

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Manipulating post-Soviet nostalgia: contrasting political narratives and public recollections in Central Asia

Timur Dadabaev* 

University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan

*Corresponding author. Email: dadabaev.timur.gm@u.tsukuba.ac.jp

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Abstract

The vision of the Soviet years in post-Soviet republics varies depending on the government's official master narrative, foreign policy priorities, and general public perceptions of the past. By contrasting the published interviews of presidents Putin, Nazarbayev, and Karimov and the outcomes of in-depth interviews with the elderly public in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan), this paper reveals the differences between the official master narratives of political leadership (positive or negative) with respect to the Soviet past and public attitudes. This paper aims to demonstrate that the narratives of political leaders/governments and public recollections coexist in the same social space in parallel to each other. While governments attempt to use their narratives to promote certain policy goals, people use their nostalgic recollections to make sense of the social changes in their respective countries and use such recollections to interpret their lives.

Keywords: Central Asia; collective memory; Eurasian Union; political discourse; Soviet nostalgia

Introduction

There are divisions regarding the manner in which the Soviet past has been narrated in post-Soviet countries. On the one hand, certain political leaders, such as that of Russia, emphasize that the Soviet era brought about significant developments in public life and the economies in the territories composing Soviet Central Asia (CA). They claim that Soviet policies produced the political systems of these states and thus constitute a common legacy, identity, and sense of belonging to the Eurasian region. For instance, Russian President Putin suggested that “we have a common language of inter-ethnic communication, which is Russian. All the countries [of the USSR] speak Russian freely. It is a great advantage. We have a common infrastructure of transportation and energy, which we inherited from our common country. That is another great advantage for integration” (Tengi News 2019). Accordingly, Putin concluded that despite

... certain phobias of the past and fears about the re-emergence of the Soviet Union and Soviet empire, the understanding that efforts to unite will serve everyone's purpose inevitably makes its way [into the minds of people]. Realizing the advantages of this [unification], which are felt by all participants of this process, we are moving farther to make new steps and go ahead (Interfax 2019).

In line with such depictions, some master narratives of the Soviet past produced by CA leaders have also frequently referred to the positive influence of the Soviet era on the region through industrialization, more effective administrative tools and education. In addition, the narrative of the Soviet years in many CA countries is still significantly influenced and shaped by the leaders of these states (for

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instance, President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan), who were educated by Soviet educational institutions, which largely influenced their ambitions to rebuild a new Eurasian state (Dadabaev 2015; Dadabaev and Komatsu 2017; Jõesalu 2012).

In contrast, the views of other leaders (for instance, those of the late President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan) portray the Soviet era as producing considerable (ethnic, linguistic, and religious) sacrifices in these states, reflected in the disapproving narratives of historians of the Soviet past (Alimova 2008, pp. 24–64). These disapproving narratives emphasize issues of ethnicity, religious restrictions, and Stalin-era repressions, as well as the scapegoating of the Gorbachev years (Dadabaev 2016; Shamsutdinov and Mo'minov 2013, pp. 486–91).

Accordingly, the evaluation of the Soviet years by the political master narratives in these states tends to be conducted in terms of a binary opposition of either praising the events of the Soviet era or praising post-independence achievements. Additionally, the very vision of the Soviet years in the post-Soviet republics varies depending on both the government's official foreign policy regarding Russia, Western states, and China and public perceptions of the past.¹ While countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan concur with Russia's ambitions regarding the necessity of constructing a Eurasian Union, the CA countries that oppose such plans utilize negative narratives of the Soviet past to distance themselves from the new geopolitical constructs of the former metropolitan state of Russia and redefine their relations with other influential members of the international community, such as China.²

Along the lines of political discourse linked to foreign policies, there is also a public evaluation of the Soviet past. Many citizens of post-Soviet CA partially subscribe to the criticism of the Soviet past and frequently refer to the linguistic, religious and cultural abuses of the Soviet administration. At the same time, a considerable number of senior citizens recall Soviet times with a sense of longing and nostalgia. Such contradictory evaluations of Soviet life among CA leaders and populations raise the following questions.

How can the official narratives produced by the leaders of CA states and Russia with respect to the Soviet past be explained? How do these official narratives relate to public perception of the Soviet past?

Both research questions are reflective of various angles of the same academic dilemma. Answering the first question uncovers the representative narratives of political leadership, while answering the second question unpacks the perceptions of these narratives by the very people who witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the hardships associated with it. In this sense, this study explains the nuances among the differences and the process of construction of both political narratives and public perceptions to provide a gradation to the views among politicians (Putin, Nazarbayev, and Karimov) who consider their Soviet past and post-Soviet present differently and the elder citizens of CA states, who are caught between the master narratives produced by political leaders and their everyday needs. There is a gap in the literature, which this paper attempts to fill, on contrasting political master narratives and public discourse on the Soviet past in general and from a comparative perspective. In addition, in contrast to the clichés and generalizations (e.g., endorsed master narratives in authoritarian states are determined by foreign policy concerns, etc.), this paper unpacks the factors influencing public narratives that go beyond the foreign policy plans of the political leadership. This paper demonstrates that foreign policy priorities are often the outcomes of identities that these leaders have developed over their terms in office. These identities of political leaders are contrasted with how the public receives these political narratives. This contrasting, in the context of post-Soviet states, is important because the public narratives in such authoritarian states are rarely heard and are often silenced by political narratives.

This paper does not attempt to claim the “objective” “truth” against which the political narratives and public recollections should be contrasted. Rather, it attempts to consider the subjectivities of all actors (political leaders and public) and present these subjectivities even when they are subconscious

¹For an outline of how memory relates to policy, see Budryte 2020.

²On how memory can influence foreign policy, see Mällksoo 2019.

and not very explicit. In this manner, this paper presents the complexities of the subjectivities of the actors in constructing their narratives.

This paper aims to answer these questions through two main steps. The first step aims to outline the dominant official master narratives created by CA leaders (Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan from the late 1990s to 2012) and their foreign policy counterparts, as exemplified by Russia's leader, President Vladimir Putin, with respect to the Soviet past (from 2011 to 2020). To do so, this paper uses published media interviews and some extracts from their authored studies. This outline demonstrates the attitudes of these leaders towards the collapse of the Soviet Union and their independent development after it. Second, this paper identifies the dominant public narratives among the older generations in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan with respect to their lived experiences during the Soviet period and, when needed, relates them to official narratives. These narratives are grouped based on the frequency of these topics being raised during the interviews and are presented in the format of subsections below. These qualitative (tape or video-recorded and then transcribed) data include lengthy (averaging anywhere between 2 and 4 hours) face-to-face interviews, life stories and narratives concerning everyday experiences in Soviet Uzbekistan (collected between 2008 and 2011), Kazakhstan (2013–2014), and Kyrgyzstan (2011–2013), conducted with or obtained from senior citizens in their 60s and 70s in occupational groups unrelated to the government and Communist Party apparatus (the sample size was seventy-five individuals per country).³ The interviewees above in their absolute majority were selected based on their age, gender and background, according to which the survey sought individuals who were never part of and did not have any relatives in the central apparatus of the Communist Party, executive committees, and elected councils in the Soviet years. The author also attempted to provide a balanced sample group with interviewees coming from all administrative regions. However, this goal was not achieved in Kazakhstan, where the respondents primarily came from Almaty, Astana, Qostanai, Uralsk, Rudnyi, Shimkent, and a few other locations. This group's experiences contribute significantly to public opinion regarding the Soviet past and constitute the epicentre of post-Soviet nostalgia. By contrasting the views of elderly citizens to those of political leaders, this paper aims to place these recollections within academic debates on the meaning of the Soviet administration for the citizens and governments of these post-Soviet republics, with this meaning being described in the post-independence years along the lines of overwhelming criticism or support. While the author has presented the parts of this survey above on the way Central Asian public perceived their Soviet past from the position of their post-Soviet present (Dadabaev 2015; Dadabaev and Komatsu 2017), this current paper develops these studies to touch upon previous unelaborated topic of how Russian and CA political master narratives relate to these public recollections.

