HOMO (POST)SOVIETICUS SYNDROME AND CIVIC AWARENESS DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS IN UKRAINE IN KHMELNYTSKYI REGION

Aleksandra SYNOWIEC

Faculty of Organization and Management, Silesian University of Technology; aleksandra.synowiec@polsl.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0001-8251-2322

Abstract: An anthropological perspective on the processes of social change provides with many insights into the effects of socialism in the sphere of mentality, attitudes and life orientations. The aim of the article is to discuss the syndrome of *homo sovieticus* and *homo post-sovieticus* as an important factor in the development of civil awareness in the rural areas in Ukraine, referring to the empirical material obtained during fieldwork in the Khmelnytskyi region in 2018.

Keywords: Ukraine, civil awareness, postsocialism, social change, homo sovieticus.

1. Introduction

Analyses of the causes, mechanisms and consequences of formerly socialist societies transition, concern many aspects in political, economic, social and cultural spheres. Postsocialism, as an empirical category, applied by ethnologists and cultural anthropologists, serves to capture the situation of the coexistence of different systems of values, social practices and institutions, as well as the social and cultural consequences of the experience of socialism. Zygmunt Bauman, describing this "in between" state, refers to the anthropological concept of liminality: "all post-communist regimes find themselves in a predicament of liminality in which everything may happen but little can be done" (Bauman, 1992, p. 130 after: Buchowski, 1994, p. 140). In turn, Caroline Humphrey, reflecting on postsocialism as an explanatory category, claims that "there never can be a sudden and total emptying out of all social phenomena and their replacement by other way of life" (Humphrey, 2004, p. 12). An anthropological perspective of the processes of social change enables to observe the effects of socialism in the sphere of mentality, attitudes and life orientations. Therefore Ukraine is a good example illustrating a wide range of attitudes towards the USSR heritage: from total rejection, even to

nostalgia. An in-depth reflection on the postsocialist mentality contributes to understanding other social processes, including these of community building in the former USSR countries.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the syndrome of *homo sovieticus* and *homo post-sovieticus* as an important factor concerning the development of the civil awareness in the rural areas of Ukraine. Presented material refers to empirical data obtained during fieldwork in the Khmelnytskyi region in 2018[1].

2. Main concept and methodological approach

This paper is a result of field research conducted as a part of the project "Persistence and change in the socio-cultural space of the contemporary Ukrainian village in the perspective of anthropology of postsocialism", financed by the National Science Center (2017). The research was based on the practical application of the concept of postsocialism (see, for example, Buchowski, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2017), that means identification of interdependence between factors of "persistence" and "change" in selected local communities in rural areas in Khmelnytskyi Oblast'. Postsocialism was defined as "the local form of the capitalistic neoliberal economy, shaped at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries in countries and societies that experienced decades of the communist regime and that were representing a social formation called real socialism" (Buchowski, 2017, p. 36). The field study was conducted in three local communities in Khmelnytskyi Oblast' – Hrytsiv, Hannopil and Hwardijske – in order to analyse and describe the socio-cultural effects of the political transformation that currently takes place in rural areas. Khmelnytskyi region is one of the least urbanized regions of Ukraine. The main branches of economy are as follows: agriculture, food industry, energy industry, mechanical engineering and production of building materials (Strategy for Regional Development of the Khmelnytskyi Oblast 2011-2020, p. 26). The percentage of the rural population is 42.48% (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 1 January 2019). The research was carried out between May and August 2018. The research material collected includes 50 semi-structured and non-structured interviews, 2,000 photographs, observation notes, as well as audio and video of study visits. The criterion for selecting the interlocutors was to obtain respondents as diverse as possible in terms of profession, age, education and social status[2]. For the purpose of this study only a very small part of obtained data was used.

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[1] National Science Centre, Miniatura 1, „Persistence and change in the socio-cultural space of the contemporary Ukrainian village in the perspective of anthropology of postsocialism", 2018.

[2] Interviews were conducted with local authorities, activists, teachers, entrepreneurs, farmers, former kolkhoz workers, service workers etc.

The advantage of field research is embedded in the fact "that this research method is based on the researcher's personal relationship with the surrounding world(s) more than any other type of social research" (Lofland et al., 2009, p. 31). The use of qualitative methods gives the researcher the opportunity to get deeper into the world studied, but also allows for the flexible use of data, as well as for following the instructions emerging from the research material (Glaser, and Strauss, 2009, pp. 127-130).

