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SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON “SOVIET” IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the problem of scientific understanding of the “Soviet” borders in the the post-Soviet space. The concept "post-Soviet space" is ambiguously interpreted by Russian and foreign researchers. The transfer of reference points responsible for the integration of society from the memory of the past to ideas about the present and the future complicates the development of identity of the young generation and identification of its basic markers. In the 1990s, the mechanisms of collective Soviet identity were destroyed, and in the early 2000s, their progressive "restoration" began. Transformations in mentality and collective representation of young people born in the post-Soviet space can be observed. The identification of perceptions of the socialist past in young people is one of the main tasks. To achieve this purpose, an associative survey and a hand-out questionnaire were used. The multiplicity of views on the phenomenon “post-Soviet space” and “post-Soviet identity” requires an analysis of definitions of “Soviet” and “post-Soviet” in terms of historical interconnectedness. The inconsistency of assessments is due to complexity, versatility, insufficient knowledge of the phenomenon "post-Soviet" and the political situation. The definition of the boundaries of the “Soviet” in the “post-Soviet” reveals the features of cultural identification as one of the main approaches to the study of Russia's integration into the world cultural space. Researchers have already touched upon the relevant issues but not the views of the young post-Soviet generation.

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1. Introduction

In 1991, as a result of the collapse of the USSR, the largest geopolitical entity, the territorial localization of new independent states connected by a common past in one state and retaining some common identity appeared. The term “post-Soviet space” was used by Prazauskas (1992, 1996) in his article “CIS as a post-colonial space”. The basis was the events of December 8, 1991, when Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia refused to enter the new political entity, the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). Our study does not examine the affiliation of the Baltic states to the post-Soviet space, since they resisted and managed to maintain their own political traditions and institutions. Moreover, since 1989 they declared their unwillingness to participate in any post-Soviet integration projects. The accession of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union in 2004 determined the vector of political and cultural development of the Baltic states.

In political and cultural discourses, there are two opinions about the subjectivity of the "post-Soviet space". The British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said: “The Soviet Union as well as the post-Soviet space no longer exist. There is a new map of Eastern Europe, with new borders, and this map needs to be protected” (as cited in Zatulyn, 2011). A. Malashenko, L. Andrusenko, and A. Suzdaltsev believe that the use of the term is inappropriate (as cited in Tofan, 2015).

Dugin (2011) suggest considering the post-Soviet space taking into account “several versions of dominant processes,” “unfolding in parallel in opposite directions”. The post-Soviet space can act in three positions: as a post-Soviet reality; as a platform for globalization and westernization, integration into the "architecture of the unipolar or multilateral world (the United States as an empire or the West as a world government)"; as a trend which involves the formation of the “Eurasian Union” based on civilizational identity and traditional values (Dugin, 2011).

The Eurasian Union involves economic and sociopolitical cooperation. Thus, creation of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the CIS Member States on March 27, 1992, the signing of an agreement on the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and formation of the Eurasian Economic Community are historical prerequisites for the creation of the union.

In the article, the post-Soviet space refers to the territory, the cultural landscape which was formed under the influence of Soviet ideology and influenced by the general history. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ideas about the USSR are based on categories of the historical past.

The Belgian geopolitician J. Tiriart compared the territory of the former USSR with a bar of chocolate. After the slices (former Soviet republics) are broken off, they are no longer enough to be put together to restore the entire bar. This can only be achieved by remelting and re-stamping the entire bar - through integration (Andronova, 2012).

Versatile actions of recreating the memory of some events previously deleted from the general history of countries, active “nostalgia” and simultaneous oblivion can be observed everywhere. Shared feelings are an important element of the consolidation of any national or confessional group (holidays or mournful dates, national cuisine and folklore). However, in modern post-Soviet reality, the prescribed emotions become the only “brace” that forms the “friend or foe” dichotomy.

Over 70 years of the existence of the USSR, a new human type has emerged - Homo soveticus (Serov, 2005; Zinoviev, 1986) based on the values of communism and Marxist-Leninist teachings.

Levada (2004) argues that “Soviet people as a personality type did not disappear with the collapse of the USSR, but live in modern Russia and are reproduced in new generations” (para. 04).

