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Nostalgic Voting? Explaining the Electoral Support for the Political Left in Post-Soviet Moldova

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Abstract

How does political nostalgia influence voting? Although nostalgic voters have been often mentioned as central to the rise of populism in the West, scholars have rarely shown empirically how nostalgia influences electoral choice. In this paper, I use survey data from 2009 and 2016 to investigate the extent and electoral impact of Soviet nostalgia in the context of democratizing Moldova. First, the paper reveals and explains why political nostalgia is distributed unevenly across Moldova's territory with certain regions and ethnocultural groups embracing romanticized views of the Communist past more often than others. Second, the paper demonstrates that nostalgic orientations toward the past and cultural factors rather than perceptions of economic conditions structure party choice in post-Soviet Moldova. The paper also identifies the discursive similarities between varieties of Western populism, Euroscepticism, illiberal worldviews, and the nostalgic appeals of the Moldovan Left.

Keywords: nostalgia; voting; Moldova; Communism; populism; Euroscepticism.

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Introduction

Scholars of democratic transitions in Eastern Europe are familiar with the phenomenon of political nostalgia defined as an emotion-loaded, reconstructed image of the Socialist past. Even though former Communist officials have won free elections across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), most of them have done so by repudiating the Communist ideology and refraining from expressing nostalgia for the old regime. However, as the scholarly interest in post-communist nostalgia began to fade away, the populist surge has generated a wave of research invoking nostalgia to explain political outcomes across Western contexts – the vote for Donald Trump (Inglehart and Norris 2019), the Brexit vote in U.K. (Kenny 2017), and the rise of the *Alternative for Germany* and *Die Linke* in Germany (Campbell 2018; Rensmann 2018).

Yet, the link between nostalgia and electoral preferences remains undertheorized. Classic studies of voting emphasize party identification and sociodemographic characteristics along with candidate evaluations, policy issues, and value orientations as drivers of party choice (Campbell et al. 1960). Other studies highlight the causal impact of economic variables on voting (Harper 1994; Pacek 1994; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Duch 2001; Tucker 2006). Then, there is much scholarship on how lasting cleavages centered on class, religion, ethnicity, and region shape voting patterns for decades (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Whitefield 2002; Roper and Fesnic 2003).

This paper contributes to the literature on voting by exploring the impact of nostalgia on electoral preferences in a democratizing one context – the post-Soviet Moldova. To that end, I use survey data to test whether positive evaluations of the past influence voting more than economic factors. In contrast to the CEE politicians, major parties in Moldova exploit rhetorically the idealized Communist past, providing emotional cues to like-minded voters. Hence, I argue that in deciding for whom to vote, citizens in democratizing Moldova frequently assess politicians using

criteria unrelated to substantive policy issues and economic performance, instead paying attention to emotional messages about the past. The study of nostalgia in Moldova thus can be conceived as a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg 2006) as it helps social scientists elucidate the link between the resilience of spatially bounded historical legacies and political representation in divided post-imperial polities at Europe's margins.

The article is structured as follows. First, I review the literature on the role of nostalgia in post-communist politics. Then, I discuss the link between nostalgia and electoral preferences. In the next section, I analyze the Moldovan case, focusing on political nostalgia and the vote for the Moldovan Left. A separate section discusses the theoretical implications of the major empirical findings, while the conclusion outlines future directions of research.

Nostalgia and Politics after Communism

A major historical event, the fall of Communism in 1989 has caused a shift in the way the political elites in former Socialist countries conceptualize collective identities and relate to their recent past. Most politicians in the CEE distanced themselves from the Communist era and imitated their EU counterparts, crafting new discourses and policies aligned with the requirements of EU accession, capitalism, and the prevailing neoliberal ideas (Vakhudova and Hooghe 2009). Expunging the Socialist past from political narratives, public spaces, and collective memory was supposed to ensure a safe "return to Europe." However, such transformations also created discrepancies between the official memory cultivated by the political and cultural elites, grassroots counter-memories, and political nostalgia among the public (Light and Young 2015).

Not all politicians in post-communism reject the Socialist past. The pressure to Europeanize and align discourses with Western democratic norms were more pronounced in countries seeking accession to the EU. By contrast, in the post-Soviet republics lacking the EU membership perspective, some politicians appropriate the past to accede to power. Explaining the

uneven remembering of Communism, Nadkarmi and Shevchenko (2015) note that the association of the one-party regimes with Soviet imperialism contributed to the rapid rejection of the totalitarian legacy in CEE in contrast to its resilience in the post-Soviet space. Similarly, Todorova (2010, 8) observes that among the diverse forms of nostalgia distinguishable across national settings, the Soviet and Yugonostalgia (i.e. nostalgia for the Yugoslav state) may have "a certain tinge of imperial or colonial nostalgia." It makes sense then to differentiate between nostalgia for the Communist past and nostalgia for the Soviet state.

The embeddedness of the Soviet legacy in conjunction with the weak influence of Western actors may explain why some parties would appropriate rather than ignore the Socialist past. Adopting the framework proposed by Bernhard and Kubik (2014, 17), it is worth exploring how politicians employ mnemonic strategies to construct a useful past, provide voters with frames about state socialism, redefine collective identities, and reinvigorate their political legitimacy. In this sense, some of the post-Soviet contexts resemble fractured memory regimes or situations in which political actors wage symbolic cultural wars over how to interpret the Communist past. Such cultural conflicts are discernible in Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, where some politicians emphasize the modernizing character and technological achievements of the Soviet regime, while others highlight its oppressive character and the terror of the political police. The divisions among elites are mirrored by political parties, which often split between those embracing nostalgic appeals and those adopting narratives centered on the moral condemnation of the Communist regime. In doing so, politicians espousing nostalgia for the Socialist past exploit rather than shape the public views on the totalitarian era.

In a democratizing setting, memories of the past, loaded with emotional triggers, prove resilient to change and evolve into different forms of nostalgizing. In her inspirational study, Boym

(2001, 41) discerns two types of nostalgia: a reflective kind referring to melancholy and mourning after one place and a restorative variety as individuals attempt the transhistorical reconstruction of the mythical lost home. In the post-Soviet region, certain political actors endorse the restorative type, reappropriating ideas from the Socialist past and promising the revival of Communist policies. Such well-crafted narratives often gain acceptance because as Velikonja (2009) observed nostalgia stands for more than just the mere longing for an imaginary past, encompassing the hope for an utopian society better than the current one.

Despite its persistence in post-communism, the empirical study of nostalgia as one of the most complex historical legacies of the past regime remains an underexplored topic. I concur with Todorova (2010) who encouraged scholars to go beyond official discourses and ask who the agents of nostalgia are and trace how the rural-urban divide, generational differences, gender, and political orientation are linked to idealized perceptions of the past. Even though Communist nostalgia is a multifaceted phenomenon taking various forms, this article will focus narrowly on demonstrating its effects on electoral preferences.

Political Nostalgia and Voting

The discussion about the political impact of nostalgia as an emotional recollection of the past relates to the wider cross-national debates about the influence of emotions on voting. Even in established democracies, politicians, aware of the importance of emotions, use campaign messages to elicit emotional responses and manipulate political behavior. Brader (2005) shows that enthusiasm in campaign ads generates more participation and activates partisan loyalties, while fear makes individuals more vigilant and open to persuasion. Two negative emotions – anxiety and anger – are often linked to the rise of populism and the far right. The anger generated by the 2015 terrorist attack in Paris drove the vote for the French far right, while fear explained the vote against the Front National (Vasilopoulos et al. 2019). Similarly, issue voting in EU referendums

is associated with anxiety, while anger has been linked to second-order voting and risky choices (Garry 2014, 238). Along similar lines, Rodrik (2018) maintains that populist politicians exploit the anxiety among voters generated by the growing automation and economic crises.

Nostalgia can be conceptualized as one of the multiple emotions influencing voting. As a romanticized view of the past, it has, at times, a powerful and poorly comprehended effect on electoral behavior. While some psychological studies show that nostalgia may have beneficial effects for mental health, political nostalgia is generally regarded as harmful for democratic politics, because it interferes with the rational deliberation supposed to precede voting. Steenvoorden and Harteveld (2018) demonstrate that nostalgia understood as societal pessimism correlates with the vote for the populist radical-right parties. Norris and Inglehart (2019) show that Donald Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again' targeted voters, who amidst the perceived societal decline, yearned for the prosperous 1950s. Mutz (2018) observes that the nostalgic appeals in the 2016 US elections were not aimed at the "left behind" working-class Americans, but rather sought to attract those who viewed their dominant status under threat and regretted the loss of America's superpower status. Another study reveals that the US Republicans and conservatives yearn for bygone eras more than Democrats and liberals, detecting a nostalgia effect on presidential approval ratings (Hibbing et al. 2017). In other Western contexts, political nostalgia has been used to explain the Brexit vote (Kenny 2017) and the electoral support for *Die Linke* and the *Alternative for Germany* in Germany (Campbell 2018; Rensmann 2018).