Although the issue of *homo (post)sovieticus* syndrome was not the main research problem of the conducted study, it naturally became one of the most important areas in identifying the relationship between "persistence" and "change" in terms of civil society development. A deep need for finding a new perspective for rural areas and development, shown in the metaphor of "moving away from the paradigm of survival towards the paradigm of creativity"[3] and the high level of reflection of many interlocutors in the context of rural resources analysis, allows to look at the processes of social change in Ukrainian villages not only in terms of "escape from socialism" (Buchowski, 2001, p. 9).

3. *Homo sovietius* and *homo post-sovieticus* as dimensions of postsosialist identity

Analytical attempts to capture the burden of the recent past of former socialist societies are often supported by Alexander Zinoviev's concept of the Soviet man – *homo sovieticus*. According to Zinoviev's vision, *homo sovieticus* is an universal man, a certain product of specific times, omnipotent and omnipresent, ready for anything at everything, "he is even ready for the better. He expects better, though he does not believe in it. He hopes for worse. (...). He is stuck in every man" (Zinoviev, 1987, pp. 168-169). However, the Polish reflection on the issue of *homo sovieticus* is dominated by the Tischner's approach, which underlines a deep ethical criticism of a particular kind of mentality, constituting a product of the communist system. Tischner describes the concept of *homo sovieticus* as a theoretical category, referring to the establishment of a certain syndrome of features, which is applicable for all societies subjected to the influence of communist ideology (Tischner, 2018, p. 141).

In turn, the vision of the Soviet man depicted by Zinoviev is ironic and multidimensional. The Russian philosopher "does not only look for the reasons for the *homo sovieticus* presence in systemic factors. He appeals to the human nature. His analysis is based on the state – collectivity – individuality relationship" (Kołodziejska, end Hnatiuk, 2015, p. 120).

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[3] Interview with president of the Association of Sustainable Development "Old Volyn'" in Hrytsiv (24.05.2018). The following notations are assigned to the interviews: HR – Hrytsiv, HA – Hannopil, HW – Hwardijske. The number assigned refers to the order in which respondents were identified in a given village. The quoted statements are marked in the text in italics.

On the contrary, in Tischner's reflection, *homo sovieticus* is a typical opportunist, "a client of communism, enslaved by the communist system – fed by the commodities that communism offered him. Three values were especially important for him: work, participation in power, and self-esteem. Owing them to communism, *homo sovieticus* started becoming addicted to it; which does not mean, however, that at one point he would have not contributed to the communism fall. When communism ceased to meet people's hopes and needs, *homo sovieticus* took part in the rebellion" (Tischner, 2018, p. 141). In the perspective of the anthropology of postsocialism, *homo sovieticus* can be an important analytical and empirical category: being in the opposition to the "capitalist pattern of a self-steering individual, responsible for its own fate, active, making independent decisions" (Kołodziejska, and Hnatiuk, 2015, p. 120).

The category of *homo post-sovieticus*, describing the permanence of manifestations of the Soviet mentality, is also a popular concept to refer to while analyzing socio-cultural effects of transition in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Venelin I. Ganev (2018) describes in detail *homo post-sovieticus* phenomenon as "a permanent fixture of the post-communistic landscape: resentful, frustrated, angry – and retroactively clairvoyant. As long as *homo-post sovieticus* exists, communism endures: it is the ancient regime that provides the interpretative templates which many citizens of post-communist countries use to interpret the world that surrounds them" ("New Eastern Europe", para. 1). Strategies and patterns of behavior shaped in the communist era have not been destroyed along with the system change. Svetlana Alexievich, a Nobel Prize winner in literature 2015, in her novel "Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets", explains it in the following way: "Perhaps it was communism's only achievement. Seventy-plus years in the Marxist–Leninist laboratory gave rise to a new man: Homo Sovieticus… Although we now live in separate countries and speak different languages, you couldn't mistake us for anyone else" (Alexievich, 2016, p. 3).

