Ilya from Ufa shares Andrey's idea regarding the fact that the phase of development that China is undergoing now coincides with the Russia's past, and the results of China are significantly more modest than those of the USSR in the past:

China... it seems to me that it is in about such a phase in which our country was somewhere in the late 1920s and 1930s. Active foreign investment, "multi-layered (mixed) economy", etc. Only we had the sword of Damocles of World War II, and there were no 25 years of quiet development in accordance with the hegemon (the USA)... then we did not have such a tight connection with either Britain, the USA, or Germany, so the achievements were of a different quality. Somebody says they were less significant, and I think [they were] higher, because they resulted in the creation of a full-fledged own scientific, technical and industrial system.

Both Andrey from Germany and Ilya from Ufa see the similarity of the Chinese model with NEP, which they do not consider an effective model of economic development. The only person who argued that NEP was one of the best periods of Soviet history, was Dmitri Ustinov, the

¹⁰⁷ NEP stands for New Economic Policy which was introduced by Bolsheviks in 1921 after the era of Military Communism. NEP contained some features of the free market.

progressive Marxist, but his answers to other questions in the interview were also highly original, and diverged from the shared opinion of the socialists.

As seen from the opinions of the analysts (Prof. Dzarasov and Prof. Maslov), the Soviet system was original and self-sustainable, while the Chinese model is nurtured from outside and is not self-sufficient. Moreover, it is based on the harsh exploitation of the other regions of the planet, like Africa, and thus cannot be used as a model for the restoration of the USSR.

6.4 Summary of Chapter 6

In this Chapter, I have demonstrated that inequality contributes to how the Soviet Union is remembered by the nostalgic internavts: in such countries where the level of inequality is almost as high as it is in the United States (Latvia, Lithuania, Russia), people speak about the neoliberal regimes in terms of gangsterism and repressions, stressing that their countries are immersed in poverty and depicting the USSR as a harbour of prosperity, safety and stability and praising it as a welfare state, while in the countries with comparative equality (first of all, Belarus and Ukraine) the USSR is remembered due to the unique Soviet lifestyle which assumed a lot of spare time that was used for developing interpersonal relations and personal growth, both intellectual and physical. Moreover, the USSR is remembered due to the high quality of its cultural products.

Also, in this Chapter I have turned to different visions of the potential restoration of the USSR suggested by my research participants, and have discovered a few main perspectives. Firstly, Russian nationalists believe that the USSR is the most powerful reincarnation of the Russian Empire, and that is why it deserves glorification. What they would like to restore is the Russian grandeur (and sometimes the monarchy). Secondly, my non-Russian participants believe

that integration of the former Soviet republics should take place or has already been taking place according to the model of the European Union (or, on the contrary: the European Union was copied from the USSR). The main concern of these informants is the potential threat of Russian chauvinism toward the other members of the future association because they find the national policy practiced in the USSR (declared internationalism and practiced Russian nationalism) the main reason that led to the collapse of the USSR. This error should not be repeated. Therefore, only mature nationalisms which feel confident against Russian cultural dominance may take this risk and try to enter the association which may be the foundation of the future revived USSR.

Thirdly, the socialists propose classical models of the revived Soviet Union based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism, and believe that any national issues should be considered as “sabotage”. What really matters in the new society is its planned economy, the absence of the private property of the means of production, the elimination of the errors of the former Soviet Union like backwardness in the field of communication technologies, and in addition, the socialists suggest to turn to the science fiction (Ilya from Ufa suggested to take fictional societies described by Strugatsky brothers as models for the future social building) as a source of inspiration for arrangements of the new socialist society.

This Chapter focuses on “different circumstances [which] lead to different concerns”, and if I were to analyze how it applies to my socialist interviewees, I would say that it applies in a minimal way. They express rather consolidated opinions, although they are different in age: Andrey from Germany is in his sixties and the late Vladimir Matveevich Sidorov from Moscow was in his seventies, Igor Shapovalenko, Alexey Travnikov and Denis from Saint-Petersburg are in their forties, while others are rather young (in their early thirties). The broad geography of their residence (different cities of Russia, Germany, Moldova, Lugansk People’s Republic) also

does not prevent them from mutual understanding, although as I mentioned earlier, Dmitri Ustinov was highly original in his responses. Importantly, Dmitri is that very person who posted on his profile on VKontakte, a slogan disgracing nostalgia for the USSR as a phenomenon of decadence and decay: real socialists should be on the barricades, and not nostalgically celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Great October Revolution with a glass of champagne and a caviar sandwich (as Zyuganov did). Although all of them as personalities have their individual opinions on some aspects of the Soviet Union, its history and its potential restoration, it is possible to say that socialists belong to “the same school of thought”.

The last model that could be considered as a source of inspiration for the future socialist society, is the example of China. However, specialists on China argue that it is not a socialist society; it is a harsh capitalism embedded in the world’s capitalist system, that leads to highly aggressive colonial policy in other regions of the planet.

Conclusion

I started this dissertation inspired by a statement from my friend who explained to me that nostalgia for the USSR is not a matter of age: it is a matter of values. Today, people nostalgic for the USSR complain that they (to be more precise – their elites) surrendered a great country for such “glass beads” as “democracy and freedom”. According to my informants, democracy and freedom have extremely negative connotations in modern Russia and elsewhere: for example, in China freedom is almost synonymous with licentiousness and permissiveness, as the francophone Canadian writer of Chinese origin Ying Chen states in her novel *The Chinese Letters* (1998). As we notice, “freedom” is not a universal value, and moreover, it can be understood differently by different people and in different cultures.

With all my interviewees, I discussed the problem of values, and especially of such a value like freedom. Vyacheslav from Chisinau gave me a brilliant explanation of how he perceives freedom from the Marxist point of view and why it is juxtaposed to the bourgeois freedom:

There is a quote well known more and less that "freedom is a conscious need." That's because, let's say, in the bourgeois sense, freedom is when we have many options to choose from, when you go to vote, and you have many candidates on your ballot, and you think: "Which one to choose?" This is, in the bourgeois sense, freedom, when you have [a choice]... And in the Marxist understanding, freedom is just when you have a wide choice and you think: "What should I choose?" - this is just not freedom. Why isn't this freedom? Ah... Because, let's say, in most cases, if you have a certain... certain... necessary amount of knowledge, and this knowledge, if it is true, then you have a kind of problem of choice - it disappears. Now I will try to give you an example. I had an article on this topic. For example, imagine that in front of you is a bomb with a mechanism. Here it will explode soon, and you need to neutralize it. And there are a lot of wires there. And now you have a wide choice - you can cut any of them. This is freedom in the bourgeois view... And in the Marxist view, freedom is when you are a certified, trained experienced sapper who knows exactly which wires to cut, that is, you do not have a choice: you clearly know that by cutting wires of this color, you achieve the result you need. That is, in the Marxist understanding, freedom is when you have true knowledge in the right volume so that you... and when you clearly know what, why and how to do it in

order to achieve a result, this is freedom, and it is therefore “a conscious need”, because you... you already have no other options, because logically, if you want your plane to fly, you need to make it a certain form, wings [should be] from a certain material. That is, you have no other options. Something like that.

