



MEMORY OF THE SOVIET PERIOD IN MOLDOVA: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL TRAUMA AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

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Anna VICHKITOVA

Harvard University*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1104-8133>

e-mail: annavichkitova@g.harvard.edu

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SUMMARY

While some research on post-Communist nostalgia convincingly explains it as a reaction to the hardships of the transitional period, others argue that this nostalgia also encompasses the yearning for a particular form of sociability and social values. Our research on the memory of the Soviet past in the Republic of Moldova shows that nostalgic sentiments persist in the society. The empirical data comprises 12 semi-structured interviews, including in-depth biographical interviews and a focus discussion group with six participants. The research focuses on those who socialized in the Soviet Union and experienced its disintegration as young adults or adolescents. The interviews were conducted in 2023. The results were interpreted based on the cultural trauma theory by Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztopka, as well as Svetlana Boym's conceptualization of restorative and reflexive nostalgia. The main findings show that post-Soviet hardships significantly influenced attitudes toward the Soviet era. The frequent comparisons of Soviet and post-Soviet living conditions highlight the profound impact of the transition stage's difficulties on nostalgia and more favorable remembrance of the USSR. Additionally, the research shows that the political context significantly influences Soviet memories. The nostalgia of the interviewees does not indicate a desire to return to the USSR. Instead, it reflects the shock of abrupt social change, underscoring its significant impact on their lives. Although some interviewees hope that the Soviet Union can be restored (restorative nostalgia), understanding that the Soviet past will never return, mixed with ironic and bittersweet feelings (reflexive nostalgia), is more common.

Keywords: Moldova, post-Communist nostalgia, post-Soviet memory, cultural trauma

INTRODUCTION

The past thirty years since the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe have been marked by nostalgic sentiments in the former Communist countries. The rise of nostalgia has drawn the attention of specialists in politics, philosophy, social theory, and journalism, sometimes producing anxiety about the possible restoration of the regime and condemning and shaming the agents of nostalgia. However, theoretical and empirical studies challenged these alarmistic and moralistic attitudes, offering a more nuanced approach both to nostalgia and post-Communist societies. What became clear is that nostalgia cannot be interpreted simply as a desire to come back (for example, back to Communism), and it can no longer be viewed as an "equivalent of bad memory" (Scanlan, 2004, p.4). Rather, it is a strategy for coping with the present. Moreover, nostalgia is a symptom, characterizing not the past but the present and anticipation of the future. Linda Hutcheon compares nostalgia's work with Mikhail Bakhtin's term "historical inversion" when "the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past" (Hutcheon & Valdés, 2000, p.31). In turn, the present is felt and imagined as wrong, complicated, unfair, unruly, etc., causing emotional discomfort and distress. At the same time, the past is edited and reconceptualized. In that sense, forgetting is an essential part of memory work and is actively involved in nostalgia's formation. It helps to remove all that is not fitting to the desired picture of the past, and it cleans the field for the work of imagination. Thus, nostalgia is a kind of memory work, referring to the past and re-envisioning it under new circumstances.

Despite numerous works dedicated to post-Communist nostalgia, there is no unanimous opinion on how to interpret it. On one hand, much research convincingly explains nostalgia as a reaction to the hardships of the transitional period, to its insecurity, unemployment, poverty, value crisis, overturned social hierarchies, and high crime rate. On the other hand, scholars argue that post-Communist nostalgia cannot be reduced to a longing for security and stability or to sentiments of the aging populace about their youth. It also encompasses the yearning for a particular form of sociability and values related to the meaning of life and human dignity (Todorova, 2010, p. 7). Moreover, some studies of post-communist countries reveal that success in overcoming and reassessing their past does not always correlate to the presence and quality of nostalgia. In the book *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, the editors call for a nonjudgmental approach to uncovering nostalgia and reconsidering it in a more unbiased and complex way (Todorova & Gille, 2010).

My research on memory and oral history of the Soviet past in the Republic of Moldova shows that nostalgic sentiments are persistent in the society. Moldova's nostalgia takes distinct forms and has a complex nature and resists a simple explanation. This paper focuses on how the abrupt breakdown of the USSR and the subsequent collapse of the social order have influenced contemporary recollections of Soviet times. It argues that the memory of the Soviet past has been shaped by the sudden collapse of the USSR, along with its social and economic consequences, and the inefficiency of social transformation and adaptation, which created social trauma for certain groups in society. Consequently, nostalgia emerged prominently in response to the prolonged transitional difficulties.

IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE

Studying how Soviet nostalgia affects Moldovan citizens today is important for several reasons. First, while there are numerous studies on nostalgia in post-Communist regions, the case of Moldova remains under-researched and underrepresented in the literature. This research aims to help fill this gap. Second, examining post-Soviet nostalgia provides insight into how nostalgia has persisted long after the regime's collapse, allowing us to think further on other factors contributing to its long-term existence. At the same time, one of the crucial reasons to approach this topic now is Moldova's socio-political situation. Amid social polarization regarding Moldova's future development—whether to join the European Union or to remain in the Commonwealth of Independent States—nostalgic sentiments are no longer seen as mere personal feelings but are subject to social scrutiny. Today, those who harbor nostalgia for the Soviet era may face social ridicule, criticism, and ostracism, highlighting a phenomenon that demands attention from social scientists.