The sample group above represents the most interesting group to focus upon for the following reasons: they are individuals who experienced both Soviet and Post-Soviet times. They are the only ones in a position to make judgements about both, while younger generations know little about the Soviet past except for what is written in publications and offered in post-Soviet "master narratives." In addition, the sample group approached by this survey consists of individuals who are essentially in the latter half of their lives, and if their views are not recognized and given nuance, there will be no views left to record and describe in a few years.

Conceptualization of post-Soviet nostalgia in the Central Asian domain

As stated above, there is a significant difference in the depiction of the Soviet past in the academic literature of each of the CA states. In Uzbekistan, for instance, many scholars emphasize various

³This paper uses data from the Oral History Project, undertaken by the Islamic Area Studies Project, University of Tokyo (with Prof. Hisao Komatsu as leader and Prof. Konuralp Ercilasun, Prof. Guljanat Kurmangaliyeva Ercilasun, and Prof. Ilkhan Sahin as principal participants on par with the author) in the CA region. These data covered seventy-five individuals in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan from 2008 to 2013. Due to the word limit, only a few quotations from the interviews are cited in the text. For a detailed transcript of the interviews, see Dadabaev 2010, 2013, 2015 and Dadabaev and Komatsu 2017.

aspects of Soviet era repressions (Shamsutdinov and Mo'minov 2013). In most Uzbek historical narratives, the Soviet era and post-independence years are counterposed to each other as periods with contradictory meanings in their significance for the faith of Uzbek nation building. Historians in Kazakhstan depict Kazakh Soviet history as an instance of the modernization of the Kazakh economy and lifestyle. For these historians, however, the end of the Soviet period is the time during which the country degraded to the point of needing reforms, as exemplified by perestroika (Aktual'ye Voprosy 1988). Many scholars in Kyrgyzstan focus on aspects of the continuity of the Soviet and post-Soviet years. Some studies divide the Soviet period into the period before perestroika and the period after it. Others consider perestroika to be a campaign fragmented into several periods to demonstrate the exact period in which the Soviet state ceased to functionally exist and the period when the Kyrgyz state essentially took over from Soviet administration (Osmonov 2005; Ploskikh and Dzhunushaliev 2007, pp. 271–77).

These contradictory interpretations of the legacies of the Soviet state have two major ramifications. First, this type of analysis is difficult because of the duality of the evaluation of this time, which is characterized by the dramatic consequences of the collapse of the USSR and the positivity brought by this collapse in the form of the decolonization of CA states and their nation building. Second, evaluations are difficult because intellectuals (historians, political scientists, etc.) in these countries, who represent the driving force of the evaluation of Soviet times, were educated under the influence of the Soviet tradition⁴ (with Marxism and historical materialism as methods of inquiry), thus rendering problematic the task of conducting an impartial evaluation of the Soviet past from a different theoretical position and perspective (Dadabaev 2016, p. 183). Such methodological problems in evaluating the Soviet past have also left space for the use of public evaluations to reconsider the Soviet past.

Several studies have focused on the phenomenon of nostalgia in Eastern Europe and Russia (Barney 2009, pp. 132–51; Ekman and Linde 2005, pp. 354–74; White 2010, pp. 1–9) and the perceptions of the public regarding the collapse of the USSR, particularly in Russia (Nikolayenko 2008, pp. 243–59). Studies have also used archival sources and ethnographic approaches to address the issue of ethnic identity formation (Abashin 2009, pp. 37–54, 2010, pp. 78–91; Esenova 2002, pp. 11–38). Additionally, some studies have detailed various aspects of religiosity (Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2002; Tokhtakhodzhaeva et al. 2003), ethnicity and migration (Dadabaev 2013, 2015; Jo'rayev and Karimov 2011; Kosmarskaya 2006). Studies that attempt to understand post-Communist nostalgia (Todorova and Gille 2012) rarely address the topic of post-Soviet nostalgia in CA. The rare studies from CA have tended to focus on the experiences of the people in individual countries (Dadabaev 2015), with few cross-country and regional comparative perspectives (Dadabaev 2016; Dadabaev and Komatsu 2017).

The current study defines nostalgia as a rejection of the present and an emotional attachment to the past. Several paths of nostalgic narrative are revealed in the official rhetoric of leaders and the recollections of the general public. One type of nostalgia emerges in recollections that reflect a special sense of attachment to the past, representing the most active years in the lives of most of the respondents (Dadabaev 2015, p. 96). It is natural for individuals of various ethnic, social, ideological, and religious backgrounds to recall their youth with nostalgia (Davis 1979).

In contrast, the second type of nostalgia focuses on the attitudes of the people towards their present lives, rather than the past. A significant body of literature argues that past traumatic events shape perceptions of the present by influencing attitudes, values, and identities (Abdelal 2002, pp. 459–84). However, empirical data from the interviews with the respondents of this study demonstrate that the respondents' high dissatisfaction with the present informs their understanding of the past, causing an idealization of the Soviet years. In a sense, for the senior citizens, nostalgia is also a type of defence mechanism against the problematic present.

This mechanism is connected to a re-evaluation of the new post-Soviet political and economic systems. At the time of the Soviet Union, many Soviet citizens hypothetically idealized the post-Soviet

⁴For the notion of Sovietness, see Tolstikh 2008.

system because it only existed in an imagined format, while rejecting everything Soviet by referring to it with derogative term “*sovok*” (implying something or someone outdated and old in age) (Dadabaev 2015, p. 96; Genis 1994). Post-Soviet nation building led many people to reassess their values and to conclude that the values of the new system, which the public rushed to internalize in the early 1990s, are unreasonably idealized to the extent that the Communist utopia is replaced with idealistic expectations of the new system. These overinflated expectations and utopianism teach that Western liberal values and development models are a panacea for the Soviet troubles that were not addressed in terms of the hopes of the public, thus leading to the critical reassessment of the present in favour of the previously rejected past.

Boym (2001; 2002, pp. 293–304), whose study of nostalgia serves as the conceptual framework of this paper, differentiated between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgics seek to “restore” the past and literally attempt to rebuild the old system, while reflective nostalgics only daydream about the “good old days.” In this paper, the rhetoric of political leaders such as President Putin, outlined below, greatly resembles restorative nostalgia, while political leaders like Nazarbayev are torn between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Another pole is represented by former Communists like Karimov who turned into nationalist political leaders, who are emotionally attached to the past but in a negative way, to the extent of being “allergic” to nostalgia and traumatized by Soviet experiences.