In the perspective of the field research conducted in three rural communities in Khmelnytskyi Oblast', it appears that mentality is an important dimension for identifying the relationship between manifestations of what we called "persistence" and "change". The importance of this aspect in the context of socio-cultural changes in Ukraine was emphasized by one of the interviewees, trying to explain mostly the passive attitude of the local community representatives in the village and indicate the source of Ukrainian everyday life problems: *(…) And you cannot understand: but why? The holes are in the road and you ask: why? Or, for example, the curb is poorly made. We have put together one answer, which is the answer to all the questions. Because a hundred years ago there was a revolution here. Simply because of that. It is all because there was a revolution here* (HW_11). In the aforementioned interlocutor's statement, the *homo sovieticus* concept is close to the Tischner's philosophy, i.e. identity regarded as a product of particular system that shapes passive and subordinate individuals. Venelin I. Ganev has a different opinion (2018). According to him, the key factor that constitutes *homo post-sovieticus* identity results from the previous membership in the community of *homo sovieticus*, competences and virtues which turned out to be inadequate and

obsolete in new times ("New Eastern Europe", para. 7). In the face of change, *homo sovieticus* has lost the ability to move in the new reality. Tischner claims that an individual *homo sovieticus* in post-communism is characterized by a claim to satisfy his needs and slave mentality, manifested by replacing one slavery with another (Tischner, 2018, p. 141).

As a result of the project entitled "How to Eliminate Post-Sovietism?", run by the Institute of World Policy, the key characteristics of Post-Soviet features have been identified, that according to the authors, have an impact on contemporary political life (Hyrych, 2017, Euromaidan press, Institute of Global Politics, 2012). The authors distinguished seven still actual symptoms of Post-Sovietism: (a) paternalism – faith in the causative power of the state; (b) conformity – when making decisions, the Post-Soviet people follow the opinion of others; (c) late adoption of innovations and fear of reform; (d) intolerance – fear of people of other cultures, societies, religions; (e) opposition to individualism – individualism is not regarded as a value for Post-Soviet people; (f) social alienation – Post-Soviet people feel alienated and do not care for public good and sphere; (g) undervaluing talent and knowledge (Institute of Global Politics, 2012).

Drawing a conclusion, *homo post-sovieticus* is a particular kind of identity developed as a result of the heritage of communism; a metaphor of attitude inhibiting the implementation of the pattern of awareness and the activities characteristic of neoliberal democracies.

4. Post-Soviet mentality and civic awareness development in rural areas

In the symbolic sphere, Ukraine put an end to the Soviet past by the adoption of the so-called Decommunization Act in 2015. Erasing the traces of Soviet heritage included the removal of communist symbols, modification of inscriptions on statues and war monuments, as well as changing the names of around 9,000 cities and streets (*Are We Europe* Foundation, 2018). On the other hand, the process of transformation of mentality, especially in rural communities, where people have painfully experienced the "trauma of a great change" (Sztompka, 2003), is much longer. One of the respondents commented on gaining independence in terms of the Tischner's "unfortunate gift of freedom" (Tischener, 1992): *We did not learn ... we got independence, but no one ... we thought that independence is great and that's enough. "Great my home country", ... no. Independence means that we depend on ourselves* [HR_3].

With regard to data collected during the field work, some of Post-Soviet features enumerated by the authors of the already mentioned report on how to overcome "bolshevism of mind" (Hyrych, 2017, Euromaidan press) occurred. Resistance to change, paternalism and conformism, were easy to distinguish in the respondents' statements. These three manifestations are also the most serious barriers for the civic awareness development in rural areas. In turn, the problem of alienation does not affect inhabitants of rural areas to a large

extent. Respondents have repeatedly emphasized the tradition of cooperation deeply rooted in rural communities, as well as empathy and mutual help – *We have such habits of social cooperation. And still in the villages, especially in the villages there are such ties* [HR_1].