A significant factor in making personal memory and feelings important social markers is that Soviet nostalgia has been politicized by current political discourse. Politicians have used nostalgia to navigate political

battles and exacerbate tensions within a polarized society since the pro-Western government came to power in 2020, even before the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022. Conversely, political opponents may also exploit the sentiments of those who disagree with the authorities for their own interests.

Furthermore, Soviet nostalgia in Moldova's society warrants attention due to its possible connection with other social characteristics, such as the Russian language and Slavic heritage. In this case, one sees how identity markers are co-opted for political purposes. Such associations risk alienating segments of the population who feel a strong cultural or linguistic connection to Russia or Slavic traditions, even if their nostalgic sentiments are not politically motivated. This situation potentially leads to new forms of inequality.

By examining how nostalgic sentiments find their way into the hearts and minds of Moldovan citizens today, one can further explore and predict how these feelings might be perceived and utilized by different socio-political agents. In addition, Moldova's persistent nostalgia can give us insights into the broader challenges faced by other post-Communist countries undergoing similar transitions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most studies on the memory of the Soviet era in Moldova focus on examining the opposition between two approaches to Moldova's past, pan-Romanianists and Moldovanists, and the resulting memory policies and memory politics (Sultani, 2020; Cușco, 2012). These studies emphasize issues such as identity crisis, statehood legitimacy, the lack of shared history, and social polarization regarding the past (King, 2000; Ihrig, 2008; Kushko & Taki, 2003). Another area of research focuses on two significant historical traumas in Moldovan history: Holocaust and Soviet repression. Studies have explored the silencing of Moldova's responsibility for the Holocaust in Bessarabia and Transnistria (Solonari, 2002a, Dimitru, 2016, Tulbure, 2016, Suveica, 2017, Sineaeva-Pankowska, 2018, Felcher, 2020) and the impact of Soviet deportations (Grati & Cojocar, 2023).¹

Often, memory and attitudes toward the past are assessed as stable entities formed based on data, such as history textbooks (Solonari, 2002b; Anderson, 2006; Worden, 2011) or specific positions (e.g., pan-Romanianists and Moldovanists, discussed in almost all research above).

Some research compares Moldova's memory of WWII with other Eastern European countries with similar backgrounds, such as Poland and Moldova (Sineaeva-Pankowska, 2019).

A body of texts is dedicated to memorial culture in Moldova, including monuments, memorials, the ideas behind them, and the analysis of museum exhibitions (Fel'ker, 2020; Felcher, 2021; Fuksova, 2019, 2020, 2024). Some works examine memory representation in different regions of the country, for example, in Transnistria (Voronovich & Fel'ker, 2020). Another substantial part of the research focuses on commemorative memorial ceremonies, particularly those related to the victims of Stalinist deportations, Holocaust commemorations, and the end of the Second World War. Thus, these research show that the dates of May 8 and 9, Europe Day and Victory or V-E Day, have remained a source of continuous debates, public clashes, and contention over public space (Cușco, 2012; Suveica, 2017; Fel'ker, 2020; Voronovici & Fel'ker, 2020).

¹ Additionally, there are some critical research on the so-called competition over the number of victims in these two events in Moldova's historiographic discourse (Suveica, 2017).

But studies on memory in Moldova do not address, with rare exceptions (Grecu, 2019), the perspectives of ordinary people. Existing research focuses more on prescriptive modes of remembrance, neglecting individual and collective memory's dynamic, selective, and retrospective nature. As a result, Moldovan society is frequently missing in many memory studies, along with its numerous voices. Mostly, ethnography on memory concentrates on particular communities, such as history teachers, historians, memory activists, or museum associates (Anderson, 2006; Fuksova, 2019).

In addition to academic studies, memory activists in Moldova have made efforts to preserve oral history. Projects focused on gathering oral history on Stalinist deportations and Holocaust in Moldova, led by Alexey Tulbure² and Ghenadie Popescu,³ should be mentioned here, as well as state initiatives to collect testimonies of Communist repression in Moldova (Birladeanu & Cojocaru, 2018). However, much of the collected data remains unanalyzed and, due to language barriers, is accessible only to a limited audience, even within Moldova. Moreover, while post-Communist nostalgia is well-known and extensively studied across Eastern Europe, research on this phenomenon in Moldova is scarce.

My study tries to fill gaps in the understanding of the collective memory of the Soviet era in Moldovan society. It focuses on individual and collective memory instead of state-prescribed memory modes, highlighting that memory is not rational but emotional. It examines Soviet nostalgia and shows how memories are often influenced by experiences during of the USSR's collapse, subsequent difficulties, and the current political situation. The paper focuses on specific recurrent topics in the respondents' narratives of the past, such as ethnic and linguistic aspects, current political views, deportation, social

welfare, and life conditions during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. These aspects are the most influential in shaping nostalgia of the Soviet time.