Nostalgic voting has been observed in non-Western contexts too. Positive emotions associated with former authoritarian regimes, inconsistent with democracy, have been documented across East Asia (Chang, Zhu, and Pak 2007) and Eurasia (Mendelson and Gerber 2005). Positive evaluations of dictator Park Chung-hee among South Koreans helped his daughter win the 2012

elections (Kang 2018). In Taiwan, the nostalgic assessment of Chiang Kai-shek's authoritarian rule prevents the completion of transitional justice policies, including the renaming of the central memorial complex in Taipei. More surprising in the context of decolonization, in some of the former British colonies in Africa, Bissell (2005) recorded manifestations of imperial nostalgia.

In post-communist countries, surveys point consistently to high levels of political nostalgia. Compared to the CEE states, from 1992 to 1998, average nostalgia scores were greater in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the former Yugoslavia (Ishiyama 2001, 857). From 1992 to 2005, the number of Russians regretting the demise of the Soviet Union rose from 50% to 70% (Munro 2006). According to a cross-national survey, most Hungarians (72%), Ukrainians (62%), and Bulgarians (62%) thought that they were economically better off under the Socialist regime, while in Lithuania (48%), Slovakia (48%), and Russia (45%), a relative majority of respondents believed that they lived well under Communism (Pew 2009). Only the Czechs (39%) and the Poles (35%) displayed less nostalgia. Equally worrisome are positive evaluations of former dictators. Thus, 41% of Romanians would have voted in 2010 for Nicolae Ceausescu, if he were to run for presidency (Rusu 2015, 42). Similarly, in Russia, a study by Mendelson and Gerber (2005) found out that one-fifth of the young people expressed willingness to vote for Stalin as a hypothetical candidate in presidential elections.

Why would democratic citizens long for the Communist era? Scholars have identified several explanatory factors. Ekman and Linde (2005) demonstrate that positive orientations toward the Communist past stem from dissatisfaction with the socio-economic situation and do not necessarily reflect anti-democratic views. Munro (2006, 13) argues that, in Russia, beliefs in collectivist welfare, Soviet identity, high economic status, age, and feelings of dislocation correlate with intense nostalgia. Maksimović (2017) discusses Yugonostalgia as a static way to cope with

the difficult present. Gugishvili and Kabachnikov (2015) argue that in Georgia, age predicts positive memories of Stalin, while higher household income, rural residency, and knowledge of Russian moderate pro-Stalinist views. In all, Communist nostalgia among the electorate appears to function as a mechanism helping the losers of the market transition cope with the economic hardships of the present.

Still, the consequences of political nostalgia may be more significant than its causes. So far, nostalgia has not been included as a predictor in models of post-communist voting behavior. Colton's (2000) elaborate voting model consists of social characteristics, economic assessments, partisanship, issues, retrospective evaluations of incumbents, leadership qualities, and prospective evaluations of parties, but no measure of nostalgia. White (2010), however, uncovered correlational evidence linking nostalgic voters in Russia (57%), Ukraine (48%), and Belarus (41%) to leftist parties, public ownership, and preferences for a deeper integration of the former Soviet republics. Nevertheless, the strength of the causal relationship between Soviet nostalgia and party choice remains unclear as other factors influence voting too. An early study of the CEE region revealed that the organizational features of successor parties mattered more in explaining their electoral success than factors such as nostalgia and deteriorating living standards (Ishiyama 2001, 858), while other studies point to the prevalence of clientelism.

Far from questioning the relevance of other factors, the present study documents how in some contexts, political nostalgia features as a separate dimension of competition along with cultural factors (Whitefield 2002, 181; Roper and Fesnic 2003). To further advance our understanding of the extent and effects of nostalgia on electoral preferences, I focus on the Moldovan context, a case largely ignored by the scholars studying nostalgia and voting.

Exploring Nostalgic Voting in Moldova

A Soviet republic for nearly five decades, Moldova became independent in 1991, after a wave of ethnonationalist mobilization against Moscow's dominance swept from power the Communist Party (Beissinger 2002). Hoping to maintain the Soviet state, some local groups resisted the pro-independence activism of the 1990s. In particular, the Russian-speakers as the privileged group under the Soviet system perceived the growing dominance of the titular nation as a threat to their status.

The nationalist mobilization of the late 1980s generated a countermobilization movement among Russian speakers (Crowther 1991, 194). While some voters joined nostalgic parties, Transnistria, a region on the eastern bank of the Nistru river with a sizeable Russian-speaking population, seceded from Moldova with help from the Russian troops in Tiraspol. Initially, the authorities of independent Moldova, fearing a Communist comeback, imitated the Baltic States and imposed a ban on the Moldovan Communist Party. Activists, however, circumvented the interdiction, founding the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM). PCRM's rise to power began in the mid-1990s amidst deteriorating economic conditions and culminated with a decisive victory in the 2001 elections (Table 1). The party dominated the Moldovan Left until 2014, when the Party of Socialists (PSRM) displaced it as the major left-wing party.

The capacity to tap into the large reservoir of Soviet nostalgia remains among the key factors explaining PCRM's and PSRM's electoral success. Unlike the reformed successor parties elsewhere, the Communists and Socialists in Moldova propagate a positive view of the Soviet regime. PCRM won votes by mimicking the practices and rituals of the Soviet Communist party (Tudoroiu 2011). Led by Vladimir Voronin, the last Minister of Interior of Soviet Moldova, who oversaw the suppression of the pro-independence movement in the late 1980s, PCRM promised to return to the Soviet past, which was presented as a prosperous era of technological progress and

contrasted rhetorically with the economic decline of the 1990s. The same narrative was adopted by PSRM. These developments lead us to formulate the nostalgia hypothesis:

H1: Higher nostalgic orientations are linked to higher odds that an individual would vote for the Moldovan Left (PCRM & PSRM).

While in power, PCRM gradually instituted what Way and Levitsky (2010) describe as a competitive authoritarian regime. In 2009, an anti-Communist coalition, backed by the West and major business magnates known as oligarchs wrestled power away from PCRM (Marandici 2021). From then on, PCRM's decline continued as some of its members, dissatisfied with the rigid leadership style of Voronin, defected and founded the Party of Socialists. The Socialists proceeded gradually to dislodge the Communists, turning into the largest party on the Left, all while running on a platform, which combined social conservatism, Soviet nostalgia, redistribution, a robust welfare state, close ties to Russia, opposition to Romania, Moldovan nationalism, Eurasian integration, and Euroscepticism.

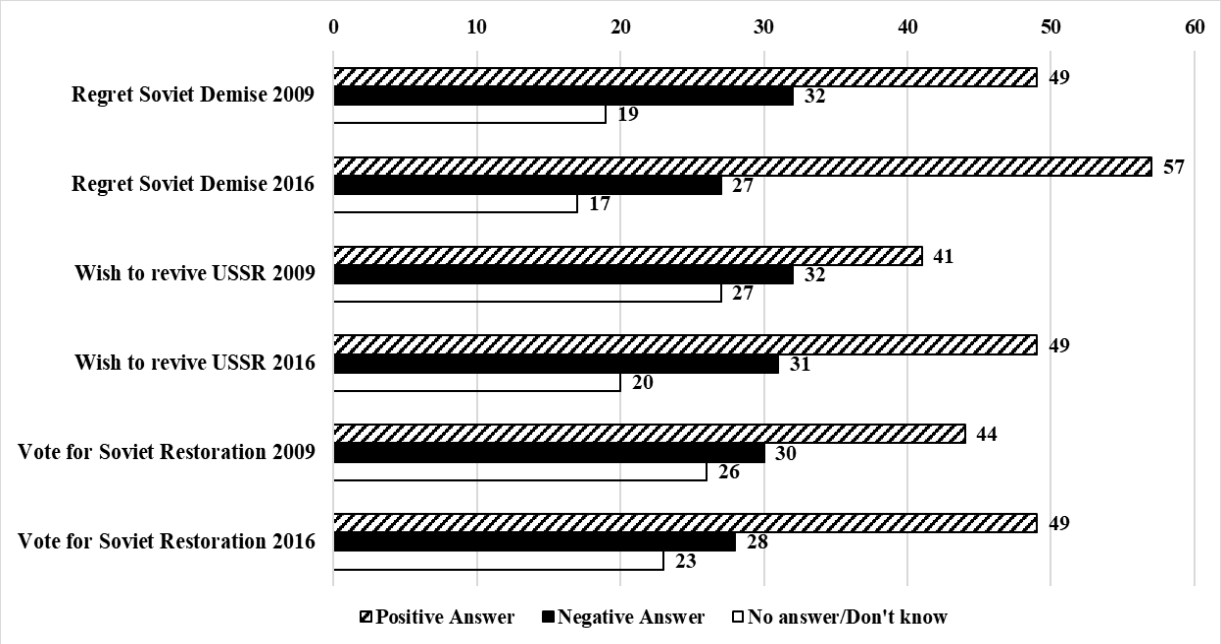
Table 1. The PCRM and PSRM vote (1995–2020).

