Symbolic Re-Sovietization and Grassroots Patriotism

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Abstract
This article is an attempt to explain the reasons for the restoration of Soviet symbols in those regions of Ukraine that have come under Russian control as a result of the current conflict, using the concepts of 'crisis of representation' and 'grassroots patriotism.' It stresses that what is happening cannot be explained as "the restoration of Soviet totalitarianism" with support from the Russian authorities, who take a different position towards the Soviet past. It is also shown that the appeal to Soviet values is an obvious consequence of the trauma of the 1990s, experienced by the entire post-Soviet space, that has not been overcome in mass mentality and the ideological domain.

Keywords: re-Sovietization, patriotism, ideology, historical trauma, the 1990s, memory politics, Russia-Ukraine conflict, crisis of representation.

In April 2022, news agencies reported about seemingly strange events taking place in territories of Ukraine controlled by Russian troops. Several cities declared the intention to restore monuments to Lenin and Soviet symbols and some actually acted on their words. The world saw photographs of the monument to Lenin reinstated in the small town of Genichesk, Kherson region. Some monuments were also restored in Melitopol and Novaya Kakhovka. Plans were also reported to bring back the monument to Lenin in Skadovsk. According to a decision by the heads of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) of March 12, 2022, previously "decommunized" names were brought back in the Donetsk territories that had come under control of the DNR troops and Russian forces.

What does this symbolic re-Sovietization mean?

There are several opinions on this score.

A contributing author of the right-wing conservative online magazine *The Dispatch*, political scientist Andrew Fink, in a comment on the restoration of the monument to Lenin in Genichesk, noted: "This might strike some as a bit strange, as Vladimir Putin has stated that Lenin's revolution betrayed the interests of the Russian nation. In 2016 he directly condemned Lenin as an oppressor who had killed priests and the czar and for having placed a 'time bomb' under the Russian state by allowing internal 'ethnic' regions in the Soviet Empire. In his pre-war speech on February 21, Putin specifically invoked Lenin as the ultimate villain behind Ukraine's existence" (Fink, 2022a). However, in another piece he authored, Fink comes to a different conclusion regarding the Russian leadership: "They may have ditched Marxism, but they kept Leninism. The Cold War is long over, but not in the heads of the Russian leadership," Russian propaganda hides Soviet ideology (Fink, 2022b).

Fink does not notice a glaring contradiction in his own judgments (not to mention the fact that his denial of NATO's aggressive policy, also present in the text, contradicts the facts of life, but it is hard to expect anything else from a conservative right-wing U.S. periodical).

Fink is not the only one who turns a blind eye to this contradiction. Luke Harding of *The Guardian* also states: "Genichesk and other

occupied areas are now seeing forced 'recommunization.' Or, put another way, they are going back to the USSR" (Harding, 2022).

Oddly enough, Russia's extreme right see eye to eye with the Western conservatives and liberals. Nationalist Mikhail Nazarov wrote a column about the return of Soviet names and monuments to Lenin under the eloquent title "How to Finally Discredit the 'Special Operation' to Liberate Ukraine." He called these actions (along with the "focus on the nationalists"—surprise, surprise!) "a patriotic variety of hereditary 'Soviet' stupidity,'" and peppered his reasoning with a pinch of anti-Semitism (Nazarov, 2022). In the right camp, this point of view is generally quite popular.

Is it really an attempt to symbolically recreate the USSR now, in the 100th year since its creation?

POST-SOVIET STATISM: A DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE WITH THE SOVIET ANTHEM

Of course, it is very difficult for anyone in Moscow (likewise in London, New York or even Kiev) to speculate about what is in the minds of people living on the territories taken by Russian troops. Of course, the interpretation of events in the context of the ongoing military conflict is incomplete by default. Of course, no sociological surveys are possible yet. However, opinion polls in Russia itself and research into ideologies and historical memory prompt some cautious assumptions.

During the period of "Leninfall," Bohdan Korolenko from the Ukrainian National Remembrance Institute answered a journalist's question about the tasks of decommunization on Politico.com in these words: "The main task of decommunization is not to take down a statue or rename a street, it is to change the identity of Ukrainians" and prevent a similar ideology from taking root again. Ukrainians, he added, "need to understand communism was a suppressive regime. Unfortunately, many Ukrainians still have not learned that lesson" (Melkozerova, 2020).

The Ukrainian authorities' growing determination to get rid of Russian cultural influence (demolition of monuments, bans on music and books) as the hostilities intensify can be seen as further effort to

build the image of Ukraine as a victim of colonization (first by the Russian Empire, then by the USSR) and—in the longer term—as a step towards fast assimilation of the Russian-speaking population the Baltic way.

