

Homo Sovieticus: 20 Years After the End of the Soviet Union

By Sergei Gogin, Ulyanovsk

Abstract

This article analyzes the nature and origins of *Homo Sovieticus* in the Soviet Union, and assesses its impact on contemporary Russian society. It argues that the establishment of the “power-vertical” by the Putin regime and its glorification of the Soviet past served to reproduce many of the worst traits of *Homo Sovieticus* in Russia, in particular distrust of others, social apathy and deference to authority. However, as the recent demonstrations indicate, if the inter-personal ties destroyed by the Soviet period can be restored within Russian society, then nostalgia for the Soviet era will soon become a phenomenon of the past.

When the USSR’s “Enlightenment” Publishing House issued the English language textbook “Poems, Songs, Plays,” for middle school students in 1967, it included a poem entitled “Wishes.” It began:

*I want to be a worker
On a Soviet modern plant
And make machines and lorries
For our Motherland.
I want to be a farmer
On a big collective farm;
We do like bread and butter
And to eat them gives no harm.*

The list of priority professions in the poem emphasized doctor, sailor, teacher and, of course, cosmonaut:

*I want to be a spaceman
And journey to the moon;
In our Soviet rocket
We’ll make this journey soon.*

However, this particular prediction did not come true: In 1969 the first man on the Moon was an American, and Soviet feet never touched the lunar surface. The inspirational ending of the poem proclaimed:

*We all are strong and happy
And gay as well as you.*

Although the last line has a double meaning today, on the whole this poem was typical of the propaganda imposed from childhood—even to teach foreign languages—to create a “new Soviet man” who would consciously build communism. But in the end, following decades of Soviet experiments, a different type of individual emerged, labeled by the emigre-author Alexander Zinoviev as *Homo Sovieticus*, and in common language is usually dubbed “sovok.”

Who is *Homo Sovieticus*?

Wikipedia in English describes *Homo Sovieticus* as a person who is passive, irresponsible, indifferent to the results of his labor, and sees nothing wrong from stealing from his workplace. He is isolated from global (and particularly Western) culture by the “Iron Curtain”, lives under censorship and easily believes in propa-

ganda. He is used to submitting to an authoritarian state and drinking a lot.

This stereotype and caricature of *Homo Sovieticus* requires further elaboration. *Homo Sovieticus* believes that he is only a small cog in a larger government machine, and is a person who conflates the state with society and himself with the state. It is difficult to alter this form of self-identification: for example, three years ago I heard from one of the elderly secretaries of the Union of Journalists that “the main task of a journalist is to help his state.” A *Homo Sovieticus* is an atheist, materialist and nominally an internationalist, believes (or at least he has been forced to believe) that the meaning of life is to work in support of his country and its people, build a better future—and for this he is prepared to make sacrifices, to endure hardships in the present and accept a low salary for his work. He consciously or subconsciously fears the repressive power of the state, hence the tradition of “double talk” when people speak freely in private conversation with their friends, but stick to ideologically correct statements in public. He is used to taking pride in the exploits of the USSR and cursing capitalism. Likewise, he is seduced by the material achievements of Western culture and is envious of its consumer standards. In the words of the famous Russian blogger and lawyer, Alexei Navalny, “the grandeur of the USSR was founded on the self-denial and heroism of its people who lived in poverty. We built space ships and told each other stories about shops where you can buy forty different types of sausage with no queues.” Finally *Homo Sovieticus* believes in hierarchy, measures his own significance by his position in the pyramid of power and is jealous of those who have attained a higher public and material position than he has.

The image of *Homo Sovieticus* is therefore inherently contradictory—at once describing an individual who is personally passive (“we cannot change anything”) and responsible for the fate of the country; on the one hand, enthusiastic in his labor, and, on the other, pinching spare parts from his factory; collectivist and suspicious of others; believing in a bright future and feeling

social apathy. These contradictions draw on two facts: first, that official Soviet propaganda did not reflect the actual state of affairs and people's thinking. And, second, that *Homo Sovieticus* is not a genetic type created in a test tube and in reality probably never existed; instead, the label best applies to a collection of specific human characteristics.