Resistance to innovation and fear of change means that Post-Soviet people do not understand the importance of reforms, do not accept them and do not want change (Hyrych, 2017, Euromaidan press). Fear of change is related to the recollection of the collectivization experience, deportations in the 1930s and with the memory of Holodomor. *This is the mentality of this generation. Different. (...) do not speak, just do not speak* [HA_8]. Fears may concern many spheres – includeing attempts to socialize and implement new ways of organising community life. One of the interlocutors quotes an example of the emergence of an initiative to create a non-governmental organization proposed by local activist: *She has already noticed what others might not have noticed, she wanted to do a lot of everything. We did not understand it – what does she want, why, what for, for whom? A third sector, social organizations, what for?* [HR_8]. Another interviewee mentions the reluctance the innovators often face in local environments, the other one draws attention to the importance of generational differences in the approach to changes: *As people come from abroad to their village and want to change something for the better, they face hostility from the inhabitants. "She came here and wanted to make some changes – rubbish segregation ... Who needs it?!* [HR_11]. *Older peoples mentality is "Slow and steady wins the race"* [HW_7].

The second feature of the *homo post-sovieticus* mentality is paternalism. Post-Soviet people perceive the state as powerful authority, responsible for solving all the problems. Researchers point the correlation of nostalgia for the USSR with longing for the so-called *good father* – "For Ukraine, paternalism is an inseparable political practice in which people are perceived as children who require paternal care from their authority and expect that the authorities themselves will change the country. Statistics show that 30% of Ukrainians want a strong leader who will fix everything himself". (Sudakova, "Ukrayinska Pravda", para. 19-21). One of the respondents explains it by referring to the omnipotence of Soviet powers: *In the Soviet Union, everyone has decided for you. The authorities had a plan for your life (...). (...) the biggest challenge today is to change people's thinking. A change of mentality we inherited from the USSR times, that people would start showing initiative* [HW_12]. On the other hand, a large distance of power and importance of social hierarchy can be observed in local communities. The authorities, in this case represented by rural councils, arouse respect among inhabitants. It is the power that manages and decides that the participation of citizens in organizing of community life is negligible. *(...) there are still people brought up in the communist system, it means in a such intimidation, that power is God and the power is here to direct you (...). That is the reason – there are those in power, who are brought up in the communist system. (...) although the system has changed in Ukraine, the power has not changed at all* [HW_15]. Another example that clearly illustrates this phenomenon refers to the difference in attitudes, depending on experiences from abroad: *(...). I have an aunt from here. She has been living here,*

working, then married a Frenchman and has lived in France for 26 years. I remember when the reform of decentralization began and she said that we should go to the village council and demand this and that. Fight for what is yours. And we just did not understand that we can change something [HW_7].

Another sign of post-Soviet identity is conformism – people often follow the opinion of others when making decisions. *Every small community has problems, and I say: let's be active, let's make a march, protest! And I hear that no, we cannot do it because the neighbors will see.* [HA_12]. *You have to show initiative. Although my generation still thinks what they think about me, what will they say about me if I do so. Such looking behind, thinking that my action may harm me. Showing the initiative has pros and cons, because by showing the initiative you can gain a lot, but you can also lose* [HW_12].

According to sociological research conducted by the Razumkov Center, 30% of Ukrainians miss the Soviet Union, (in the group of individuals under-30 the amount equals 14%); there are representatives of various groups among people feeling nostalgia, but it is possible to distinguish many factors that connect them - longing for stability above all of them (Sudakova, "Ukrayinska Pravda", para. 1). Feeling of loss, indifferentism, lack of trust – these are features typical for the societies undergoing processes of transition. The higher is the faith in the responsibility of the state, the stronger resentment and dissatisfaction with the direction of change are. A positive attitude towards the Soviet past is *de facto* a longing for "better times" and social status that was lost.

5. Conclusions

The experience of communism is a barrier slowing down the process of recovery and shaping subjectivity in former socialist societies. Among the village inhabitants there is a lack of faith in having an impact on reality. The source of this phenomenon is disappointment with the pace and nature of change and longing for a good host. In the opinion of Lew Gudkow (2018), a Russian sociologist who analyses the phenomenon of *homo sovieticus* mentality, the will to be "like others" and the ability to adapt to the situation with readiness to reduce expectations, are constitutive features for the so-called Soviet man (Sudakova, "Ukrayinska Pravda", para. 23-24). The sociological research shows that the feeling of nostalgia for the USSR is corelated with a low social activity and lack of willingness to participate in actions showing people's worldview: their action is limited only to complaining and longing to return to the "golden age" (Sudakova, "Ukrayinska Pravda", para. 4). The issue of post-Soviet mentality is undoubtedly one of the most important problem areas in the reflection on the development of civil society in the countries of the former Eastern bloc.

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