But part of the problem is that the struggle against the Soviet legacy, even if it is disguised as "anti-colonial" and "anti-imperial," in practice turns out to be a struggle against the ideology of social justice. Remarkably, in some countries of the post-Soviet space and in Latin America alike a positive attitude towards Russia is very often based on the identification of Russia as being akin to the USSR. I myself could see how disappointed my Latin American acquaintances felt when they encountered the capitalist realities in modern Russia.

Undoubtedly, the glaring contradiction noted by Fink, quoted above, does exist. On the one hand, there is Putin's anti-Leninist and, by and large, anti-Soviet message, mentioned above and, on the other hand, we are witnessing the restoration of Soviet monuments, symbols, etc.

How can one explain this contradiction?

Attempts to interpret it as a method used by the Russian leadership (or part of it) to build Russia's colonial policy do not hold water for several reasons. First and foremost because the ideological position of the Russian authorities is controversial. On the one hand, it relies on the victory in the Great Patriotic War, and, on the other hand, it worships the legacy of the Russian Empire. Fink finds this ideological combination "a bit strange." Moreover, it often leads to odd combinations: for example, while glorifying the Victory in the Great Patriotic War, they keep Ivan Ilyin in the pantheon of authors important to the Russian leadership as a "patriot," although he not only collaborated with the Nazis, but even after 1945 had nothing against the idea of a nuclear bombing of the USSR. I have noted such contradictions in the ideological model of modern Russia previously (Solovyov, 2018); the fact that now this model has grown stronger does not make it secure from inevitable failures in the future.

At this point it is necessary to consider the historical policy of modern Russia.

There is a widespread view that contemporary Russia's memory politics is based on the "doctrine of total continuity." Olga Malinova argues: "The 'doctrine of total continuity' undoubtedly heralded a new approach to the political use of the past: instead of solving the dilemmas that the construction of a holistic narrative inevitably involves, a course was taken towards selective 'exploitation' of historical events, phenomena and personalities fitting in with a specific context" (Malinova, 2015, pp. 70-71).

Continuity—yes, but the totality of this continuity is out of the question. It should rather be described as discrete. In the very center of the official historical politics (or memory politics—I do not see any difference between these two terms), or more precisely, the process of constructing an ideology—continuity is centered around the state. Everything that contributes to a strong state is good. Anything that weakens the state is bad. There are some reservations here (especially regarding the Yeltsin period and the role of Yeltsin himself), but in general, this emphasis on the state provides a platform for the eclectic cross-breed of the double-headed eagle and the Soviet anthem that constitutes the backbone of modern Russian ideology. Malinova points to this feature: "In the new official discourse, it is the state (regardless of changing borders and political regimes) that is now portrayed as a value core that cements the macropolitical identity" (Malinova, 2015, p. 71). And despite the introduction of the concept of the Great Russian Revolution, designed to neutralize the specific flavor of the October 1917 events, the displacement of the revolutionary component of Russia's history remains an invariable feature of the Russian authorities' historical policy from the early 1990s to the present day, regardless of other ideological fluctuations, attitudes towards the Stalinist period and the Soviet period as a whole (for more on two positions that had taken shape by the early 2010s, see: Miller and Lipman, 2012, pp. 355–358).

The attitude towards the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War was relatively recently converted into an idea of reconciliation and symbolically embodied in a monument in Crimea. But the monument itself has turned out to be extremely unsuccessful in symbolic terms: a golden (Why golden?) statue of the Motherland stands on a stella

above its children, who clashed in the Civil War. She does not embrace the Red Army soldier and the White Guard soldier, she does not try to reconcile them, but stands above them! In fact, she is a symbol of the state, and not the Motherland.

The model of reconciliation through statism, state continuity, as embodied in monuments and in the official "conservative" ideology, denies the personality of Lenin as "the destroyer" of the state, the enemy of the empire, and the "defeatist" in World War I—and also the "creator" (as Putin said) of Ukraine.

The figure of Lenin does not fit in with the ideological model of state continuity at all.

Konstantin Pakhalyuk notes quite correctly: "It is an attempt to compensate for the shortage of values, that is, to formulate moral arguments,that makes politicians and diplomats look back on the past" (Pakhalyuk, 2020, p. 102). But even for ordinary people, history becomes a source of values and meanings, transferred not only through the state's ideological apparatus, but also through "grassroots" exchanges, within the family, and this transfer of values may well contrast with the official ideological expectations. Pakhalyuk notes: "A look back on the past in foreign policy appears in the form of a nationally oriented narrative with an emphasis on positive pages. History is needed as a kind of representation, as a piece of unambiguous evidence, cleared of any contradictions. <…> Controversial pages of history turn out to be inconvenient, and any reference to them begins to be seen as an encroachment on the moral status" (Ibid, p. 105).