In contrast to their leaders, respondents from the general public in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan are “reflectivists” in their strong longing for the past. Some of the interviewees quoted in this paper might resemble “restorative nostalgics” in that they seem to remember the “benefits” of the Brezhnev era with few reservations. However, this paper treats these narratives as reflectivist because they functionally serve the purpose of expressing strong dissatisfaction with the present and of bidding “a symbolic farewell to” the good old days. They can also be compared to a tribute to rites of passage (Bartmanski 2011, p. 217). In such political narratives and public recollections, the distance from the object of nostalgia is often indicated by the admission that the past can never be restored but that it still deserves respect. In this sense, the nostalgic feelings expressed by the public are a form of “intellectual sympathy for the historic underdog, instead of a form of sentimentalized ignorance” (*Ibid.*). For many, such selective remembering, the rejection of the present and the idealization of the past provide the only opportunities to establish the “self” (or in the words of Dominic Boyer (2012), to “define and claim autonomy in the present”) among the new generation of “others” under the conditions of a highly unstable present. This process includes both temporal and spatial comparisons: the “self” contrasting to the past self in memory, as outlined in the sections on ethnicity and modernity below; and the “self” contrasting Soviet CA to its “negative” and “positive” “others.” Afghanistan (as a Muslim country close to the CA states but that rejected the Soviet style of development and eventually ended up in a continuous civil war) is accepted by many as an example of a “negative other,” defined by what could have happened to CA states if not for the Soviet modernization project. China, in contrast, is a country considered through “positive otherness,” implying the possible and, in fact, desired path of development for Soviet constituencies. The leaders of these states, however, attempt to mobilize these largely “reflectivist” public sentiments to achieve their own polarizing geopolitical goals, whether they consist of neo-Eurasian integration or decolonization rhetoric, as indicated below.

Official master narratives and policy orientations

The official master narratives expressed by the political leaders of CA states and Russia regarding the Soviet past and its impact on post-independence contemporary policies in the post-Soviet CA region can be broadly divided into three main types. The first is represented by the rhetoric frequently employed by the leadership of Russia with respect to the post-Soviet space. In a famous series of interviews with Oliver Stone, Vladimir Putin referred to the collapse of the Soviet Union:

People often criticize me for my regrets about the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the first and foremost thing is that as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, 25 million Russians in one

night found themselves abroad, and this is indeed one of the biggest catastrophic events of the 20th century (RIA News Agency 2018).

Asked whether there are any events in the past that he would want to stop from happening, he again suggested that it was the collapse of the Soviet Union (*Ibid.*). At the same time, Putin stated that “anyone who doesn’t regret the passing of the Soviet Union has no heart. Anyone who wants it restored in the previous format has no brains” (Putin 2010). Putin regards the format of the former Soviet Union as outdated, while implying that it has something about which to be nostalgic. This attitude is highly symbolic of the attitudes of Russia’s political leaders with respect to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which for them not only emphasizes the loss of the “Motherland” but also raises traumatic memories of inefficient economic, social, and ideological systems. In this sense, many of the statements and ideas supported by Russian leaders regarding the Soviet Union are informed and influenced by the experience and connotations of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Additionally, Putin is unapologetic about his desire to have the Soviet space consolidated into a closer group because he sees it as an effort to once again “collect” Russian lands. As he bluntly put in one of his interviews

At the time of establishment of the Soviet Union, there was a right of exit set in it but without detailed procedure, it raises the question. If a certain republic which entered the Soviet Union received a large mass of Russian lands, traditionally Russian historical territories and then decided to secede from the Union, then it needs to secede with what it had at the time of entry. It did not need to drag with it the gifts it received from Russian people (Ferghana.ru. 2020a).

This “collecting of Russian lands” (*sobiranie zemel’ Russkikh*) greatly defines Russian identity, as Russia has historically shifted from times of dissolution to times of consolidation and expansion. Therefore, for Putin and those who share his views, the process of the collapse of the Soviet Union is not the end of the nation; rather, it is one of the stages of another “reclaiming” of the lost motherland so frequently seen in Russian history. The Russian historical narratives, which inform political agendas, frequently refer to how Russia has been devastated, time after time, yet has regained its powers and “recollected” lost Russian lands (Gorski 2010). In particular, Russian historians often refer to the Mongol-Tatar Chingiz Khan rule of Russia from 1237 to 1480 (when Russia was part of the Golden Horde Empire) (Zemtsov and Shubin 2013), the French Napoleon Bonaparte war against Russia (when the Moscow was burned to stone) (Tarle 1994), the Russian empire’s participation in WWI (Bazanov 2014; Belova 2011), which resulted in two revolutions and collapse of the Russian empire (Schubin 2014), and Hitler’s Nazi Germany invasion of the Soviet Union during the devastating WWII period (Putin 2020). In all of these cases, Russia is depicted as the one being attacked, forced to defend, and ultimately victorious, “liberating” Russian lands from “invaders.” The collapse of the Soviet Union is narrated in a similar manner, with Russia being “betrayed” and “fooled” by Western promises and liberal idealism.⁵ Thus, the logic of “recollecting” Russian lands (which is a frame that includes Russian geopolitical, political, military, economic, and domestic concerns) is the driving force behind Russia’s incursion into Crimea⁶ and possibly supporting the separatist movements in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.⁷

From the viewpoint of the CA region, however, Putin’s rhetoric in most cases ignores or selectively “silences” the important contributions of CA republics and the sacrifices made by the CA public in the liberation of Russian territory in WWII. Uzbekistan alone sent fifteen military divisions accounting for 1,951 million soldiers to the frontlines with 538,000 of them dead and 640,000 wounded. Of these numbers, 120,000 received medals for military actions with 338 individuals awarded the highest

⁵For Russian nostalgia as an impediment to democracy, see Mendelson and Gerber 2005.

⁶For Russian strategies, see Hosaka 2018, pp. 321–64.

⁷On memory and nostalgia in Ukraine and Russian attempts to reclaim the lost lands, see Hosaka 2019, pp. 551–78.

military distinction in the Soviet Union of Hero of the Soviet Union (Ferghana.ru 2020b). These figures do not account for the huge sacrifices that people from the CA region had to make in accepting 1.5 million (including 250,000 children) refugees and 150 production facilities from war-torn Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia (in addition to re-orienting its own 300 factories) (Ferghana.ru 2020c). In a colonial manner, however, the Russian official discourse does not appeal to the crucial roles of CA in maintaining human forces, arms, and food supplies to the front lines or in rebuilding the economic structure of the Soviet Union after the war. Soviet historical victories are referred to as the result of sacrifices by Russian and other brotherly Slavic nations, while the indispensable roles of the CA republics are conveniently silenced, ignored, and forgotten.

Putin never emphasizes the contributions of Central Asians in any form, with the exceptions of his meetings with CA leaders. References made by Putin regarding WWII victory being a “common” achievement of all Soviet people contrast with how little he thinks of CA contributions. In his narratives, CA participation was not as important as those of Slavic or East Europeans, who are given medals and commemorated on the occasion of the anniversary of victory (Ministry of Defence of Russia 2020). Moscow organizes parades on the days of liberation of East European capitals and gives the cities the title of “heroic” cities, but no such honours have been given for the sacrifices paid by Central Asians or to the cities of Tashkent, Almaty, or Bishkek, in honour of either their sacrifices or their contributions to the front lines. These cities are not included in the list of cities to even to be considered for the title of City of Labour Valour established under the orders of the President of Russia to honour the cities contributing to the WWII victory. The gestures made by Putin to include CA divisions in the parade is nothing more than a geopolitical tool to “consolidate” the narrative of “common” heritage to weaponize it and is by no means a proper recognition of CA sacrifices and losses.

In this sense, the nostalgic views of Russian leaders drive Russian foreign policy and dictate the need to develop new geopolitical constructs to compensate for Soviet losses and to “reclaim” recognition, influence and, potentially, authority in the longer term. In the words of Putin, Eurasian (economic) space is a

project that without exaggeration is historical not only for three (Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan) countries but for all states in the post-Soviet space. The path towards it has been uneasy and troublesome. It started twenty years ago right after the collapse of the Soviet Union and creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Generally speaking, we managed to have found the model that helped to preserve the great number of civilizational and spiritual nets which unite our peoples. Essentially, we are talking about turning integration into an attractive, sustainable and long-term project that does not depend on the shifts in the temporary political or any other agenda (Putin 2011).