Year	Election	Votes	% of vote	% seats
1995 PCRM	Local	184,627	15.8	16
1996 PCRM	Presidential	159,533	10.2	—
1998 PCRM	Parliament	487,002	30	40
1999 PCRM	Local	355,562	33.3	38
2001 PCRM	Parliament	794,808	50.1	71
2003 PCRM	Local	595,289	48.1	55
2005 PCRM	Parliament	716,336	45.9	56
2007 PCRM	Local	394,034	34.2	41
2009 PCRM	Parliament	760,551	49.5	60
2009 PCRM	Parliament	706,732	44.7	48
2010 PCRM	Parliament	677,069	39.3	42
2011 PCRM	Local	508,444	36.9	39
2014 PCRM	Parliament	279,366	17.5	21
2014 Socialists	Parliament	327,912	21	25
2015 PCRM	Local	131,549	10.2	12
2015 Socialists	Local	213,287	16.6	14
2016 PCRM	Presidential	No candidate	—	—
2016 Socialists	Presidential	834,081	52.1	Win
2019 PCRM	Parliament	53,175	3.75	0
2019 Socialists	Parliament	441,191	31	37
2020 Socialists	Presidential	690,615	42.5	Loss

Source: Author's calculations based on Central Election Commission data.

Both PCRM and PSRM communicate positive interpretations of the Soviet past to win elections. As such, their nostalgic appeals resonate with the worldviews of their constituents. The 2009 and 2016 Public Opinion Barometer (BOP) surveys included a battery of identical questions about three elements of nostalgia: the regret over the breakup of USSR, the desire to revive the Soviet state, and the hypothetical participation in a referendum to restore the Soviet state. From 2009 to 2016, despite pro-Western governments holding power, the levels of nostalgia have increased (Figure 1). 49 percent of those questioned in 2009 and 57 percent of respondents in 2016 regretted the Soviet disintegration, whereas 44 percent of survey participants in 2009 and 49 percent in 2016 declared that they would have voted in favor of USSR's restoration in a hypothetical referendum.

Figure 1. Three dimensions of Soviet nostalgia in Moldova, 2009 and 2016.



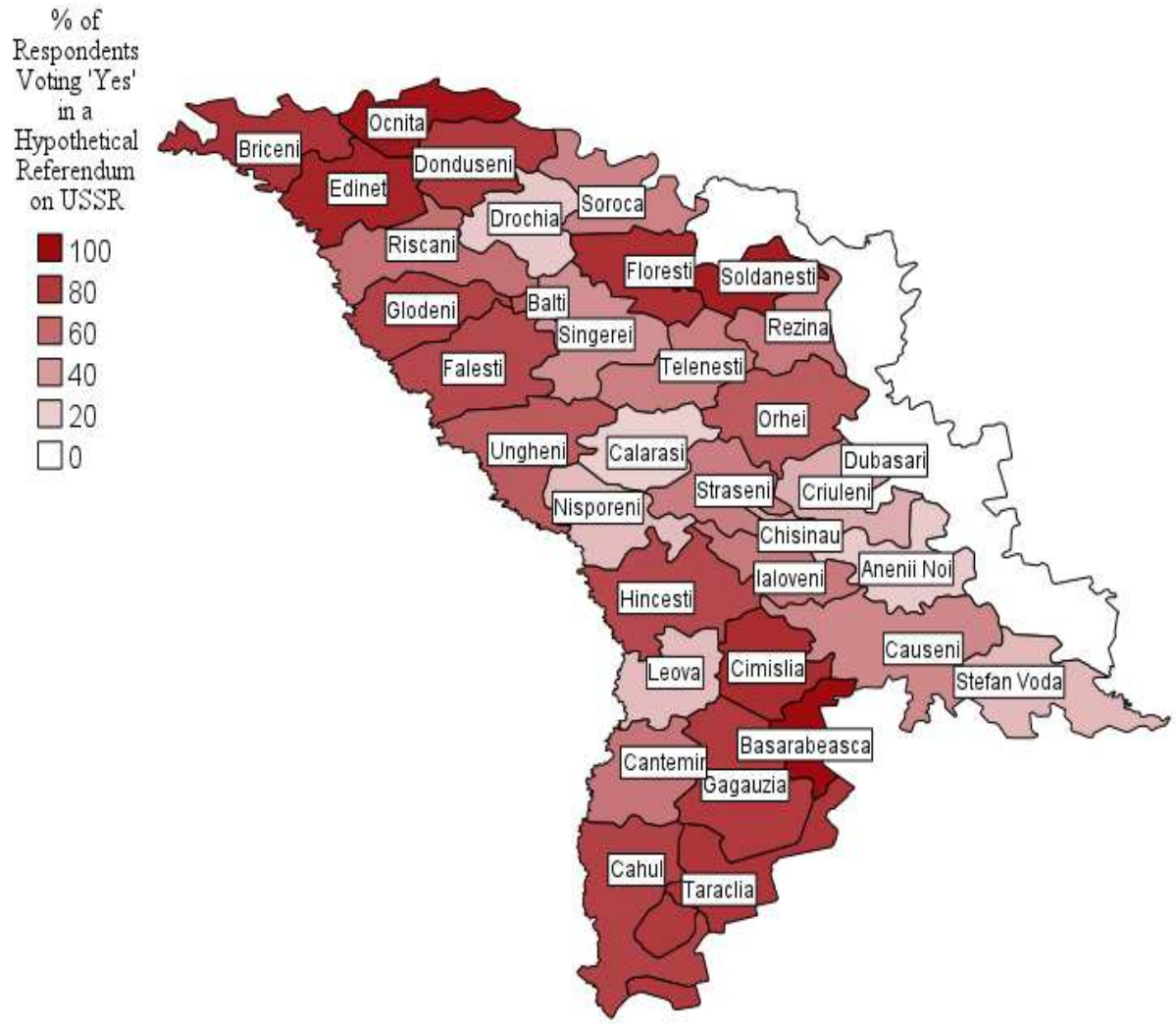
Source: Author's calculations using BOP data from 2009 and 2016.

Furthermore, the spatial distribution of nostalgic orientations across Moldova is uneven. To display the regional clusters of Soviet nostalgia, I plotted on the administrative map of Moldova the share of nostalgic individuals per district. Since the third dimension of Soviet nostalgia, the

restorative one, stands in stark contrast to the independence of the Moldovan state, the maps in Figures 2 and 3 display the percentage of respondents in each district, opting in favor of an imaginary Soviet restoration. The visual analysis of the two heatmaps indicates that in 2009, the highest share of potential USSR supporters lived in Basarabeasca (100%), Dubăsari (100%), Ocnița (95%), Șoldănești (92%), Edineț (89%), Briceni (84%), Taraclia (82%), and the Gagauz

region (80%). By contrast, there were few nostalgic voters in Călărași (19%), Anenii Noi (21%), Nisporeni (28%), and Leova (28%).

Figure 2. Vote in favor of a Hypothetical Soviet Restoration, 2009 (percentage of survey respondents per district expressing support).

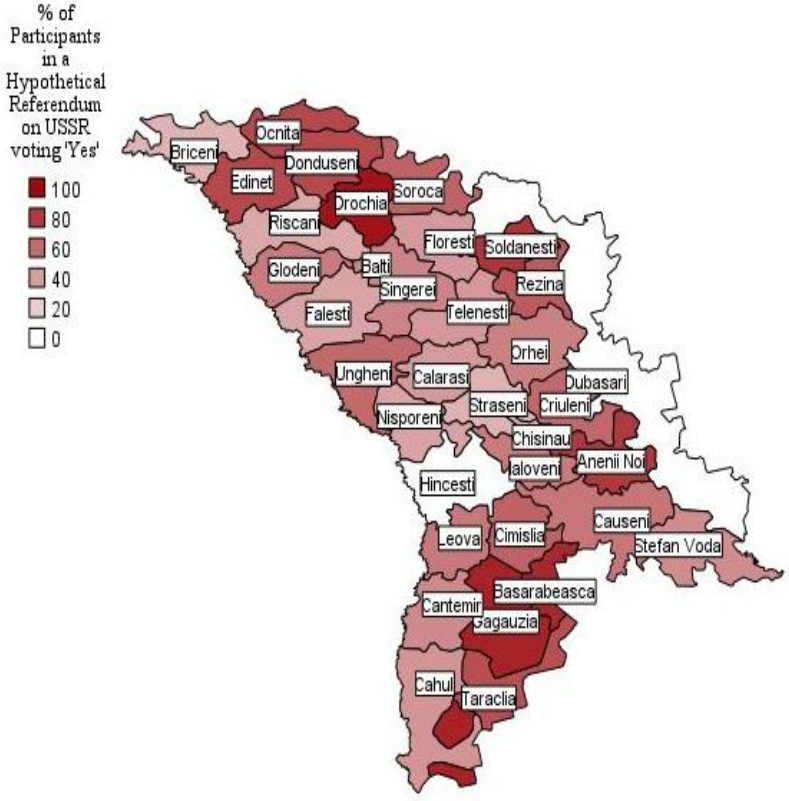


Source: Heatmap created by author in SPSS 27 using the data from the Barometer of Public Opinion (BOP 2009). No information was available for Transnistria.