At the same time it should be noted that in the unofficial historical memory, in the public mind, these contradictions are unmistakably present, and the eclecticism of the official ideology by no means contributes to their elimination.

In terms of the Russian state's modern historical policy, the restoration of monuments to Lenin (and not double-headed eagles) in cities taken by Russian troops is ideologically inconvenient from both domestic and foreign policy points of view. Another confirmation of this is seen in a recent statement by one of the DPR's "field commanders," Alexander Khodakovsky, which will be discussed below.

So why is this happening? The answer that instantly offers itself is this: because after the *Maidan* coup in 2014 these monuments were demolished across Ukraine. Their restoration is a symbol of revanche. But is it encouraged by the Russian authorities? I have big doubts about this. Rather, this matter has been left (for the time being) to the discretion of local activists—pro-Russian groups of the population and the DPR and LPR authorities. It is very important to grasp the symbolic meaning of what is happening: the restoration of monuments to Lenin, Soviet names and emblems is clear evidence that the people, especially older people, associate Russia with the Soviet heritage. And one of the possible positive expectations they pin on Russia is the restoration of Soviet stability and greater social justice, and not just the protection of the Russian-speaking population. The same attitude towards the Soviet past lingers in a significant part of Russian society.

The collapse of the USSR shows that its current idealization can only be the result of an ideological vacuum. Undoubtedly, the idealization and mythologization of the Soviet past, especially of the late Soviet period, is, above all, a consequence of the post-Soviet trauma.

What part of the "Soviet memory" is contemporary Russia's ideology based on? The clue to understanding why this Soviet memory lives on is not "thanks to" but "in defiance of." It is rooted in the trauma of the 1990s, the frustration caused not just by the collapse of the Soviet state, but, above all, by the horrible drop in the people's living standards and the lack of confidence in the future. It is this frustration that still fuels the nostalgia (although this term is not quite accurate in this case) for the Soviet past and its idealization.

But this trauma was inflicted not on Russia alone, but almost on the entire post-Soviet space. One of the ways to overcome it was consolidation based on the politicization of ethnicity (Guboglo, 1998; Semenov, 2004) and the formation of nationalist ideologies in the former Soviet republics. Religions and churches played a significant role in the ideological overcoming of the Soviet legacy. It was precisely for this purpose that the concepts of enslaved peoples were invented. During the Soviet period they were allegedly exploited and deprived of their national identity. Although in all Soviet republics it was the

other way round: the national identity, however controversial and volatile the Soviet nationalities policy might have been, was formed during the Soviet period. And despite the significant successes in the formation of nationalist ideologies in different countries, the Soviet heritage, including the symbolic heritage, remains the main unifying force in the post-Soviet space, partly in economic terms (preservation of the remnants of the Soviet infrastructure and ties prevented the severing of contacts for a long time), but above all, in the cultural and ideological terms. Moreover, against the will of the ruling classes in the post-Soviet space, which built their ideologies on the denial and demonization of the Soviet period (with Belarus as an exception of some sort).

Of course, this heritage per se is in many ways an ideological construct brought to life by the trauma of the 1990s. And this trauma is experienced by a significant part of the population (especially in the provinces) as a consequence of "wild capitalism." This trauma becomes a unifying factor within the framework of "patriotism of despair" described by Serguei Oushakine (2009, pp. 76-77).

Since an overwhelming majority of the population in the former Soviet Union (and the former Russian Empire) acquired literacy and the opportunity to use social mobility elevators precisely in the Soviet period, the memory of the USSR has a unifying force, while references to pre-Soviet times for all former Soviet republics, whatever their distinctions and local specifics, lack such strength. Of course, the people's age factor is also important: for those over forty-five in the middle or low income brackets, the Soviet heritage remains relevant. And not only for them. A liking for the Soviet past is growing among young people, too—at least in Russia (Yadova, 2021).

No other unifying incentive has been found in Russia throughout the entire post-Soviet period: the ideology of the "Russian World" inevitably either denies the Soviet project (and then loses most of its content) or incorporates it (which is particularly true of a significant part of Russian diasporas in post-Soviet countries). Sociologists draw attention to the fact that the self-identification as "Russian" for a significant part of the population is not identical to the ethnic status,

but rather a sense of belonging to a political nation rooted in the Soviet period (Clément, 2021, p. 20).

