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**THE LEFTISM IDEOLOGY OR NOSTALGIA  
FOR THE SOCIALIST PAST?  
SEARCHING FOR *LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE* IN THE POST-SOVIET  
CULTURAL SPACES**

The research paper contributes to the experiences and memories dated back to the Soviet occupation period in Latvia in respect to their thematisation in the post-Soviet Latvia. The research paper focuses on the socialist past discourse in the public space, consequently the predominant data sources and the research methodology are based on the media content analysis, interviews and studies of the cultural spaces of Latvia. The main research question is rooted into the growing interest regarding the inherited experience accumulated during the Soviet occupation period and its consequences as well as into the actualization of the discussion of the thematisation of the socialist past in the post-socialist era within the context of the aggressive tendencies of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the mentioned tendencies, the research paper is discussing the issue whether the rehabilitation of the Soviet experience is related to the nostalgia for leftism ideology within the actual socio-political context or to the urge of restoring the lost evidences of a certain past period.

The research practice referring to the dynamics of the post-Soviet condition has been expanding proportionally to the growing time distance since the collapse of the Soviet Union. A great deal of the post-Soviet condition research presents a specified emphasis on diverse aspects of the post-Soviet nostalgia (in several sources referred to as Soviet nostalgia). There can be distinguished three mainstream research focuses: the phenomenon of so-called *Ostalgie* in the former GDR [Berdahl, Bunzl 2010], *Yugonostalgia* in the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [Djokić, Ker-Lindsay 2010] and the impact of the post-Soviet nostalgia onto the socio-political and cultural actualities in Russia [Kalinina 2014]. Meanwhile, the research practice of Latvia mainly focuses on the analysis of different aspects of the Soviet occupation period, neglecting the thematisation of the period in the

post-Soviet era. As an exception the research practice carried out by the Social Memory Research Centre at the Faculty of Social Science of the University of Latvia can be mentioned. Still both in the academy and public discourse in Latvia the Soviet occupation period is overwhelmingly related to negative connotations. The predominant research topics are related to the reconstruction of the traumatic experiences dating back to the Stalinist era, the restrictions upon human rights and personal freedoms under Soviet authorities and the negative socio-political aspects of the so-called Soviet heritage [Kaprāns, Zelče 2010]. The public discourse shows even more explicit tendencies of semantic negativity in thematisation of the Soviet past. Thus, the public description of the mission and exposition of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia offers to characterize the period by the following keywords: *terror, colonization, mass murder, crimes, suffering, grave consequences, the burden of memories* [Latvijas Okupācijas muzejs 2015], while the keywords characterising the period within the framework of the project *The Virtual School* featuring the topic *Latvia in the Soviet Union* addressed to the 15–16 year old pupils are as followed: *control, repressions, particularly severe, pursuit, fear, violence, forced, distortion, falsifications, forbidden* [Virtuālā skola 2015]. The negative thematisation of the Soviet period is widespread also in everyday conversations, as can be observed from the interviews with the interviewees of the research:

Reinis (42 y/o): *My Grandfather was a Red Army Soldier. Recently my son arrived home from school and declared that Granddad has belonged to the “Russian swine” killing the Latvian people and raping women. I remember myself playing war games with neighbouring boys: “ours” were “the Red Army”, “the others” were “the fascists”. So I realized I cannot share this part of my childhood stories – not to make my son to believe his Dad belonged to the “Russian swine” too* [Interview with Reinis Bērziņš 2015].

*It is well known that the bloodsucking bolsheviks deprived the hardworking peasants of the land by handing all the private property to the slum parasites. (..) The workers of the collective farms were massively prepared for attacking the capitalist countries. (..) The suspected peasants were sent into concentration camps masked under innocent euphemisms, such as agar plants* [Šausmas padomju kolhozu laikos 2015].

Velta (21 y/o): *My mum got rid of all the Russian books at home since they contain “the Soviet influence”, including Pushkin and Tolstoy. We use to throw out everything reminding of the Soviet era* [Interview with Velta Gūtmane 2015].

Barbara (10 y/o): *We do not talk about the Soviet times at home. But they told us at school that people were starving then and that they were killed for going abroad* [Interview with Barbara Daļeckā 2015].

