

War in Ukraine and the international left: what happened to Soviet nostalgia? Interview with Volodymyr Artiukh

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The war that Russia has unleashed in Ukraine has split the international left, some sectors of which are struggling to metabolise the collapse of the Soviet Union. The USSR and its symbolic apparatus have been used in former Soviet countries as a tool to criticise the present, but in the end the one who really appropriated that legacy by bending it to his own purposes was Vladimir Putin. This is the analysis of Volodymyr Artiukh, Ukrainian researcher, sociologist and activist.

Putin's war in Ukraine seems to have split [the international left](#) like few other events. Still almost a year and a half after the large-scale invasion, there is no common opinion on what the position of socialist, communist and social-democratic parties and forces should be. Some have decided to unhesitatingly support even military support for the attacked country, others call for a halt to arms shipments and promote initiatives for negotiations that leave Russian achievements intact, while still others argue that the responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict is to be sought in the policies of the Ukrainian government or those of the United States and that it is therefore only in the power of the latter to stop the war.

On the contrary, the impression is that many times there is a discussion without any minimum points of shared reality: [narratives and interpretations](#) of opposing signs chase each other, accusations of fascism and claims of anti-fascism are wasted with reference to one side or the other. Why this radical discrepancy of view on East European events? It weighs, probably, a [lack of collective reworking](#) of what the collapse of the USSR in '89-'91 meant. There is also a lack of knowledge and debate about the type of political forces that filled that 'vacuum' in the states that were being formed in the East, where the majority of parties that called themselves 'communist' and 'socialist' in reality took on strongly populist-clientelist traits and extremely socially conservative positions.

On the other hand, there are also those who, from an extra-parliamentary and more 'movement' perspective, have tried and still try to use and reinterpret the Soviet legacy from a progressive and emancipatory perspective, both in theory and symbolism. This is in spite of (or perhaps because) the stigma attached to this legacy in various East-European contexts, which has only intensified due to the ongoing war: in Ukraine, for example, it is worth recalling the de-communisation laws of 2015 and, following the Donbas conflict, the banning of communist party forces, until, after the invasion, the progressive elimination of references to the past of 'Russian domination'. How, then, to orient oneself in such a context? How to assess the phenomenon of 'Soviet nostalgia' which (alongside 'Ostalgia' in the former East Germany or 'Jugostalgia' in the Balkans) has helped shape the political scene in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus? More generally, what to do with the Soviet legacy on the left today - while Putin's war rages on and claims victims -? We tried to discuss this with Volodymyr Artiukh, Ukrainian researcher, sociologist and activist, member of the editorial staff of *Commons*.

Ever since the collapse of the USSR, the Eastern European political context has been marked by the phenomenon of 'Soviet nostalgia' or at least by a panorama whereby, while on the one hand various acronyms and parties have continued to refer to the Soviet legacy in terms of symbolism and programmes, on the other hand that legacy has carried a certain stigma (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country). How would you summarise these dynamics? How did the Left relate to all this?

As far as the 'socialist' and 'communist' parties active after '89 were concerned, the Marxist and nostalgic background of the Soviet Union was from the outset an element on which to base their participation in the 'political market' that had been created in the 1990s and 2000s. What kind of political landscape were they faced with? A panorama in which clientelist and patrimonial relations dominated above all between parties and voters, as opposed to the more 'classic' mobilisation and consensus-building dynamics of a representative democracy. I believe, from my point of view, that these political forces were therefore concerned to become part of these relations, using the symbolism and certain elements of the Soviet period to mark a distinction from the rest of the political spectrum, to build a niche of recognisability around themselves. In short, the hammer and sickle and the appellation 'communist' or 'socialist' were in essence identity traits, which had little to do with the existence of any revolutionary strategy or the will to change the system and the 'political marketplace' in which they were operating.