Putin’s version of Eurasian economic space, which is greatly inspired by the Soviet past, is the first stage of his ambitions. As he claims,

We put more ambitious goals in front of us; that is, to get to the next higher level of integration – a Eurasian Union. ... We are not talking about the resurrection of the USSR. It would have been naïve to try to restore and copy something that is already in the past, but close integration based on the new value-based political and economic ground is the will of time.

We have a common heritage of the Soviet Union – it is infrastructure, the established specialization of industry and a common linguistic, scientific and cultural space. It is in our common interests to use this resource for a common benefit. An effective Eurasian Union is the way that will enable the participating countries to gain a deserved place among the leaders of global growth and civilizational progress and to achieve success and prosperity (*Ibid.*).

However, Putin's strong negation of the relevance of this idea to the restoration of the Soviet Union only demonstrates that the Soviet past is always a reference point for Putin in his drive to configure a new approach to coerce the former Soviet territories into a new structure of geopolitical dominance and power. It is also an indication of a deeply rooted trauma to his ideas caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, which in Putin's view is associated with the loss of the proper place in the international community. His reactions demonstrate that he is aware of the criticism of Alexander Dugin's Eurasianism and its application to the post-Soviet space and Putin's attempts to adapt to these criticisms.⁸

CA leaders have developed their own responses to such Russian discursive encroachments and geopolitical complexes/stereotypes. However, these responses differ from country to country depending on the geographic position, ethnic composition, and level of reliance on Russia.

The first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was one of the most prominent generators of rhetoric with respect to the Soviet past and a common Eurasian future. Kazakhstan shares a very long border with Russia, and Russians constitute a significant segment of the population of Kazakhstan. Thus, this reality is greatly reflected in the ideas articulated by its first president.

During his years in power (1990–2019), Nazarbayev championed an alternative to the Russian vision of post-Soviet Eurasia. To some extent, President Nazarbayev shares the nostalgic views of Putin and Gorbachev with respect to the loss of international authority and recognition of the former superpower.

As he puts it below, he was overwhelmed by the degree of decentralization occurring at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nazarbayev was not only pleased with the independence of his country but also terrified by the scope of the loss with the collapse of the Soviet state:

On my insistence, during the December 21, 1991, Almaty summit, we managed to stop the dangerous process of the chaotic collapse of the disappearing superpower. As a direct participant of these events, I still keep in my memory the unexplainable high drama of those days... The sense of satisfaction with the gaining of a much longed for independence by Kazakhstan and other republics was closely intermingled with the sense of understanding of the historical challenges that our nations faced. We were in the midst of political crisis, which was killing the economy. We witnessed how the previously unified economic mechanism of the country was falling apart. It was the time when not just particular enterprises were collapsing but the economic sectors of industries were failing. Many people were unemployed and were without any means to survive. I, like many of my colleagues, i.e., leaders of other republics, realized the devastating nature of this path for our countries, which would bring about only bloody conflicts, never-ending poverty and high risks of finding ourselves on the margins of history, only being assigned the role of a supplier of natural resources for the world economy (Nazarbayev 2011).

At the same time, Nazarbayev displays a sense of awareness of the colonization policies that Russia and, subsequently, the Soviet Union applied to his country. As he describes it,

There is no ethnicity aside from Kazakhs that had deep roots here. People were resettling here from the times of Stolypin ([referring to Pyotr Stolypin, the third prime minister of the Russian Empire and minister of internal affairs from 1906 to 1911]), especially with the attempts to utilize unused [*tselina*] lands. Later, the metallurgical plants were constructed. Kazakhs were not given training there; they would just bring specialists from other republics (Nazarbayev 2017).

However, according to him, the common historical experiences had created a common understanding of many issues and a "Soviet-communistic mentality" by the time of the collapse of the Soviet

⁸For a critical view of Eurasianism, see Shlapentokh 2007, pp. 143–56.

Union (*Ibid.*). After the collapse, Nazarbayev still hoped that ties would not be severed and that historical connections would be preserved.

Everybody initially thought that the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) would be the institution that would preserve the Soviet Union. Importantly, the equality of all needed to be strictly adhered to: smaller brothers, smaller states and bigger ones... And this is exactly what did not happen. Bigger ones wanted to dominate... It is absurd to believe that we are brothers and need to share with each other in this situation; nothing like that is going to happen. The sooner we realize this, the better it will be for everybody (*Ibid.*).

Therefore, for most of his presidency and beyond, Nursultan Nazarbayev has been torn between his emotional attachment to and a certain degree of nostalgia towards the economic might and international standing of the Soviet Union and his strong commitment to the decolonization of his country. Such contradictory views are also informed by his personal infatuation with the Russian and Soviet anthropologist and father of Eurasianism, Lev Gumilev. As Nazarbayev later confessed,

In May 1994, I proposed creating qualitatively different units from the CIS integration unit of the Eurasian Union of States. The fact that I have made this idea public in the presence of an academic audience from Moscow State University, named after M.V. Lomonosov, was not an accident. The ideas of the outstanding Russian thinker Lev Gumilev always appealed to me, as he developed further than others the “school of Eurasianism,” which appeared among Russian immigrants in the early half of the 20th century. He conceptually explained the unity of the geographic, cultural and historical ties between the peoples of the huge Northern and Central Eurasia...

It is possible that euphoria based on the gaining of long-sought independence did not allow the generation of leaders of the CIS to see the long-term potential of the idea of Eurasian integration (*Ibid.*).

Nazarbayev’s rhetoric seems to strike a balance between a strong Russian nostalgia towards the Soviet Union and the isolationism of other ethno-nationalist regimes in the CA region. Nazarbayev advocated approaching Eurasian ideals from a pragmatic (economic cooperation) perspective while considering the common history and ties of the people.

Nowadays, our peoples more and more feel that they play a part in forming a Eurasian identity not only with its cultural, religious and linguistic multiplicity but with a similar longing for fruitful economic cooperation and a good neighbourhood. We are witnessing the birth of a new unique Eurasian community that possesses not only rich experience of a common past but also an undividable history of the future.⁹

Nazarbayev’s vision of Eurasia aims to combine longing for the good parts of the Soviet past and the inevitable realities of the post-independence present.

He foresees that his Eurasian ideas and a certain degree of attachment to the Soviet past will become the polarizing point both in Kazakhstan and in other republics, noting that there will be Eurasia-sceptics and Eurasia-optimists. He warns against politicizing this issue.

My ideas about the creation of a Eurasian Union do not have anything to do with either *manilovschina* [the Russian term for utopias] or political nostalgia that overshadows the future. There is no and never will be a “restoration” or “reincarnation” of the USSR. These are just phantoms of

⁹In 1998, Nazarbayev proposed a document called ‘Ten steps towards ordinary people’ that he wanted to be the basis for Eurasianism. In this document, he advocates measures for preserving the ties of people in Eurasia.

the past, interpretations and speculations...We need to overcome the fear of the words “union” and “coming of empire.”

The third official discourse with respect to Soviet nostalgia and the past belongs to the first President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, who was a vocal opponent of Eurasianism and the white-washing of Soviet policies. Despite being a former Communist and member of the Politburo as well as a product of the Soviet system (and most likely because of discrimination within the party that he experienced), Islam Karimov developed a strong “allergy” towards the Soviet empire. In his words,

Today, certain forces in the former Soviet space are generating ideas about the restoration, in a new format, of the empire called the USSR. Our people have built their destiny and future with their own hands, have tasted the air of freedom and will never return to the old ideology and the past (Karimov 2015).

For Karimov, remembering and attachment to the Soviet past have different connotations. In the two previous discursive narratives of Putin and Nazarbayev, the past was discursively connected to the present and the future, but in Karimov’s beliefs, the past has a different special meaning: “Recalling what we had to survive in the past, we need to preserve our current free life, appreciate it and be cautious [against the encroachments of others]” (*Ibid.*).

