

“The Soviet Union is Inside Me”: Post-Soviet Youth in Transition

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ABSTRACT

The USSR ceased to exist 28 years ago, and there are generations of young people who were born after the dissolution. Mobility opportunities are now abundant and easily available to them. Yet the Soviet past still shapes the post-Soviet present for citizens of countries of the former USSR. We interviewed eight young people from Belarus and Moldova who currently reside in the Netherlands and utilised grounded theory methodology to understand how they make sense of the Soviet past of their countries and how it influences them. While the post-Soviet young adults possess an internalised experience of reminiscences of Soviet times and have inherited certain patterns of thinking, communicating, and behaving, they are detached from Sovietness and express neither love nor hatred towards it. They locate themselves in a symbolic middle position in which they are critical both towards the Soviet legacy and ‘the Western’ alternatives, and the very transitional character of their position becomes the essence of it. The findings contribute to the body of scholarship on young adults’ experiences in post-Soviet countries, and the evaluation and understanding of the Soviet experience. Furthermore, they assist in understanding current events as well as the trends and the mobility trajectories of post-Soviet young adults.

Keywords: Post-Soviet, mobility, young adults, transition, Moldova, Belarus

Starting with the October revolution until the dissolution... It is such a short period of time but it is so full of different things," says Marina. We notice how she is genuinely impressed as she says this, and how her mind appears to be full of thoughts. We are talking with her in an empty classroom of an international school. The walls are full of posters of different writers and books. Only later on in the interview does it become clear how this diversity of the posters is symbolic of the changes she went through when she moved away from home, and how she managed to get out of the box represented by her home country. She was exposed to an unusual diversity of opinions that at first was hard to grasp. Moreover, like every other interviewee, she stresses the fact that the interview is important to her. The Soviet Union ceased to exist 28 years ago, but it keeps exerting influence even on younger generations, and this influence does not seem to be completely rationalised. As researchers from similar backgrounds, we wanted to find out what the Soviet past means to young people. We did not set out with particular expectations. Even after doing the literature review it was hard to get any precise idea of what was awaiting us in the field.

We interviewed eight young people, all of whom were born after the fall of the Soviet Union, who are highly mobile in that they are studying abroad in the Netherlands. They have taken up the opportunities provided to them by the globalised world. However, there is a part of them that seems to belong to the USSR. In this paper we explore the following research question: *how do Moldovan and Belarusian mobile young adults, residing in the Netherlands, make sense of the Soviet past of their countries and how does it influence them?*

Firstly, we discuss previous academic work on post-Soviet transitions and processes of identification to contextualise our research. Secondly, we describe the development of the research. Lastly, we elaborate on our findings through the themes of cross-border mobility, balanced perspective on the USSR, imposed social norms, hard life at home, and language and communication strategies, and we draw conclusions.

Transformations in post-Soviet identification: From euphoria-nostalgia to the cosmopolitan home

The majority of the studies on Soviet cultural memory and its impact on post-Soviet young adults pay close attention to the issues of rethinking national identities of the former Soviet states (Chafetz 1997; Thelen and Honeycutt 2004; Robinson et al. 1993; Denison 2009). While most of them focus on the larger and central former Soviet republics, there is a rising number of articles addressing the implications of the transition of the peripheral and smaller states from the USSR to independence.

The study most closely related to our research is the one by Keshishian and Harutyunyan (2013). They conducted semi-structured interviews with three groups of Armenians – those who lived under the Soviet system, those who grew up in it and lived in post-Soviet Armenia, and those who were children under the Soviet system or were born after its dissolution – to compare their values, beliefs, and attitudes. The research demonstrates that interviews with the third group, which is similar to the population of our research, gave rise to the theme of 'euphoria-nostalgia' (Keshishian and Harutyunyan 2013, 369). The authors claim that even though a certain level of euphoria about the independent present of the country is observed, there is also nostalgia about the Soviet past. This nostalgia is transmitted to the generations of young adults growing up in post-Soviet times mainly through the narratives of their older relatives about the everyday aspects of their lives. These narratives have played an important role in the formation of the young people's value orientation. While

the study is relevant, it focuses on the economic and political aspects while leaving out the role of culture.