In Russia, this evolution was evident: the communist party of the Russian federation and its leader gennadij andrejevič zjuganov were offered a very specific role in the political arena, namely that of 'controlled opposition'. That is to say, a type of opposition that would in no way question the government, but which would slightly criticise its actions, especially with regard to social policies, thus being able to absorb much of the popular indignation and protest and also to tame them, containing them and channelling them into forms less threatening to the existing power.

The situation in Ukraine to some extent was different: after the start of the [war in Donbas](#), the parties that drew on the legacy of the soviet union were 'hijacked', as was the case with the socialist party which was emptied of any political content or planning due to the fact that almost all of its members were linked to the interests of various political entrepreneurs, or outlawed, such as the Communist Party, which ended up being deprived of any political function after a lengthy prosecution for using Soviet symbolism. Recently, the leader of the communist party petro mykolajovyč symonenko was spotted at the so-called 'anti-fascist congress' held a few months ago in minsk and was basically repeating the points of putin's propaganda against Ukraine. This is its natural evolution, given the premise: it is a party that has basically worn down the memory of the Soviet union by transforming it into a form of purely symbolic 'political capital', which was, among other things, completely lacking in bite in the context of the social functioning of the post-Soviet states.

What, on the other hand, roughly happened with the a-partisan left in the post-Soviet contexts is that the various acronyms and groups failed to elaborate and offer the population anything more than a critique of the 'peripheral capitalism' that dominated in our countries: their main enemies were liberals and nationalists. In this context, they used Soviet memory and symbolism as a form of mobilisation and as a means of criticising the dominant ideology and gaining mass support. But it is a political project that has largely failed, mainly because the appeal to the memory of the Soviet Union was not accompanied by the elaboration of some vision for the collective future, based on a thorough theoretical analysis of the situation in which Ukraine and other countries found themselves. In short, they were not able to offer a programme that addressed the contradictions of the current condition but also gave a glimpse of a better future for the majority of people. The material of Soviet nostalgia in fact created a kind of ideological '[Dutch syndrome](#)' for the extra-parliamentary left: just like gas and oil, it was an easy resource for gaining political consensus. And

just as when it is possible to easily extract profit from the exploitation of raw materials and there is therefore no drive to invest in technological development or human capital and education, for the left there was a similar dynamic in relation to Soviet nostalgia: since there was this Soviet or para-Soviet imaginary ready to use, they settled on such an imaginary without bothering to build a new one, let alone a concrete future-oriented political programme. So, to sum up, from my point of view for both left-wing forces (parliamentary and non-parliamentary) Soviet nostalgia has played a negative role. Not entirely negative, mind you: like any historical phenomenon, it was a contradictory process.

In the specifics of Ukraine, the Euromaidan protests of 2013/14 but especially the start of the [war in the Donbas](#) constituted a quite significant moment from this point of view as well: in line with the Kremlin's rhetoric, left-wing groups and forces read the anti-Janukovyč uprisings as a 'coup d'état', perhaps Nazi-fascist in nature, on the one hand, and the separatist movement in the east of the country as an anti-fascist and socialist battle, on the other. What is your interpretation?

A very eclectic ideological camp had formed in the part of the population and groups that supported the separatist movement in donbas. Some on the left saw it as a political opportunity and therefore joined the first protests and a minority part even went to fight in the ranks of the separatists. At the same time, some of the separatist groups made use of Soviet symbolism and fielded references to the Soviet past, including that of the very early years after the revolution. But it was clear from the outset that there was almost nothing progressive or even rooted in an idea of the future in this use: this was a movement that was purely reactive in nature compared to the Euromaidan protests. The population was in fact polarised, and not because of the use of symbols or because of Janukovyč, but I would say above all because of the economic and political networks that separated the social body of the country at that time, and also because of the way in which the Kremlin then decided to exploit these endogenous divisions.