Memory of the Soviet past in Moldova is filled with nostalgia, which I interpret within the framework of the theory of cultural, or social, trauma developed by sociologists Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztompka. Jeffrey Alexander argues that cultural trauma is constructed by society. This trauma must be regarded not on the basis of the actual harm of the events but on whether these phenomena are believed to be harmful (Jeffrey, 2004, pp.9-10). Piotr Sztompka emphasizes that cultural trauma may occur as a reaction to a social change accompanied by four 'traumatogenic traits': suddenness, comprehensiveness, fundamentality, and unexpectedness (Sztompka, 2004, p.159). As an illustration, Sztompka refers to the 'Revolution of 1989,' which led to the downfall of the Communist regime in East-Central Europe. Considered a positive shift by the rest of the world, this change was experienced as a traumatic event for many members of society living through it and it may affect the memory of the previous time and produce nostalgia.

Another useful theoretical tool for understanding Moldova's memory of the Soviet times is Svetlana Boym's concept of restorative and reflexive nostalgia (Boym, 2001). Restorative nostalgia is linked to nationalist sentiment and aims to restore the past in some way, while reflexive nostalgia tends to treat the past more critically. The latter acknowledges that its perception of the past is rather selective and emotional and uses references to the past as a means of reflecting on its own identity, sometimes ironically. My research shows that elements of both types of nostalgia are present within Moldova's society, which adds complexity to understanding how memory works in this case.

DATA AND METHODS

The empirical base consists of 12 semi-structured interviews, including in-depth biographical interviews with a family history perspective (Bertaux & Delcroix, 2000; Semionova, 1998; Doktorov, 2012), as well as a focus discussion group with six participants. The interviews were conducted in Moldova during the second half of 2023. This article focuses on interviews with older respondents, those who witnessed the collapse of the USSR and keep their memories about it.

The interviews were conducted in Russian. The gender distribution of the respondents is almost equal, with slightly more women: 10 female and 8 male interviewees. The geographic scope includes Chisinau, Gagauzia, and the northern part of Moldova. Among the secondary data are sociological studies on contemporary Moldova (see bibliography), news websites about modern politics in Moldova, and other conversations with local residents.

The research was conducted within the framework of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and incorporated elements of ethnographic research, discourse and content analysis, a case study approach, and historical analysis. The limitation of the research lies in the difficulty of generalizing data from one case to another and the restriction of interviewees to those who could speak Russian. The method chosen for working with the transcripts of semi-structured interviews was thematic coding (Flick, 2018, p. 259). In the analysis, in addition to research codes, "in vivo" codes were taken into account, i.e., self-definitions and self-descriptions used by respondents to characterize and evaluate themselves, their activities, and colleagues (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Respondents' names were changed to maintain anonymity.

² The Institute of Oral History of Moldova, <https://oralhistory.md/ru>. Accessed June 19, 2024.

³ Deportari, www.deportari.md. Accessed June 19, 2024.

MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MOLDOVA'S SOVIET PAST: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Soviet power was established in Moldova twice. The first instance was in June 1940 when, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union occupied the former Romanian territories of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Subsequently, Bessarabia was united with the Moldavian Autonomous SSR, which geographically corresponds to today's Transnistria. In turn, Bukovina became part of the Ukrainian SSR. This newly formed Soviet region was named the Moldavian SSR. To establish new power in the region, the Soviet authorities started by purging dissidents. The local NKVD was responsible for mass arrests, killings, and incarceration. Additionally, collectivization led to further arrests and deportations. According to the data, 26,173 people from Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and Hertza county were forced to migrate to Siberia and Kazakhstan in 1941 (Cașu, 2010, p. 52).

The territories were soon retaken by Romanians who had allied with Germany against the Soviet Union. The Nazi and Romanian armies ruled the region until August 1944, when they were pushed back. Between 1941 and 1944, the Holocaust took place in the region, claiming the lives of approximately 380,000 Bessarabian and Transnistrian Jews and Roma (Suveica, 2017, pp.388-289).

During the Jassy–Chisinau offensive, the Soviet Army successfully attacked Axis forces, destroying them and pressuring Romania to switch sides from the Axis to the Allies. As a result of fierce battles, Bessarabia was heavily damaged. The Soviet Union reclaimed it, rebuilding infrastructure and re-establishing Soviet power.

Collectivization and deportations resumed in 1949. Mass deportations in July 1949 affected about 35,000 people, most called *kulaks* (Cașu 2010, 53). These deportees had to build their households from scratch at the new places. Although many returned after Stalin's death, with some regaining their property partially, others did not survive the harsh initial conditions in which they were left without shelter. Moreover, the postwar 1946-1947 famine, exacerbated by heavy state taxation, also claimed many lives.

During this time, the region was Russified, the Romanian language was turned into Cyrillic and called 'Moldovan.' The local Soviet historiography started developing the idea of Moldova's total independence from the Romanian nation. The region underwent rapid collectivization and overall industrialization; many specialists came from across the USSR to work in the industrial sector. The language they used was primarily Russian. Politically, the Soviet system was incorporated at every social level, with local authorities and security services largely composed of the local population maintaining the Soviet order in the region.