A topic often encountered in the literature on post-Soviet countries is the issue of the national language, for example, in William Beeman's (1999) analysis of the formation of group understanding in post-Soviet Tajikistan. The nation-building journey for Tajikistan involved dilemmas on various levels. Like Moldova and Belarus, Tajikistan is a relatively small country with difficult economic perspectives, which made the country vulnerable to the power of the Soviet authority (Beeman 1999). In this context, the USSR not only made its presence felt in the political and economic life of Tajikistan but also influenced its cultural and national positioning (Beeman 1999). Language was one of the aspects that raised much debate both in the public and private sphere: from a national perspective, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Tajik government encouraged the use of the Tajik language (Beeman 1999). However, as Beeman argues, the implementation of a national linguistic ideal became more complex in practice since in post-Soviet Tajikistan many people still did not possess sufficient knowledge of the Tajik language to be able to use it as the language of instruction in schools or in private life (Beeman 1999). These findings are significant for our research due to the analogy that can be drawn between Tajikistan, Belarus, and Moldova: in all countries language played a crucial role in defining the cultural belongingness of individuals in the process of cultural reformulation.

In order to refer to the changes that occur at the level of social and personal identity among young adults from the post-Soviet space, we will use the terms of self-understanding, identification, and groupness. Despite the concept of identity being widely applied in studies similar to ours, we refrain from using it due to its ambiguity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) explain that the notion of identity is often used in distinct frameworks, making it too ambiguous. The authors provide five common uses of the term: (1) as a base for social and political action, (2) as a group phenomenon driven by the common features among group

members, (3) as a deep, defining aspect of the self, (4) as the outcome of social and political action, specifically in the context of social movements, and (5) as a notion underpinning the fluid and unstable nature of the "self" in contemporary societies (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 8). Consequently, we decided to use the alternatives provided by the authors. Firstly, we will use the term *identification*, referring to the active process of identifying and categorizing oneself by oneself as well as by others. In this context, we can distinguish between relational identification as positioning the one who is identified in a "relational web" (e.g. kinship, friendship, etc.), and categorical identification, understood as one's belongingness to a group with which one shares certain categorical characteristics (e.g. race, sexuality, gender, etc.) (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 15). Additionally, we will use the notion of *self-understanding* when talking about the subjective sense of one's self and social location. Self-understanding needs to be comprehended as an auto-referential term, excluding the external identifications or categorizations of others of the individual. Lastly, we will use the term *groupness* when speaking of the collective affiliation of individuals with a group, based on a feeling of belonging to a specific collective.

Taking into account that our research intends to present an analysis of Moldovan and Belarusian highly mobile young adults, an important aspect to explore is the process of transnational movement and the implications of mobility in the lives of our respondents. The concepts of *Europeanization* and *cosmopolitanism* provide a suitable framework for exploring the ways in which cross-border mobility contributes to a change in the self-understanding of individuals. Delanty (2005) explains that the notion of Europeanization manifests itself as a social reality which facilitates a re-articulation of the physical space. In other words, cross-border interactions (e.g. for work, tourism, sports) play a major role in expanding the border of nation states and increasing the overall mobility of individuals. In this sense, the author argues, mobility for the purpose of education, especially higher education, has become a distinct social reality of "Europe as a knowledge society" (Delanty 2005, 410). This aspect is relevant for our

research in that the mobility of our interviewees is primarily motivated by their higher education aspirations.

Additionally, the process of Europeanization, as explained by Delanty (2005), proposes a cosmopolitan cultural model. Gunesch (2004) complements this idea by operating with Hanenerz's conception of cosmopolitanism as entailing a genuine multicultural understanding of the world and a certain willingness to "engage with the Other" in an accepting manner (as cited in Gunesch 2004, 256). In this regard, cosmopolitanism can be perceived as providing occasions for the social to be constructed beyond the national borders of societies, offering a platform that facilitates change, besides improved mobility and higher transnational connectivity (Delanty 2005). Moreover, Gunesch (2004) accentuates the role of physical mobility in shaping the identification of cosmopolitan individuals and their relation to the physical space. For cosmopolitans, the author argues, home is not the opposite of being mobile but is situated anywhere in the local or the global sphere. The cosmopolitan home often provides personal meaning, encouraging a certain level of autonomy, which allows the individuals to navigate the space between a new culture and their culture of origin (Gunesch 2004). That said, home can also remind individuals of their lives prior to mobility, articulating a nostalgic feeling for the past and for the familiarity of a certain physical place. The question of home is, thus, attributed multiple connotations in cosmopolitanism, leaving it open to the conceptualization of the individual. We sought to explore this aspect with our interviewees as well, as we will discuss in the findings section.

The context: Challenges and opportunities in the post-Soviet transition

Moldova and Belarus were two of the 15 constituent countries of the USSR that regained their independence in 1991 (Abbott 2007). The period of transition following the breakup of the Soviet Union was accompanied by radical changes for the citizens of the former Soviet states in various dimensions of their lives. As Abbott (2007) claims, the countries were facing

a period of creation of nation-states, a shift in political systems from totalitarianism to democracy, and the transition to a market economy. These changes resulted in increased economic inequality and unemployment rates and reduced state spending, all of which led to the loss of social security and welfare benefits for the citizens.