The Origins of the *Homo Sovieticus*

The notion of *Homo Sovieticus*—as outlined above—developed over the course of the 70-plus years of the Soviet regime. As noted by historian Andrey Zubov, “the Soviet man” evolved as a result of a deeply negative selection process, whereby “the best, most honest and most cultured people were either killed or prevented from having a family and raising children by exile or imprisonment, whilst the worst sort of people, namely those who took part in the creation of this new form of man or silently supported the new authorities, could ‘be fruitful and multiply.’”

One of the most decisive factors in forming *Homo Sovieticus* was the abolition of private property. American historian Richard Pipes argued that private property is the prerequisite for a free society, since only a person who has property and works consciously becomes a responsible citizen and guards democratic institutions, as these in turn protect his property.

But, perhaps it is also worth looking into the more distant past to explain the development of *Homo Sovieticus*. In the 16th century, Tsar Ivan the Terrible created a centralized Russian state, strengthened the system of serfdom, subordinated the principalities of Novgorod and Pskov under Moscow's authority and thus destroyed the early shoots of democratic people power that existed there. The subsequent centuries of serfdom, peasant communes, the cult of a Supreme authority supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and the kind of thinking that these institutions fostered turned Russia into a breeding ground for the Soviet experiment. To a certain extent, this experiment was also extended to other Socialist countries, but in Eastern Europe the period of overpowering communist ideology was relatively short and the break with the Soviet past occurred much more rapidly and therefore the impact of the *Homo Sovieticus* was less than it was in Russia.

The Return of *Homo Sovieticus*

Many experts agree that two decades after the Soviet Union collapsed, *Homo Sovieticus* is still alive and continues to define post-communist Russia, although *Homo Sovieticus* himself has mutated. As the writer Vladimir Sorokin pointed out, the “mentality has remained Soviet, but this man has come to understand quality.

He wants to have a Mercedes and to vacation in Spain or Italy.” This type of person has also come to form the basis of the Russian electorate; brought up under the conditions of state paternalism, they are more susceptible to manipulation and the rhetoric of the authorities, which is largely aimed at them, particularly during election campaigns.

In power, Vladimir Putin has acted like a social behavioralist, capable of tapping into the old public consciousness of the *Homo Sovieticus* when needed, as seen with his revival of the melody from the old Stalinist Soviet anthem as the new Russian national anthem, his statement that the collapse of the USSR was the main tragedy of the 20th century, and his anti-Western speech at the Munich Security conference in 2007. Also, as noted by Konstantin Troshin, an Ulyanovsk resident who is a supporter of the banned Nationalist-Bolshevik Party and an activist in the Other Russia organization, “Putin plays on old Soviet myths in the public consciousness, nostalgia for the country where people grew up and lived for most of their lives. Putin is a political strategists' creation designed to win the backing of people disorientated by the reforms of the 1990s.

Putin's main idea today—preserving stability—fully corresponds with the thinking of *Homo Sovieticus*, who fears change. If the typical “sovok” response in the Soviet period was “those at the top steal, but leave some for us” today's *Homo Sovieticus* also believes that the current authorities are corrupt, but do not want to change them—instead preferring to retain the status quo of hazy stability. The sociologist Elena Omelchenko also suggests that the nucleus of support for Putin is not made up of *sovoks*, but is comprised of pragmatic individuals from different social strata, who profited during the time of the 1990s reforms and do not want to lose these gains. In the opinion of Omelchenko, those who vote for Putin are “office plankton,” who want to preserve their stable salary, and that today's *Homo Sovieticus* are, first and foremost, bureaucrats and “Soviet capitalists” who are “the heirs of the old mentality that reproduces the Soviet type of elite.” A young communist and lecturer at Ulyanovsk State Technical University, Konstantin Gorshkov, agrees and suggests that “‘sovok’ is a useful term to describe the contemporary representatives of the power vertical who have adopted the worst traits from the old Soviet system: bureaucracy, corruption, the feeling of powerlessness before the system and the desire to fill their own pockets.”