Similarly, the 2016 heatmap (Figure 3) indicates that more individuals favoring USSR's revival lived in the districts of Drochia (96%), the Gagauz region (90%), Șoldănești (82%), and Basarabeasca (88%). The least inclined to vote in favor of a Soviet comeback were the inhabitants of Hîncești, Strășeni, Chișinău, and Călărași. The comparison of the 2009 and 2016 heatmaps

points to a stable regional pattern with support for an imaginary Soviet restoration concentrated in the Northern, certain Southern, and the Gagauz region. Given the low number of cases per district, the two heatmaps should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 3. Support of Soviet restoration in Hypothetical Referendum, November 2016.



Source: Heatmap created by author in SPSS 27 using data from the Barometer of Public Opinion (BOP 2016).

Nevertheless, this is the first visual evidence of the presence of regional pockets of nostalgia in Moldova. The geographic variation of nostalgia coincides with the higher concentration of ethnic minorities and Russian speakers in the Northern, Southern, and Gagauz districts. Not to be confused with ethnic Russians, the Russian-speaking population comprises individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds forming what Laitin (1998) called *conglomerate identity groups*. The 2014 census indicated that 21% of Moldova's population communicates daily in a language other than Romanian/Moldovan, while 18% – self-identified as ethnic minorities (NBS

2017). Russian is officially designated as the language of interethnic communication and is widely used in urban areas, whereas Ukrainian and Gagauz are spoken in certain districts. Census data indicate that the percentage of population speaking a language other than Romanian/Moldovan is the highest in Gagauzia (99%), Taraclia (91%), Bălți (48%), Ocnița (43%), Basarabeasca (36%), Briceni (29%), and Edineț (28%). All these districts register elevated levels of Soviet nostalgia, a fact suggesting that Moldova's ethnocultural minorities perceive the economic decline more acutely than the titular nation, perhaps feeling alienated in the new state. The intertemporal comparison of the two maps corroborated with the data in Figure 1 allow us to infer that the overall levels and the spatial dispersion of nostalgia in Moldova remain relatively stable between 2009 and 2016. The resilience of nostalgia during this timeframe is even more striking given that the ruling coalitions designated the Soviet period as an occupation regime.

Why do some Moldovans display nostalgia for the Communist regime? While the 2016 survey did not include any questions about the triggers of nostalgia, in 2009, respondents identified the following reasons for their regrets over the Soviet demise – a better life (25%), job security (17%), freedom of travel (6%), affordable prices (6%), material well-being (6%), stability (5%), order (3%), free education and medicine (2%), planned economy (2%), and lack of egoism (2%). The 'better life' category seems to refer to the material aspects of living and the quality of life under Communism. Given that Moldova's Western border was one of the most guarded in the USSR, it is somewhat puzzling that some Moldovans thought that it was easier to travel before 1991. Such beliefs may be due to the administrative hurdles encountered by the Moldovan migrants going to Russia and the introduction of a visa regime with Romania in 2007.

The nostalgic perceptions of the past thus form via an implicit intertemporal comparison of the imagined economic conditions under Communism with the direct experience of the

transition to capitalism. This should not come as surprising as previous research has already established that the mass privatization of the early 1990s may have contributed to increased stress and mortality rates (Stuckler, King, and McKee 2009). Besides the dramatic rise in unemployment and the dramatic GDP drop, the hyperinflation of the 1990s wiped out the retirement savings of the entire Moldovan population. For three decades, Moldova remains one of the poorest countries in Europe afflicted by growing inequality. Hence, much of the early nostalgia may have been caused by the deteriorating living standards. Even though inconsistencies in beliefs at the individual level demonstrate that respondents construct an unrealistic version of the past, subjective rationalizations of nostalgia link it to the material aspects of life under Communism. Still, tracing the origins of political nostalgia to recollections of the Communist economy remains somewhat baffling given the stagnation of the Moldovan economy during the late Soviet period (Crowther 1991, 187). Available survey data do not indicate which segment of the Soviet past respondents yearn for, but it appears that at least some voters mythologize the bygone era, viewing it as an uniform historical episode characterized by better living conditions.

In addition to the uneven spatial distribution, nostalgia varies across generations. Respondents over 60 are the most nostalgic, but data show that young voters, who have not lived through the Soviet times, express it too. In 2016, 43 percent of the respondents in the 18–29 age group displayed regrets over the Soviet demise. The nostalgic orientations among the young generation, lacking any direct experience of Communism, can be linked to a variety of mechanisms. Earlier studies have shown that nostalgia can be transferred across generations via family socialization, education, remembrance practices, cultural performances, rituals, and media communities (Wildschut et al. 2018). In a study of nostalgia among the Ukrainian youth, Nikolayenko (2008, 256) found that nostalgia was associated with weak attachments to the state,

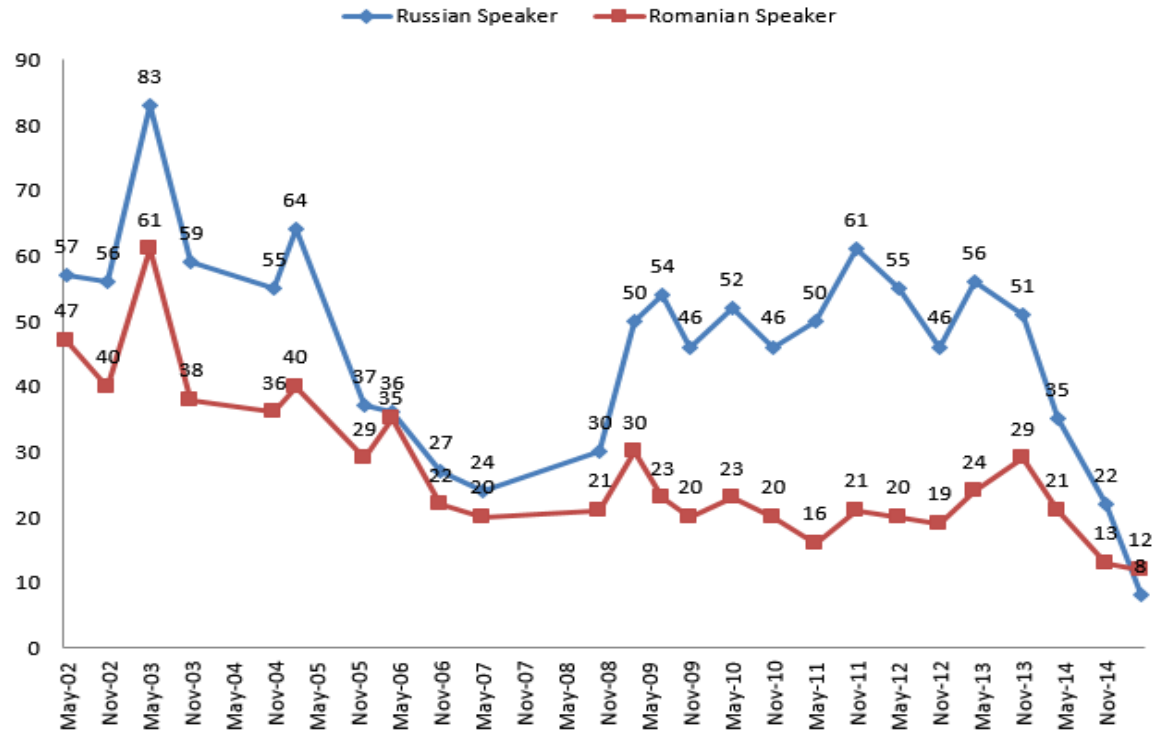
regrets over the superpower status loss, and dissatisfaction with the breakdown of cooperation among Slavic people.

In Moldova, Soviet nostalgia is mixed with Euroscepticism. The Soviet past is juxtaposed to an European future. For instance, while the PCRM faction abstained from ratifying the Moldova-EU Association Agreement in 2014, Grigore Petrenco (2014), a young MP voted against it, declaring that his homeland was not the independent Moldova but the Soviet Union. Nostalgic politicians and activists defend Soviet monuments against demolition, preserve Communist-era street names, refuse to condemn the Communist crimes, and conserve Soviet cultural artefacts. Moreover, nostalgia translated into distinct foreign policy preferences. In 2014, the population of Gagauzia opted overwhelmingly in an informal referendum in favor of the accession to the Eurasian Economic Union with regional authorities using legitimizing narratives invoking the Russian World (Kosienkowski 2020). Comparable views prevail in Transnistria (O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolossov 2016). Still, the overlap between nostalgia and Euroscepticism is partial. Nostalgic voters do not view the foreign policy options presented by PSRM and PCRM as mutually exclusive. 53% of the individuals expressing support for a Soviet restoration in a hypothetical referendum (BOP 2016) would also have voted for Moldova's accession to the European Union, an observation consistent with recent research by Buzogany (2020) uncovering similar contradictory trends in the Southern Caucasus.