Our choice to analyse post-Soviet young adults' experiences of their past in Moldova and Belarus was driven by several factors. Abbott (2007) argues that both countries are relatively small, situated on the periphery of the former USSR, "sharing the status of being outsider states," with a territorial position between the European Union and the Russian Federation (220). While Belarus has undergone minor political and economic changes, maintaining the command economy system and an authoritarian regime, Moldova had attempts to establish a democracy, which proved to be unsuccessful after the Communist Party reinforced their influence by winning the general elections in 2001 and 2004 (Abbott 2007). As claimed by Abbott (2007), even though the transition from a command economy was initiated in Moldova, the current situation can be described as "distorted market economy", not concerned with the welfare of the citizens, resulting in decreased levels of trust and civic engagement among the population (Abbott 2007, 220). In the case of Moldova, there is also persistent "ethnic tension between the Russian and Romanian populations", which impacts country's struggle for a national identity (Abbott 2007, 220).

As Roberts (2003) points out, the economic, political, and social changes that followed the fall of the USSR had significant implications for young people. The rapid changes and social turmoil in the newly independent states directly influenced young adults' perspectives on life, allowing them to combine their existing world perception with aspects of Western values and lifestyles (Roberts 2003). In addition, substantial emigration led to a major decrease in the number of young citizens in the post-Soviet countries (Abbott 2007). This is confirmed by Shevtsova (1992), who argues that in post-Soviet countries young people between 20 and 35 years old are most likely to seek emigration.

The relevance of our research can be derived from the abovementioned processes occurring in post-Soviet Moldova and Belarus. Tied between Russia and the recent openness for European Union, young people in both countries seek to find a middle ground between the Soviet past and the new opportunities they are exposed to. The goal of this research is to find out whether the decades that have passed after the fall of the Soviet Union caused a certain detachment from the elements characteristic to the Soviet era and an increased interest for the West, or vice versa.

Methodology

We conducted our research in an interpretivist paradigm. We assumed that reality is constructed intersubjectively through meanings that arise in the process of social interaction (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). We emphasise the dialogical rather than monological character of research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). The participants in our ethnographic research consisted of eight young people: four from Moldova and four from Belarus (see Table 1). All the participants were born after the fall of the USSR and currently reside in the Netherlands. They had moved away from their homes from six months to two years before the time the research was conducted. Our personal contacts played an important role in recruiting participants. All of them were people with whom we had been acquainted prior to the research. We contacted people directly and also reached out to the student communities of the nationalities needed for our research. Thus, when the interviewing process started, some rapport had already been established with the participants.

It is important to note our personal position in relation to the topic. Ilya was born in Belarus, and Olga was born in Moldova, and we spent most of our lives in these countries. The research was born out of our genuine personal interest in the topic, while also driven by the identification of a gap in the academic literature. While we realise that our interpretation is an essential part of our research, we tried to emphasise our interviewees' experiences. On the one hand, the internalised knowledge about the social reality

we were researching assisted us in entering the field and allowed for easier communication with the interviewees and deeper understanding of their stories. On the other hand, our preconceptions might have interfered with the research findings and some assumptions taken for granted might have been overlooked. In order to counteract this potential limitation, we made sure to establish good communication with each other. We made an attempt to thoroughly discuss interviews, findings, and interpretations, and this helped us not take elements of data for granted and avoid overly personal interpretations.

In preparation for the interviews, we created an interview guide to make sure that we received the information from the participants that we needed and also to have some degree of comparability between the interviews. At the same time, we realised that following the interview guide too closely could lead to missing significant parts of the interviewees' stories. Therefore, the interviews were semi-structured, and the guide served as a general framework of the interview, allowing flexibility and extensive probing. The guide was developed collaboratively and was structured around the intersection between the literature and our research question. It consisted of three thematic blocks relating to the main ideas underlying this research. First, we attempted to find common ground with interviewees by asking them about their ideas of what constitutes the culture of the USSR and their experience of interaction with it. The second block was on the interviewees' identification of and their positioning of themselves in relation to the USSR and their new nation-state. The third block, inspired by Gunesch's (2004) emphasis on the importance of mobility for personal identification, dealt with the interviewees' experiences and perceptions of transition from their countries of origin to the Netherlands as well as their identification in the framework of this transition.