Of course the model of *Homo Sovieticus* is heterogeneous, with differences among the disappearing generation of veterans from World War II, the post-war generation, and the “lost generation” which grew up during Brezhnev's stagnation. Members of the Brezhnev gen-

eration are now coming up to the end of their working lives and make up the grassroots mass of *Homo Sovieticus*, notes Gorshkov.

The head of the Levada Center, Lev Gudkov, explains the revival of *Homo Sovieticus* in Russia by noting that despite the change in the external attributes of the authorities, the structure of power remains the same. “As during the height of communism, society has no way to hold the authorities accountable ... The social system’s key features include a dependent judiciary, politicized police and censorship of the media”. Ulyanovsk State University philosophy professor Valentin Bazhanov also reminds us that one of the features of *Homo Sovieticus* is his fear of the authorities, and sadly notes that in the 2000s this fear returned to Russia. He suggests that despite the chaos of the 1990s, this period was one of relative freedom. However, with Putin’s ascent to power, the sovok tradition of double-think and servility returned. The magazine *Kommersant-Vlast* now even holds an annual competition “Suck-up watch,” which features the most egregious obsequiousness directed at the prime minister and president. Among the competitors this year is Alexei Filatov, the vice-president of the International Association of Veterans of the Alfa counter-terrorist squad, who said that “in critical moments, the Russian people have always been endowed with God’s blessing, including in the form of its leaders. Putin is one such blessing. Only God knows where we would end up without him’.

Reproduction of *Homo Sovieticus*

In outlining his explanation of the mechanisms driving the reproduction of *Homo Sovieticus*, Professor Bazhanov proposes a socio-psychological model based on Jung’s archetypes. He argues that “this latent structure [*Homo Sovieticus*] exists in the public unconscious and manifests itself under specific conditions. At the present time, the conditions that facilitate the revival of *Homo Sovieticus* are political-economic and are caused by the actions of the power vertical.” As a result of the current authoritarian power structures, the worst traits embedded in the Russian nation have been revived, leading to the revival of the phenomenon of the *Homo Sovieticus*. Furthermore, independent researcher Ludmila Novikova draws on psychology to explain that the origins of the “Soviet individual” are found in the totalitarian system that influences everyone and to which an individual must adapt because he or she has no freedom of choice, which in turn changes the individual. People must therefore adopt different psychological coping strategies to reduce the pressure from the system and even to survive within it while finding a moral basis to explain their own adaptation. Interestingly, even today,

Russia’s authoritarian regime exploits these same mechanisms with the goal of manipulating the consciousness of citizens.

For example, in accordance with these mechanisms of rationalization and moralization, people influenced by sovok thinking do not demand the release of political prisoners, but rather, as in Stalin’s time, convince themselves that “our leaders do not put innocent people in jail” or say, as Putin did about Khodorkovsky, that “a thief should sit in jail.” A focus shift strategy allows people to redirect their unhappiness with the regime to a search for domestic and foreign enemies: “NATO is advancing to our borders” or as Putin complained in 2007 “Within the country, there are jackals who line up outside foreign embassies.” Putin’s December call-in show demonstrated the mechanism by which people “identify with the aggressor.” Igor Khalmanskikh, a defense plant worker from Nizhny Tagil told the prime minister, “If the police are not able to work and cannot deal with the situation, my friends and I are ready to come out and defend our stability ourselves.” Novikova has identified fourteen different types of behaviors, illustrated by examples from Russia’s Soviet and recent past, which she argues suggest that either contemporary Russia is experiencing a revival of the *Homo Sovieticus* phenomenon or that it had never gone away in the first place.