Karimov was well aware of the official discourses in Russia and Kazakhstan and tirelessly opposed them by often ignoring the simple fact that the older generation of people in Uzbekistan still felt nostalgia for their Soviet experiences.

There are various efforts in certain countries to beautify the Soviet times and to return to those times. Certain TV channels tend to glorify the eras of Lenin, Stalin or the USSR. Such views and approaches are not acceptable for us. We have a mind of our own, and we have the experience, the will of our people and our own path. We will never agree to return to the state of dependence and reattachment. As our forefathers said, the blind [person] loses his stick only once....

I want to restate what I said during the celebratory meeting dedicated to the 22nd anniversary of our constitution: we will never join any union that aims to restore the old system (*Ibid.*).

As a political leader with totalitarian tendencies, Islam Karimov’s way of thinking is the by-product of several factors. On the one hand, like any post-colonial leader, he resents the idea of being advised or of having certain ideas imposed. In this sense, he rejects the notion of nostalgia and claims that there is no such phenomenon among the public. Second, he despises his counterparts in Russia and Kazakhstan, as he seems to believe that the ideas articulated in those countries necessarily aim to impose a certain political will on his rule:

The most important thing for us is to build [an] independent state, free society and achieve the dignified level of life for our people. To say it more simply, we need to live by the life [living standards] enjoyed in the most developed democratic countries, and these ideals are more and more firmly implanted into the consciousness [minds] of people and are reflected in their practical deeds. In this sense I cannot but mention some contradictory statements and actions that currently take place in post-Soviet space and testify about the great deal of nostalgia about previous times. Contradictory statements of some statesmen and public figures can be observed in the fact that, on certain occasions, they conveniently state that they have been active fighters against the old communist regime and on some other occasions when they want to gain cheap authority [recognition] to represent themselves as those who fought for the preservation of the Soviet Union to the end (Karimov 2002, p. 44).

To explicitly express his attitude towards Eurasianism, Karimov likes to repeat that “our people like the saying that before entering a certain door, think about how you are going to get out of it.” To a great extent, this saying symbolizes Karimov’s rejection of the Soviet past, outright downplaying the nostalgia among the public and seeing the Soviet era as the colonial period of the history of Uzbekistan.

While their views are significantly different, presidents Putin, Nazarbayev, and Karimov all command a certain degree of public support, especially among the post-Soviet generations. For instance, a recent poll conducted by the University of Tokyo Institute of Advanced Studies of Asia in 2019 among approximately 800 university students in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (400 per country) found that Putin’s support ratings were approximately 80% in Uzbekistan (with 31.5% somewhat confident and 52.1% fully confident in his leadership) and approximately 70% in Kazakhstan (37.1% and 51.1%, respectively), followed by Nazarbayev (27.4% and 50.5% in Kazakhstan and 36.5% and 14.2% in Uzbekistan being somewhat confident and fully confident, respectively), with no data available for Karimov (Sonoda 2020). However, such overwhelming confidence in leadership does not necessarily extend to support towards mobilizing the past for the goals of public policy among the general public, especially those in the senior age group, as described below.

Public appeal of Soviet modernity in Central Asia

In contrast to the above, the notion of nostalgia among the general public is not necessarily related to policy goals of creating Eurasian space or opposing it. While leaders tend to use their nostalgic recollections to mobilize their populations’ support or to oppose certain ideas, the general public’s nostalgia is associated with the notion of Soviet modernity, inter-ethnic merging, solidarity beyond ethnicity, the Soviet mode of freedom, and the Soviet social contract, as explained below. These public views are obviously more informed by people’s everyday needs and experiences than by geopolitical constructs and goals.

In particular, when recalling the Soviet past, many respondents in this study who are senior citizens from CA states referred to the period using nostalgic rhetoric, not because of the social and economic benefits that they lost when the new post-Soviet economic and social system entered their lives but because this rhetoric is engendered by regret at the loss of the Soviet ideal of modernity. As many have argued, there was a pronounced appeal of Soviet modernity that went beyond Soviet boundaries (Arnason 1993) and represented a non-Western attempt to conceptualize modernity (Arnason 2000). According to the people interviewed by the author, the appeal of the Soviet model of modernity and the process of modernization came from steady improvements in policies and daily lives, with the people attributing these outcomes to the function of active agency in such a process and the changing patterns of human relations. For these individuals, this progress peaked during the Brezhnev era (1964–1982), which was later referred to by many historians as a time of stagnation. However, this time of so-called “stagnation” was the “golden era” of their lives.

Although the Brezhnev era was considered a time of so-called “developed socialism,” these senior citizens recall pronounced impressions that life improved not only during Brezhnev’s rule but also throughout the Soviet era. Their recollections were marked by the severe economic hardships of the 1920s, when the Soviet administration (1917) and the Soviet Union were first established (1924). Although people remember the conditions of the late 1930s and 1940s as severe, they believe that they were able to survive these years primarily because of the measures undertaken by the Soviet government to uplift the living conditions of the population, including the people in CA region. It should be noted here that respondents in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, in their absolute majorities, expressed this view in various ways, while in Kazakhstan, this view was prevalent in the northern parts of Kazakhstan. This perception was not expressed, however, in the south of Kazakhstan (Shimkent, for instance), where there was rejection of such a vision of the Soviet past while emphasizing the sacrifices and sufferings of the Kazakh population.

The respondents in this study emphasize that their views were shaped by their personal living experiences. They often recall how their families’ well-being progressed from “poverty, eating fried

up wild plants, catching wild birds to eat” to acquiring jobs in the Soviet construction of the Fergana Canal¹⁰ and to life improving to the extent that they even forgot about the years of hardship and hunger (Uzbek female from Tashkent). Others say that their lives improved so much because the “Soviet Union taught me, made me literate, gave me education” so that “I had dreams of travelling around and going to various resorts” (Chok tal, male, Kyrgyz, Kyrgyzstan).¹¹

These views contrast with the narrative of Soviet oppression created by post-Soviet leaders such as Karimov. At the same time, because of the nature of memory construction, the recollections mentioned above are examples of selectively remembering the past. They do not include the famines of the 1930s, the food shortages of the war years, the crop failures under Khrushchev, the empty store shelves under Brezhnev, or the bread lines under Gorbachev. For many, what is fixed in their minds is the positive image of improvements, which contrasted not only with their impoverished early Soviet past but also with their late Soviet experiences, which some refer to as “far more severe than what we experienced” during the early Soviet years (Russian female from Samarkand).¹²

This opinion is complemented by comments from other senior citizens who viewed the economic and social problems of the Soviet era as rooted in numerous different factors, rather than the Soviet government, again contrasting with the official narratives of leaders in the first section of this paper. One explanation for this vision is likely related to the ideological frames used in the Soviet educational system, which succeeded in persuading people about the positivity of Soviet gains. This finding is in line with Arnason’s description of how ideology limited the role of reflexivity in social life in Soviet society (*Ibid.*, p. 68). Another plausible factor is the feeling (whether based on the real state of affairs or illusions) among people that the Soviet administration delivered on many of its promises, as exemplified by educational gains and the increase in living standards over an extended period of time, and thus did not abuse public trust in this administration. People recall elevated living standards, educational, and career opportunities created for the public, the provision of welfare and many other achievements of the Soviet government as exemplifying why they relied on the Soviet government and why they felt that these hopes were reasonable and realizable. In addition, these comments are reflective of the deficiencies of post-Soviet governments and their geopolitical constructs to account for the needs of ordinary people, compared to the public’s Soviet experiences.