Negative assessments of Lenin's role in the Soviet Union's nationalities policy are unable to change this situation. Suffice it to recall the historical facts: the development and climax of Ukrainization in the 1920s-early 1930s occurred when Lenin was dead and Stalin struggled for power. It was Stalin who supported it until the transition to the policy of Russocentrism in 1932–1934 (for detail see: Brandenberger, 2002). But the real history of the Soviet nationalities policy is extremely complex and requires further serious research (it is worth recalling works by Terry Martin (2001), Francine Hirsch (2005), Amanzholova et al (2021). In the modern ideological context history is of secondary importance.

"NON-STATE PATRIOTISM"

In her study "Patriotism from Below," important for understanding many ideological processes in post-Soviet Russia, Carine Clément notes: "The development of patriotism, its Kremlin version or some other, responds to the striving for solidarity that comes from below" (Clément, 2021, p. 14). She rightly refers to Eric Hobsbawm who wrote that national phenomena "… are… dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is, in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are necessarily national and still less nationalistic" (Hobsbawm, 2012(1992), p. 10).

In her work, Clément, based on interviews conducted in different cities of Russia (including capitals and provincial towns), analyzed various types of patriotism to arrive at this conclusion: "The most common type of patriotism is patriotism which is critical of either state propaganda of patriotism, or even of the political course in general. The most common criticism is social criticism, that is, criticism of the inequality between the poor and the rich, as well as criticism of privatization, as a result of which the national treasure ended up in the hands of a narrow circle of owners" (Clément, 2021, p. 22). Clément's research shows that there is no connection between patriotism

and resentment: people with a declining social trajectory displayed significantly lower levels of patriotism than those whose status was rather stable or rising. Also, the study did not confirm the existence of a link between patriotism and xenophobia (Ibid, p. 24).

It is especially important in this regard that Clément's research is qualitative, it is based on the analysis of interviews, and not on public opinion polls. According to this study, a majority of Russians, in whose worldview patriotism plays a significant role, do not accept the official variety of patriotism. They prioritize social injustice, inclined towards critical thinking, and contrast "working people" and "rich" fake patriots. Clément describes this complex of views as "non-state patriotism." This "patriotism from below," or grassroots patriotism, which allows Russians to overcome the trauma of the collapse of the USSR and familiar institutions in the 1990s and the 2000s, has a distinctly leftist tinge. Of course, it is not ideologically institutionalized, it is spontaneous, but the facts show that identifying the state of the public mind with the picture provided by the official media and public opinion polls (purely quantitative, not using qualitative methods of analysis) leads to delusion.

The restoration of Soviet symbols, on the one hand, is, indeed, flirting with those people in the territories taken by Russian troops who still identify themselves with the USSR. On the other hand, it may be a manifestation (at least to a certain extent) of the grassroots striving for social justice that is associated with the Soviet past.

Another reason for the "viability" of the Soviet component of historical memory in modern Russia and in part of the post-Soviet space is the weakness of the ideological structures that were expected to pull down and replace Soviet ideology. In Russia, in this regard, the attempt to symbolically replace the Soviet holiday on November 7 with National Unity Day on November 4 ended with utter failure. There emerged just another day off with a historical description unclear to a majority of the population. Such examples abound. But the main problem is not historical mythology or ideology.

The question inevitably arises: How correct is it to apply Clément's conclusions to the situation in other post-Soviet countries, above

all, in Ukraine? The complexity of conducting relevant sociological research is obvious. At the moment it is simply impossible. Mechanical extrapolation is totally incorrect, of course. Well-known Ukrainian historian G. Kasyanov has observed: "The Southeast (primarily Donbass) and Crimea remained an almost untouched preserve of Soviet, imperial and Soviet-nostalgic narratives. Since 2014, there has been a disastrously rapid displacement of the Soviet-nostalgic and partly imperial narrative from Central, Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Here the influence of the exclusive model of the national/nationalist is growing" (Kasyanov, 2019, p. 175). How successful this displacement was is now hard to say, but the existence of noticeable, albeit passive, opposition to this displacement, in my opinion, is undeniable.