By contrast Gudkov, has proposed a “territorial-economic” explanation for the revival of *Homo Sovieticus*. He argues that in large cities, in which the market economy is more noticeable and dependence on the authorities is weaker, political consciousness is more flexible. However, two thirds of the Russian population live in small cities, and it is “precisely in this zone of depression and poverty that the model of a Soviet person is being reproduced. In the larger cities there is greater potential, represented by the supporters of reforms, but it is currently suppressed by the conservative periphery.”

The archaic and authoritarian structure of Russian power and the absence, or poorly developed nature, of democratic institutions are not conducive to political and technological modernization. Indeed, when there is nothing to draw on other than oil and gas, it becomes necessary to turn to the past in search of an ideological model. A new term has even emerged “nostalgia modernization” that describes the process by which the Russian authorities appeal to the country’s past as a form of ideological support for future development. According to the Levada Center’s Boris Dubin, as a result of this trend, the 2000s have witnessed the revival of “propaganda centered on reconciling ourselves with the Soviet past. What was once merely ‘Soviet’ became ‘ours’ and ‘good.’ These socio-economic explanations for the return of *Homo Sovieticus* stress that because the economic

reforms and crises deprived many people of their savings and jobs, they formed a negative view about the end of the Soviet Union. Dubin argues that “people wanted to hide from reality by retreating into a safe past and this trend created fertile soil for such forms of propaganda.”

Interestingly, young people, who never lived in the USSR and have only learnt about it from old Soviet films and the stories of their parents and grandparents, can also hold a positive opinion of Russia’s Soviet past due to such political propaganda and family stories. In Levada Centre opinion polls, 60% of young people believe that life was better in the Soviet period.

The sociologist Elena Omelchenko adds that some young people have negatively reacted to the growing consumer culture by adopting the esthetic of the Soviet past, arguing that “as soon as glamour and showing-off emerges, young people become more concerned with injustice and inequality and protest against a system that is based on inequality. These young people adopt some Soviet symbols as symbols of protest.” Alla Mikheyenko, an Ulyanovsk medical student, for example, said, “I imagine that Soviet society was more fair and humane. At the moment there is a lot of negativity, calls for individualism and exhortations to live only for oneself and one’s family. In the Soviet Union it was not like that. Perhaps people lived in an atmosphere of fear, stagnation and did not believe that their life could change. But that was better than how it is now. Back then, there was stability and certainty that you would not be killed in a dark corner. But today, there is terrorism, crime, and poor medical care, and at the same time there are constant calls for self-enrichment and consumption—it is disgusting.”

The sociologist Boris Dubin argues that the worst effect of the Soviet regime was that it deprived society of the ability to believe in something. In order to make its population passive and subordinate, the regime attacked the social ties that held people together. Today, polls conducted by the Levada Center indicate that people do not feel that they have the power to change anything and that it is pointless to ask for their rights. The only thing that an individual controls now is limited to his or her immediate family.

However, Dubin has also suggested that the December 10, 2011, demonstrations in favor of free and fair elections represented the first time since August 1991 that such a large mass of very diverse people within Russian society came together in support of a better life and prepared to work for the future. The protesters had a sense of community and appreciated that they were able to stand next to each other. ... This is completely different from the model of *Homo Sovieticus*. The mass protests on 10 and 24 December 2011 in Moscow demonstrated that there is still potential in Russian society to rebuild the social and communal ties that have been lost.

Today many Russian observers believe that, with time, the key traits of the *Homo Sovieticus* will disappear. As Other Russia’s Konstantin Troshin noted, “in the near future the archetypal Soviet individual will disappear through natural processes.” In place of the generation that feels nostalgic about the Soviet era, a new generation of young people will emerge that has its own leftist ideology, one which will express its own ideological aims without nostalgia for the Soviet past.

About the Author

Sergei Gogin is an independent journalist and a regional correspondent for Radio Liberty.