Marx appreciated the teachings of Aristotle, as seen from multiple quotations of this Greek philosopher in “The Capital”. According to Aristotle, to be free meant to have a chance to realize one’s potential and to fulfill such a function which a person fits best of all, and we see that the ideas of Vyacheslav from Chisinau meet the Aristotelian logic in full: an individual should not be trapped by many opportunities, but rather they have to have exact knowledge about the situation, and they have to follow the only possible right path. On the contrary, liberal philosophers - starting from Immanuel Kant - suggest that freedom means to act autonomously, to have an opportunity to determine one’s goals independently.

As we see, even if socialists are talking about freedom, this is not that freedom which is promoted by the Western society, which means possibility to choose, to have a few options, which is perceived by a Marxist as a trap because very often a choice is based on ignorance, while a socialist does not need a fan of possibilities; a socialist needs precise knowledge: what to do and how. It seems to me that by this Vyacheslav gives an excellent foundation for socialism as a system based on a scientific approach and a planned economy, which should lead society away from the chaos of the market. And, as I said above, for young socialists the USSR becomes a source of inspiration while for the mature people who experienced it, it is an object of yearning.

Based on the research conducted I can state that there are a few different nostalgic visions of the USSR that we find online: the collapsed USSR is depicted as a welfare state, as a citadel

of friendship and internationalism, atheism and technological progress, but more often it is depicted as a more humane society than capitalism where human dignity was not determined by money, where every member of society had human dignity by default. Igors Ivanovs expressed his nostalgia for this lost humanism very clearly:

Well, everything - I repeat once again – everything is understood by comparison: after [some time], as they say, from the year ninety-first, when our “respected and beloved” traitor Gorbachev destroyed the USSR, as they say, and [the Baltic states] began to live separately from the Union, well, when you see all this - you see, feel, live in it and compare everything and understand that we lived then better, *more humane and kinder*. This is what I can say... It was more... more humane. Indeed, there was concern for a person, but now only hoarding. Whoever has more money is right, like that. Everything is paid: medicine, and all prices go up all the time. And I don't like the politics: that's precisely the policy towards Russia. Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia - it seems that historically [Russians] helped them all the time - Russia helped, developed culture, and, having separated from the Union, they, in tandem with America, spit on the Soviet Union, as they say, throw mud at it. Well, that's not true. This is really not true. I just don't like this nationalism. In general, we lived just like *a human being*, which is why I am nostalgic for the past (Italics are added by T. Amosava).

Lost morality and humanism are bemoaned most of all. This morality has a double nature: it is understood as noble, elevated ambitions of the Soviet civilization by atheists, and like humanism whose roots are in Christian values which were realized best of all in the USSR, by those who believe in God.

I explained the differences in nostalgic visions of the USSR through diverse circumstances: first of all, inequality generated by neoliberalism leads people to nostalgic thoughts. I share this explanation of nostalgia for the USSR with other scholars, for example with Neringa Klumbitė (2009, 2010). Given that I had interviewees from only a few former Soviet republics—despite the fact that I made honest attempts to recruit informants from all the former Soviet republics on the nostalgic online fora—I focused on the study of only six countries (Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine) which made up two clusters: the

countries with a neoliberal profile (Russia and the two Baltic states), and three countries with comparative equality (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova). My participant from Moldova is a young socialist, that is why his opinion on the USSR is determined not only by the current situation in his country, but rather by his ideology and political worldview. Nevertheless, technically Moldova belongs to this second cluster according to its characteristics, taking into account its Gini-coefficients and the state policy in the sphere of housing and its privatization (it is the same as in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, and not like in the Baltic countries).

My participants are natives of the former Soviet republics, in which neoliberalism is clearly expressed, mostly nostalgically recall the USSR as a safe state, a state of general welfare; but participants who are natives of countries with relative equality indicate more often that they are nostalgic for the Soviet lifestyle and for the opportunities for personal growth that were available in the Soviet Union. This nostalgia for having a lot of spare time which was possible to devote to family and friends also can be understood as a critique of capitalism. Earlier, I mentioned Arlie Hochschild (2003) with her ideas on how capitalism deprives people of soulfulness in intimate life, because they tend to substitute their emotional efforts with money. We find the same critique of capitalism in a famous French movie “A Toy” (1976) with Pierre Richard where a son of a wealthy businessman chooses an unemployed journalist as a toy in a big supermarket, and then leaves his cold, calculating father for this new friend. And by the way, the Soviet people adored this film.

Moreover, due to the fact that each former Soviet republic experienced socialism, and especially, post-socialism differently (Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2004), the local path of post-socialism may influence the retrospective perceptions of the USSR. A specific factor of how the USSR is viewed retrospectively is the Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukrainian wars which

undermined to a significant extent the positive visions of socialism not only in these countries, but in other former Soviet republics, too. The so-called “colored revolutions” also contribute to a particular retrospective vision of the USSR – more frequently, negative. Currently, a revolution which many try to identify as “colored” takes place in Belarus, however, the clear pro-Western features of this people’s upheaval are not obvious, rather, it is a protest against a particular person.

The specificity of my research lies in the fact that my informants are not always located in their countries of origin, but digital technology allows them to be involved in events in their countries, even if they, for example, being Ukrainians, are currently in Australia, or being Russians, they live in Germany. Thus, my dissertation certainly touches on the topic of globalization. This can be seen even from the geography of the participants in my study (they live in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America).