After Stalin's death, life in the region began to stabilize. Political persecution and repression slowed, except for an anti-religious campaign initiated by Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s.

After Khrushchev came several decades of Brezhnev's economic stagnation until Gorbachev's perestroika sparked a national movement. It ultimately expedited Moldova's exit from the USSR.

TRAUMA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MEMORY

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was sudden, unexpected, and comprehensive in its impact on society. Based on Sztompka's theory, one may consider that it was incredibly traumatogenic for the Soviet republics. The consequences produced by this social trauma and the traumatic symptoms in the post-Communist countries mentioned by Sztompka are also evident in the post-Soviet region. The complete collapse of the former axiological paradigm in society, political, social, and economic crises, the breakdown of social institutions (family, education, health care, public transport, etc), unemployment, inflation, deindustrialization, rising crime rates, corruption, mass migration, and other consequences of the Soviet Union's fall were felt across the entire post-Soviet space. It led to the social trauma embodied in distress syndrome, pessimism about the future, political apathy, trauma of collective memory, and a nostalgic image of the past.

Being a historically agrarian region and going through rapid industrialization in the north of the country, and forcible collectivization of the south during the Soviet period, Moldova faced severe hardships after the Soviet break-up. The country went through deindustrialization and liquidation of the collective farms, while these two economic branches were the main sources of jobs for the country's population. There were abandoned industrial plants and collective farm fields.

Although people were initially enthusiastic about the break-up of the USSR, they soon felt vulnerable. During post-Soviet times, a large part of the population was forced to migrate for work. Women predominantly worked in caregiving roles, while men worked in construction. Many labor migrants were unable to see their families for years, leading to a situation where many children became 'social orphans,' and the elderly were often left behind, resulting in a new social trauma

(Yanovich, 2013; Vaculovschi, 2023; Turcan, 2023). Those who could not find employment as labor migrants survived as best they could. The population that was already at their pre-retirement age suffered the most, not being able to adjust to the new social conditions. Typically, they relied on remittances sent from abroad. But some of the elderly lost contact with their emigrated children and were forced to survive on a meager pension. They nostalgically remembered their Soviet past, when they lived a stable and secure life and were valued as specialists, had a sense of dignity, and held onto certain values shared by society at large.

The mass migration, reflecting the long-lasting economic stagnation within the country, has persisted through to the present. The recent analysis of the population dynamics over the past three decades in Moldova shows that the country continues to experience a long-term population decline, primarily attributed to high levels of emigration. From 1991 to 2021, the country experienced

high depopulation due to migration outflows, with premature mortality exacerbating the natural decline (Tabac & Gagauz, 2020). After the COVID-19 pandemic, a new intensification of emigration has been registered (Vaculovschi, 2023; NBS, 2022). The World Bank's data shows that Moldova has remained one of the poorest countries in Europe for the last two decades (WBM, 2023).

This research shows that Soviet nostalgia plays a crucial role as a coping mechanism in the face of the emerging inequalities and uncertainties that accompany Moldova's transition to a democratic system. The perception of reduced dignity and stability further reinforces feelings of nostalgia, indicating that it is not just a longing for the past but a response to present-day socio-political circumstances. It also may be interpreted as the evidence that the democratic regime in Moldova failed to provide some social groups with a sense of dignity and belonging to a new society.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

The recollection of the Soviet past is influenced by the discourse of the USSR that remains relevant in Moldovan politics today. This rhetoric is used by both ardent critics of the Soviet past and those who treat the Soviets more favorably. The memory of the Soviet Union has become instrumentalized by Moldovan politicians. Those who advocate for Moldova's EU membership and distancing from Russia's political influence may portray the USSR as an undesirable future for Moldova, suggesting that this fate would inevitably repeat without taking proper actions towards Eurointegration. This perspective evokes strong emotions among both proponents and opponents of Moldova's political Europeanization. As a response, Eurointegration's opponents have increasingly favored the USSR due to dissatisfaction with the authorities. In effect, the USSR is not perceived as the past; rather, it is seen as a lasting and relevant political entity.

Contemporary Russia is often perceived as if it were the USSR, both by pro-Soviet and EU advocates. For instance, Russian-speaking Soviet citizens who arrived in Moldova during that period are still often referred to as 'Russians' today, while, conversely, Russian-speaking is associated with 'Soviets.' The potential political success of opposition groups favorable to building relationships with Russia is seen as a return to the USSR, prompting respondents to reminisce about the missed benefits

of Soviet life, benefits like access to cheaper goods, a sense of security, guaranteed employment and welfare benefits, and the freedom to travel within the former USSR countries.

Moreover, a new wave of increased attention to the Soviet past has emerged in response to current political events. The war in Ukraine, subsequent state of emergency, and the sanctions against Russia that have impacted Moldova's economy, causing rising gas and electricity prices and inflation. In addition, upcoming presidential elections, recent discord with Gagauzia⁴ and long-lasting tension with Transnistria, and political reforms related to preparing the country to EU membership all play significant roles in shaping current perceptions of the Soviet past.