PCRM and PSRM attracted nostalgic voters by providing cues through symbols, party structure, rituals, celebrations, and political rhetoric. PCRM's paraphernalia included the sickle and hammer, the red flag, and the term *Communist* in the official designation. To those suggesting a name change, Voronin (2007) would reply that the term *Communist* in the party's name brought in about fifteen percent of the vote. To evoke positive associations with the past, during the 2001

election campaign, PCRM promised to reverse privatization, bread and salami at Soviet prices, and free healthcare (PCRM Election Program 2001). At a 2007 rally commemorating the October Revolution, which the author has observed as a journalist, PCRM's slogans were identical to those of the Soviet era with some of them written over the old ones. With party cells in enterprises, a central executive committee, and a Politburo, PCRM's internal organization replicated the structure of the Soviet party. Each year on April 22nd, new PCRM members would receive their party cards in a ceremony at Lenin's statue in Chișinău. Other PCRM and PSRM rituals include celebrations of holidays erased from the official calendar such as the Defender of the Fatherland Day (February 23), the Victory Day (May 9), and the commemoration of the Iași – Chișinău operation supplemented by the invention of new collective traditions such as the Moldovan version of the March of the Immortal Regiment.

Figure 4. PCRM's support as a percentage of each language group, 2002–2015.



Source: Author's calculations using Public Opinion Barometer data.

In addition to nostalgic voters, PCRM and PSRM attract the Russian-speaking vote. From 2002 to 2015, the support for the successor party among Russian speakers was consistently higher than among Romanian/Moldovan speakers (Figure 4). PCRM signaled that it would defend the rights of the Russian-speaking group by promising to adopt Russian as the second official language. Yet, in 2002, PCRM's attempt to follow through on its campaign promise failed due to massive street protests. Once relations with Moscow worsened, PCRM adopted the European integration discourse, losing support among the Russian speakers (Crowther 2007). The 2009 post-election violence and PCRM's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protesters accompanied by anti-Romanian rhetoric polarized again society along language lines (Figure 4). This observation leads to the formulation of the second research hypothesis:

H2: The language hypothesis. Compared to non-Russian speakers, speakers of Russian will be more likely to vote for the leftist parties.

Aware of the nostalgic orientations among their bases, the PCRM and PSRM politicians have transformed the Soviet historical legacy, which elsewhere remained largely inactive, into an usable past, a valuable political resource, situating themselves as defenders of the Russian speakers, and guardians of what they publicly describe as a prosperous and glorious Soviet past.

Data, Variables, and Methods

Data

To test the effect of nostalgia on electoral preferences, I use data from two BOP surveys implemented by the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) in November 2009 and November 2016. Given the identical wording of the questions of interest, the two surveys are perfectly suited for a comparative analysis. The surveys contain information on 1,118 individuals in 2009 and 1,109 – in 2016 (Appendix 1). Abstainers, non-responses, and undecided individuals were excluded from the analysis. No data were collected in Transnistria.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable – the vote for PCRM and PSRM – was created using the following question "If elections would be organized next Sunday, which party would you vote for?" The value of 1 was assigned to respondents choosing PCRM and 0 – to non-Communist voters. In 2016, the number of PCRM voters in the sample was insufficient to conduct a meaningful analysis, hence, given that most PCRM members migrated to PSRM, both parties were grouped together. Individuals opting for multiple parties and electoral blocs were not included in the analysis as such choices were either unavailable or prohibited under the existing rules.

Main Independent Variable

Political nostalgia. Munro (2006, 2) identifies three dimensions of political nostalgia – a positive assessment of the past regime, a wish to return to the status quo ante, and the expectation that the past regime will be restored. Here, I build on Munro's (2006, 2) operationalization of nostalgia.

Instead of treating nostalgia in a narrow sense as regret over the Soviet collapse, I find it more expedient for analytical purposes to conceptualize nostalgia as a cluster of beliefs consisting of three elements: regret over the breakup of USSR, wish to restore it, and political support for its recreation. Combining the three dimensions into a scale allows us to rank voters based on the intensity of their nostalgia. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and high intercorrelations among items point to the internal consistency of the latent construct and allow us to combine the three items into a reliable nostalgia index (Table 2).

Table 2. The inter-item correlation matrix for the Soviet nostalgia dimensions.

	November 2009			November 2016		
Regret over the breakup of USSR	1.00	.817	.789	1.00	.715	.700
Wish to revive USSR	.817	1.00	.894	.715	1.00	.882
Hypothetical Vote for USSR	.789	.894	1.00	.700	.882	1.00
Cronbach's Alpha		.938			.908	

Control Variables

Economic variables. Given the vast literature on economic voting, I add several economic variables (Pacek 1994; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Harper 2000; Duch 2001; Tucker, 2006). For retrospective and prospective sociotropic evaluations or assessments of the economic situation at the national level, the following questions were used: "How do you assess the current economic situation of Moldova compared to one year ago?" and "How do you think Moldova's future economic situation will evolve compared to the present?" To test the effect of retrospective and prospective individual-level economic evaluations or the pocketbook hypotheses, I relied on the following survey questions: "How would you assess your current economic situation compared to the year before" and "Do you anticipate an improvement in your economic situation next year?" With values ranging from 1 (extremely good) to 5 (extremely bad), the four economic variables were recoded to reflect the changes in sociotropic and pocketbook economic evaluations.

Language. To test whether language, a marker of ethnocultural identity, influences voting, I have added a variable reflecting the linguistic preferences of each respondent. 23% of respondents in 2009 and 20% – in 2016 filled out the Russian version of the questionnaire and were hence classified as Russian speakers.

Additional variables such as gender, age, education, household income, region, employment status, and residence were used as socio-demographic control variables in all regressions.

Analytical strategy

The data analysis process proceeds in three steps. First, I run a bivariate test to detect any association between Soviet nostalgia and party choice. Second, I implement binary logistic regressions to check whether nostalgia is a valid predictor. After the initial assessment of two baseline models (Model 1a and Model 1b), control variables were added stepwise. The third phase of the data analysis includes several robustness checks.

As recommended by Gelman (2007), the analysis was conducted on weighted samples with the missing data removed through listwise deletion. To correct for potential bias due to listwise deletion, I employed multiple imputation techniques and estimated the same models on datasets with the imputed missing values included. There were no major discrepancies between the estimates obtained from the imputed datasets and those from the observed data, hence only the results for the observed data are presented here. All statistical procedures were conducted in STATA 15.

Results

Bivariate analysis

The bivariate test indicates that nostalgia varies across parties. Voters of the Moldovan Left (PCRM and PSRM) are more nostalgic compared to right wing and centrist individuals. Regret

over USSR's demise among the PCRM and PSRM voters, in 2009 (74 percent) and 2016 (80 percent), was twice as high compared to other parties. Likewise, in 2016, over 70 percent of those who wished to recreate the USSR and were ready to vote for it in a referendum would have voted for PSRM. The lower proportion of nostalgic voters among the supporters of other parties suggests that the association between nostalgia and the leftist vote, while strong, should not be assumed beforehand.

Table 3. *Nostalgic voters across Moldovan parties (BOP 2009, 2016).*

Nostalgia dimension / Party	Nov 2009				Nov 2016			
	PCRM	Non-Left	Total	p	PCRM & PSRM	Non-Left	Total	p
Regret over USSR breakup	74%	31%	49%	*	80%	46%	61%	*
Wish to revive USSR	69%	25%	44%	*	75%	35%	53%	*
Hypothetical Vote for USSR	83%	32%	46%	*	76%	35%	53%	*

Notes: Proportions (%) are given for voters, who expressed nostalgia. Non-responses excluded.
*χ^2 significant at $p \leq .05$, **χ^2 significant at $p \leq .01$.

5.2. Binary logistic regressions

Table 4 presents the results of the binary logistic regressions with the vote for PCRM and PSRM as dependent variables. To ease the interpretation of results, odds ratios (OR) were reported.

Several key findings emerge from this examination. Nostalgia features as the strongest predictor of the leftist vote. In 2009, each unit increase of nostalgia resulted in higher odds that the respondent would vote for PCRM. The nostalgia effect on the leftist vote declined in 2016 (OR = 1.38 in Model 3b). Thus, one unit increase on the nostalgia scale led to a 38% increase of the odds that someone would vote for the PSRM. Another result confirms the existence of a linguistic cleavage. Holding other predictors constant, the odds of a Russian speaker voting for the PCRM in 2009 were seven times higher (OR=7.03 in Model 3a) than the odds of a non-Russian speaker. In 2016, the odds of someone speaking Russian and voting for the PCRM/PSRM were four times higher (OR = 4.04 in Model 3b) than the respective odds for non-Russian speakers.