Additionally, we conducted the interviews in the language that each interviewee preferred, since it suited the topic and ensured that no information was missing due to speaking in a second language. In the end, three interviews with the Belarusians were conducted in Russian

Pseudo-nym	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Grew up in...
Lena	21	Female	Moldova	capital city
Tanya	23	Female	Moldova	capital city
Dima	20	Male	Moldova	capital city
Kiril	22	Male	Moldova	rural area
Vika	18	Female	Belarus	rural area
Sveta	24	Female	Belarus	capital city
Marina	18	Female	Belarus	capital city
Katya	19	Female	Belarus	capital city

and one in Belarusian, while all four of the interviews with the Moldovans were conducted in Romanian. The interviews were rather informal, highly autobiographical, and in-depth. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours, and they were audio-recorded. We also made brief reflexive notes during interviews to assist us in the analysis by marking the parts that seemed important, stood out, or helped during the interview. As soon as possible, the interviews were transcribed and the interview guide was adjusted accounting for the experience of the interviews. We used the website otranscribe.com to make transcriptions. Alongside transcribing, summaries of the interviews in English were made to acquaint each other with the interviews, do initial coding, and prepare preliminary results in the form of analytical memos.

The overall approach to data analysis was grounded theory. After the transcriptions were finished, we started open coding in the program Atlas.ti. By using open coding, we made sure that we take into account all the relevant information and did not miss anything. After that, the codes were amended and the transcriptions were analysed for the second time according to the codes generated. Then,

some codes were deleted and some amended again. When the coding was finished, we clustered the codes, and from these clusters we developed themes that served the basis for our theory.

The outlined methodology is most suitable for the research question because it required an in-depth inquiry into the interviewees' perception of Soviet times. Detailed semi-structured interviews generated comprehensive data and discussions of the themes that interviewees themselves found significant. It helped develop solid accounts of interviewees' experiences. Furthermore, it ensured that the researchers did not dominate in the interview and that a more equal reciprocal relationship was established.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Most of the interviews included discussion of the interviewees' memories, families, and political views. Therefore, some of the data that we have gathered is sensitive. In order to protect participants' privacy, we asked them to sign consent forms where we explained the particulars of the research and changed their names in the final report.

Likewise, it is important to mention a few limitations of our research. First, the interviewees are students of an international school and university. This factor represents a limitation for our findings because young adults striving to achieve higher education might have a more critical perspective on reality, influencing the way they relate to their past and make sense of their post-Soviet experiences. However, since our intention was to develop analytical themes grounded in the data rather than to generalize the outcomes, this limitation is not significant. Second, we conducted the interviews in the native languages of the participants. Even though we believe that our research has benefited from it greatly since we obtained the data that otherwise would not be available, it posed problems for analysis. Since Ilya could not read the interviews in Romanian and Olga possesses limited knowledge of Russian, the data we obtained was communicated between us through summaries in English, and the primary analysis was conducted by one person who possesses the necessary language skills. Thus, we realise that

some data might have been missed or miscommunicated. Nonetheless, we strived to ensure clarity in communication, we discussed our findings on a daily basis, asked for clarifications and explanations, and we are convinced that our gains outweigh our losses.

Findings

As mentioned before, our eight interviews allowed us to gather rich qualitative data and develop five themes after a thorough analysis and refinement. In the following section, we elaborate on each of these themes in turn.

Young adults' cross-border mobility

Mobility opportunities, as we had expected, exerted influence on the way the interviewees perceive themselves, their home countries, and the USSR. In each interview conducted with Moldovan participants, travelling was mentioned as one of the crucial aspects in shaping their self-understanding. The significance of mobility opportunities for post-Soviet youth can be sensed in Lena's words.

Lena (21, Moldova, grew up in the capital city): After I turned 16, I started travelling, attending international projects. This had a great impact on me, I decided I want to do something different with my life. I started detaching myself from everything related to Moldova and of all this culture... ehm... it is then when I started transforming and becoming who I really want to be.

We can observe that not only is travelling important for our participants, but they also perceive mobility opportunities such as study abroad programs, international exchanges, and travelling as adding a positive dimension to their lives, creating an awareness of their cultural belonging to their home country, while also empowering them to change their perception on reality and on themselves. Mobility, in other words, is as Delanty (2005) identifies a catalyst for reshaping the social reality. Additionally, we can confirm that cross-border mobility for educational purposes helps articulate a new European sphere which focuses on knowledge, exposing the individuals to a redefined social space. Tanya from Moldova tells us that ever since she was seven

years old, her parents took her travelling around Western Europe. She considers herself lucky to have had this opportunity since she claims that it provided her with the necessary tools to build her own understanding of the past and present times. Moreover, she mentions that only through travelling was she able to detach herself from the political divisions within the country, escaping the "West vs. East" divide by identifying herself as a "child of the world". In this case, we can observe that Tanya (23, Moldova, grew up in the capital city) has adopted the cosmopolitan cultural model which facilitates her multicultural interactions and creates a social sphere for her outside the national borders, as explained by Gunesch (2004).