In such a context, then, the use of Soviet symbolism represented a 'negative' tool, which served to express distance and dissent from what was happening with euromaidan and to mark a gap in terms of identity with those events. For this very reason, I also think that the adherence to the symbols and memory of the Soviet Union was merely superficial: I do not believe that any supporter of the separatist movements actually had a desire to concretely recover elements of the Soviet past. It was, in my view, a reaction that found its roots in the way the various local political elites over the years competed with the central power in kyiv. The group that had originated in the donbas, which could count on a good capacity to mobilise the inhabitants of the area, had always been in a bargaining and negotiating process with kyiv and the separatist protests could therefore be read as the consequence of a failed bargaining process, protests that were soon exploited for their own benefit and ends by the kremlin.

So I would say that the purely negative reaction to Euromaidan originated in the first place, and elements of Soviet nostalgia then emerged as a means to express this negativity. Evidence of their purely 'decorative' character can be seen in the fact that they could very easily coexist with symbolism belonging to theoretically opposite ideologies such as that of the Russian monarchists, linked to Strelkov, or with groups of explicitly fascist inspiration. Once the Kremlin had substantially appropriated this movement and a managerial-organisational structure that I would call proto-political was solidified in the area, the space for a potential critique of the present or for some change in a progressive direction was minimal. So, yes, there was a nice display of Soviet symbols but this was not accompanied by an ability or willingness to fight for some progressive instance, for better living conditions for the working class, or to put into practice any of the actions that Marxist ideology or theory would presuppose. And finally, it must be said that this use of Soviet symbolism persisted until the beginning of the large-scale invasion and was recycled by the Kremlin's political

technologists during the first months of the war: just think of the signs on the tanks or the way the icon of the [old woman with Soviet flag](#) refusing to welcome the Ukrainian soldiers was exploited. In short, at that point, I would say it was clear how the one related to the USSR and communism had really become a 'zombie-symbology' even more devoid of content than it was during the previous donbas war.

Despite this instrumentalisation and confusion, it has been pointed out by many that the work of the Kremlin is something strongly 'anti-Soviet' in its essence: after all, in [the speech with which Putin](#) announced the start of the invasion, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were directly blamed for the creation of Ukraine. Do you think that references to the USSR and its legacy still hold critical potential for the left in the current context?

The use of 'Soviet nostalgia' has been somewhat central for some groups on the post-Soviet left. However, I think its usefulness with regard to left-wing politics now is questionable to say the least. There are several groups in Ukraine, Russia or Belarus that use symbols and references to the Soviet Union as tools to criticise the present. A few years before the start of the war in Ukraine, indeed, there was a kind of revival of interest in the history of the USSR on the part of the post-Soviet left: reading groups were formed in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, for example, which resumed analysing classical texts of the Marxist tradition but more generally sources of political literature from the Soviet era. Many young socialist and Marxist *YouTubers* appeared, who started to narrate and reinterpret Soviet history from a Marxist perspective.

These circles represented quite a significant phenomenon, in terms of views and popularity. This generated the hope that such a phenomenon could lead to a renewal of the post-Soviet left, which could perhaps result in a broader movement (or even a party) capable of carrying out a sensible critical analysis of the current situation and thus constitute an alternative to the traditional left represented by the communist and socialist parties of the post-Soviet area and the so-called 'new left' of the groups and acronyms most influenced by more Western-style Marxism. Now, the reaction of most of these circles to the outbreak of war in Ukraine has been decidedly disappointing. To be fair, some of them have tried to work out an analysis of why the large-scale invasion began and have attempted to elaborate, if not exactly a political programme, at least a positioning in this regard, but the vast majority of these young 'nostalgics of the Soviet Union' have turned out to be petrified in their thinking. In practice, they went on in their thinking as if the start of the war did not impose any rethinking or adjustment of their analyses and convictions. Their political message, in the context of the invasion, was as follows: we should take no part in this war, we should not be active but, on the contrary, withdraw from any practical initiative and continue to engage in our own path of reading and reinterpreting Soviet history, in the hope that this kind of engagement would be a useful way of criticising the ongoing war. In essence, almost everyone condemned Putin's decision but, on the other hand, saw the demise of the Soviet Union as the ultimate cause of the outbreak of war. In short, the root of the 'evil' lay in nationalism and capitalism on both sides of the conflict, finally arriving at the conclusion that not Putin but Gorbačëv was in fact to blame for the war because he was 'seduced' by the lure of the West and consumerism. How should we act, according to them, in the context of the invasion of Ukraine? First of all by not aligning themselves with any 'impure' movement or reality that was to varying degrees collaborating with nationalist or liberal forces.