The evidence in support of economic voting is weak. Sociotropic prospective socioeconomic judgements received some backing in 2009 after eight years of PCRM rule. Thus, individuals expecting a worsening of the national economic situation were less inclined to vote for the PCRM compared to those who did not expect any change (OR = .53 in Models 1a and 2a and OR = .39 in Mod. 3a). By contrast, Moldovans anticipating economic improvements were ready to elect the Communists (OR=5.61 in Model 1a and OR = 4.50 in Model 2a). In Model 3a, there is some evidence of retrospective pocketbook voting, whereas sociotropic retrospective economic evaluations show no significance. Compared to voters reporting no changes in their personal material situation, those, whose finances worsened in the past year were 64% less likely to vote for the PCRM. In 2009, voters expecting improvements of their personal finances were three times as likely to support the PCRM compared to respondents anticipating no changes. By contrast, economic assessments did not have a significant effect on voting in 2016.

Socio-demographic factors predict party choice as well. As expected, age figures as a valid predictor in all models. Compared to the youngest cohort, respondents over 60 were more likely to vote for leftist parties. In 2009, the intergenerational divide was particularly strong (OR = 3.58 in Model 3a), whereas in 2016 – the effect of age declined (Model 1b). Next to age, education is a significant predictor of the Communist/Socialist vote across all models. In 2009 (Model 3a), the odds of college-educated individuals voting for PCRM were 68 percent lower compared to respondents without a high school education (OR = .32). Similarly, in 2016, highly educated individuals were less likely to vote for PSRM compared to the less educated group (OR =.39). Surprisingly, higher incomes are associated with the leftist vote in 2009 and 2016. In 2016, high income individuals were twice as likely to vote for the Socialists compared to individuals in the lowest income bracket (OR = 2.50).

Then, there is the regional divide. In 2009, the chances that Gagauzia residents (OR = 5.95 in Model 1a and 4.04 in Model 1b) would vote for PCRM were much higher compared to the odds of those living in Chișinău. By contrast, the inhabitants of the Southern districts closer to the Romanian border were least likely (OR = .15) to vote for the Left compared to voters in the capital. In 2016, the odds of the Central region residents voting left were 62% lower (OR=.38 in Model 3b) compared to those living in Chișinău. The shift to the left from 2009 to 2016 indicates that by 2016 the urban electorate has moved further to the left, a trend confirmed by the Socialist win of the municipal elections in Chișinău.

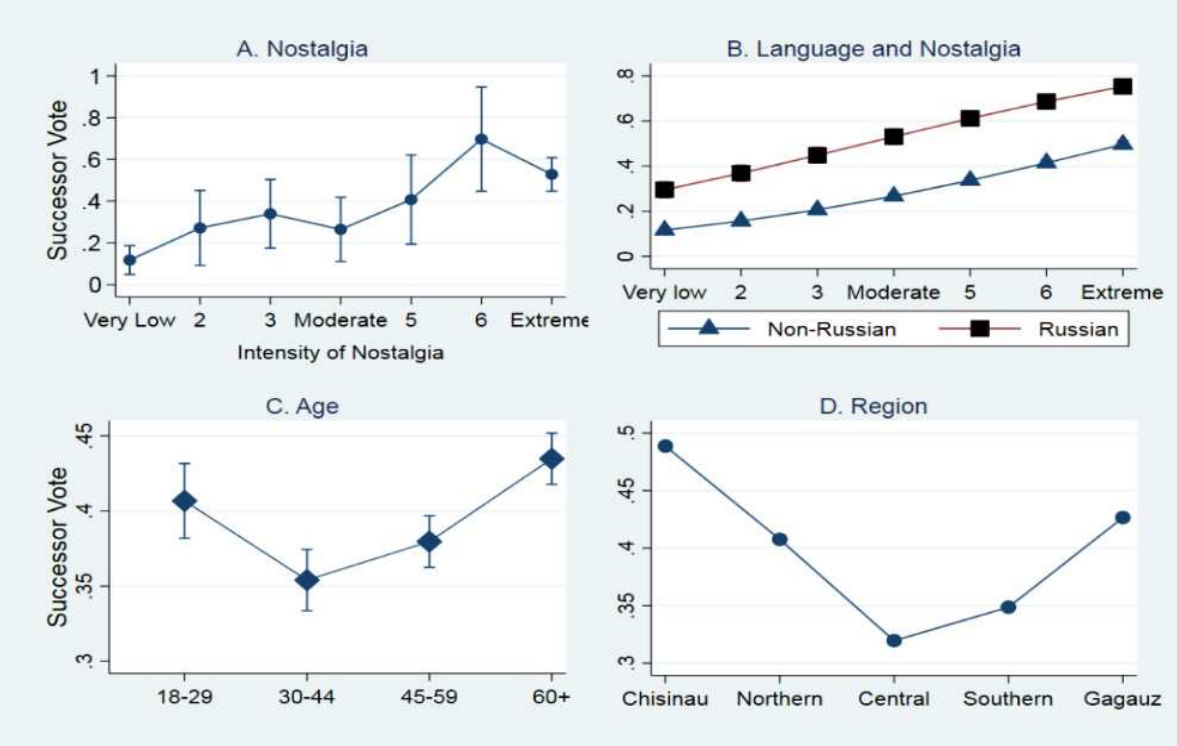
Table 4. Logistic regressions predicting the vote for the Left (PCRM & PSRM).

VARIABLES		Communist Vote in 2009			Communist &Socialist Vote in 2016		
		Mod. 1a	Mod. 2a	Mod. 3a	Model 1b	Model 2b	Model 3b
ECONOMIC VOTING							
Sociotropic Retro	Worse[a]	.77	.67	1.67	1.28	1.45	1.35
		(.39-1.5)	(.3-1.37)	(.65-4.3)	(.61-2.6)	(.68 - 3.1)	(.59-3.1)
	Better[a]	1.23	1.14	1.68	.74	0.69	0.62
		(.64-2.4)	(.58-2.2)	(.76-3.7)	(.44-1.2)	(.39-1.2)	(.34-1.1)
Sociotropic Pro	Worse[a]	.53*	.53*	.39**	.76	.69	.61
		(.27-1)	(.27-1)	(.15-.97)	(.4-1.36)	(.37-1.26)	(.32-1.1)
	Better[a]	5.61***	4.50***	1.92	1.01	094	.88
		(2.4-13)	(2-10.5)	(.76-4.8)	(.56-1.8)	(.49-1.76)	(.4 - 1.7)
Pocketbook Retro	Worse[a]	.59	.58	.36*	1.03	.98	.79
		(.26-1.3)	(.25-1.4)	(.1-1.18)	(.5- 2.1)	(.4- 2.18)	(.35-1.7)
	Better[a]	.94	.92	.54	1.19	1.21	1.14
		(.49-1.8)	(.47-1.8)	(.23-1.2)	(.68-2.1)	(.69-2.09)	(.6-2.07)
Pocketbook Pro	Worse[a]	.85	.89	1.41	0.71	0.64	0.79
		(.4-1.68)	(.45-1.7)	(.56-3.6)	(.4-1.2)	(.36-1.14)	(.42-1.4)
	Better[a]	2.24*	2.43*	3.06**	.89	.98	.91
		(.9-5.51)	(.98-6.1)	(1.-9.27)	(.48-1.6)	(.5 - 1.78)	(.47-1.7)
GENDER(1=male)		1.51	1.42	1.93**	1.26	1.36	1.33
		(.9- 2.5)	(.85-2.3)	(1-3.7)	(.8-1.96)	(.84 - 2.2)	(.8- 2.19)
AGE	29–44[b]	3.83***	3.85***	3.42**	1.34	1.09	1.03
		(1.6-8.9)	(1.6-9.1)	(1.2-9.7)	(.67-2.6)	(.54-2.2)	(.47-2.2)
	45–59[b]	4.55***	4.62***	2.58	1.79*	1.38	1.01
		(1.9-11)	(2-10.9)	(.8-7.97)	(.9- 3.4)	(.71-2.67)	(.47-2.1)
	60+[b]	4.59***	4.35***	3.58**	2.38**	1.76	1.40
		(1.8-11)	(1.7-11)	(1-11.5)	(1.2-4.6)	(.88-3.48)	(.65- 2.9)
EDUCATION	High School[c]	0.28***	.25***	.26***	.85	.70	.86
		(.13-.61)	(.12-.55)	(.09-.69)	(.4-1.68)	(.34-1.43)	(.4-1.76)
	College+[c]	.22***	.20***	.32**	0.38**	.29***	.39**
		(.1-.47)	(.09-.45)	(.11-.87)	(.178-.82)	(.129-.65)	(.17- .89)
UNEMPLOYED		1.2	1.07	1.27	.83	.86	.89
		(.66-2.1)	(.59-1.9)	(.57-2.8)	(.48-1.4)	(.48 - 1.5)	(.49-1.6)
INCOME	Low[d]	.73	.82	.9	.96	.92	1.01
		(.37-1.4)	(.4-1.64)	(.3-2.6)	(.5-1.67)	(.51-1.67)	(.5-1.88)
	Moderate[d]	.61	.74	.98	1.68	1.60	1.81
		(.28-1.3)	(.34-1.6)	(.3-3.17)	(.8-3.38)	(.77-3.34)	(.83-3.9)
	High[d]	1.34	1.87	4.83**	1.44	1.69	2.50**
		(.49-3.6)	(.68-5.1)	(1.1-21)	(.6-3.1)	(.76- 3.7)	(1- 6.1)
	Very High[d]	.87	.97	.91	0.78	0.91	1.18
		(.21-3.5)	(.24-3.9)	(.1-8.15)	(.29-2.1)	(.33-2.5)	(.37-3.7)
RESIDENCE[e]		1.32	1.93**	2.7**	0.79	1.12	1.00
		(.7-2.39)	(1.1-3.5)	(1.19-6)	(.48-1.3)	(.65-1.92)	(.5-1.78)
REGION	North[f]	1.2	1.19	.75	.70	.73	.63
		(.63-2.4)	(.58-2.4)	(.29-1.9)	(.37-1.3)	(.38-1.4)	(.28-1.3)
	Central[f]	.67	.77	.29**	.35***	.40**	.38**
		(.28-1.5)	(.32-1.8)	(.09-.99)	(.17 - .7)	(.18 - .83)	(.17- .87)
	South[f]	.38**	.35**	.15***	.56	.56	.51
		(.16-.94)	(.14-.89)	(.04-.52)	(.26-1.2)	(.25 - 1.2)	(.21-1.2)
	Gagauzia[f]	5.95**	2.08	2.71	4.04**	1.23	0.90
		(1.1-31)	(.37-11)	(.1-68.8)	(1.3-12)	(.35- 4.4)	(.24- 3.4)
LANGUAGE[g]			4.76***	7.03***		5.52***	4.04***
			(2.4-9.5)	(2.8-17)		(2.9-10.6)	(2 - 8.15)
NOSTALGIA				1.78***			1.38***
				(1.5-2.1)			(1.2- 1.5)
Constant		.17*	.02***	.00***	1.40	.14*	.05***
		(.03-1.1)	(.00-.15)	(.00-.01)	(.2- 9)	(.02 -1.1)	(.01-.45)
Valid sample		480	480	401	467	467	455
Pseudo–R2		.331	.361	.524	.102	.158	.216