Alongside with the negative thematisation of the Soviet period there can be traced a growing interest in the Soviet past and a tendency of balancing the negative

dominant with subjective memories focusing on positive or neutral aspects of the socialist reality. In several cases the interviews reveal the insecurity and confusion of the interviewees when contrasting personal experiences and the official public discourse:

Ilze (51 y/o): *My father was the chairperson of a kolkhoz. I was a secretary at the Youth Comsomol organisation of the school. None of us was highly ideological though, we were just hardworking and responsible by nature. Perhaps I should condemn both my parents and my Comsomol activities, but it feels strange without any inner need* [Interview with Ilze Pomere 2015].

Kristīne (23 y/o): *My Mom and Dad are totally grateful to the Soviet authorities. Dad was an orphan; Mom was coming from a poor family. The Soviets helped them with education, working position, place for living. But I would not inform my friends about that, because it sounds somehow wrong* [Interview with Kristīne Muižniece 2015].

Gita (30 y/o): *I was at school in times when the Russian language was a total no-go. Everything Russian was associated with the Soviet, namely, the disgusting. But we had many kids of the soldiers in the yard, we were playing together. I was ashamed to be fluent in Russian. Only now, particularly when talking to foreigners, I realize it is a benefit to know an extra language* [Interview with Gita Dumpe 2015].

Mareks (12 y/o): *My Dad was a Soviet militia man. He uses to tell about them pursuing criminals. I think that is supercool. But everyone says that the Soviet militia was bad. I would like to pursue criminals, too, but I do not want to be called bad if the times change* [Interview with Mareks Jāņkalns 2015].

To sum up the main tendencies of the thematisation of the Soviet past, there can be distinguished four predominant approaches:

1. Conscious and deliberate ostracism, often related to the stigmatization of the Soviet past, represented as a sense of feeling ashamed or guilty for the Soviet experiences;
2. Disassociation from the Soviet past as a *non-existent* period of time in personal or family history;
3. Longing or nostalgia for the “lost Soviet paradise”;
4. Exotization of the Soviet past, often used as a marketing strategy.

One must state, though, that these tendencies are not exclusive and that they are more characteristic to the general public discourse than to the academic research. Generally they coincide with the general feeling of the loss of balance after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when, quoting the Hungarian historian Istvan Rev: “Gone were the certainties, the pillars of one’s life: the recurrent family events, the rhythm of life, the week-days and the holidays, the well-known street names, the social significance of neighbourhoods, the meaning of the photographs

in the family album, the social capital, the knowledge of Russian as a usable foreign language, the value of the sociometric network of one's private and professional world, the stability of memories, the comprehension of private and public history. What remained was unknown" [Rev 2005:9].

In 1990s, directly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the predominating reference to the Soviet past was intentional ostracism both affecting the individual and group memory. The tendency of stigmatization of the past was related both to the fact that the active population was still closely related to their socialist past and instead of mere forgetting had to use much more radical methods of getting rid of the Soviet heritage [Kaprāns, 2011]. In late 1990s – early 2000s the tendency of ostracism and stigmatization was replaced by milder tendency of forgetting the Soviet past, related to questioning the so-called European identity of the first post-Soviet generation born in 1970s and 1980s, who were embraced both by general changes related to Latvia's joining the international institutions and by individual identity shaping encountering the international market of education and labour. Maria Mälksoo discusses the identity question in the Baltic States in early 2000s, asking if the focus should be put on belonging to, returning to, joining to Europe or just *behaving like a European* [Mälksoo, 2006]. The critique directed from *the West* towards *the East*, combined with remnants of ostracism and stigmatization of the Soviet past, creates the sense of embarrassment, shame and traumatized identity [Ilves 2004] particularly characteristic to the first post-Soviet generation. In the middle of the decade this uncertainty serves as a trigger for increasing awareness of the Soviet past.

The economic crisis of 2008–2012 marks a shift regarding the thematisation of the Soviet past. The illusions of the mightiness of the neoliberalist economy are gone, accompanied by fierce migration towards the West and the raise of neonationalist and neoconservativist tendencies at home. These changes trigger a strong tendency towards the feeling of the post-Soviet nostalgia. It can be manifested, following the nostalgia theory by Svetlana Boym, both as restorative and reflective nostalgia: the first refers back to the *nostos* or home component of the Greek origin word and tends to restore the lost place, while the second concentrates on *algia* or the longing component and finds reflecting upon the lost past more attractive than restoring it. Both types of nostalgia use to intertwine [Boym 2001/2007]. Still, expanding the above mentioned theory, I would like to argue that the restorative nostalgia tends to predominate the public discourse since it is related to the tangible manifestations and repeatable – restorable – artefacts located in a particular space giving the sense of security to the involved. Analysing the phenomenon of the post-Soviet nostalgia (here and furthermore the more popular term is used compared to the other option: Soviet nostalgia) within