In this respect we recollect the argument of Lee (2013) who referenced the term “glocalization” and contended that nostalgia for the Soviet past in Russia is a local response to overwhelming “Americanization”. In my research I have noticed some discontent with the values that the West (and the United States as its symbolic embodiment) imposed on the “Orthodox Russian World”. For example, one of the common themes typical of nostalgic people from the Russian World is homophobia. Homosexuality is being viewed as a negative influence from the West (it should be noted that I do not share these homophobic or anti-American sentiments). Especially, these complaints of anti-Americanism and homophobia, came from the Baltic informants whose acquaintance with the Americans and NATO is the closest. As an example, with Igors from Riga, (like with other participants), we discussed democracy and Western values, and in answering my question as to whether he agrees that with abandoning socialism in

favor of capitalism, “we have got freedom, but we have lost justice” (it is an expression that widely circulates on the Russian Internet) Igors said:

I totally agree with this. I agree. Freedom, I believe, from a Western point of view, is permissiveness, immorality. Now, let's say, we will have on March 3rd, March 3rd in Riga - I REALLY WANT TO EMPHASIZE THIS EVEN TO THE WORLD COMMUNITY - what is the morality and attitude of this West in general, as they say, to people? This year Latvia is considered to be one hundred years old. Well, the centenary of the founding of Latvia. Do you understand? Latvia should be proud and celebrate this. And at the same time, at the same time, listen: this is the truth, the bitter truth, on the third of March... on the third of March will be a hundred-day gay parade. Can you imagine? Under the leadership of America¹⁰⁸, all these, excuse me, evil spirits (nechist') will go to Latvia, to Estonia, and this sabbath will last [for a hundred of days]. This is the 100th anniversary of Latvia - a hundred-day gay pride parade! Is it symbolic or not? How do you think? It's a shame!

The same discontent with the USA is expressed by my interviewee Yevgeniya from Sidney, Australia (originally – from Kiev, Ukraine), but she rather underscores the aggressive politics of the United States in relation to other countries:

After the Maidan I got stuck [in Australia]. The Maidan was terrible. It all started long before the Maidan. It's all America! It all started little by little. America needs [to defeat] Russia. America needs Russian resources because they are already exhausting theirs. They need to be fed somewhere! See: they rob some countries all the time. They rob - then they will live a little. Here's Iraq, Iran, and Syria... And how they simply ruined Yugoslavia, annihilated it... They launched peacekeepers there... And what about the peacekeepers? They [the peacekeepers] simply slaughtered the bulk of the people there... Cleaned up. Now that's how they want to clean up the Donbass. Everyone is at war: Moscow somehow wants to keep Donbass, to delimit Donbass and Ukraine, and Poroshenko wants to let peacekeepers into the entire Donbass. So what? There will be the same cleansing as it was in Yugoslavia...

¹⁰⁸Gay people are often blamed for the destruction of traditional values in the former USSR. The United States is frequently held responsible by nostalgic former Soviet citizens for a perceived increase in the number of homosexuals. The United States often serves as the stand-in for “the West”, or “the rotting West” as it was called in Soviet propaganda.

As we see, my informants express their discontent with the new realities coming from the West, very often represented by the United States. These new realities contribute to my informants having anti-American sentiments. They think about their Russianness and it evokes nostalgic feelings towards the USSR which, in their opinion, was the most effective embodiment of the Russian Empire.

Instead of putting emphasis on local discontent with Americanization, American policy of conquest in all regions of the world, and Western values as a factor of nostalgia for the USSR, it is theoretically relevant to describe the online communion of the post-Soviet nostalgic subjects which participate in multiple post-Soviet nostalgic groups in terms of an imagined community (Anderson, 2006). As we remember, Anderson applied this term “imagined community” to nations. These are such communities where people do not know each other in person, and this community cannot cover the entire globe because no nation is equal to all of humanity. However, in these communities, people believe that any other member of this community shares essential features with him or her: people are unified with the same life experience, understanding of social realities and institutions. If we neglect the possibility of the Proletarian world revolution, when the entire world becomes the USSR, we can admit that Anderson’s concept is applicable to those multiple pro-Soviet or nostalgic communities that exist in the global net and make up the virtual USSR. The people who belong to them, have their shared understanding about who may belong to the community, and who may not. In this regard, please refer to the post with “Three Badges” (**Figure 4**). This is a gatekeeping technique which states that only those who were born before 1985 can speak about the USSR, and belong to this community. Screenings of eligibility to participate in discussions about the USSR are made according to a person’s age: according to this community, not everyone has the right to be nostalgic for the USSR! The members of this

huge community believe that a person must have a live, authentic experience of living in the USSR in order to belong. But this is not a general opinion: it is an opinion that often circulates in nostalgic fora.

Due to the fact that the participants in my study offered a lot of versions of what the revived USSR could be, the thought does not leave me that it is necessary to return to Svetlana Boym's (2001) ideas that nostalgia can be restorative. If, for instance, a young philosopher speculates that the new USSR can be resurrected in accordance with the best features of fictional worlds of Strugatsky Brothers and Pereslegin (despite the fact that this is not a desire to restore what was before), it is consistent with the very modernist spirit of the Soviet Union, the aspiration for the future, which all socialists in my sample spoke of.

The main criticism toward Boym (2001) is, as mentioned earlier, that it is necessary to recognize the irrevocability of the past as the very basis and quintessence of nostalgia. The essence of nostalgia, according to Boym's critics, is that it is about irrevocability. Well, if people hope for the return of the past, but are not sure that it will return, is it possible to assess their moods as nostalgic?

My socialist interviewees see the restored or renewed USSR as a just society with a planned economy, common property of the means of production and advanced information technologies, and total informatization of the country. It does not matter where this new society is located. Presumably, it will start from Russia, and then will spread all over the world.

My non-socialist informants who are concerned with the issue of nationalism and who believe that the imperial Russian nationalism undermined the brotherhood of nations in the

Soviet Union, express an idea that a new alliance of nations of the former USSR is possible on the basis of mutual respect with diminished threat of the Russian dominance.

Some of my informants pointed at the fact that Russia could use modern China as a model for the future successful development. It is rather ironic, but this would be, indeed, a restoration of Russia's past because what is happening in China now resembles to my well-educated interlocutors the New Economic Policy of the years 1921-1928. In addition to this, the experts on China, such as Dzarasov and Maslov, contend that China is an aggressive capitalist society, having nothing in common with socialism.

As a result of all this analysis, I have come to the conclusion that nostalgia is not about irrevocability. It is about displacement in time or in space, or both. The accent should be done not on the fact that the beautiful past is irrevocable, but that the person does not belong to this time or to this space: “It’s not my time and not my place” – this is the slogan of nostalgia. I already mentioned the novel of a francophone Canadian writer Ying Chen (1998) who writes about the Chinese in Montreal. She elegantly traced this idea of not-belonging-ness through the character of the main heroine Sassa who says that she feels alien in China, but she would feel even more alien in Canada. However, nostalgia assumes that a person who does not belong to this time and place, knows about the existence of a better time and place to which he or she would love to belong.