The sense of social trauma, coupled with ongoing political processes that revive the discourse of the Soviet Union as a viable future, significantly influences memories of the Soviet era. For instance, individuals already nostalgic for the USSR tend to selectively emphasize aspects of Soviet life they believe are absent or significantly worse in contemporary society, searching the past for more arguments to solidify their position. Conversely, those who want to see Moldova in the EU focus solely on the negative aspects of the past.

⁴ The bashkan of the Gagauzia region has not been approved by the central authorities in Chisinau for a year. Recently, the unauthorized leader of Gagauzia began seeking support from Russian authorities.

SUSCEPTIBILITY TO TRAUMA

However, there is no uniform understanding of trauma across all social groups, and each group has its own susceptibility to trauma, influenced by factors like age, ethnicity, religion, education, profession, financial status, gender, and geography.⁵ These factors add layers of complexity to memory formation, leading to diverse perspectives within distinct social groups. This paper focuses on those people who were socialized in the Soviet Union and experienced its disintegration as young adults or adolescents. They typically have a more articulated position about the Soviet past and their recollections are supported by strong emotions.

Among the factors mentioned, ethnicity should be highlighted. In general, Moldovan memory of the Soviet past intertwines with Romanian/Moldovan (depends on an individual's self-identification), Gagauz, Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish ethno-cultural perspectives, with the latter two being the least represented in the sample. While there is no clear tendency toward more favorable or critical views based solely on ethnicity, one may say that those who self-identify as Romanians more often hold pan-Romanianism's views, so their attitude to the Soviet past would be heavily negative even if their personal experience did not support that.

Moreover, the very definition and self-definition of one's ethnic identity may indirectly point toward the Soviet past and its reception. Respondents may define their ethnicity and their language as either Moldovan or Romanian, and this often -- but not necessarily -- reflects their views on the Soviet past. Those who support Eurointegration are more likely to self-identify

as Romanian and view the Soviet Union in a purely negative light, while those who self-identify as Moldovan more often assess the USSR in different ways, varying from neutral to critical or positive.

In contrast, the Gagauz people generally remember the Soviet past more favorably. Their positive experiences in the USSR include an active social life, better healthcare, and education. The Gagauz republic is mostly comprised of rural areas. While social life was active during Soviet times, revolving around local collective farms, it has faded since the USSR's dissolution. This often leads to nostalgia for the more active social life, such as the local cinema club in a village. Additionally, many local medical aid stations were closed, which makes the elderly associate the Soviet era with a better and more secure social life.

At the same time, their opinion is significantly influenced by post-Soviet events, such as discrimination based on language⁶ and ethnicity, as well as an incident of open aggression, like the so-called march on Gagauzia (*pokhod na Gagauziiu*) conducted by far-right Moldovan nationalists in early 1990, remembered by the Gagauzi as an existential threat coming from the Chisinau authorities, even though it was stopped at the last moment. Another factor contributing to the Gagauz people's favorable view of the Soviets is the widespread negative oral history regarding the Romanian pre-war presence in the region. Some of the elder generations still remember the corporal punishment in school and occasional cruelties executed by the Romanian authorities.

RECOLLECTIONS OF STATE VIOLENCE

The theme of Stalinist deportations, which occupies a significant place in Moldova's public memory and historiography, manifests ambiguously in recollections. Responses vary, ranging from neutrality and forgiveness to clear negativity and judgment. Some Moldovans and Gagauz people who remember the deportations recall them in a positive way, neutralizing the aspect of state violence.

Consider the example of Tatiana (b. 1940), whose earliest memories begin with a departure from her native village to Siberia. She recalls the long train and the barracks where they lived just after arrival. She

says that she enjoyed living in a large community, emphasizing the value of international communal life and mutual support. Yet she neglects the circumstances that brought these people together. Reflecting on her life in Siberia, Tatiana remembers this period of her life the best. She enjoys talking about her school years, recalling her school and favorite teachers. It was during this time that she first learned Russian, and she often refers to the people she met during that period as "Russians." She recalls, "These Russians were very hospitable, and the teachers respected us. After classes, our teachers clothed us and followed us to the yard's doors. I was very happy about our teachers, and I remember them until now."

⁵ The distinctive mode of remembrance in Transnistria is related to the region's specific historical context. Generally, the memory of the USSR's collapse assumes a subtler manifestation in this region, being overshadowed by the more pronounced impacts of the military conflict between Chisinau and Tiraspol in 1992, as well as the region's pursuit of independence. Due to its uniqueness, which requires more space to be explained, this paper mostly excludes the analysis of Transnistria's memory.

⁶ The Gagauz are mostly bilingual, speaking both Gagauz and Russian. Although they learn Romanian in schools, the language usually remains part of their passive knowledge.

