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Nargiz Yagubova
Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Art
(Azerbaijan)

yaqubovanargiz@mail.ru

IS THERE A SOVIET NOSTALGIA IN AZERBAIJAN?

Abstract. Nostalgia is the longing for those times, romanticizing the memories and elements of the past. For nostalgia to develop, however, there must be a contrast between the past and the present over a period of time. The article examines the possible contradictions between modern Azerbaijan and the Soviet era, the possible reasons for nostalgia. Among these reasons, the importance of socio-economic factors is emphasized.

Key words: nostalgia, Soviet nostalgia, social hardship, economic change, postsovet period.

Introduction. The end of the twentieth century was marked by very important and dramatic events. Just as the disintegration of the USSR led to large-scale changes in the world, it was already known that it would affect the daily lives of ordinary people. These changes were initially met with great hope and enthusiasm, the future was envisioned as a rapid and painless transition from socialist totalitarianism to liberal democracy and from a planned economy to a market economy. But the initial enthusiasm gave way to distrust, apathy, and in some cases anger [6, p.74]. This reality, which affected the population of the former socialist countries, forced social scientists to reconsider the changes. Early studies of post-Soviet culture have often emphasized a break with the Soviet past: the change of political symbols, the creation of new national myths that replaced the myth of “Soviet” identity, the triumph of “wild capitalism” and the cult of individual success, the consumption that ended the famine economy. But since the 2000s, nostalgia – a desire to return to the past – has begun to attract attention, as the post-Soviet population regrets the collapse of the communist system [13, p.7]. The results of regular surveys confirm this. According to a survey conducted

by the Levada Center in Russia in 2018, those who regret the collapse of the USSR are twice as many as those who do not (66% regret and 25% do not regret) [21]. The percentage of those who regret fell below 50% only once, in 2012 it was 49%. It is natural that these percentages are high in Russia, the legal successor of the USSR. But according to a Gallup poll in the post-Soviet space, 51% of the post-Soviet population think that the collapse of the USSR harmed their country, only 24% think that it was beneficial [20]. The results in Azerbaijan show that 44% of participants said it was beneficial and 31% said it was harmful. Among the possible reasons for the feeling of longing for the USSR are, first of all, economic reasons. For a long time, post-Soviet countries ranked last in statistics on living standards. From 1988 to 1994, the poverty rate rose from 4% to 32%. From 1989 to the mid-1990s, the number of people living on less than \$ 4 a day increased tenfold to 147 million [9]. Therefore, various studies have begun to emerge, showing that nostalgia in the former Soviet Union stems from economic reasons. In order for feelings of nostalgia to emerge, there must be a contradiction between the past and the present over a period of time [4, p. 11]. Are there still feelings of Soviet nostalgia in Azerbaijan, and to what extent does the contradiction between the past and the present give rise to this?

The interpretation of the main material. In order to understand the extent of nostalgia in Azerbaijan, we must first clarify the attitude of the population to the USSR. To be more precise, is the disintegration of the USSR just a post-Soviet period for them? Or does it contain other, post-colonial elements? We substantiate this with the fact that, unlike many other Soviet republics, Northern Azerbaijan was part of Tsarist Russia for a long time (with the exception of two years Azerbaijan Democratic Republic) before the establishment of the Soviets. However, the connection and continuity between colonialism and the Soviet era is still a subject of research for scholars. “Although the Bolsheviks called tsarist policy “colonial”, they borrowed from it and embellished it to implement their own policies – building socialism and communism, creating the “new Soviet person”, and establishing “friendship of people”, “drawing nearer” and even “merging”” [1, p. XXIV]. Therefore, the USSR is considered only as a modified version of colonialism and we would not be mistaken to evaluate both stages through the prism of colonialism.