I would like to finish my thesis with a poem by the famous Russian poet Marat Akhtyamov from Yelabuga (Tatarstan) who became popular on the Russian Internet and whose poem about technological degradation of the modern Russia in comparison to technologically advanced Soviet Union, I cited earlier in my dissertation. This very poem which sounds like a

coda to my work became so popular in Russia, that one politician even paid to the author 5,000 rubles in order to be able to use it in his election campaign¹⁰⁹ as a slogan.

For the anniversary of the USSR¹¹⁰ (2007)

Marat Akhtyamov

Do not lie that the fallen country
Was an abode of evil and falsehood.
I remember those times,
I remember everything as it used to be.

There was no wolf squabble,
There people believed each other
And instead of: “Push the weak one” (c)
Always held out a hand.

There, sex was not going ahead of love,
The brotherhood there was just a brotherhood
And they did not teach on TV
Whoredom¹¹¹ without limit.

There, a thief, a bandit, a scoundrel and scum
Feared a strong law,
And Themis had never been
In slavery to Mammon.

¹⁰⁹ The poet shared this with me in our personal email correspondence.

¹¹⁰ <https://stihi.ru/2007/12/30/1027> - The original in Russian is available here. – Access: 2020-12-18.

¹¹¹ The poet uses a low register word here.

I remember these times

I remember everything, and I will not forget.

Do not lie that the fallen country

Was an abode of evil... Judas!

Bibliography

- Abramov, R. (2011). ‘Sovetskii Cherdak Rossiiskoi Blogosfery’ / ‘The Soviet Attic of the Russian Blogosphere.’ *INTER* 6, 88-102.
- Abramov, R. (2013). ‘Muzeifikatsiya Sovetskogo: Istoricheskaya Travma Ili Nostal’giya?’ *Chelovek*, 5, 99-111. // ‘Museumification of the Soviet: Historical Trauma or Nostalgia?’ *Human* 5, 99-111.
- Alexanyan, K. (2013). “The Map and the Territory: Russian Social Media Networks and Society”, PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2013, <http://academiccommons.columbia.edu/catalog/ac%3A156925>, accessed: 2018-10-18.
- Ambrosio, T. (2006). “The political success of Russia-Belarus relations: insulating Minsk from a color revolution.” *Demokratizatsiya* 14 (3), 407–434.
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, New York: Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, The University of Minnesota Press.
- Åslund, A. (2013). *How Capitalism Was Built: The Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, The Caucasus, and Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baym, N. K. (2000). *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community*. Thousand

Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Baysha, O. (2014). *The Mythologies of Capitalism and the End of the Soviet Project*. Lanham,

Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books.

Berdahl, D. (2010). 'Good Bye, Lenin! Aufwiedersehen GDR: On the Social Life of Socialism.'

Post-Communist Nostalgia, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York &

Oxford: Berghahn Books, 177-189.

Bilaniuk, L. (2005). *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine*.

Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.

Boele, O. (2011). "Remembering Brezhnev." *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, 3-29.

Boele, Otto, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe. (2020). "Introduction: The Many Practices of

the Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Affect, Appropriation, Contestation." *Post-Soviet Nostalgia:*

Confronting the Empire's Legacies, edited by Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos and Ksenia

Robbe. New York and London: Routledge, 1-17.

Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce C., & Taylor, T.L. (2012). *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A*

Handbook of Method. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bohle, D., & Greskovits, B. (2012). *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery*. Ithaca

& London: Cornell University Press.

Bohnet, A., & Penkaitis, N. (1988). "A Comparison of Livings Standards and Consumption

Patterns Between the RSFSR and the Baltic Republics" / *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 19 (1)

(Spring 1988), 33-48

Boyer, D. (2006). "Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany" / *Neoliberal*

Historisities, Public Culture, 18 (2), Duke University Press, 361-381.

Boym, S. (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Brainerd, E. (2001). 'Life and Death in Eastern Europe: Economic Reform and Mortality

in the Former Soviet Union: A Study of the Suicide Epidemic in the 1990s.' *European*

Economic Review 45, 1007-1019.

Brotsky S. R. & Giles, D. (2007). "Inside the 'Pro-ana' Community: A Covert Online Participant

Observation. Eating Disorders." *The Journal of Treatment & Prevention* 19, 93-109.

Buck-Morrs, S. (2000). *The Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in*

East and West, Cambridge, MA, London, England: The MIT Press.

Bunce, V., & Wolchik, S. (2010). 'The Diffusion of Democratic Change under

Communism and Postcommunism'. *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the*

Postcommunist World, Cambridge University Press, 30-56.

Caldwell, M. L. (2002). 'The Taste of Nationalism: Food Politics in Postsocialist Moscow.'

Ethnos 67 (3), 295-319.

Caldwell, M. L. (2011). *Dacha Idylls: Living Organically in Russia's Countryside*. Berkley,

Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Creed, G. W. (2010). 'Strange Bedfellows: Socialist Nostalgia and Neoliberalism in Bulgaria.'

Post-Communist Nostalgia, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York &

Oxford: Berghahn Books, 29-45.

Castells, M. (2010). *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture. Volume III: End of*

Millennium. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Chen, C., & Sil, R. (2007). 'Stretching Postcommunism: Diversity, Context, and Comparative

Historical Analysis.' *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23(4), 275-300.

Chen, Y. (1998). *Les Lettres Chinoises*. Québec: LEMEAC.

Chernyshova, N. (2013). *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. New York: Routledge.

Chikisheva, A. S. (2009). "Fenomen nostalgii v postsovetskoi massovoi kul'ture."

Fundamental'nye problemy kul'turologii: Sbornik statei po materialam kongressa, edited

by D. L. Spivak: *Kul'turnoe nasledie: Ot proshlogo k budushchemu* 6, 267– 277.

Moskva: Novyi Khronograf, Eidos / Chikisheva, A. S. (2009). "The Phenomenon of

Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Popular Culture." *Fundamental problems of cultural studies: a*

collection of articles based on the materials of the Congress, edited by D. L. Spivak:

Cultural Heritage from the Past to the Future: 6, 267– 277. Moscow: Novyi Khronograf,

Eidos. <http://ec-dejavu.ru/n/Nostalgia.html> - Accessed: November 17, 2019.

Coleman, G. (2014). *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*.

London, New York: Verso.

Cusco, A., & Voronovici, A. (2016). "The "Politics of Memory" and "Historical Policy" in Post-Soviet Moldova and Transnistria: Competing Narratives and Uses of an Uncertain Past." *History, Memory, Politics*. Collection of academic articles. Kyiv: The Institute of History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Science, 155-199.

Davis, F. (1979). *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, New York: The Free Press.