In political science works, general tendencies of the development of processes in the post-Soviet republics have been discussed (Egorov, 2011). The content of the actions changed the usual attitude to Western principles and the gradual “conversion” of the positions of the “other” and “alien”. The difference in initial conditions, diversity of cultural traditions, unequal possibilities of socio-economic transformation, the external influence predetermined a change in the political and cultural landscape of the post-Soviet space.

The main premise of these processes is a plurality of conflicts in the era of perestroika (1985-1991: the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijanis and Armenians; December events in Alma-Ata in 1986 which caused the formation of an independent movement and demonstrations. Political and civil conflicts in the republics increased the number of refugees up to 1 million people, aggressiveness accelerated the changes in vectors in the line of “friend-foe-friend” (Romanova & Yakushenkov, 2013; Romanova et al., 2013).

The first and second Chechen wars, the Ossetian-Ingush and the Islamic conflicts strengthened the decomposition of cultural contacts that served as the basis for a dialogue of cultures. Sociocultural space and its conflict reduce the degree of attraction between its components, making them separate and isolated. The post-Soviet sociocultural space can be characterized from the standpoint of historical interconnectedness, which can act as a connecting fabric of modern global integration. The factors that contribute to the integration are historical traditions of cooperation of peoples, the Soviet multinational culture, the Russian language.

In the post-Soviet space, the main parameters and volumes of the scale “Friend - Foe” images are changing, the ideological separation between Friend and Foe is replaced by an ethnic and religious rift (Romanova, 2016).

We take as a basis the concept of Lacan (2010), namely, his triad of the Imaginary Symbolic-Real, where the interaction can take place on three levels: “neighbor other”, “Big Other” and “other”.

“Soviet man” as a special type of identity exists. Soviet man is not only a product of Soviet ideology. He is a result of historical features of the development of Russia as a whole.

The post-Soviet period was accompanied by the destruction of Soviet identity and took place in parallel with the large-scale anti-Soviet propaganda in most former Soviet republics, influencing the change in consciousness of Soviet people.

At present, the Russian Federation acts as an agent of nationalism for the former Soviet republics and a successor to the Soviet heritage, where many factors (place of origin, characteristics of the host society, period of residence in the country of relocation, social status, position, etc.) influence the construction of identity, attempting to become a space of unity (an imaginary unity).



Figure 01. Identity Identification System

The Soviet history is the remote past, it is analyzed by researchers, it became an object of collective mythologization and nostalgia. In Russia and other former Soviet republics, new generations of citizens were born. They socialize under the influence of globalization, digitalization and new political ideas which form attitudes towards each other as representatives of foreign states (Topchiev et al., 2016). The Russian society consisting of various ethnic groups, former residents of the Union republics, is puzzled by three fundamental questions for determining identity, positions of “friends”, “aliens” and a further vector of sociocultural development (Figure 01).

The contemporary “Russian” is still not filled with its own, self-determined content, however, the answers of the respondents make it possible to declare recognition of a common starting point - the Soviet past. The definition of “post-Soviet” should be considered the basic nomination for modern Russian society, which fully demonstrates the incompleteness of social formation.

The controversial situation requires additional research of large-scale reflection on the Soviet past and its connection with modern Russian reality. Mass culture is filled with images from the past that are evaluative in nature.

2. Problem Statement

The collapse of the USSR entailed a number of socio-cultural and political processes:

- destruction of the ideological foundation of socialism;
- abandonment of the idea of a struggle between two poles – capitalism and socialism;
- political, economic, cultural, religious, and ethnic separation;
- fragmentation of the cultural field and globalization;
- the short-term period of “anti-communism”, discrimination of the Soviet Union;
- a large-scale post-Soviet identity crisis, the space occupied by the former Soviet republics is referred to as “post-Soviet.”

3. Research Questions

Discussing the concepts “my homeland”, “my country”, “my compatriots”, individuals often build a series associated with home, family, friends and historical and cultural markers that influenced their formation as individuals. The combination and coexistence of different ethnic groups, religions, cultures, traditions forms the face of Russia. The young generation born in the post-Soviet period do not have an emotional connection and personal experience associated with the Soviet era. The self-identification in the context of digitalization and globalization occurs by establishing new ideological, civic, family, career and sexual orientations. Is the identity and future orientation of the young generation formed by constructing the image of the Soviet past?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to determine the sociocultural phenomenon “Soviet” in the “post-Soviet” and to identify the basic positions of the emerging collective memory of the young generation in the post-Soviet space.