Sociologists Volodymyr Ishchenko and Oleg Zhuravlev published an important article in 2021, describing the political process that most post-Soviet countries have in common. They called it a "crisis of representation" (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev, 2021). Both political scientists have mentioned this phenomenon in relation to Russia more than once, but in this particular article the problem is considered as a common one to the entire post-Soviet space. "The crisis of representation is a decline in the ability of the ruling elites to successfully represent the interests of broader social groups, let alone the entire nation. The crisis manifests itself in dwindling trust and participation in the institutions of representative democracy (such as elections), a reduction in the membership of political parties and civil society organizations, a growing gap between the masses and the traditional political elites, perceived as "the same corrupt ones." The authors argue, fairly enough in my opinion, that the "post-Soviet elite's political parties had no party traditions to rely on other than those of Brezhnev's Communist Party of the Soviet Union. They reproduced and exacerbated some of its worst traits: paternalism, meaningless ideology, opportunism, and weak activist mobilization." In Ukraine, nationalist mobilization both before and after the Euromaidan, did not ease, but on the contrary strengthened the traditional split between the West and the East of the country. The conservative model of stability with an authoritarian leader (Russia and Belarus) became the main

alternative to the crisis of representation, but even here this crisis of representation was only mothballed, and not overcome. As the crisis goes on, the old symbolic models continue to be reproduced over and over again—simply for the lack of new ones.

...On July 24, 2022, the DPR's politician and "field commander" Alexander Khodakovsky wrote in *Telegram* about the restoration of Soviet symbols: "My team is mostly young, and I don't remember anyone who would risk one's life on the battlefield, while being a follower of Lenin. For whom are we resurrecting a dying cult then? The idea of Communism has lost to the selfish nature of man, which turned out to be stronger. The idea of social justice is alive, but there is no mechanism for its implementation in the material world. Then I repeat my question: For whose sake is this flirting with an obsolete idea?" (Khodakovsky, 2022).

How obsolete the "obsolete idea" really is, is a good subject for debate, but the main problem is that apart from mobilization within the framework of the current military conflict no alternative ideological and symbolic forms that might unite and inspire the people (and not only the older generation) have been created. And even less efficient for inspiring people are the egoistic nature of man, the theses of Ayn Rand and Friedrich Hayek, and Ivan Ilyin's fascist "popular monarchism."

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Both historical policy and ideological transformations may seem subjects of secondary importance unworthy of attention at this particular moment. However, the lack of a proper understanding of these processes or the delusion that any ideology and historical memory are entirely and completely constructed by spin doctors result in fundamental mistakes. We have witnessed some of them already. The underestimation of grassroots patriotism, both in Russia and abroad, causes political failures and ridiculous mishaps in the academic world.

In 2022, Lev Gudkov's book "Recurrent Totalitarianism" was published, in which the author actually arrives at the conclusion that Russian society is doomed to authoritarianism and atomization: "The core of collective perceptions is made from the values of strength

and self-worth of a 'great power,' which is a synonym or pseudonym for uncontrolled power. Violence in this case becomes a highly significant and valued code of social behavior, a sign of high status and respect" (Gudkov, 2022, p. 378). Another quote from the work of this renowned sociologist: "The fact is that the assumed or imagined opinions and views of blue-collar workers turn out to be the 'norm of the majority' (although factory workers do not constitute the largest socio-demographic category of those surveyed), to which other groups of the population mentally orient themselves as a reference category of socially acceptable ideas. All sociologists and historians who have studied working class affairs agree that by virtue of their role and social specificity workers are distinguished for anti-intellectualism and distrust towards the high values of culture" (Ibid, p. 246).

It should be noted that far from all sociologists and historians well familiar with working class-related issues have pointed to workers "anti-intellectualism" (suffice it to recall the classic study of Edward Palmer Thompson (1966), a work by George Rudé (1984) or the views of Pierre Bourdieu (see Riley, 2017)). We have before us classical elitism, if not social racism, which ascribes to the lower classes inherent viciousness and a propensity for practices of violence and totalitarianism. Clément's study cited above completely debunks such views. Simply put, such conviction about the "anti-intellectualism" of industrial workers means that the post-Soviet society remains inhabited by "Soviet plebeians" and therefore doomed to totalitarianism. In reality, however, the situation is much more complicated.

Indeed, a considerable part of the population in the post-Soviet countries would like a return of some kind of Soviet stability and Soviet equality (but without Soviet shortages), but this hope for overcoming the lingering trauma rests more on protest against social injustice than on nostalgia or resentment. Given the above-mentioned "crisis of representation," a significant potential for social protest remains across the entire post-Soviet space. So far it has not taken new organizational and ideological forms, except for appeals to the Soviet past.

How correct the above speculations regarding the motives behind the restoration of Soviet symbols and the nature of grassroots

patriotism, which does not coincide with the official ideology, are, will be clear in the medium term—regardless of how many monuments to Lenin are back in place.

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