Although people experienced various limitations and problems, they remember being satisfied with their everyday lives. For instance, recollecting Khrushchev, one of the most contradictory figures in Soviet history, farmers in Kazakhstan evaluate his actions through the lens of what his policies brought to their homeland, which again differs from the evaluation of Nazarbayev with respect to Soviet policies in agriculture:

He directed all the power of the Union... After this campaign, Kazakhstan became the third largest grain producer in the Soviet Union, after Russia and Ukraine. This was completely due to Khrushchev’s efforts and good policy... If Khrushchev hadn’t made this effort, millions of hectares of land would still be idle. Then, we wouldn’t have any grain, and we wouldn’t have any livestock... When the Virgin Lands campaign was announced, people happily accepted it... People welcomed the newcomers. Nobody opposed the campaign. It was impossible to oppose it.” (male, Kazakh, Qostanay) (Ercilasun 2017, pp. 53–65).

Others in CA recollect these agricultural campaigns with mixed feelings. While certain rationales of such campaigns are well recognized among some interviewees (female, NA, Kazakh, Qostanay; male, 1941, Kazakh, Shymkent), there seems to be a critical sentiment in these recollections. However, in their recollections, people tend to evaluate the relative value (better or worse than now) as opposed

¹⁰The Fergana Canal was the famous Soviet grand project to provide water to the Fergana Valley.

¹¹For detailed narratives of these interviews, see Dadabaev 2015, pp. 97–99.

¹²For traumas of the past and their remembrance, see Dadabaev 2015.

to the absolute value (generally good or bad) of the Soviet period. Thus, nostalgic recollections are relative with regards to both the negativity of the time and current developments in the CA states.

Looking back, I would have to say that among the good things about that era was that the Soviet state gave everyone an education for free. However, you did have to make skilful use of that system. Another good point was that all healthcare facilities, kindergartens and other services were provided at no charge. We were able to live our lives without worrying much about tomorrow.

There were often times when our lives were almost too secure, and we would have trouble deciding how to spend our free time the following day. In contrast, today, we have far too many things to do, and we are so busy that it is tough to figure out what errand to run first tomorrow. Under such hectic conditions, who has any time to read books? Moreover, even if we work our fingers to the bone every day, there is no guarantee that we will earn enough money to fill our stomachs with food. In my view, the greatness of the Soviet Union was that even if you were poor, there were still no anxieties about what tomorrow would bring. (Uzbek male from Tashkent)

As is obvious from the above, the nostalgia towards the past does not have a direct relationship or connection with the grand narratives of post-Soviet Eurasian construction by Putin or Nazarbayev or the post-colonial narrative of Karimov; past Soviet policies of improving everyday living conditions seem to appeal to them more than post-Soviet grand narratives. People felt “satiated” (*toqin-sochin*) with all of the goods and services provided in excess (often referred to by the public as “*serob*”) (Uzbek female from Tashkent). This sense of satiation provided the courage and enthusiasm to accept challenges that individuals would never have accepted in the past.¹³

When these statements are viewed in the context of the people’s present lives, they seem to selectively omit all of the negative facets of the Soviet economy, such as poor-quality goods, black markets, excessive waste and empty shelves. In doing so, they, through nostalgic recollections, testify against the current modernization processes in their countries. These statements are also indicative of the people’s longing not for socialism or the Soviet state per se but for a system that guaranteed the diversity of choice offered in a market economy accompanied by the social protection of the Soviet state. In this case, similar to other empirical cases from socialist countries (Yang 2003), nostalgia demonstrates the resistance of the public to the changing conditions of modernity.

Soviet mode of freedom

When individuals express nostalgia for the Soviet past, this nostalgia is often connected to their views that, despite being under the control of the state apparatus, the Soviet state offered greater freedoms than what post-Soviet leaders, such as Putin, Nazarbayev and Karimov, have allowed since the collapse of the USSR. In these recollections, people necessarily compare their freedoms during the Soviet era to the freedoms and rights acquired during their post-Soviet lives. In such comparisons, the present does not always occupy a more advantageous position than the past because the governance of post-Soviet states under Putin, Nazarbayev, or Karimov sometimes surpasses the authoritarian rule of the Soviet administration. The Soviet administration appealed to the public as more open, accessible and transparent to many because of the system of various councils and the Party’s local branches, in which people felt that they were a (whether actually or illusory) part of the governance. In contrast, in the post-Soviet context, whether in Putin’s Russia, Nazarbayev’s Kazakhstan, or Karimov’s Uzbekistan, the newly independent states essentially deny the public any active role in constructing society through the usurpation of power.

In this sense, the nostalgia among senior citizens in CA not only confirms longing for the past, “but it is also more than that; it is a longing for an experience – subjective in the first place and yet far from

¹³For communist and post-communist enthusiasm in Eastern Europe, see Scarboro 2012.

limited to the individual” (Walder 2009, 2011, p. 4). Such views of the general public also contrast with the attempts by governments to either construct a new Eurasian space or isolate themselves because the views of the public and nostalgia are not related to these attempts but, rather, represent “closure” and “grief” with regards to the loss of Soviet experiences.

In addition, two notions feature prominently in the interviews: the sense of certainty and confidence about the future. When pressed, people speak of the USSR’s “adequate provision of social services,” “full employment,” “no lack of jobs,” and “fully paid wages,” which made people feel “pretty much free” (Uzbek male from Fergana).

Very similar narratives can be found in the description of Kyrgyzstan; the respondents did not “worry so much about ‘tomorrow’ and everyone... attempts to do his or her work better,” emphasizing that the economic conditions created in the Soviet state resulted in improved performance of the public and more devotion to work (Kyrgyz, female, Kara Dobo, Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan).

Soviet ideological and administrative constraints appear to be of secondary importance in the recollections of the public. The first reason for such selectivity in appreciating Soviet-era “freedom” more than the freedom that currently prevails is related to the social circumstances and the feeling of being part of the process, as argued in the interview below:

As it turns out, his [Gorbachev’s] perestroika mostly meant destruction and the disappearance of people. I do not know, maybe wasting resources [*tuda-siuda razbrasyval*] is something to be referred to as perestroika. These days, [the president of Kyrgyzstan at the time] Bakiev now makes some suggestions, and frankly, I do not listen. I do not read newspapers anymore, except the crossword puzzle section. I cannot stand reading newspapers anymore. I watch TV sometimes, but I do not know what the truth is and what the lies are among what is being told to the public. I listen to both, I guess. (Kyrgyz, male, Chui, Kyrgyzstan)

The second factor concerns the public’s understanding and acceptance of freedom. Whereas the degree of political freedom was low, there was a notion of “certainty in the future” that, for many, signified freedom from want and, as such, surpassed the necessity of political freedom in importance. To many, the type of freedom currently experienced is not as attractive because the limitations that individuals encounter remain the same as in Soviet times, but governmental responsibility has significantly decreased.

Social contract in the time of “developed socialism”

Based on the interviews with the respondents, they seem to accept the controls and sacrifices under the Soviet administration as constituting a certain type of social contract. Accordingly, the public accepted the role of the Communist Party and the government as those that made political decisions. For many, this acceptance was an easy sacrifice since they did not aspire to be active in politics. The other side of this social contract was that the government ensured that, as long as one diligently performed one’s work and did not interfere with politics, the rewards for one’s work would follow naturally.

Under such a social contract, as an individual advanced through elementary school and high school and on to university, he or she would simultaneously become a member of Communist Party organizations (*Oktyabriata*, *Pioneers*, and *Komsomol members*, respectively). Membership in these organizations was regarded by parents as a step in the maturation of individuals and as part of the collective upbringing of children (Uzbek female from Tashkent).