the framework of Boym's theory, the undeniable destination of the nostalgic restoration is the Soviet component, lost after the post-time has been established. According to the Encyclopaedia of Law provided by the Academy of Science of the Russian Federation, soviets are the collegial representative bodies of the public authority in the Russian Empire, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, elected by the general population for a certain period of time [Энциклопедия юриста 2005]. In this respect, the concept of soviets refers to an ideological model characterized by equality and social justice, thus following the main ideological conditions of leftism [Fiala 2015]. Consequently, the restorative nostalgia for the soviet past can be regarded as a struggle for restoring the lost leftist or, more specified, socialist ideals. Often the loss of these ideals is associated to the *shock therapy* of the neoliberalist economy within the transitory conditions of the post-socialist societies [Wacquant 2012]. Due to the developmental tradition, neoliberalism serves as a welcoming background for neoconservativist outbursts directed towards several minority groups like homosexuals [Spektrs 2015] and neonationalism which is severely affecting the balance of the society claiming for hatred towards immigrants and traditional national minorities [Feldman 2012]. Neoliberalism can be blamed also for its impact on so called new leftist radicalist groups and Muslim terrorist groupings.

Above mentioned conditions easily explain the activating of nostalgia for the lost paradise of leftist ideals. Here should be mentioned firstly the idealistic – or idealized but still powerful – slogans declared to the young Soviet citizens since early childhood, which claimed for moral virtues like friendliness, respecting others, efficiency, honesty, sincerity, helpfulness and selflessness [Ločmele 2010], followed by the directions to young communists focusing on the involvement into the maintaining the progress of the whole community by means of personal development and social responsibility [Graiska 2015].

In a community longing for lost ideals and finding itself on a seemingly never-ending route of redefining identity and protecting its uniqueness against merging with the mainstream Western tradition which is actually not very welcoming in respect to cultural differences based on the heritage rooted in the experiences sampled on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, certain benchmarks are intrinsically necessary in order to find the lost connection with the past. The French historian Pierre Nora offers his concept of the simulacra of remembrance or *lieux de mémoire* as a tool designed by the community in cases its identity is in question due to some past event or period endangered to be erased from the collective memory. *Lieux de mémoire* is a term attributed to any meaningful entity, whether material or non-material, which has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage

of some community by purposeful human performance or the work of time. *Lieux de mémoire* functions as an array of mnemonic techniques which is set into action when the “real”, “true” memory (Nora refers to it as *milieux de mémoire*) dies out, and a necessity arises for constructing a network structure of referring back to past, thus sustaining the actual identity of a community and laying a solid foundation for developing the existing identity or re-shaping it [Nora 1996]. Certain *lieux de mémoire* recognized within the group can serve as a tool for building identity and communication via both actual remembering and delivering knowledge to the further generations, and embracing ideals of the *lost past paradise*. A characteristic example of *lieux de mémoire* referring back to the Soviet past is activities related to the Victory Day, celebrating the end of the WWII in the former Soviet Union on May 9. Since the number of the witnesses of the war is diminishing year by year, the Victory Day celebration joins the representatives of different ages and social groups in a meeting point inviting to remember and share not only memories about the actual event, but to communicate values on a larger scale, mostly referring back to socialist past and ideals in general (within the framework of this research paper the aspect of propaganda is excluded since it would extend the author’s purpose to trace the relations between the post-Soviet nostalgia and leftism ideology without discussing the different impacts). Similarly, countless cultural projects serve as *lieux de mémoire* referring back to the Soviet past, such as post-Soviet history expositions in Liepāja Karosta prison or the secret bunker in Līgatne, recent theatre productions such as “Revidents” by N. Gogol directed by Alvis Hermanis or “Five Evenings” (“*Pieci vakari*”) by A. Volodin directed by Māra Ķimele in the New Riga Theatre, movies like “The People Out There” (“*Cilvēki tur*”) by the young director Aiks Karapetjans or Soviet-style setting in public places such as the club “The Eastern Border” (“*Austrumu robeža*”). Post-Soviet nostalgia manifests itself also in the social networking space as, for instance, shared series of photographed artefacts dating back to the Soviet period.