Duijn, M. (2020). "Journeying to the Golden Spaces of Childhood: Nostalgic Longing in the Online Community *The USSR is Our Motherland* Through the Visual Image of the Soviet Toy." *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire's Legacies*, edited by Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos and Ksenia Robbe. New York and London: Routledge: 21-37

Etkind, A. (2014). "Post-Soviet Russia: The Land of the Oil Curse, Pussy Riot, and Magical Historicism." *Boundary 2*, 41 (1), 153-170.

Frear, M. (2018). *Belarus under Lukashenka: Adaptive Authoritarianism*. London: Routledge.

Freud, S. (1917). *Mourning and Melancholia*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, 237-258.

Gajdosikiené, I. (2004). 'Oscar Lewis's Culture of Poverty: Critique and Further

- Development' in *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas*. 1, 88-96.
- Ghodsee, K. R., & Mead, J. (2018). "What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?"/ *Catalyst* 2(2), 101-133.
- Gille, Z. (2010). 'Postscript.' *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 278-289.
- Goralik, L. (2007). "'Rosagroeksporta syrka": Simvolika i Simvoly Sovetskoi Epokhi v Segodnyashnem Rossiiskom Brendinge' in *Teoriia Mody. Odezhda. Telo. Kul'tura*. 3, Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 12-32 (in Russian) ("Rosagroeksporta syrka": Symbolism and Symbols of the Soviet Epoch in Today's Russian Branding' in *The Theory of Fashion. Clothing. Body. Culture*. Moscow: New Literature Review).
http://linorgoralik.com/sov_brend.html (Retrieved: October 24, 2016).
- Goriashko, S. (2013). "V Sovetskii Soiuz Uzhe ne Ochen' Khochetsia." *Kommersant'*. / "I don't really want to go to the Soviet Union." *Kommersant'*. -
<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2102515>. Accessed: November 17, 2019.
- Gronow, J. (2003). *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of The Good Life In Stalin's Russia*. Oxford: Berg.
- Henderson, S., McGreal, R. & Vladimirschi, V. (2018). "Access Copyright and Fair Dealing Guidelines in Higher Educational Institutions in Canada: A Survey" / *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 13(2), 1-38.

- Hine, C. (2008). 'Virtual Ethnography: Modes, Varieties, Affordances.' *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* ed. by Nigel Fielding, Raymond M. Lee and Grant Blank, Los Angeles: SAGE, 257-270.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2003). *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Holak, S. L., Matveev, A. V., & Havlena, W. L. (2008). 'Nostalgia in Post-Socialist Russia: Exploring Applications to Advertising Strategies.' *Journal of Business Research* 61, 172-178.
- Iglin D.A. (2016). "Tsvetnye Revoliutsii" Na Post-sovietskom Prostranstve Kak Obschestvenno-politicheskoye Yavleniye: Opredeleniye I Osnovnye Vzgliady"/«Color Revolutions» in Post-Soviet States as a Socio-Political Phenomenon: Definition and Basic Views. *Post-Soviet Issues* 3, 130-144 (In Russ.).
- Kalinina, E. (2014). *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia*. (Dissertation). ResearchGate.net. Retrieved September 21, 2021 ([PDF Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia \(researchgate.net\)](#))
- Kara-Murza, S. (2001). *Sovetskaya tsivilizatsiya/Soviet civilization*.
http://kara-murza.ru/books/sc_a/sc_a_content.htm
- Khudenko, K. (2016). 'Segodnya budem lomat' vashu dver': Kak Latvia otmechaet 25 let s nachala denatsionalizatsii zhilya/Today we'll break your door: How Latvia

commemorates the 25th anniversary of denationalization of housing’

<https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/story/segodnya-budem-lomat-vashu-dver-kak-latviya-otme>

chaet-25-let-s-nachala-denacionalizacii-zhilya.d?id=48096673&all=true (Accessed: 20-04-2019).

Kruglova, A. (2017). ‘Between “Too Young” and “Already Old”: The Fleeting Adulthood of Russia’s Split Generation’ *Elusive Adulthoods. The Anthropology of New Maturities*, edited by Deborah Durham, Jacqueline, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 174-196.

Klumbité, N. (2009). ‘Post-Socialist Sensations: Nostalgia, The Self and Alterity in Lithuania.’ *Lietuvos Etnologija: socialnės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos* 9 (18), 93-116.

Klumbité, N. (2010). ‘The Soviet Sausage Renaissance’. *American Anthropologist* 112 (1), 22–37.

Kollmorgen, R. (2013). “Theories of Postcommunist Transformation. Approaches, Debates, and Problems of Theory Building in the Second Decade of Research.” *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 5(2), 88-106.

Lee, M. (2013). ‘Nostalgia as a Feature of “Glocalization”: Use of the Past in Post-Soviet Russia.’ *Post-Soviet Affairs* 27(2), 158–177.

Legault, M. (1992). *Spatial Patterns of Meat Consumption in the Soviet Union, 1985 and 1988*.

Master's dissertation.

Levada, I. A. (2001). 'Homo Post-Sovieticus.' *Sociological Research* 40(6), 6-41.

Lowenthal, D. (1985). *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Markham, A. N. & Baym, N. K. (Ed.). (2009). *Internet Inquiry. Conversations about Method*, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Mazur, L. (2015). "Golden age mythology and the nostalgia of catastrophes in post-Soviet Russia" in *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue canadienne des slavistes* 57(3-4), 213-238.

McFaul, M. (2010). 'The Missing Variable' in Democracy and Authoritarianism. *The Postcommunist World*, Cambridge University Press, 3-29.

McKee, H. A., & Porter J. E. (2009). *The Ethics of Internet Research. A Rhetorical, Case-Based Process*. New York: Peter Lang.

Meslé, F., V. Shkolnikov, & J. Vallin. (1992). "Mortality by Cause in the USSR in 1970-1987." *European Journal of Population / Revue Européenne de Démographie*, 8(4), 281-308.

Nadkarni, M., & Shevchenko O. (2004). "The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices." *Ab Imperio* 2, 487-519.

Nadkarni, M. (2007). "The Master's Voice: Authenticity, Nostalgia and the Refusal of Irony in Postsocialist Hungary." *Social Identities* 13(5), 611-626.