The Russians were very respectful; they visited us in our barracks. I would have liked to stay there [she meant the time after the amnesty], but my father wanted to go home” (Tatiana, interview #1). Here, memory selects the positive moments of the past while leaving behind the problematic ones. The interviewee prefers to stay within her child’s perception of the situation, rather than adopting an external viewpoint. The past remains critically not analyzed and produces a nostalgic picture. In turn, Tatiana does not want to remember the USSR’s collapse and the time after, she became emotional and sad. And based on indirect statements it became clear that the time was hard for her in many ways.

In contrast, some respondents view the repressions as pure state violence. Ludmila (b. 1949) uses the word “repression” many times in her narrative talking about deportations. While she generally viewed her life in the Soviet Union positively, she admits that she reevaluated it entirely after the USSR’s collapse. The transitional period brought a series of disappointments: first with Soviet ideology, and then with Romanian nationalism. She felt deceived by politicians and admits that she has stopped participating in all political life, including voting (Ludmila, int. #2).

At the same time, some interviewees from younger generations, who inherited their knowledge on deportations from family members, have internalized these stories and feel them as part of their identity. Talking about the Soviet past, one interviewee begins with the statement, “I am from deportees...” (Andrei, b. 1974, int.# 3). During the conversation, he partially explains his current political views and his identity, relying on the deportation story of his family.

Estimating their forced migration, some respondents, like Tatiana, admit that while it was a difficult time for their parents initially, it soon became better, and life went on as usual in the new place. Deportation is perceived as a temporary period of hardship that preceded stable times, seen as the price for future stability. When prompted to explain the reason for the Soviet deportations, some responded that it was a political necessity to create collective farms. While they do not approve of this measure and understand it as inherently unfair, they perceive state violence as something inevitable, almost a kind of fate.

Another attempt to explain Soviet violence as inherent to the world order puts the responsibility on their own community and neighborhood. It is often emphasized that it was the neighbors who reported on people to the police out of dishonest motives, such as revenge, jealousy, greed, and the desire to earn something, which is interpreted as part of human nature. One interviewee explains why neighbors reported on her family: “These people were poor! Their houses were not like ours!” (Tatiana, int. #1).

Another explanation of the deportation frames it as Stalin’s supposedly wrong decision. When asked about political pressure in Soviet society, one interviewee claims, “It was safe if you didn’t break the rules! And we went to work singing! -- But what about deportation? -- That was Stalin, and it happened everywhere, in Russia as well. It was about the rich people. It was an order, not like now” (Alexander, b.1947, FDG).

To extract the underlying logic from this statement, one might interpret it as follows:

1. “That was Stalin” = it was something exceptional, or we can/should make an excuse for Stalin;
2. “It happened everywhere, and in Russia as well” = since it happened everywhere, including Russia, it might have been right, or, at least, unavoidable;
3. “It was about the rich people” = it was fair, a restoration of social justice;
4. “It was an order, not like now” = it might have been hard, but it was represented social order, in contrast to today.

This interpretation is to some degree speculative, as many statements were not made directly, yet it tells us a lot. Notably, even the deportations in the late 1940s are explained through the prism of the post-Soviet transitional period.

MISSING SOCIAL WELFARE AND PEACE OF MIND FOR THE FUTURE

According to the interviews, the most missed aspects of the Soviet past include education, community engagement, shared values, confidence in the future, freedom of movement within the Soviet borders, and the opportunity to find a job in one’s hometown or country, without the need to migrate for employment. Additionally, many people nostalgically mention the industrial infrastructure lost after the Soviet Union

collapsed. The criminalization of society and the spike in alcoholism are other frequently mentioned factors that make respondents miss the Soviet era. Due to the challenges posed by labor migration, which often leaves the elderly and children behind, memories of the Soviet Union often favorably recall the opportunity to work at home and the job allocation system of that time.

While the interviewees elsewhere admit that their Soviet life was economically limited, they still note that it was sufficient to live well. Typically, statements acknowledge some lacks of Soviet life but then turn to positive compensations. For example, Alexander (int.#4, FGD) says, "Under the Soviet rule, we did not have a lot of money, but everything was cheap." Other interviewees mention that shortages were compensated by their own household production and a quiet and interesting communal life. Q: "But was it a shortage?" A: "We had our own household, instead." Another interviewee adds, "But it was happier and more interesting to live" (FGD).

A frequently repeated saying, heard across different parts of the country, goes, "It was communism; we did not notice it. Everything was cheap." Or, slightly differently, "To be honest, we lived under Communism but just did not get it" (Oleg, b.1966, #5). In some cases, these statements are complemented by clarifications such as, "We had a small salary, but we had everything" (FGD) or "We lived like under socialism. There was everything, and everything was harmonious, everything was for human needs. And we had everything. Yes, the clothing was simpler, but there was not a big difference, and you felt that you had money. And now?" (Nina, b. 1962 #9). Shortages were not forgotten. Instead, what makes this memory interesting that the negative aspects have been taken into account, but the post-Soviet period is regarded as a still more disadvantaged time, "Nowadays, there is everything in stores; you just need money. This is in contrast to Soviet times when wages were stable, but with some shortages" (Oleg, int. #5). What is important for this paper's argument is that this retrospective estimate of the late Soviet Union as a tranquil, unproblematic, and secure life rests on the opposition to the post-Soviet turbulent times, underlying a binary opposition: *then* and *now*.