While in the interviews with Belarusian participants the aspect of mobility also proved to be significant, it manifested itself in a different fashion.

Vika (18, Belarus, grew up in a rural area): Even though I can say that you can vaguely say that there is post-Soviet East and there is West, when you zoom in... You know, inside of these... So to say, circles there are still many differences, and I realised it when I came here [to the Netherlands].

As a result of the high level mobility, young adults also realise the problematic and unproductive character of the "West vs. East" divide. However, when they navigate in the symbolic space, they still put themselves on the Eastern side of the spectrum. Some say that they "found home" back in Belarus. However, Sveta's (24, Belarus, grew up in the capital city) account of this was different, and somewhat similar to the one that the Moldovans exhibited, that is, she has adopted the cosmopolitan cultural model and avoided close identification with Belarus. What is most significant to understand here is that our interviewees are disillusioned with the bipolar division of Europe and their mobility has heavily contributed to their perception of this division.

Balanced perspective

An aspect frequently encountered throughout the interviews is the acknowledgement of the controversy of the USSR. On the one hand, the

recollection of negative aspects of the USSR was prominent in all of the interviews. As Vika (18, Belarus, grew up in a rural area) said, "My first associations with all this [Soviet culture] are bad. A part of the family, to which I was very close, suffered greatly in those times." Repressions, mass killings, poverty, deficit of consumer goods – all these factors among others are pieces that form the negative picture for the interviewees. Bearing in mind that data about such conditions started being widely discussed only in the 1980s, our interviewees were among those who had access to this kind of information when they were growing up.

On the other hand, the interviewees stressed their realisation that there were positive aspects to the USSR. Particularly, they mention social security benefits that the state provided. "My grandma 'was given' a flat, and we still live there" (Sveta, 24, Belarus, grew up in the capital). In a survey conducted in 2008 in Russia and Ukraine, Nikolayenko (2008) observed a similar pattern of coexisting positive and negative attitudes towards USSR among adolescents. The general prevailing perception of the USSR is formed and then shaped for the interviewees by the stories told to them by their families. The absence of direct contact with the era of which they vaguely see themselves a certain part makes them rely fully on the experience of the relatives who did have direct experience of the Soviet time or the aspects they wish to highlight, through movies, for instance. Our interviewees believe that almost every family suffered from the Soviet rule, though some people were devoted to the idea behind the Soviet ideology regardless. Thus, we can see how there are two contrasting images of the past that are transmitted to the interviewees.

Our interviewees reject thinking in terms of two extremes and acknowledge the multidimensionality of the era. They admit to having internalised Soviet culture, and they clearly realise that they have lived in the trenches of the enduring Sovietness. As Vika (18, Belarus, grew up in a rural area) put it: "The Soviet Union is inside me." At the same time, they experience "stagnation", as Marina (18, Belarus, grew up in the capital city) calls it, being stuck in that era is alien to them. They are disillusioned with the Soviet ideology, while

their older relatives, they admit, often are not. Young people refuse a similar ideological brand offered by contemporary political powers. Thus, this theme is not only about the past and the perception of the past as such. One particular instance of this influence is the current political orientation. Tanya (23, Moldova, grew up in the capital) notes, "The divide can be observed even now... Uhm, you can even see how they vote in the elections." She admits the influence of the past experiences on the political orientation of her family members.

In its turn, their political orientation influences the way she herself orients in politics. Her observation of the two possible extremes, pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet as transformed into pro-Russian and pro-European stances respectively, balanced her political view, and she sees herself as positioned in-between. In contrast, Vika (18, Belarus, grew up in a rural area) had a primarily negative idea of the USSR transmitted to her. However, she has come to the realisation that the Soviet part of her family history plays a crucial role in her personality. The details of Vika's story are different from Sveta's (24, Belarus, grew up in the capital city), whose family felt provided for by the Soviet state. However, both stories demonstrate to us how the controversial character of the USSR is mediated through family members' experience and is critically thought through by the younger generation, which then influences their political and personal identification. The interviewees do not position themselves in the 'pro-Soviet' camp while they are also not inclined to see themselves as unconditionally pro-European. They generally are not inclined to use the notion of 'the West' as a coherent whole, and when asked they exhibit some level of scepticism towards it too.