R.G. Suny draws attention to the use of the terms “friendship of peoples” and “brotherhood of peoples” and writes that they were used for different purposes. Although the brotherhood signifies kinship, it also involves hierarchy between

older and younger brothers and it was clear to everyone which nation would become the “older brother”. Friendship has the advantage of emphasizing equality among the Soviet people. “Friends after all are equivalent to one another; their relationship is about trust, devotion, dependability, affection, and reciprocity. Equality and hierarchy were brought together in Stalin’s toast of 8 November 1938: ‘Old Russia has been transformed into today’s USSR where all peoples are identical...Among the equal nations, states, and countries of the USSR, the most Soviet and the most revolutionary is the Russian nation’” [14, p.26].

This is why the results of opinion polls show that the Russians are the ones who are most saddened by the collapse of the USSR. In 2009, 58% of respondents agreed that “it is a great misfortune that the Soviet Union no longer exists” [19]. As Russia formed the core of the Soviet state, the Russian and Soviet identities were intertwined. Various reports show that Russian citizens see the collapse of the Soviet Union as a personal loss and a heavy blow to the national image [16]. Putin called the disintegration of the USSR “the main geopolitical catastrophe of the century” [18]. Asked if there were any events in the past that you would like to stop, he responded it was the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Putin said that those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart, and those who want it to be restored to its previous format have no brains. He considers the format of the former Soviet Union to be outdated but also emphasizes that it is worthwhile to feel nostalgic [17].

The term nostalgia was first used in 1688 by Y.Hoffer in his medical dissertation. Combining the Greek words nostos – to return home and algia – longing, he called the symptoms he observed in Swiss soldiers (grief, insomnia, weakness, loss of appetite, etc.) nostalgia – “longing to return home.” While other scholars continued Hoffer’s research, it became clear that this disease can be seen in anyone (especially soldiers serving outside their homeland) who is forced to leave their traditional environment, which is accompanied by a sudden rupture of emotional bonds, thereby causing feelings of weakness and loneliness [11, p. 343]. From the 19th century onwards, the word began to lose its medical meaning, began to be used in psychology, and later in sociology, mainly in relation to transitional periods.

For nostalgia to develop, there must be a clear distinction between the past and the present. Nostalgia is the romanticization of past events, people, attitudes, and values that conflict with the current situation. Although nostalgia

is about the past, it says a lot about the current situation, especially if promises and expectations for a better future have not come true. In short, the more dissatisfaction with unfulfilled dreams and promises, the more nostalgia [15]. In this sense, the reason for the growing nostalgia in post-Soviet countries is the dissatisfaction with the failure of the hoped-for world of prosperity. Although nostalgia is associated with a sharp breakdown and loss of the past, the reason for the increase in nostalgia in the former Soviet Union is not communism itself, but the post-communist period. The social, economic, and political changes that have taken place since 1989 are the most traumatic. “While crime and inflation can be seen as universal– that is, affecting everyone – unemployment and degradation of status affected those who were less financially successful, who were deprived of both social position and economic wealth under the new capitalistic conditions” [8, p.45].

Of course, Azerbaijan, a former Soviet country, could not stay out of these processes. The difference between the past and the present can often be heard in the memories of people who lived at that time. The discussion started with the phrase “everything was better then” continues about free education, free health, ease of working conditions, etc. “For many citizens who were raised in socialist states, the revolutions of 1989 and 1991 overturned one vision of the common good – one in which the state- dominated the economic and political spheres, made choices on behalf of citizens, and provided basic social services to all, in exchange for obedience to the absolute political authority of an unelected party elite – and replaced it with another, couched in the rhetoric of democracy, freedom, and human rights, but lacking the solidarity and the social safety net of the past” [5, p. 2]. A retired man who has worked in one of Sumgayit’s factories for more than 30 years says: At that time, we were paid only 100 manats a month, but our money was enough for everything. Now I see that even though people earn more than that, they always complain that there is not enough money. Everything is there, but you can’t buy anything. Everything about the past, both individual and collective, is based on a mixture of selective memory and deep forgetfulness. Therefore, nostalgia is also selective. The objects of longing are not the Stalinist repressions and prisons, not the ongoing lack of commodity or the years of famine but the vouchers for a car, annual holiday, employment, free of charge: sanatoriums, education and widely available medical care [10, p. 107].