Despite the status of these organizations, the criteria for becoming members in them were not very transparent or obvious. The methods of control exercised had both positive and negative aspects for the people involved. The negative elements were primarily associated with ritualized bureaucratic formalities, whereas the positive aspects were connected to the sincere belief in and work for the common good present in people’s memories.¹⁴

¹⁴For similar conclusions with regards to Russia, see Yurchak 2003, pp. 480–510.

These positive aspects represent the aspects for which people are currently nostalgic. In particular, individuals emphasize the aspects of “order” and strong governmental functions in addition to the “discipline” within governmental organizations and public life. These efforts are often contrasted with the post-independence conditions in the respondents’ respective countries, and the absence of state functions, corruption, and economic hardships that prevailed after the collapse of the USSR.

I never once thought of speaking out or taking an interest in domestic politics. First of all, there wasn’t all that much information available about such things, and we didn’t even know what was happening or where political events took place. We had everything we needed, and we were able to go to stores when we wanted to and buy what we needed. The most important thing was whether or not we felt satisfied with life.

Although our salary was a mere 60 *sum* [roubles], we were satisfied with that. No one entertained pipe dreams of living in big fancy homes or buying anything more than we really needed. Although everyone shared the same lifestyle, so long as we had a house and a family, that was enough... Therefore, the conditions were different from what they are today. (Tatar female from Tashkent)

Although there is no written mention of the Soviet social contract in Soviet documents, the following can be assumed: during the period of so-called “developed socialism” under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, the Communist Party and the government cared about the socio-economic needs of the people and ensured that they were provided with the necessary means for their everyday needs. In turn, people accepted the limitations in political life imposed upon them by the government.

One example of restriction was the resident registration system. Unlike residents from urban areas, many rural district residents were oppressed by this system because they were restricted from moving to cities. This system aimed to control the mobility of the public and to secure a stable supply of labour in rural districts where the living environments were less favourable than those in major cities. Similar limitations were imposed on temporary relocation, even for educational purposes. While many people from rural settings attended universities in capital cities, the authorities often attempted to persuade applicants to choose institutions of higher education in the provinces where they lived, if available, to balance the demographics of cities (Uzbek female from Tashkent).

The cotton harvest mobilization in Uzbekistan is another case that illustrates governmental constraints. With respect to the cotton harvest, students were frequently mobilized as common labourers. Many respondents spent up to 3 months in autumn in the fields harvesting cotton. This labour was regarded by the government as the appropriate contribution by the people for their living standards and economic conditions.

While the majority of respondents disapproved of this practice, in their memory, these episodes were only of secondary importance compared with the discipline of the Soviet era and the absence of widespread corruption. In addition, the practice of residents’ registration and students’ mobilization for cotton harvesting continued in Karimov-era Uzbekistan, rendering the negative Soviet practice not very different from Karimov’s approach. This is one of the reasons why these memories of the negative aspects of the Soviet era coexist with nostalgic emotions. What people dislike about the present is the corruption of the legal system (from police officers on the streets to judges in the courts). At present, people frequently believe that anything and anyone can be bribed. They claim that such a level of corruption did not exist in the USSR because the Party was in command. Such contrasts cause people to compare the present to the past with nostalgia.

Most respondents emphasized that crime, bribery, the use of positions for personal advantage, and other infractions were severely punished. Naturally, such behaviour did not cease to exist in Soviet CA. In contrast, when the conventional channels of access to goods and services were not effective, the public used “alternatives,” which included speculation and other irregularities such as “trade under the table” [*Torgovlia iz pod prilavka*] (Uzbek male from Tashkent).

However, the public attitude towards these acts differs between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. According to many respondents, during the Soviet era, “speculation,” the buying of goods “under the table,” and bribery were conducted with an awareness that these measures were “irregular,” whereas in the post-Soviet era, the rules of the informal economy and networking have become the norm.

Thus, many senior citizens stated that they regarded incidents of corruption during the Soviet years as little more than isolated incidents.¹⁵ Such evaluations represent another example of selective remembering and the results of comparing the past with the present.

In many of these recollections, in addition to the geographical “other” (Afghanistan and China in the examples above), many people contrast their past with their present and thus evaluate their past through comparison with their present “other,” as demonstrated in the following recollection.

I have seen many leaders, such as Razzakov, Usubalev, Kulatov, and Sierkulov. Their cars were not escorted by police cars, and they travelled only by one car. When our current governor travels, he is escorted by 5–6 cars. This signifies his distance from the people. If our leaders cannot be close [accessible] to their constituents, I believe they govern in a dirty way, and they are afraid of people. I used to go for various duties with Kulatov [a politician], and we always commuted in one car: myself, him and the driver. They did not behave [pretentiously] like the current ones [politicians]. I worked as the head of a local agency for 15 years. Not even once did I bribe the Party secretary when they went to resorts, and I never butchered a sheep for them [referring to the tradition of celebrating a major event by butchering and cooking sheep meat]. (male, Kyrgyz, Naryn region, Kyrgyzstan)

As stated above, the people believe that the faults of the Soviet government were not intentional but resulted from efforts to increase people’s prosperity and not from the pursuit of personal gain. They generally conclude that such results signify the failure of these efforts to improve the lives of people but are not reflective of an effort to embezzle funds or benefit elites. The structural problems of Soviet modernity outlined by Arnason (2000, p. 84) and others do not receive much attention in these selective narratives. Additionally, many respondents, in light of post-independence problems, view many Soviet limitations as necessary evils meant to benefit the people. Therefore, although there was dissatisfaction with the restrictions, limitations, and controls mentioned above, this dissatisfaction never developed into opposition to the government or Party or anti-government movements. In addition, the degree of dissatisfaction with the Soviet authorities was not high. Although people did complain to one another, doing so was considered a way of relieving stress, which was then forgotten in the midst of everyday life. Ultimately, people conclude that in the Soviet era, they were at least guaranteed other social benefits in exchange for obedience, whereas in the post-Soviet era, this practice was transformed into open exploitation of the people by the government.

Inter-ethnic “merging” and solidarity beyond ethnicity

While the grand narratives of Putin, Nazarbayev, and Karimov, in a very nationalistic manner, attempt to appeal to Russians, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks, respectively, senior citizens appear to appreciate more the Soviet appeal of inter-ethnic “merging,” which refers to inter-ethnic marriages and the mixing of ethnic traditions with newly acquired Soviet traditions. Soviet authorities believed that this merging would lead to a decrease in ethnic attachments and the eventual birth of a new type of identity, referred to as the Soviet man. The CA region was no exception to this policy (Dadabaev 2013). Thus, the Soviet administration encouraged people to travel extensively throughout Soviet territory, interacting with people of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Considering the control of foreign travel at the time, this policy also served as a good substitute for foreign travel for many (Uzbek male

¹⁵For similar accounts, see Kondrat’eva 2008, pp. 128–44.

from Tashkent). In the post-Soviet context, many interviewees listed multiculturalism as the USSR's greatest achievement and the loss of multiculturalism as their greatest regret concerning the collapse of the Soviet Union (Russian female from Samarkand, Uzbek male from Tashkent, and many other respondents across all three countries).

According to many senior citizens, "confidence" in terms of the economic conditions during the Soviet administration translated into better relations with (ethnic, religious, etc.) "others" at the level of human interactions (male, Kyrgyz, Issyk-kol Oblast, Kyrgyzstan).

They claim that freedom of movement was guaranteed and that "no one ever asked who we were," referring to police ID checks in the post-Soviet environment (Uzbek male from Fergana). In addition to annual holiday trips, educational exchanges between Soviet republics were popular. Such exchanges allowed individuals with scholarly ability to further enrol at universities in Moscow, Leningrad, and other major cities (Tartar male from Tashkent). Currently, such opportunities are limited to individuals with extraordinary abilities and to those who possess the necessary financial resources.