Notes: Effect estimates presented as odds ratios. Confidence intervals given in parentheses. Reference categories: [a] Unchanged, [b] Age 18–29, [c] No High School, [d] Very low income, [e] Urban, [f] Region, [g] Russian. Significance levels: *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001

To ease the interpretation of results, the predictive margins for the variables of interest in 2016 were plotted in Figure 5. The average marginal effect of nostalgia on the leftist vote is non-linear and slightly weakens toward the extreme (Figure 5A). Among all the respondents displaying nostalgia, the Russian speakers score higher than the rest and are more likely to vote for the Socialists (Figure 5B). In terms of age, the chances that a young person would vote for the PSRM are higher than the likelihood of such a vote among middle-aged individuals (Figure 5C).

Figure 5. Determinants of the PSRM and PCRM vote in 2016 (95% CIs).



Overall, adding language and nostalgia increased substantially the goodness of fit measures. The pseudo-R^2 improved from .331 (Model 1a) to .524 (Model 3a) and, respectively, from .102 (Model 1b) to .216 (Model 3b).

To verify the robustness of the results, three additional tests were performed. First, it could be argued that besides PCRM and PSRM other parties belong to the Moldovan Left. Using the Party Manifesto Database (Volkens et al. 2020), the dependent variable was recoded to include

PCRM, PSRM, the Social Democratic Party (PSDM), and the Democratic Party (PDM). Second, alternative economic measures as independent variables were tested such as household income and employment status. The final check involved re-specifying the models to include three additional variables – satisfaction with democracy, trust in political parties, and Russian media consumption. Neither satisfaction with democracy nor the level of trust in political parties had any impact on electoral choice. Hence, the leftist vote in 2009 and 2016 should not be equated with a protest vote against democratic institutions. While the inclusion of the Russian media consumption variable decreased the causal effect of language, it did not have any discernable effect on the PCRM and PSRM vote, which suggests that media consumption may have a mediating effect between language and voting. In all, the additional tests confirmed that language and nostalgia remain the strongest predictors of the leftist vote.

Theoretical Implications

The preceding analysis carries implications for the study of nostalgia, collective memory, and voting. First, the assumption prevailing in the literature that voters hold similar memories and beliefs about major historical events needs to be reconsidered (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 32). In line with the concept of fractured memory regimes advanced by Bernhard and Kubik (2014), this study has shown that diverging popular perceptions of the past correspond to divisions among collective identities. The disproportionate concentration of nostalgia in the Northern, Southern, and Gagauz regions for three decades is a finding consistent with studies documenting the variation in the assessments of the Socialist past across and within national contexts (Ekman and Linde 2005; Munro 2006; White 2007; Light and Young 2015). The reasons for the unbalanced geographical distribution of nostalgia are unclear and require further exploration. One explanation may be related to the ethnolinguistic diversity of those areas. Still, even if we know that the Russian-

speaking population votes predominantly for the Left and displays higher levels of Soviet nostalgia, the mechanisms underlying this empirical trend remain obscure.

The prevalence of nostalgia among the Russian-speaking population tells us that there is a causal connection between the demise of Soviet state, political nostalgia, and the reconceptualization of collective identities in post-Soviet Moldova. Much has been written about the transformation of the Russian speakers of the post-Soviet region from ruling groups into minorities seeking to defend their cultural and political rights against the homogenizing pressures of the new states (Laitin 1998; Peyrouse 2008; Kosienkowski and Schreiber 2014). Nostalgia among Russian speakers may then reflect their anxiety when faced with the downgrade of their social status in the novel cultural milieu, rendering them more receptive to Eurosceptic appeals. Having enjoyed extensive privileges in the Soviet system, some Russian speakers may have become alienated in the newly independent Moldova, a country in which political power is largely controlled by the cultural group previously underrepresented. In the absence of an inclusive definition of nationhood, the idealization of the Soviet past may function as an imagined society, the kind of utopian project described by Boym (2001), in which ethnolinguistic minorities feel secure, free from the need to adapt to the inherent cultural demands of the new state. In this sense, the Russian-speaking population differs from the marginalized minorities in Western contexts as Moldova can be regarded as a post-colonial space, where Russian-speakers represent what Peyrouse (2008) identified as the imperial minority, a group associated with the Soviet power, deprived of its influence in some of the new post-Soviet republics. Unsurprisingly, many Russian speakers develop loyalties for parties campaigning in Russian and promising the protection of their rights in the new state.

Additionally, this study documents high levels of nostalgia among the general population beyond the Russian-speaking group. While survey responses indicate that the economic crises of the 1990s may have contributed to the formation of lasting sentimental views of the Soviet past as a prosperous era, such explanations seem inadequate in clarifying why younger individuals display nostalgic views. Changing elite discourses, media narratives and collective remembrance practices do not seem to alter considerably nostalgic orientations. After authorities defined the Soviet period as an occupation regime, nostalgia levels remained intact. This impermeability suggests that Soviet nostalgia is not necessarily sensitive to political, media, and cultural interventions but may be sustained by underexplored mechanisms such as, for instance, intra-family and intra-community socialization, media consumption patterns, informal mnemonic practices, and psychological processes at the individual level undetectable via survey data.

Another theoretical consequence pertains to the problem of endogeneity. The underlying assumption of the preceding analysis centers on the notion that politicians exploit rather than generate popular nostalgia. The significant differences between the leftist electorate and other voters in terms of their orientations toward the Soviet past can be traced to the early 1990s, pre-dating the formation of the current parties. However, this may not be the case in other contexts. While the strong association between nostalgia and the Left falls in line with previous research in the post-Soviet region (White 2007; White 2010), it appears to contradict arguments demonstrating that nostalgic voters support populist and extreme right parties in the West (Farrall et al. 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018; Kang 2018; Rensmann 2018; Hibbing, Hayes, and Deol 2017; Kenny 2017). The explanation behind nostalgia's diverging effects in Eastern and Western Europe may be related among other things to the absence of a Communist totalitarian experience in the West.