Nadkarni, M. (2010). "'But It's Ours': Nostalgia and the Politics of Authenticity in

- Post-Socialist Hungary.” *Post-Communist Nostalgia* edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 190-214.
- Nora, P. (1999). Problematika Mest Pamiati’. *Frantsia-pamiat’* / P. Nora, M. Aussouf, J. de Puimège, M. Vinok / Per. s fr.: Deena Khapaeva. - SPb.: Izd-vo S.-Peterb. un-ta, 1999, 17-50. (In Russian) (Nora, Pierre.1999. “The Problem of Places of Memory.” *France-memory* / P. Nora, M. Aussouf, J. de Puimège, M. Vinok / Transl. from fr.: Deena Khapaeva. - SPb.: Publishing house of St. Petersburg. University, 17-50).
- <http://ec-dejavu.ru/m-2/Memory-Nora.html> (Retrieved: 2021-11-21).
- Morenkova, E. (2012). ‘(Re)creating the Soviet Past in Russian Digital Communities. Between Memory and Mythmaking.’ *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 7, 39-66.
- Morenkova-Perrier, E. (2017). *Mémoire et Politique : Les Représentation du Passé Soviétique en Russie*. Paris: Édition Panthéon-Assas.
- Olick, J. (2007). *The Politics of Regret: The Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. New York: Routledge.
- Oushakine, S. A. (2007). ““We’re nostalgic, but we’re not crazy”: Retrofitting the past in Russia.” *The Russian Review* 66, 451-482.
- Oushakine, S. A. (2009). *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*.

Ithaka and London: Cornell University Press.

Oushakine, S. A. (2020). "Second-Hand Nostalgia: On Charms and Spells of the Soviet *Trukhliashechka*." *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire's Legacies*, edited by Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos and Ksenia Robbe. New York and London: Routledge: 38-69.

Outhwaite, W., & Ray, L. (2005). *Social Theory and Postcommunism*. Blackwell Publishing.

Petrović, T. (2010). "Nostalgia for the JNA? Remembering the Army in the Former Yugoslavia." *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 61-81.

Pourtova, E. (2013). "Nostalgia and Lost Identity." *The Journal of Analytical Psychology* 58, 34-51.

Ries, N. (1997). *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika*. Cornell University Press: Ithaka and London.

Robertson, R. (1995). "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities*, 25-44. London: Sage.

Rose, R. (2009). *Understanding Post-Communist Transformation: A Bottom Up Approach*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

- Shevchenko, O. (2009). *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Silitski, V. (2010). ““Survival of the fittest:” Domestic and International Dimensions of the Authoritarian reaction in the Former Soviet Union Following the Colored Revolutions.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, 339–350.
- Simmel, G. (2000). “The Change in Cultural Forms.” *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, edited by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 103-107.
- Snieskienė, D., & Dulinskienė, I. (2014). ‘Homelessness in Lithuania: Policy and Research’ in *European Journal of Homelessness* 8 (2), December, 211-230.
- Sommers, J., & Woolfson, C. (2014). *The Contradictions of Austerity: The Socio-economic Costs of the Neoliberal Baltic Model*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stankunas, M., & Kalediene, R., Starkuviene, S., Kapustinskiene, V. (2006). ‘Duration of Unemployment and Depression: A Cross-sectional Survey in Lithuania’ in *BMC Public Health* 6, 174.
- Stasulane, A. (2017). ‘Foreword: Religion and Magic Behind the Iron Curtain’ in *Religion and Magic in Socialist and Post-socialist Contexts II. Historic and Ethnographic Case Studies of Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, Alternative Spirituality* edited by Alexandra Cotofana,

and James M. Nyce. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.

Szelényi, I., & Szelényi, B. (1994). 'Why Socialism Failed: Toward a Theory of System Breakdown - Causes of Disintegration of East European State Socialism'. *Theory and Society* (23), 211-231.

Tarkovsky, A. (1987). *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, Retrieved: March 17, 2018,
https://monoskop.org/images/d/dd/Tarkovsky_Andrey_Sculpting_in_Time_Reflections_on_the_Cinema.pdf

Tsivinsky, V. (2014). "The Spatial Metaphor of Utopia in Russian Culture and in Analysis." *The Journal of Analytical Psychology* 59, 47-59.

Tverdiukova, E. D. (2016). "Deyatel'nost' Organov Sanitarno-pishchevogo Nadzora po Obespecheniyu Bezopasnosti v Sfere Oborota Prodovol'stviya v SSSR." *Problemi Sotsialnoi Gigieni, Zdravookhranenia i Istorii Meditsiny* 24(1), 49-52. DOI: 10.1016/0869-866X-2016-1-49-52/ "The Activity of Bodies of Sanitary Food Supervision in Support of Security in Sphere of Foodstuffs Turnover in the USSR." *Problems of Social Hygiene, Public Health and History of Medicine, Russian journal* 24 (1), 49-52. DOI: 10.1016/0869-866X-2016-1-49-52.

Vihavainen, T., & Bogdanova, E. (Eds). (2015). *Communism and Consumerism: The Soviet Alternative to the Affluent Society*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.

- Voslenskii, M. S. (1984). *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Wijermars, M., & Lehtisaari, K (Ed.). (2020). *Freedom of Expression in Russia's New Mediasphere*, New York: Routledge.
- Yanushevich, I. (2008). "Problemy Revolyutsionnogo Terrora po Otnosheniyu k Tserkvi I Religii (Iz Opyta Frantsuzskoi I Oktyabr'skoi Revolyutsii)" ("The Problem of Revolutionary Terror in Relation to the Church and Religion (from the Experience of the French and the October Revolutions)."
Gumanitarna-eknamichny Vesnik 2, 76-80.
Accessed 2018-01-28: <http://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/8433>
- Yurchak, A. (2006). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Yurchak, A. (2008). 'Post-Post-Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today' in *What is Soviet Now? Identities, Legacies, Memories* edited by Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon, Jr., Verlag, Berlin, 257-276.
- Zaprudski, S. (2007). "In the Grip of Replacive Bilingualism: The Belarusian Language in Contact with Russian" / *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 183, 97-118.
- Zinoviev, A. (1986). *Homo Sovieticus*. Publisher: Atlantic Monthly Pr.
- Zinoviev, A. (2019). *Global'ny Cheloveinik*. Moskva: Kanon-Plus/ Zinoviev, Alexander.

2019. *The Global Humant Hill*. Moscow: Kanon- Plus.

<http://greybooks.ru/images/kanon/36145.pdf> - Access: 2020-12-15.

Appendix 1. Interview Guide

Interview Guide in English:

1. What brings you to this particular forum? How did you choose this one among many other fora (on Facebook, VKontakte, on Odnoklassniki)?
2. What forms does your participation in this forum take? Do you create something of your own to share with the group (for example, do you write your own lyrics, do you create nostalgic music videos)?
3. Why are you nostalgic today for the Soviet past?
4. What was the most valuable thing in the USSR?
5. What period can be called the “Golden Age” of Soviet history?
6. Who is responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union?
7. Who (which group of the population) is most nostalgic for the USSR today?
8. Would you like to restore the Soviet Union? And if so, would you restore it in its original form, or with changes?
9. How would you describe the reasons why some people perceive the USSR very negatively? (Give examples of negative statements about the USSR).
10. Do you think that today's children and youth have a complete and objective picture of Soviet reality?