In all the above mentioned cases the identity building of the group and the mutual communication of the leftism ideals through certain *lieux de mémoire* is located within a definite space, whether it would be a museum, memorial, theatre space, public eating place, diegetic space of a film or a social networking site location. Respectively, the restorative nostalgia tends to perceive time spatially – like a defined period which represents itself as a segment of space. Entering this secluded segment of space of certain *lieux de mémoire*, the insiders hope to reach the lost time of ideals, in this case – to create an illusion of restoring the simulacrum of the virtues of the socialist past. Even in cases of the negative thematisation of the socialist past or exoticization it to serve a marketing strategy the restorative nostalgia with its spatialized time concept is present: on both occasions the Soviet

era is regarded as a defined period of time which can be either discarded as a discrete unit or offered as a product for sale for the lucky outsiders.

In this respect it is also interesting to turn attention, even though shortly, to the other type of nostalgia mentioned by Svetlana Boym. Reflective nostalgia, the eternal longing [Boym 2007] provides keeping distance from the object of nostalgia, regarding the past time only as one of the potentially merging time modes and optional experiences. The reflective nostalgia embodies the potential of intellectual playfulness. Thus, in case of the post-Soviet reflective nostalgia, the Soviet past and its heritage is considered to be an array of certain knowledge, namely, the ability to recognize and interpret the cultural symbols and sign systems referring to the Soviet period. The approach of the reflective nostalgia allows dissolve the concept of the post-Soviet nostalgia through dismantling the spatialized predominance of the *post-Soviet-ness*. Consequently, the longing for the ideals associated to the leftism ideology can be disentangled from the historically determined cohabitation with the negative thematisation of the socialist past embodied by the official public and partially academic discourse in Latvia. Moreover, through emphasizing nostalgia as the eternal longing, the leftism ideals can be enriched with new possibilities of interpretation.

### Conclusion

Following the analysis of the thematisation of the Soviet experience in the public discourse of the post-Soviet Latvia, the main observed tendencies can be generalized according to the approaching the Soviet occupation period as a spatially defined unit of time, manifesting itself through certain artefacts, respectively *lieux de mémoire*. Although a great part of the community regards the Soviet period and the *lieux de mémoire* representing it as unwelcome negativity, a shift of views can be observed to occur since the economic crisis of 2008–2012 which caused a major disillusionment towards the values and goals of neoliberalism. The shift marks a renewed interest into the socialist past alongside with the restorative nostalgia approach towards the Soviet *lieux de mémoire* expecting to re-establish also the lost ideals of the leftism ideology claiming for social justice and equality. It must though be admitted that similar tendencies can act destructively and lead to extreme chauvinism. As an optional alternative could be provided the analytical approach towards the socialist past characteristic to the reflective nostalgia. Thus, without an urge to restore the *lieux de mémoire* reflecting backwards to the Soviet past, the successful aspects of the socialist experience can be discussed and revalued.

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**Abstract**

The concept *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) was developed by the French historian Pierre Nora in the 1970–90s, who suggests to use the term to refer to “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” [Nora, Kritzman 1996:18]. *Lieux de mémoire* function as an array of mnemonic techniques, which are necessary when the real memory

(*milieux de mémoire*) fades. *Lieux de mémoire* are repeatedly employed in referring back to the past, thus sustaining the actual identity of a community and laying a solid foundation for developing the existing identity or re-shaping it. In the Post-Soviet cultural space of Latvia *lieux de mémoire*, which are associated with the Soviet past, can be encountered everywhere, from the “The Government Inspector”, staged by Alvis Hermanis and performed during the 2010s, to the nostalgic interior objects in cafés, the hullabaloo stirred by the contest New Wave, the popularity of Karosta Prison in Liepāja, and social media users’ commentaries on the Internet about the topical events in contemporary society. The article discusses the potential links of these phenomena to contemporary socio-political events and attempts to establish if they hide any efforts to restore collective and individual memory, which were split alongside the so-called rewriting of history that took place as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, or indications of flaws in Western neoliberalism and neoconservatism while seeking opportunities for renewal of society by way of indirect leftist ideological implications.

**Keywords:** *post-soviet cultural spaces, leftism ideology, socialism, site of memory.*