If anything, this study points to the limited applicability of the Western-derived concepts of Left and Right in describing the Moldovan political spectrum. PSRM does not resemble the typical Western left-wing party. Much like some of the populist parties in the West, the Moldovan Socialists adopt nostalgic appeals. Yet, despite its class-based roots and the Soviet nostalgia, the ideological makeup of the Moldovan Left stays socially conservative, acquiring, at times, nationalist tones. The constellation of meanings associated with its rhetoric points to an Eurosceptic, statist, social conservative worldview. The Moldovan Socialists self-identify as traditionalists, ally with the local Christian fundamentalists, and reject the LGBTQ rights agenda. In 2014, PSRM stoked xenophobia and Islamophobia by spreading conspiracy theories about the resettlement of Syrian refugees. Among the issues promoted by the party are anti-unionist activities (i.e. Union with Romania), anti-NATO events, federalization as a path toward the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, and a referendum on changing Moldova's tricolor to the historic banner of Stephen the Great (1433–1504), whose rule is heavily mythologized by PSRM, illustrating a distinct, pre-modern kind of nostalgia for the medieval state of Moldova. In contrast to the pro-Romanian stance among right-wing voters, PSRM's ideas about national identity build on the Soviet policy of Moldovanism. Socialist leaders occasionally talk about a Greater Moldova and make revisionist claims against Romania (Socialistii.md, 10 September 2014).

Competition on the Left pushed the Moldovan Socialists to adopt a distinct blend of Euroscepticism mixed with illiberal ideas. To make itself distinguishable from PCRM, PSRM protested against the EU-Moldova Association Agreement and the course of European integration altogether, opting instead for the accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. The party joined the Izborsk Club, a Russian organization known for its support for an expansionist foreign policy, Orthodox radicalism, and the wholesale condemnation of Western democracies. It would

thus be an error to regard the Moldovan Socialists as a working-class, progressive party similar to some of its Western counterparts. Instead, the party models itself after the conservative *United Russia* party, the backbone of Russia's illiberal system, with which it has established a strategic partnership. Mimicking *United Russia*, PSRM named its youth wing – the Young Guard, a reference to an underground partisan organization from World War II. PSRM leaders self-identify as defenders of the Moldovan state, people, culture, and language against what they perceive to be the twin threats of Romanianization and Westernization. Acting as Russia's closest ally in Moldovan politics, PSRM contributes to the diffusion of illiberal ideas, bearing resemblance to what Bluhm and Varga (2019) describe as illiberal conservative parties.

There is then an external dimension to nostalgia. Despite EU's growing role in Moldova, Moscow as the former imperial center still exerts substantial influence over its politics. When PSRM politicians use nostalgic and Eurosceptic appeals, they often do so to gain the benevolence of the Russian Federation, an external patron of the party, known for its sponsorship of Eurosceptic parties in the West (see Snegovaya 2021). Equally problematic for the quality of democracy in Moldova is the support enjoyed by a foreign authoritarian figure. In 2021, 86% of the PSRM voters expressed trust in Vladimir Putin, higher than the national average of 62% and above trust level in domestic politicians (BOP 2021). To exploit such trends, during the 2014 election campaign, the Socialists placed billboards depicting Igor Dodon sitting next to the Russian president, a sign that nostalgia may be interwoven with trust in authoritarian figures.

A key theoretical insight concerns the weakness of class-based and economic voting (Pacek 1994; Harper 2000; Tucker 2006). Moldovan voters are not eager to evaluate politicians based on their economic performance. Instead in line with research by Bloom and Shulman (2012), Brader (2005) and Garry (2014), this study contributes to the wider debate about the effect of emotions

on voting by demonstrating that ethnocultural factors and emotions influence electoral choice. Voting driven by emotional appeals and identity issues does not bode well with the idea of a rational and informed public monitoring effectively governmental officials in a democratizing environment.

In sum, Soviet nostalgia, a latent historical legacy of the totalitarian regime, may be activated via well-constructed appeals by political elites in culturally diverse post-imperial borderlands to attract votes and legitimize alliances with the former colonial power. The survival of Soviet nostalgic orientations implies that breaking discursively with the old regime is a complicated undertaking as different ethnocultural groups incorporate conflicting evaluations of the past as elements of their reinvented post-Soviet collective identities and worldviews.

Conclusion

By examining the phenomenon of Soviet nostalgia in Moldova, the article demonstrated that positive assessments of the Soviet past remain unaltered and serve as a useful political resource for the Moldovan Left. In line with studies in other contexts (White 2007; White 2010; Light and Young 2015), the empirical analysis reveals that nostalgia is distributed unevenly across Moldova's territory, an unbalanced spread translating into diverging perceptions of the Soviet past across political parties. As hypothesized, nostalgic orientations toward the past figure as the best predictor of the leftist vote. Much like the nostalgic voters in the West opting for populist parties, some citizens are influenced by well-crafted emotional appeals rather than rational assessments of economic conditions. The ideological blend of Soviet nostalgia and Euroscepticism, prevailing among the Russian-speaking group carries as pointed out by Todorova (2010), a symbolic association with the imperial center, and features as Laruelle (2016) noted among the elements of the mobilizational narratives that accompanied secessionism in Ukraine.

This study has also shown that language, as a marker of cultural identity, influences electoral preferences, structuring the Moldovan party system since the early 1990s. Consistent with the language hypothesis (H2), nostalgic parties target ethnocultural minorities, experiencing a sharper decline in their socio-political and economic status after independence. This finding aligns well with previous research demonstrating that the divide between Russian speakers and non-Russian speakers, which emerged during the nationalist mobilization of the late 1980s, evolved into lasting patterns of political participation in Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan (Whitefield 2002; Roper and Fesnic 2003; Peyrouse 2008; Bloom and Shulman 2012). Such cleavages may evolve. The fact that many Moldovans hold more than one citizenship further complicates the study of voting as some individuals see themselves as responsible members of several political communities simultaneously (Knott 2017). While this project focused on a single case, future comparative endeavors could explore further the structure of nostalgic discourses as ideological alternatives to the liberal democratic discourse across the post-Soviet region and beyond.

Furthermore, the narratives adopted by the Moldovan Left resemble populist discourses in the West and the authoritarian-conservative ideology in Russia. Given such ideological affinities, it should not come as surprising that nostalgia predicts the vote for the Left in Moldova, while in the West it is associated mostly with the support for the populist radical-right parties (Farrall et al. 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018; Rensmann 2018; Hibbing, Hayes, and Deol 2017; Kenny 2017). In this sense, nostalgia functions as an emotion undergirding Euroscepticism both inside and outside the European Union. Populist politicians develop partisan loyalties among the formerly dominant groups by conjuring up idealized pasts in which life was prosperous and stable, and the state enjoyed great prestige in international affairs. This imaginary

past is then contrasted rhetorically by nostalgic politicians with what they believe to be a depressing present marked by rapid change caused by globalization, deindustrialization, diminished international standing, and the rise of previously marginalized communities.

Taken together, the intersecting cleavages structuring the Moldovan party system explain why the decline of PCRM did not lead to the disappearance of nostalgic parties but contributed to the emergence of a second-generation of successor parties, a phenomenon which did not receive scholarly attention. Likewise, the crosscutting cleavages structuring the party system have been overcome when issues such as state capture gained in salience on the public agenda, leading to cross-ethnic, transideological collective action against oligarchic state capture (Marandici 2021). The preceding analysis thus lends greater confidence to the notion that nostalgia and other emotions partially explain the vote for Eurosceptic and populist parties. As such, the observed causal links between the endurance of political nostalgia, emotional appeals, and electoral choice are neither random nor superficial.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 5. Frequency distributions for relevant variables.

Variables	2009 (%)	Cases	2016 (%)	Cases
Party Choice		747		738
PCRM & PSRM	42		43	
Non-PCRM & non-PSRM	58		57	
Gender				
Male	46		45.4	
Female	54		54.6	
Age Group		1118		1107
18–29 years	24		23	
29–44	25		28	
45–59	29		26	
60+	22		23	
Education		1115		1107
No high school	22		13	
High school	45		50	
College	34		37	
Russian speaking		1118		1107
Non-Russian	77		80	
Russian	23		20	
Income		876		930
Very low	28		26	
Low	43		30	
Moderate	21		22	
High	6		14	
Very High	2		8	
Residence		1118		1107
Urban	41		45	
Rural	59		55	
Region		1118		1107
Chisinau	23		24	
Northern	29		31	
Central	25		24	
Southern Region	19		15	
Gagauz Autonomy	5		6	
Nostalgia Index		827		1060
Media consumption		801		846
Russian TV	31		43	
National TV	69		58	
Sociotropic Retrospective		1009		1078
Worse	45		52	
Unchanged	37		38	
Better	19		10	
Sociotropic Prospective		825		883
Worse	28		37	
Unchanged	29		44	
Better	43		19	
Pocketbook Retrospective		1100		1090
Worse	32		42	
Unchanged	54		48	
Better	13		10	
Pocketbook Prospective		802		851
Worse	19		33	
Unchanged	38		42	
Better	43		25	

Source: Public Opinion Barometer data from November 2009 and November 2016.