Azerbaijan has also been involved in economic innovations. The attitude of neo-liberals and neo-institutionalists to economic reforms in post-Soviet

countries is different. Unlike neo-institutionalists, which advocate the gradual implementation of economic reforms, for neo-liberals, change must take place as soon as possible, and new institutions must be established quickly. Many post-Soviet countries have embraced the shock therapy offered by neo-liberals and its main focus, mass privatization. The reasons for the application of the Western concept to the non-Western population were that 1) if commodities are freely exchanged between places and groups 2) people would learn individual self-interest and abandon their collective passions 3) which would help them form into civic communities of independent middle-class citizens 4) who would demand further civil rights from their states and vote against inefficiencies 5) which would facilitate more trade, prosperity, freedom and growth [12, p. 321]. The scheme from the market to individualism, then to civil society, democracy and development, seems to have failed. The reason for the failure of shock therapy was “building capitalism without capitalists” [9]. Shock therapists, in turn, blame the governments of post-Soviet countries for failing to apply the rules correctly. In any case, it should not be forgotten that although the system can change immediately, the mentality of people who have lived in another system for a long time does not change quickly.

It is true that Azerbaijan did not follow the path of shock therapy and mass privatization, but the results were not as pleasant as in all transition countries. Although privatization in Azerbaijan began later than in other republics, the privatized companies suffered from both internal and external financial difficulties due to the lack of a capital market [2]. All this has affected the level of unemployment and poverty in the country. The poverty rate - the number of people living below the poverty line rose from 33% in 1989 to 50% in 2001 [7]. It has led people with higher education and qualifications to try themselves in other fields. Those who could not find work in Azerbaijan had to turn to neighboring countries out of necessity. Only since 2005 the economic situation began to stabilize and migration began to decline.

Conclusion. S.Boym gave two classifications of nostalgia: restorative and reflective [3]. Restorative nostalgia emphasizes “nostos” and seeks to restore a lost home, while reflective nostalgia romanticizes longing for home by highlighting “algia”. As a result, we can say that nostalgia in Azerbaijan is a reflective one caused by socio-economic problems. There is an opinion that nostalgia will disappear after the demise of the generation that grew up and lived in the Soviet era. But there is also a “second-hand” nostalgia, which is formed in a more positive way in young people through the media, as well as from what

they hear from the memories of adults [15]. We tried to investigate the feelings of nostalgia in Azerbaijan in general. In addition, it would be interesting for future research to find out the opinions of people who did not live in that period.

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Nərgiz Yaqubova (Azərbaycan)

AZƏRBAYCANDA SOVET NOSTALGİYASI YAŞAYIRMI?

Nostalgiya keçmişin xatirələrini, elementlərini romantikləşdirərək həmin vaxtlar üçün darıxmaqdır. Nostalji hisslərinin yaranması üçün isə müəyyən zaman müddətində keçmişlə indi arasında təzad üzə çıxmalıdır. Məqalədə müasir Azərbaycanla sovet dövrü arasında mümkün ola biləcək təzadlar, nostalgiyanı yarada biləcək mümkün səbəblər araşdırılır. Bu səbəblər arasında əsasən sosial-iqtisadi amillərin vacibliyi vurğulanır.

Açar sözlər: nostalgiya, sovet nostalgiyası, sosial çətinlik, iqtisadi dəyişiklik, postsovet dövrü.

Наргиз Якубова (Азербайджан)

ЕСТЬ ЛИ СОВЕТСКАЯ НОСТАЛЬГИЯ В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ?

Ностальгия – это тоска по тем временам, романтизация воспоминаний и элементов прошлого. Однако для развития ностальгии должен существовать контраст между прошлым и настоящим в течение определенного периода времени. В статье рассматриваются возможные противоречия между современным Азербайджаном и советской эпохой, возможные причины ностальгии. Среди этих причин подчеркивается важность социально-экономических факторов.

Ключевые слова: ностальгия, советская ностальгия, социальные трудности, экономические перемены, постсоветский период.