5. Research Methods

The structural-functional method is used to study the basic parameters of cultural identity of the “Soviet” and “post-Soviet”. The use of associative survey and questionnaire methods made it possible to identify the main trends in the perception of the Soviet past by the young generation. The general scientific methods, historical and logical methods were used as well. In October 2019, we conducted a continuous sociological study using the associative survey and questioning. Respondents were students of Astrakhan State University (born at the turn of the 2000s), the sample size was 100. The associative field was the Soviet Union.

The associative method was used to identify historical and cultural stereotypes about the USSR. The use of the free association method made it possible to identify associations that reflect random situational relationships and social values, which are the “deepest foundations of culture” that serve as a “measure of what people consider important and significant” (Savin, 2010, p. 110), namely, to identify trends in youth among the perceptions of the socialist past.

Students were asked to write any word or phrase associated with the Soviet Union. We did not set the task to identify linguistic or psychological aspects of the association. We considered it necessary to identify the “social component” of associations, understand how social associations and stereotypic thinking are reflected in the associations, as far as the respondent’s associations reflect personal and social experience of the groups.

6. Findings

Connotations of the association can be divided into two categories: general (related to popular culture) and historical (historical figures and events). It should be emphasized that this division is conditional. Respondents mentioned the following historical associations: “Stalin”, “Lenin”, “repression”;

"The Great Patriotic War", "collapse", "perestroika"; general associations: "Communism", "deficit", "sickle and hammer", "worker and collective farmer", "collective farms". Material objects are rarely mentioned which mean that the younger generation focuses on emotional and historical factors. The image of the "sickle and hammer", as well as the monument to the "worker and collective farmer" can be attributed to objects that actualize the images of the past. The associations do not show what place the ideas about the USSR occupy in the modern identity of the young post-Soviet generation. The phenomenon "Soviet" in exists in the position of the Other, being an object of the historical past, causing interest, but without a clear value (positive or negative) definition.

A continuous survey was carried out (the sample size was 100). According to the question indicated in the questionnaire, the respondents had to list the most significant events in Russian history. They often mentioned "Victory in the Great Patriotic War" (38 %), "Collapse of the USSR" (36 %), "February and October revolutions" (18 %). Based on the responses, it can be concluded that the image of the Soviet Union is determined by the concepts widely used in the course of history and in the media propaganda.

7. Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union created new states and a geopolitical vacuum and intense tension in relations with Russia. The trends identified should be considered in retrospect, taking into the post-Soviet space 20 years after the collapse of the USSR, analyzing the current state of the former Soviet republics. The new generation born after the collapse is reintegrating the memory of Soviet culture, while continuing the process of cultural oblivion.

Post-Soviet identity is a controversial, ambivalent phenomenon. The image of the "Alien" is a transit type, leading to a conflict of identities. It has no clear interpretation in modern scientific discourse. The sociocultural contexts of identity construction are changing. The changes should be considered in the synthesis of a retrospective of Soviet society and active digitalization of modernity. Awareness of the theoretical framework of the concept "post-Soviet" occurs on several grounds: the complete denial of the phenomenon of the post-Soviet space; a phenomenon that has completed its existence; or a transit cultural phenomenon for modern Russia and the CIS countries. The temporary distance of the young generation allows us to explore the meaning of the "Soviet" outside the political ideology of the USSR, defining the "Soviet" as a set of specific forms of existence and interaction of the individual in society.

The study of "post-Soviet" using the categories of "collective identity", "collective memory" and "Friend-Foe" reflect the incompleteness of the abandonment of Soviet values. The collective "We" is still at the stage of forming the concept of "Ours" and "Alien". Updating the current state of the "post-Soviet" allows us to set the shape of the images of the past, present and future. The space that represents the nostalgic image of the "Soviet" is the Internet. The virtual "Soviet" format is consumed by younger generations, forming new cultural ties and breaks.

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