Normativity and imposed social norms

Another important topic mentioned by our interviewees is the need to conform to certain normative standards in their home countries perceived as negatively shaping one's creativity and reasoning. What was identified as necessary in such living conditions was the need to obey the rules, otherwise one is perceived as different and is, thus, treated differently.

Marina (18, Belarus, grew up in the capital): At school in an essay [...] I wrote that I did not like the book... I wrote why I did not like the character, the language of Dostoyevsky was too hard for me. [...] I answered the question. But I was told '[Marina], you shouldn't write things like this'. [...] You cannot have an alternative point of view, fullstop. The system [...] has chosen for you that you like the book, and you can only explain why you like it following templates.

Sveta (24, Belarus, grew up in the capital): When I moved [to the Netherlands], I understood that when you live in a friendly environment, you do not need to conform. I thought that that [conformity] was my inherent trait, you know, but I realized here that it is not when some people started giving me weird looks and told me about this.

As can be seen above, participants conveyed that this need to fit into certain structures is institutionalized. They state that creativity was not encouraged in schools, you could not argue with the teachers or you would get in trouble. All of this, as Sveta (24, Belarus, grew up in the capital city) says, shapes "a cult of narrow-mindedness" that is inherited from the USSR. More than this, these normative standards are present in every aspect of life. "There are a lot of things that are expected to be the same... From, uhm, buildings to ways of thinking" (Lena, 21, Moldova, grew up in the capital). Lena summarises how conforming to the spoken and unspoken rules is expected. Moreover, she recalls architecture and hints at the mass apartment building projects in the USSR, the *khreshchevka* - standardised low-rise flat blocks that were built under the rule of Khrushchev (Luhn 2017). By mentioning this, she establishes a connection between the imposed standards ranging from the material sphere to the realm of thinking, suggesting the twofold character of this association.

Before moving to the Netherlands, Sveta perceived the urge to conform as her inherent trait. She was made to think so by the circumstances and people's attitudes. She continued behaving in the way she was used to when she arrived in the Netherlands, but people around made her realise that she could behave more as she pleased without the need to conform. What we can observe here is that horizontal Europeanization facilitated Sveta's implementation of behaviors witnessed in another European state, changing her personal self-understanding (Brüggemann and Kleinen von Königslöw 2007).

Similar informal normativity is witnessed in cultural products spread around all post-Soviet countries. Many of the interviewees were nostalgic about Soviet movies. Others, like Sveta, mentioned that they feel how people from their home countries like these movies. This demonstrates that the expectations of sameness are high. By virtue of growing up in a certain place, one is expected to know certain products of the culture of a state that does not exist anymore. If one exhibits a lack of knowledge of a famous movie from the Soviet times, one will have to face surprise and condemnation. The strength of the influence the old state exerts can be felt in Sveta's words.

Previous research identified these normative patterns followed by most inhabitants of post-Soviet countries as factors that facilitate the creation of a certain type. Novikova (2015, 188) refers to this "type of personality" as "Homo Sovieticus". She argues that the Soviet man is significantly influenced by utterly ideological Soviet education and propaganda. Moreover, the author explains the Soviet people as "the product of an unstable sociopolitical system", "de-individualized, opposed to everything elite and idiosyncratic, transparent" (Novikova 2015, 189). Novikova (2015) argues that freedom of initiative and freedom of spirit was not a part of the Soviet project and was replaced with conformism, inflexibility, and traditionalist views on life. These views are understood as a social expectation projected onto others, creating what Brubaker and Cooper (2000) define as groupness, a sense of affiliation and commonness with the typology of the 'Soviet individual'. The same ideas were observed in our participants' stories: institutionalized normativity which was taught to them at school, strict gender expectations which, when not obeyed, led to marginalization and exclusion, and other significant aspects of 'Soviet education' were identified as limiting factors in our participants' personality development.

Hard Life at Home

Another significant finding of our research is that post-Soviet young adults perceive the hard living conditions in their home countries as a factor which shapes their characters, understanding the difficult lives they face as a reminiscence of the Soviet Union. As stated in Nikolayenko's (2008) study on the effects of Soviet nostalgia on the historic memory of a nation, the low levels of economic development of post-Soviet states and the uncertainty that occurred after the dissolution of the Soviet Union influences the way young adults perceive the past and relate to the idea of 'Soviet nostalgia', often referred to in post-Soviet countries. In other words, the poverty and difficult life conditions post-Soviet younger generation faces in their home countries was shown to create resentment towards the past, often being perceived as a negative outcome of the USSR. Our interviewees confirm these views. As stated by three of our participants, in their home country they live a continuous battle, a state where they know they have to work hard if they want to escape poverty and achieve good living standards and in most cases, this can only be done through the means of mobility.