I would say that this led to a kind of involution of these reading circles and eventually resulted in a large-scale political demobilisation of those who followed this kind of activism. However, some of them who remained prominent in the Russian context were forced to leave the country. They live in exile and criticise their government from outside, but at the price of having no real following that can be politically mobilised on the ground. Those who have stayed, on the other hand, try to avoid any kind of topic that can be used by the power as a pretext for repression. Hence my discouragement at a strategy that seeks to replace ideas and projects that look to the future with an

almost obsessive focus on the past as a means of criticising the present. The other phenomenon that led me to question whether 'nostalgia' could be a useful tool for the left was what happened in Russian society in general, as well as in Belarusian society. If we stick to the polls, the majority of those who express a positive attitude or some kind of nostalgia for the Soviet union end up supporting Putin's aggression against Ukraine. So, yes, one can argue that through a positive approach to the Soviet union one could arrive at an effective way of criticising the present, but the point is that nostalgia is not a political programme or an ideology, it is not even a worldview.

On the contrary, if we use Gramscian terminology, we could say that nostalgia is nothing more than an element of 'common sense' within 'common sense'. The problem is that this element of common sense remains at the level of individual, everyday memories, which are very ambiguous and uncoordinated with each other and, moreover, memories that have become raw material in the hands of the [Kremlin propaganda machine](#) which has reassembled them to its own advantage. And, in fact, we see how in the end it is Putin's rhetoric that has effectively appropriated the component of 'greatness' that in the collective memory can be associated with the Soviet union: the reminder of a time when the USSR was capable of challenging US hegemony and was respected internationally, a country powerful militarily but also a country that, according to the Russian president's vision, continues its historical mission of reunifying the Slavic peoples of the east (i.e. 'the Russians'). So, in conclusion, one can only say that Soviet nostalgia as 'raw material' has worked much better for Russian nationalists and the Kremlin than for the left. A success for the post-Soviet right, which has indeed brought some fractions of the left to its side: in Russia, we see that not only the communist party (which has always been an essentially conservative and chauvinist force, exploiting nostalgia for the Soviet union) but also part of the 'new left' that had been very active in opposing the Kremlin during the 2011/12 protests have sided with Putin. To summarise: those forces and groups that were most inclined to use the weapon of 'Soviet nostalgia' to criticise the present have at the same time turned out to be the most inclined to support the present state of affairs. Given these premises, I do not see how 'Soviet nostalgia' can be useful in the reconstruction of a left in the present.

What kind of theoretical work should be carried out, then? The invasion of Ukraine is leading many to elaborate new approaches to reading even the Soviet past, very often from a 'decolonial' perspective. What is your point of view?

What I think is that we need to be very careful with re-readings of history that we like only because they seem to suit the current political moment. I would put much more energy into analysing present trends, rather than channelling this energy into revising and reinterpreting the past. We still need patient theoretical work that perhaps focuses on the history of the periphery of the Soviet Union, since the majority of the history of the Soviet Union was written based on the archives in Moscow and can be said to have been written with a Russian-centric attitude. We still know too little even about what happened in Belarus and Ukraine, although these were important republics in the Soviet structure, and even less about the Central Asian nations. I therefore think that this work of revision consists above all in filling the historiographical gaps that we are currently facing. Without this work, I believe that the left will not be prepared for a progressive use of Soviet memory and heritage, something I remain sceptical about, but do not believe impossible.