Among the benefits often cited by respondents, education and a 'peace of mind for the future' stand out. Notably, these aspects are mentioned across generations, from people in their 80s to those in their 30s. The 'peace of mind for the future,' often described as 'confidence in tomorrow' (*uverennost' v zavtrashnem dne*) appears crucial to many, and its importance is also rooted in its juxtaposition in the following time. Apparently, for those who experienced the Soviet era, the uncertainties and insecurities of post-Soviet period have become synonymous with stress and exhaustion. As a result, this period is perceived as full of disadvantages: "After the USSR, there was nothing good, only chaos" (FGD).

One interviewee shares her recollections of the Soviet times with nostalgia about the stability of the social system, "Everything was cheap, and there was no unemployment. Those with even a specialized secondary education were confident they would find a job because of the job referral system. <...> Purchasing housing was much easier. There were even condominiums. <...> My parents were even going to buy a car. Of course, not everyone could afford it, but if someone wanted it,

it was possible. Moreover, people's relationships [were better]! And [the freedom of] movement within the Soviet Union!" (Irina, b.1975, int.#7). A subsequent in-depth interview with Irina proves that her estimate is also retrospective. She graduated from a prestigious university as a translator. However, her graduation coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Irina was unable to find a job in her field and she has made her living through unskilled labor.

Social equality, often mentioned as a missed feature of Soviet life, is relevant here as well. "There were no very rich or very poor individuals, actually. All people felt more or less equal. Even if people had more, no one would show that. Any person who wanted to achieve something could work, earn money, and build their own house, and all the people would help them" (Nina, int.#9). Notably, some nostalgic feelings come even from people who are now very critical about the USSR. Larisa (b.1976) admits that she is very happy about her Soviet childhood. Talking about her early years, she admits that only positive feelings remained from that period, "I do not see anything bad for me [at that time]. [...] I remember it with nostalgia" (Larisa, int.#6).

The interviewees often express nostalgia for the sense of belonging, the value of their work, and the feeling of contributing to a society that characterized their Soviet life. Elena (b.1952) nostalgically recalls working as a teacher in the late USSR. She believes everyone should have a calling and contribute to society, and she remembers that her contribution made her happy. In contrast, losing her position in the 1990s was a very challenging time for her financially and emotionally. It made her feel worthless. After finding a job as a nanny at a local kindergarten, she partially felt a sense of restored self-esteem. Working with children whose parents had left for jobs abroad, she noticed the children's feelings of being abandoned and unloved, and she made it her mission to help them. Despite the challenging life circumstances and low pay, this work comforted her emotionally. But the sheer number of children left behind only deepened her feelings of negativity and despair about the USSR's collapse. Elena admits that she never reconciled herself to the new conditions and considers her Motherland the Soviet Union, confessing that the Soviet hymn evokes strong feelings in her.

Trust in Soviet school and university education, as well as in the figure of the dedicated Soviet teacher, are also frequently mentioned. These memories are often personalized: those who were taught by Soviet teachers remember their educators with appreciation as formative influences. For instance, Tatiana (int.#1) recalls her teachers in a Siberian village with deep gratitude. The image of the Soviet teacher could be so inspiring that some people chose their professions based on it, like Marina, who was so impressed by Igor Razgodin's painting "A Village Teacher" (1957) that she aspired to become a teacher in a village.

“First of all, I was impressed by an image created by a Soviet painter at school. I don’t remember the name of the painter, but I vividly recall this painting. It depicted a young woman with a slightly blurred background, wearing a scarf on her head and carrying books in her hands. She represented the ideal teacher to me. I don’t know why! It was something innate. I desired to become a village teacher. In addition, growing up in this city, which was a small village at that time, I was aware that good teachers were needed in villages. (Marina, b.1953 int. #10)

Although the Soviet Union featured an iron curtain and closed borders, the free movement between the former republics and cheap public transport meant that for many people there was a sense of comparative ease of travel. According to Elena (b. 1952), the transportation system in the USSR was cheap and accessible, while the new system is private and expensive. She recalls how in Soviet times, she could travel to her relatives in Ukraine every summer, while today it became too expensive for her. In addition to financial aspect of traveling, another interviewee emphasized bureaucratic difficulties, expressing it as follows, “You could travel to any part of the USSR with one passport!”

The feeling of shared values and openness among members of society was mentioned many times, usually in contrast to the current moment. “After the collapse, people started dividing everything. They became black and white, red and white, and so on...” (FGD). The case of the provincial town exemplifies social anomie and isolation. For example, former teachers who have lived on the same street for many years were a community during Soviet times but felt isolated in the post-Soviet era. The small town, now half-empty, does not provide the same social scene. Consequently, these women find themselves locked in their town, street, and finally, their houses, feeling abandoned.