Lena (21, Moldova, grew up in the capital) confirms this: Look at any person from Western countries. For the majority of them there is no need to get out of it, to leave, to go away somewhere. They are born and raised in good living conditions. Look at us, we have to get out of there. There is that feeling that you have to get out of this shit. You have to work to get out of it, you have to go somewhere and make it there, but not home.

Growing up in this environment shaped the resilience of our participants, making them aware of the hardships of life. Vika (18, Belarus, grew up in a rural area) talks about the feeling of reality and pain that she experiences, tracing it back to the Soviet times and the stories she heard ever since she was a child. Marina from Belarus explains that the fact that she grew up in a post-Soviet country prepared her for life, helped her perceive the life in a very real, authentic way and added a certain simplicity to her existence.

Marina (18, Belarus, grew up in the capital): I have the impression that I have already done everything in this life. To such an extent that I can communicate in an 'elite society' [...], but at the same time I can collect blueberries [...] and sell them on the highway. [I never had] rose-tinted glasses on. I grew up in poverty among various people and went through various situations. I saw a lot of things already.

The Role of Language and Communication Strategies

Language facilitates the transmission of the memory between generations. While language certainly is a means of communication, it also carries a mark of past societal processes. In the case of Moldova and Belarus, the language issue was significant. Wide-scale processes of Russification were set in place during the times of the USSR in these countries (Ioffe 2003; Cisel 2006). Thus, the role of the Russian language was growing while the role of the national languages was diminishing. While in Moldova, the Romanian language became a symbol and a means of achieving independence from the Soviet legacy, in Belarus, the Belarusian language occupies a secondary place. The fact that three out of four interviews with Belarusians were conducted in Russian is telling. Still, Russian has prevailed in both countries, has carried certain meanings from the USSR, and continues to connect youth to the Soviet past. The interviews demonstrate the influence of the USSR on the language situations of the interviewees.

Tanya (23, Moldova, grew up in the capital): It's so funny... If I find a Moldovan Russian speaker outside Moldova I would immediately start speaking Russian to him. No hesitation... Even though my Russian is not that good... In Moldova, ehm, I would not do that. I would expect him to speak Romanian.

Tanya's words convey that language creates a sense of groupness among Moldovans, even though it might not be their mother tongue, through the common and Russian-speaking Soviet past. Many elements of the Soviet times, cultural and social, are forgotten and/or

rethought. Even though Romanian is the official language of Moldova, Russian used to serve as a universal language of communication within Soviet republics and persisted as such even after the fall of the USSR. Being transmitted from the older generations to the younger ones as a universal means of communication, the Russian language still represents a unifying element for the Moldovans abroad. It serves as a marker of sameness in the environment where the Moldovan is a foreigner. Tanya finds it funny and seems not to fully comprehend why it is so, which is telling for how some influences are not fully acknowledged and how everyday practices of the younger generations are affected by the Soviet order of things only subtly.

Vika (18, Belarus, grew up in the capital): My father [who is a poet] and his friends [...], poets, singers... The majority of them work in Russian, but this is because no one speaks Belarusian, which brings us back to the fact that [...] there is something left [from the Soviet Union].

While Vika's words should not be taken literally, since there are people who speak Belarusian, they demonstrate how even in the sphere of culture people prefer to stick to the Russian language, which thus remains in the country. This links back to Beeman's (1999) discussion of Tajikistan, where people were unwilling or unable to speak the Tajik language in light of the prevalence of Russian.

Our discussion does not account for the variety of social, economic, and cultural reasons for these language conditions, but rather emphasises the role of the language as legacy from the Soviet Union, especially on the level of micro-narratives of one's own life. We found that our interviewees' perception of the communication strategies used by their fellow nationals represents a distinct attribute which, in their mind, reflects an internalized Soviet legacy.

Lena (21, Moldova, grew up in the capital): I think I have a different way in which I see the world. For instance, here [in the Netherlands] they often have

principles that are useless or just exist for the sake of principles. It was a huge adventure to get into the library when I forgot my student card.

Here Lena continued to tell the story about how she could not negotiate her entrance to the library with its guard when she did not carry her student card – an attribute that is required by the rules. At a glance, her lack of understanding in this situation is confusing. However, in this situation she exhibits what Novikova (2015, 188) calls "informal networking". According to her, this strategy of negotiating one's way somewhere while one does not fulfill the necessary conditions is widely present in the post-Soviet space as its legacy. Thus, it is an indicator that there are communicative strategies that result from young people's post-Soviet socialisation that makes them different from their peers.