In addition, in the post-Soviet era, Central Asians travel to Russia more for labour opportunities than for education, and they are often treated as second-class citizens in the territories of the former USSR. In many cases, these people cannot seek legal redress if they encounter problems. However, they continue to travel because of CA's poor economic circumstances. This complicated economic situation causes respondents to recall the "good old Soviet days" with nostalgia.

The military conscription system facilitated further interactions of CA citizens with people from other parts of the Soviet Union. These recollections of military service, which are gender specific and exclusively masculine, also provide an interesting perspective for understanding how CA Soviet citizens defined themselves in relation to multiple "others," as in the following case:

I was stationed in the border town of Kushka. The other side of the border was Afghanistan, and I worked as a tank mechanic on the Soviet [Turkmenistan] side ... We eventually finished our military service and were getting ready to return home. One day, we were in a local restaurant, and an Afghan came in. We soon learned that he was an Afghan Uzbek, and my Uzbek friend struck up a conversation with him.

He told us that he was 30 years old and unmarried. We asked him why he was single, and he replied that he couldn't figure out whether he should take a girl from a farming village as his wife or look for a bride in the city. He went on to explain that taking a wife from a rural area meant that the groom had to pay the bride's family a dowry but that this sum was much less for city girls. We couldn't figure out why he was so undecided, and it seemed naturally better to choose a wife who had been educated in the city and who wouldn't cost so much. He replied that city girls were strong willed and wouldn't listen to what men told them. Country girls, in contrast, would put up with almost anything. Marrying a country girl, he added, no one was likely to complain even if you killed her, for example, while that would certainly not be the case with a wife from the city.

This event made me realize that, even among ethnic Uzbeks, there were major gaps in thinking between Uzbeks born and raised in the Soviet era and those from Afghanistan. (Uzbek male from Fergana)

As demonstrated in the comments above, for many citizens in the CA region, the evaluation of the Soviet years and the consequent nostalgia are also related to comparing Soviet achievements to hypothetical scenarios of development had the Soviet administration never existed. In many accounts, Afghanistan is mentioned as an example of such alternative scenarios, demonstrating that the CA republics were better served by being part of the Soviet Union. Thus, for many respondents, CA benefited from the Soviet years in terms of socio-economic conditions, making this region part of the Soviet project of modernity, while Afghanistan fell into a long civil war. In this sense, Afghanistan represents a "negative" "other" to which CA states and their populations want to contrast "themselves."

In contrast to Afghanistan, which serves as a negative model of development for many of the respondents, the current Chinese path of development represents a positive “other” – an “alternative modernity” mentioned by many during the course of the interviews.

All of our parents [elders] were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the Soviet Union. To this day, they condemn Gorbachev because they look at China. Life is good in China. We would have the same if ... [we had followed the same path] ... If only we preserved certain aspects and mixed them, we would be good. If we had learned from China, we would have followed a good path. This means that socialism was not such a terrible thing. Not only do they have a large population, but their economy has also moved far ahead. (male, Kyrgyz, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)

In this sense, the Soviet past is reflected upon not only in terms of “good” or “bad” but also in respect to imagined possible “others” and “selves,” with Afghanistan and China representing the low and high points of modernity, respectively, to which CA could have been subjected if not for the Soviet project of modernization.

These views of the older population are also transferred to and resonate with the views of younger generations in CA, for whom Afghanistan, to a significant extent, is associated with a negative influence (reaching 29.9% for negative influence and 29.3% for rather negative influence in Uzbekistan and 20.4% for negative influence and 17.5% for rather negative influence in Kazakhstan) (Sonoda 2020). Conversely, the Chinese positive influence (26.9% and 54.6% in Uzbekistan and 21.8% and 34.8% in Kazakhstan, respectively) is second only to the Russian influence (45.9% and 38.8% in Uzbekistan and 37.1% and 33.7%, respectively, for Kazakhstan), again drawing clear lines of negative (Afghanistan) and positive (China and Russia) “others” for the CA public (*Ibid.*).

Conclusion

The views of senior citizens in CA regarding the Soviet past have been previously presented in various formats. However, the angle of this paper, which attempts to place these recollections into a comparative perspective with political master narratives uncovers the following new perspectives. First, this paper argues that Soviet history has become a contentious issue in official narratives shaped by political leaders to serve particular political goals. As shown in this paper, these goals can be diverse and range from the need to justify the newly post-colonial independent nationhood of these states to the “reclaiming of motherland” and the creation of regional institutions such as the Eurasian Union. In this sense, the official narratives produced by leaders are not purely reflections of the past; rather, they are frequently a method of public mobilization with respect to a particular goal that has elements of “restorative” nostalgia.

Second, this paper argues that narratives of both political leadership and the public are largely the outcomes of their identities that they developed over their Soviet years. These identities are informed by their understanding of “self” and the “other,” subconsciously under the various circumstances of their Soviet experiences. These identities shape their master narratives in respect to the importance of the Soviet past and impact their views on their present.

Third, as can be seen in the narratives of political leaders, they are torn between the admiration of Soviet past (Putin), reserved appreciation of its achievements (Nazarbayev), and outright rejection of it (Karimov). In all three cases, however, leaders operationalized their understanding of the past for the purposes of public policy. In case of Putin, his understanding of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a “mistake” and his perception of Russia as continuously being under attack from the “others” led him to weaponize his attachment to the Soviet past in order to achieve the following strategic goals: “return of lost Russian lands” and eventually Russia’s glory and power. In Nazarbayev’s case, his positive past experiences (as he was rumoured to be considered for the position of Prime Minister of the reformed Soviet Union under Gorbachev) and awareness of the negativities of the Soviet past led him to champion Eurasian rapprochement with Russia in hopes to form a new structure centred around

Kazakhstan. In addition, his concern about potential separatism in northern parts of Kazakhstan bordering Russia may have influenced his support towards Eurasianism as the way of containment of Russian ambitions and preventing the scenarios like Crimea in Kazakhstan. In contrast to them, Karimov viewed the Soviet past as an unjust to Uzbekistan, which resulted in exploitation of its agriculture, degraded its environment (leading to the loss of Aral Sea) and prevented it from developing its rich human resource base and economy. It is this understanding that strongly influenced his rejection of the past and mobilized this sentiment in favour of nationalist-driven (anti-Russian and anti-Eurasianist) agenda.

Fourth, in contrast to the political leadership, the nostalgia in the narratives of senior citizens should be understood as an attempt not to restore/weaponize the past but rather to reflect on their present through the lenses of the past. Post-Soviet and post-Communist nostalgia have frequently been explained solely by the painful processes of economic and social transition of these societies to a market economy and liberal values. The statements of the respondents described in this paper question this view as one that does not necessarily explain nostalgic feelings towards the Soviet past in an accurate manner. Based on the interviews above, for many, the Soviet era was not a time with fewer problems than the post-independence era. However, the respondents in CA states appreciated the social environment and spirit of constructing a conceptually new Soviet state. For them, participation in the construction of the Soviet state did not aim to prove to the outside world that Communist ideology was the most appropriate for all countries, as might seem to be the case from the ideological slogans of the time. Rather, people felt that such ideologically driven development led to a new understanding of modernity, a new conceptualization of social and collective associations that went beyond primordial ethnic and tribal attachments, freedom from want as well as freedom of mobility and a social contract between the state and society. Thus, the respondents felt that these aspects were missing from their current post-Soviet lives and the geo-political constructs offered by leaders such as Presidents Putin, Nazarbayev, and Karimov, causing the past to look more appealing than their lives in the present.

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