To sum up, interviews reveal that the most missed aspects of the Soviet past include education, community engagement, shared values, confidence in the future, freedom of movement, and local employment

opportunities. Nostalgia often centers on the stability, affordability, and sense of community provided during the Soviet era, contrasting sharply with the uncertainties and hardships of the post-Soviet period. While acknowledging the modest economic means of Soviet life, interviewees stress that it was sufficient for a good life. They recall how shortages were managed through household production and a supportive community. Education and ‘peace of mind for the future’ emerge in the narratives as particularly important, mentioned across generations, and rooted in the sense of security that contrasted with the stress and exhaustion of the post-Soviet era. The ability to move freely and affordably within the Soviet Union and the sense of shared values are also fondly remembered. These aspects reflect the unity and common identity shared by Soviet citizens, who perceived themselves as part of a large supranational group of Soviet people.

This nostalgic view highlights a binary opposition between the perceived tranquility of the Soviet past and the turbulence of the post-Soviet present. The nostalgia expressed by the interviewees does not indicate a desire to return to the USSR. Instead, it reflects the shock of abrupt social change and the trauma of the transitional period’s hardships, underscoring the significant impact of this historical shift on their lives. In Boym’s terms, these might be classified as reflective nostalgia, yet with elements of restorative nostalgia, when the interviewees consider the USSR as a bigger social entity to which they were proud to belong.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper is part of a larger research project on the memory of the Soviet era in Moldova. It focuses on individuals who came of age in the late Soviet period, spent their formative years there, and those, who spent in the USSR their early youth and still have memories are based on firsthand experiences. The study reveals that the memory of the Soviet Union among these people is complex and ambiguous. Their recollections can be critical yet nostalgic in some aspects, ironic and forgiving, selectively focused, and influenced by the post-Soviet transitional economic and social hardships and the country’s current political climate.

A significant limitation of the results is the language of the research. The language of the research was Russian, which excluded Romanian speakers or those who did not wish to speak Russian, posing a substantial limitation for generalizing the results to the entire Moldovan society.

It is likely that Romanian-speaking individuals would be more critical of the Soviet period.

Nevertheless, the data is valuable for understanding the memory of a segment of Moldova’s society. The research shows that post-Soviet hardships, including political tensions, societal conflicts, and financial difficulties, significantly influenced attitudes toward the Soviet era.

However, despite longing for Soviet times, individuals mostly acknowledge that there is no return to the past. The results introduce a new perspective by broadening the conventional understanding of how the turbulent transitional period evoked a longing for the stability of the late Soviet era. In particular, while the majority of research on post-Communist nostalgia focuses on its potentially negative sociopolitical consequences, seeing a restorative nostalgia, using Boym’s terms, the research shows that nostalgia includes the positive aspects when

used as a tool that may help individuals preserve their identities and cope with socio-economic difficulties they faced in the transitional period. Thus, Moldovan feelings mainly belong to reflective nostalgia, which does not have explicit political claims. At the same time, there is a risk that nostalgia will be politicized in society further and lead to other consequences.

The knowledge gained would be significantly enhanced if more Romanian-speaking people were included in the study. Furthermore, the research should be continued when the economic and socio-political situation changes.

As we can see, the nostalgia of the Soviet times revealed in Moldova's society might be two-fold. Although there are some hopes that the Soviet Union can return somehow, that might be characterized as restorative nostalgia, according to Boym's classification. However, it is rather wishful thinking that is not supported by an actual determination to take any actions in that direction. More common is a kind of reflexive nostalgia, when missing the past is mixed with an ironic, bittersweet feeling that going back to that past is impossible. For some people, this nostalgia helps to explain their feelings of abandonment and not belonging to the present reality.

The saying, "We lived under communism, but just didn't get it," reminds us that the values of Soviet life were only genuinely understood in retrospect. The frequent comparisons of Soviet and post-Soviet living conditions highlight the profound impact of the transition stage's protracted difficulties on people's nostalgia for the past. In addition, it is essential to remember that these results study the memory of the respondents who mostly lived in the Soviet Union of the late period. It was a time of economic stagnation, but socially, it might be called 'calm' as no considerable turbulent events happened in Moldova at that time. Notably, wanting the past restored is often complemented with irony, including self-irony, and an awareness of drawbacks of the Soviet economy.

The memory of the Soviet past is not a one-dimensional glorification. It is also a critical reflection, where people remember the good things but simultaneously admit that they would never want to go back. Some even retrospectively acknowledge their naivety at that time, a testament to the complexity of societal memory.

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List of Interviewees

1. Tatiana, b. 1940
2. Ludmila b. 1949
3. Andrei, b. 1974
4. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with six people:
 - 1) Egor b.1954
 - 2) Maxim b.1960
 - 3) Olga b.1953
 - 4) Alexander b.1947
 - 5) Irina, b.1976
 - 6) Ilia, b. 1975
5. Oleg, b.1966
6. Larisa, b.1976
7. Irina, b.1976
8. Elena b.1952
9. Nina b. 1962
10. Marina b. 1953
11. Igor b.1943
12. Lilia b.1949
13. Nikolai b.1931