11. What factors influence how young people perceive the USSR today?
12. Do you think that communication in such fora is friendly and positive? Does it look like communication in Soviet times?
13. Are there any conflicts during the discussions in these fora? How are these conflicts resolved?
14. Do you agree that only those who were Octobrists, pioneers and Komsomol members have the moral right to participate in discussions about the USSR?
15. Do you think that a technologically mediated form of such communication reduces his sincerity?
16. What else are you doing, in addition to participating in such fora, to revive memories of the USSR?
17. Calls to shoot corrupt officials are often heard on nostalgic fora (a quote attributed to Lukashenko, the shooting of Chinese corrupt officials, calls to shoot Gorbachev). How do you feel about the death penalty for economic crimes?
18. How would you define the place of religion in Soviet society, which will be reborn? Are socialism and Orthodoxy (another religion) compatible?

Interview Guide in Russian/Опросник для интервью

1. Что привело вас именно на этот форум? Как вы выбрали именно этот среди многих других форумов (на “Фейсбуке”, “ВКонтакте”, на “Одноклассниках”)?
2. Какие формы принимает ваше участие в данном форуме? Создаёте ли вы что-то собственное, чтобы поделиться этим в группе, (например, пишете ли вы собственные тексты, создаёте ли ностальгические музыкальные клипы)?
3. Почему Вы ностальгируете сегодня по советскому прошлому?
4. Что было самым ценным в СССР?
5. Какой период можно назвать “Золотым веком” советской истории?
6. Кто ответственен за развал Советского Союза?
7. Кто (какая группа населения) больше всего ностальгирует сегодня по СССР?
8. Вы бы хотели восстановления Советского Союза? И если да, то вы бы его восстановили в изначальной форме, или с изменениями?
9. Как бы вы описали причины, по которым некоторые люди очень негативно воспринимают СССР? (Дать примеры негативных высказываний об СССР).
10. Считаете ли вы, что нынешние дети и молодёжь имеют полную и объективную картину советской реальности?
11. Какие факторы влияют на то, как молодёжь воспринимает СССР сегодня?

12. Считаете ли вы, что общение на таких форумах имеет дружеский и позитивный характер? Похоже ли оно на общение в советские времена?

13. Случаются ли какие-нибудь конфликты во время дискуссий на этих форумах? Как эти конфликты разрешаются?

14. Согласны ли вы с тем, что только те, кто был октябрятами, пионерами и комсомольцами, имеют моральное право участвовать в дискуссиях об СССР?

15. Считаете ли вы, что технологически опосредованная форма такого общения сокращает его искренность?

16. Что вы ещё делаете в дополнение к участию в таких форумах, чтобы оживить воспоминания об СССР?

17. На ностальгических форумах часто звучат призывы расстреливать коррупционеров (цитата, приписываемая Лукашенко, расстрел китайских коррупционеров, призывы расстрелять Горбачёва). Как Вы относитесь к смертной казни за экономические преступления?

18. Как бы Вы определили место религии в советском обществе, которое возродится? Совместимы ли социализм и православие (другая религия)?

Appendix 2. Forms and Documentation

Example of Consent Form (English)

Title of the study: Nostalgia for the Soviet past in the Russian-speaking online communities

This is a doctoral thesis project.

Researcher: Tatsiana Amosava, PhD (Candidate) in sociology, School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies, University of Ottawa, email: (~).

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the above-mentioned research study conducted by Tatsiana Amosava.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to understand why people join nostalgic online forums and why they are nostalgic for the USSR, what the practices of the nostalgic online discussion groups are, how generational belonging affects one's capacity to discuss and speak of the Soviet past, if there is a certain kind of normative subject that represents and is able to speak for the Soviet past, and if forums such as this seek to produce it through promoting certain kinds of rules, languages and materials that are there circulated.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of participating in an interview via Skype that will last for an hour.

The interview will be audio-recorded with the participant's permission:

I give permission _____ I do not give permission _____

Risks: My participation in this study will not entail any risks. However, I will use my personal time and it may distract me from my daily routine.

Benefits: My participation in this study will not be beneficial for me personally, however, the information gained through this research will be beneficial to the academic community, especially to the scholars of post-socialism and online researchers.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the research mentioned above and that my confidentiality will be protected through using pseudonyms.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: while quoting any part of the interview the pseudonym of the interviewee will be used.

Conservation of data: The data collected (tape recordings of interviews, transcripts, notes) will be kept in a secure manner on the researcher's personal computer protected by password, only the researcher and her two supervisors will have access to the data and conserved for five years. As the evidence shows, the books on the basis of ethnographic studies are published 7-10 years after the data collection. In addition to mandatory five years of preservation, the researcher plans to keep the data safely for as long as needed until they are published in the book. Original data or a copy of the data must be kept on uOttawa campus during the full period of retention.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering

any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be securely deleted by the researcher.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Tatsiana Amosava, a PhD student of the School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, (~).

Tel.: (~)

Email: (~)

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Example of Consent Form (in Russian)

Бланк согласия на участие в исследовании

Название проекта: Ностальгия по советскому прошлому в русскоязычных интернет-сообществах

Это диссертационный проект на соискание степени доктора философии.

Исследователь: Татьяна Амосова, аспирант, школа социологических и антропологических исследований, факультет социальных наук, университет Оттавы: электронный адрес: (~)

Приглашение к участию: Меня пригласили участвовать в вышеупомянутом исследовании, проводимом Татьяной Амосовой.

Цель исследования: Цель исследования состоит в том, чтобы понять: почему люди присоединяются к ностальгическим интернет-сообществам и почему они ностальгируют по СССР, каковы практики ностальгических интернет-сообществ, как принадлежность к определённому поколению влияет на возможность высказываться о советском прошлом, существует ли определённый нормативный субъект, который является представителем советского прошлого и “уполномочен” говорить о нём, и верно ли, что форумы, такие, как этот, создают такого субъекта посредством продвижения определённых правил, языка и материалов, циркулирующих на форуме.

Участие: Моё участие будет состоять в ответах на вопросы интервью, которое будет проведено по Скайпу и которое будет длиться час.

Будет произведена аудиозапись данного интервью с разрешения участника:

Согласен/согласна _____ Не согласен/не согласна _____

Риски: Моё участие в этом исследовании не повлечёт за собой никаких рисков. Однако, отвечая на вопросы интервью, я буду использовать своё личное время, что может отвлекать меня от повседневных дел.