Another communicative pattern is described by Sveta from Belarus.

Sveta (24, Belarus, grew up in the capital): With the Russian language... It's so important to me, and I am... very aware of it. And there is a certain type of language in Soviet movies. Intonation, style. And when I hear these patterns in the real life... There are no more people who speak like this in my surroundings now (laughs).

This quote also demonstrates how everyday practices and decisions are affected by the Soviet past mediated through the language, but in a different way. The creation of a 'new person' (Gerovitch 2007), a Soviet citizen, also required the creation of a new language. This kind of language has been preserved in Soviet movies. What Sveta says about vocabulary, speech structure, and intonations can be interpreted as elements that served the state ideology, transmitted through the medium of cinematography. Combined with the negative experience of her family in the USSR and also the experiences that she had with her family, Sveta develops resistance to such language and builds her social network avoiding the people who have elements of such "Soviet speech" in the way they communicate.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, 28 years after we got our independence... we were never independent. There were always either Russian or Romanian values imposed on us [...]. In Moldova, the influence is not West vs. East, but Russia vs. Romania. We were never independent in our brain, we were always taught that there are two sides but no middle. Everyone wiped their feet on our country, on our independent Moldova. You're either Russian or Romanian, but there is no middle. It's an ideological battle and it's such a pity... (Dima, Moldova)

When we finalised the research process, we realised that this quote seems to be voicing the grievances of many of the interviewees, and ours too. For many years the state that is called the USSR has not existed, yet it has been exerting its influence. After the fall of the USSR, many people were happy. They hoped for independence, a new, better life and, most importantly, freedom. However, they did not necessarily know what to do with the freedom, nor how it worked. New forces and dynamics immediately activated that influenced post-Soviet people on the level of the everyday life, too. A significant change was observed concerning the identity of the participants.

As previously explained, we chose to substitute the term identity with three alternative concepts. Firstly, at the level of identification, the interviewees exhibited awareness that mobility had changed the way they identify themselves and are identified by others, situated in a position of in-betweenness in relation to their home country and host society. Secondly, their self-understanding is primarily impacted by the transition to the Dutch society and the exposure to different social norms than in their home countries, affecting the way they behave and relate to themselves (e.g. the disappearance of the need to conform to certain normative standards while abroad). Lastly, the students' sense of groupness is shaped by their increased mobility as well, influencing the ways in which they identify to a group by reconciling their symbolic belongingness to their home country and

simultaneous identification as cosmopolitans. Now that post-Soviet generations enter adulthood, having lived after the fall of the USSR and having been exposed to cross-border mobility opportunities, they utilise their structural position of 'transitionality' to form a particular angle from which they see the world and to negotiate a symbolic space for themselves in which they can feel at home.

Post-Soviet Moldovan and Belarusian young adults have an internalised experience of the reminiscences of Soviet times. This has been acquired in various ways through Soviet cultural products, conversations with their relatives, and simply elements of their day to day lives that are connected to the Soviet past. Overall, this experience has had a certain influence on their personalities such as the way they communicate or behave. Nonetheless, they exhibit detachment from Sovietness, which leads to a balanced perception of Soviet times, as they place themselves in a middle position that is neither nostalgic romantic love nor hatred and denial. The societies that the young adults are coming from are still in the processes of social and cultural transformation, which means that these processes have been taking place for the entire lives of the interviewees. Furthermore, at a certain stage of their lives, the interviewees became actively mobile which added a transnational dimension to the transitional aspect of their lives. This multi-dimensional transitionality in turn conditions the young adults' middle position in relation to two extreme stances: West versus East. It also allows them to maintain a critical distance from which they observe the Soviet times, their countries, and 'the West'. However, having inherited certain modes of thinking, communicating, and behaving, post-Soviet young adults still relate to elements of the Soviet past, which makes them feel different in a foreign country.

We have also identified the need for further research in the area. It would be beneficial to interview mobile young adults from other countries than Belarus and Moldova, which are located at the borders of the former USSR, as well as young adults from these countries who reside in countries other than the Netherlands. Potentially, it might yield different or complementary results since we found out that

there are variations between the perceptions of Belarusians and Moldovans and that the aspect of mobility is crucial for the interviewees' self-understanding. What is more, the young adults who still reside in Belarus and Moldova remain under-researched and their perspective would add greatly to the research of issues in question.

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