Certainly, one must avoid falling into a vulgar anti-communism, which forces one to totally abandon references to Soviet history in the name of an aggressive nationalism. At the same time, it seems to me that the purely ornamental use of Soviet symbols and memories should be conducted with caution, if not actually left aside. This is because it will probably for years, if not decades, be immediately associated with its use by Putin's imperialist and conservative discourse and [ideology](#). It must be understood that mobilising people on the basis of Soviet memory and symbolism will be a much more arduous task than it was in the 1990s and 2000s. If one wants to go down this road, which I would not, however, dismiss out of hand, one has to be aware that this implies a really big

job of criticising the appropriation that has been put in place by the Putinist right. It is true that this kind of theoretical work has already been started to a certain extent: the circles I mentioned earlier are trying to implement it, they are trying to criticise this conservative appropriation as well as that put in place by the servile pro-Putin left. But I would say that it is too late.

The fact is that in the 1990s and 2000s, the main enemy of the post-Soviet left was exclusively the liberals: fighting them was the alpha and omega of post-Soviet leftist activity. Now conditions have evidently changed both internationally and in the post-Soviet context. We see, for example, that liberalism, in its hegemonic version of the 'end of history', if not ended has certainly lost influence in the world-system along with a [decline in US hegemony](#). What we are witnessing is the emergence, especially in Putin's Russia, of an imperial-nationalism [with fascist or parafascist traits](#) but also the solidification of similar forces on the European continent, from Poland to Germany, in the form of right-wing populisms. And it occurs to me that, for some reason, the left finds it very difficult to criticise these political phenomena. Probably also because of a deep-rooted fear of aligning with liberal forces: on the other hand, how can you criticise these new conservative movements without appealing to principles such as those of democracy or civil liberties or even just freedom in general?

In this sense, I would say that the post-Soviet left has never developed the necessary tools to do so, and I do not see a way in which the Soviet legacy and memory could be used effectively to criticise political phenomena of this kind. At most, they could be used to show that in the past alternative forms of living and coexisting in our countries were given in the present, and that the role that Russia played in this context was also different from the imperialism of today and is not historically predetermined. But clearly this is an insufficient goal. As I see it, at the moment, the post-Soviet left and the international left are far from being able to formulate a political programme that looks to the future. Without that the usefulness of the legacy and memory of the Soviet Union will always be limited, and given the times to come this limitation will only increase.

However, this does not mean that we should stop talking and thinking about the Soviet Union. On the contrary, there is a lot of theoretical work to be done, there are also ideological battles to be fought, such as the one against the simplistic idea of applying the concepts of decolonisation to the post-Soviet context. But one has to be aware that all these discussions, however necessary they may be, cannot immediately be tools for social mobilisation or some kind of political propaganda. In this sense, in the context of the current war, I would certainly like to see much more serious and informed discussions than there are now about the global system of nation-states and international security. Topics that the Left has stopped focusing on. On the contrary, we very often see the repetition of concepts and theories that were developed in the 1990s or 2000s, mainly from the analysis of US imperialism. In short, it seems to me that we do not analyse well the short- and medium-term trends we have before us and this sometimes leads us to create a distorted image of the times we live in.

There are not enough debates concerning the left's medium-term strategy. We are somehow stuck between discussions about alternative versions of history - the left is happy to discuss what could have happened if, for example, the Minsk agreements had been implemented or [if NATO](#) had not accepted new members etc. - or conversely there are discussions concerning time horizons in the distant future - what will happen after China becomes the world's leading power etc. But really there is a very poor debate about trends in the coming years, we have no idea what is actually happening in the global south - as much as almost everyone on the left likes to talk about the global south. But what will happen to the security arrangements when China, I think inevitably, claims greater weight on the international stage? How will states realign themselves should nato dissolve, as the so-called anti-war left wants? There is no serious discussion about this.

I think it is crucial to discuss what we want now, in the current conjuncture. In the background

there is certainly a fear of facing the present, because war is a matter of life and death waiting around the corner, which also creates the fear of a nuclear apocalypse, but in the face of this fear we prefer to close our eyes and dream of a future of global revolution or a past that might have been different. That is, we fail to metabolise this fear in a political sense.

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