Выгоды: Моё участие в этом исследовании не будет выгодным для меня лично, однако информация, полученная благодаря этому исследованию, будет полезной для научного сообщества, особенно - для исследователей пост-социализма и тех, кто проводит исследования в Интернете.

Конфиденциальность и анонимность: Я получил заверения исследователя, что информация, которой я поделюсь, будет оставаться строго конфиденциальной. Я понимаю, что мои высказывания будут использованы только в упомянутом выше исследовании и что моя конфиденциальность будет защищена с помощью использования псевдонима.

Анонимность будет защищена следующим образом: при цитировании любой части интервью будет использован псевдоним.

Сохранение данных: Собранные данные (аудиозаписи интервью, транскрипты, заметки) будут храниться надёжным образом в персональном компьютере исследователя, защищённом паролем, и будут доступны только исследователю и её двум руководителям. Данные будут храниться не менее пяти лет. Как показывает практика, книги на основе этнографических исследований выходят в свет через семь-десять лет после сбора информации. Поэтому исследователь в дополнение к обязательным пяти годам сохранения

данных планирует безопасно сохранять их сколь угодно долго, пока не будет опубликована книга на их основе. Оригинальные данные и копия данных будут храниться в университете Оттавы в течение полного периода сохранения данных.

Компенсация: За участие в этом исследовании компенсация не предусмотрена.

Добровольное участие: У меня нет обязательств участвовать, и если я решу отказаться от участия, я могу сделать это в любое время/или отказаться отвечать на любые вопросы, не испытывая негативных последствий. Если я решу отказаться от участия, все данные, полученные от меня до этого момента, не будут использованы исследователем и будут удалены.

Согласие на участие: Я, _____, согласен/согласна участвовать в вышеуказанном исследовании, проводимом Татьяной Амосовой, аспиранткой школы социологических и антропологических исследований.

Если у меня будут вопросы по данному исследованию, я могу связаться с исследователем и её руководителем.

Если у меня будут вопросы по этической составляющей этого исследования, я могу связаться с ответственным за следование протоколу исследовательской этики, университет Оттавы, (~).

Тел.: (~).

Электронный адрес: (~)

Существует две копии этого соглашения, одна из которых остаётся у меня.

Recruitment Script for Moderators of the Online Fora (English):

Dear (name of the person)_____!

My name is Tatsiana Amosava. I am a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Ottawa. I would like to conduct research on this forum. The research is dedicated to nostalgia for the Soviet past in the Russian-speaking online communities. The purpose of the study is to understand why people are joining such forums and why they are nostalgic for the USSR. I am a participant of this discussion group, but I would like to ask you to announce that I am conducting research here which includes observation over the group's activity and conducting interviews, and will contact some people in person through personal messaging in order to arrange interviews with them via Skype. Also, I would like you to mention that everybody interested in participation in this research is invited to contact me through the personal messaging or via email: (~). All the volunteers are very welcome. However, my research presumes a limited number of participants. It means that those people who contact me first, have better chances to be recruited. If you could share your opinion and memories of the Soviet past with me in the format of the interview, I would be grateful to you. I am attaching the text of the announcement of my research in the discussion group.

Recruitment Script for Moderators of the Online Fora (in Russian)

Текст обращения к модераторам:

Уважаемый (имя _____)!

Меня зовут Татьяна Амосова. Я аспирант по социологии в университете Оттавы. Я бы хотела провести исследование на этом форуме. Исследование посвящено ностальгии по советскому прошлому в русскоязычных интернет-сообществах. Цель исследования - понять: почему люди присоединяются к таким форумам и почему они ностальгируют по СССР. Я - участница этой дискуссионной группы, но я хотела бы попросить Вас объявить, что я провожу здесь исследование, которое включает наблюдение за активностью группы и проведение интервью, и что я буду связываться с некоторыми людьми через личные сообщения, чтобы договориться с ними о проведении интервью по скайпу. Также я хотела бы, чтобы Вы упомянули, что все, кто заинтересован участвовать в этом исследовании, могут связаться со мной через личное сообщение или по электронной почте (~). Я очень надеюсь на то, что будут добровольцы, но хотела бы сообщить, что моё исследование предполагает конечное число участников. Это значит, что те, кто свяжется со мной первыми, получают приоритет. Если бы Вы могли поделиться своим мнением и воспоминаниями о советском прошлом в формате интервью, я бы была Вам очень признательна. Я прилагаю текст объявления о моём исследовании на форуме.

Recruitment Script for the Potential Interviewee:

Dear (Name of the person)_____!

My name is Tatsiana Amosava. I am a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Ottawa. I would like to ask you to participate in my research dedicated to nostalgia for the Soviet past in the Russian-speaking online communities. I feel that you may be an expert on this topic, because you speak out actively on the forum (title of the forum). I would like to conduct an interview with you on Skype at any time that is convenient for you between August 15 and September 30, 2017. If you agree to participate, I will send you a scan of the consent for participation in my research in Russian and in English. The interview will last for about an hour. It will depend on the level of interest that some questions may invoke in you. There are 18 questions. If you are interested in discussing something in addition to what is formulated in my questions, and you feel that it relates to the topic of nostalgia for the USSR, we can do this. Your identity will be protected, you can choose your pseudonym that will be used by me when I quote you in my publications. Thank you for sharing your opinion!

Recruitment Script for the Potential Interviewee (in Russian):**Текст рекрутирования интервьюируемых:**

Уважаемый (имя)_____!

Меня зовут Татьяна Амосова. Я аспирант по социологии в университете Оттавы. Я хочу попросить Вас поучаствовать в моём исследовании, посвящённом ностальгии по советскому прошлому в русскоязычных интернет-сообществах. Я чувствую, что Вы можете быть экспертом по этой теме, потому что Вы активно высказываетесь на форуме (название форума). Я хотела бы провести интервью с Вами по скайпу в любое удобное для Вас время между 15 августа и 30 сентября 2017 года. Если Вы согласны участвовать в моём исследовании, я Вам пришлю скан формуляра согласия на участие в моём исследовании на русском и на английском языках. Интервью будет длиться примерно час. Это будет зависеть от Вашего интереса к определённым вопросам. В интервью будет около 18 вопросов. Если Вы заинтересованы обсудить что-то в дополнение к тому, что я сформулировала в вопросах и что, как Вам кажется, относится к ностальгии по СССР, мы можем это сделать. Ваша идентичность будет защищена. Вы можете выбрать псевдоним, который я буду использовать, цитируя Вас в своих публикациях. Спасибо Вам заранее за то, что Вы готовы поделиться Вашим мнением!