

One year of Ukraine's De-communisation A change in the historical narrative

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A year ago, the Parliament of Ukraine adopted four bills on the policy of national memory: on granting access to the archives of the repressive organs of the Communist totalitarian regime in the years 1917–1991, on the legal status and commemoration of Ukrainian independence fighters in the twentieth century, on the immortalisation of the victory over Nazism in the Second World War, 1939–1945, and on the condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes and the forbidding of their symbolism from being promoted. The laws came into force on 21 May 2015. After a year, it can be stated that only the latter two are being observed – the official narrative regarding World War II has been changed, mainly due to the activity of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINR), but also as a result of public statements by President Petro Poroshenko. The process of removing from public places the names and commemorations referring to the Soviet era is underway, and the fears that this may trigger serious conflicts have not proved true. From roughly a thousand placenames subject to de-communisation some two thirds have been changed so far (parliamentary bills regarding the remaining ones are awaiting approval) and most statues of Communist leaders have been removed. However, the law concerning independence fighters, which raised the most serious controversies, did not have any practical consequences. Moreover, nothing suggests that this could change. The implementation of the de-communisation laws is associated with a significant change in Ukrainian patriotic narrative: it is no longer focused on national martyrdom and it is beginning to emphasize heroic motives, which is in line with wartime needs. The fact that some of these motives are likely to trigger problems in Ukraine's relations with Poland seems to be viewed as a marginal 'by-product'.

The law on the status of independence fighters

The law concerning Ukrainian independence fighters was essentially a declarative act, its implementation did not require any further action, and its principal goal was achieved when it came into force. It acknowledged the importance of the fighters' struggle for Ukraine's independence in 1917–1991 in the context of

the restoration of the Ukrainian state in 1991. However, it did not recognise these fighters as combatants (the reasons included the fact that most of the organisations listed in the law were civilian organisations). The law mentions the intention to grant 'legal status' to those individuals, although it fails to provide any details regarding this status or specify how it would be confirmed or granted to a specific individual. Although this law has now been in force for over

a year, during this period no actions were taken to grant this status to former fighters (in practice – OUN-UPA veterans and dissidents active in the 1960's through to the 1980's) or offer them certain concessions and social benefits.

Contrary to fears, the provisions of the act on the legal status of independence fighters are not being used to hinder academic research and critical reflection on the activity of OUN-UPA.

The law committed the state to increase its efforts to research into and to propagate the knowledge of the struggle for Ukrainian independence in the 20th century and to revere the memory of this struggle. It also included a provision saying that expressing “contempt” for independence fighters, attempting to prevent their rights from being pursued, as well as publicly denying the legitimacy of the struggle for Ukraine’s independence are illegal and shall be penalised according to the law in effect. However, it failed to specify the details. So far, no attempt has been made to incorporate this ban into the penal code (in its present wording the provision included in the act cannot form the basis for action by the prosecutor’s office and by the courts) and there is no indication that such initiatives will be carried out soon.

Contrary to fears voiced, for example, by some historians, the act’s provisions are not being used to hinder academic research and critical reflection on the activity of OUN-UPA. This reflection emerged in Ukraine around 2010. However, it later vanished, which was a consequence of the war and this happened before the laws discussed in this article were adopted. The state’s commitment to increase its efforts to research into and to propagate the knowledge of the struggle for Ukraine’s independence in the 20th century and to revere the

memory of this struggle is being implemented almost exclusively by the UINR, which is carrying out measures which are dynamic and multifaceted. These include devising methodological papers and materials to be used in the media, as well as inspiring changes in school curricula which are being gradually implemented. The Institute strives, for instance, to include the struggle (mainly against the Soviet Union) by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in the national and state tradition which is generally seen in a positive light. At the same time, it has no intention of rejecting dialogue with Poland. One element of this dialogue naturally involves discussion on the subject of UPA crimes. A Polish-Ukrainian Forum of Historians has been established on the initiative of the UINR and Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance and has launched its activities. The status of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance is that of a central executive body subordinated to the government. Its tasks involve realisation of the state’s historical policy (in practice, it is the Institute that defines the lines of this policy). However, it has no investigative competences, no right to carry out lustration or to establish field offices. It is a rather small institution with several dozen employees and a limited budget. The UINR owes its present significance mainly to the dynamism of its head, Volodymyr Viatrovykh, a young historian with an impressive research track record, a participant in the Revolution of Dignity, who has shown no political ambitions so far. Of equal importance is the fact that the UINR remains outside the rivalry between various political groups, as it only has limited funds at its disposal.

De-communisation of the public space

The implementation of the law providing for the removal of names and symbols associated with Communism from public places has proved the

most difficult mainly due to the large number of objects covered by it. Furthermore, there were fears that the process may trigger disputes and social protests as well as attempts at using these for political purposes. These fears turned out to be exaggerated: attempts at using the issue in the campaign ahead of local elections were few and far between, and after the elections de-communisation initiatives gained momentum. However, residents of some towns opposed the changes (in particular involving the renaming of streets), although their resistance was not particularly forceful. The planned activities did not manage to be fully implemented within the six-month period specified in the act, though the process is underway.

In most cases, the renaming involves restoring a historical name. If no historical names are available, new names are invented, derived from rivers and other geographical landmarks.

It can be assumed that it will have been completed by the end of this year (obviously, only on those territories under government control). The plan to rename certain towns and streets was largely approved of by the general public, facilitated by the fact that it did not entail the necessity of changing identity documents etc., and the process of removing statues, commemorative plaques and symbols associated with the Soviet state was hedged with a provision to guarantee that the statues located in cemeteries as well as other works of funerary art will remain intact.

The present de-communisation mainly covers the central, southern and eastern parts of Ukraine; in western regions it was carried out back in the 1990's when certain towns and streets were renamed and Communist-era statues were removed. Only 17 local names remain

to be changed in western Ukraine. The de-communisation laws are not being implemented on the territory controlled by the Russian Federation and separatists. The UINR has drafted a list of new names of towns located in these regions (including Crimea). For obvious reasons, in its work it has omitted the task of consulting with local residents about the plans.

By the middle of May 2016, out of 941 districts and localities (including 76 cities and towns) indicated by the UINR, 688 places (including 56 cities and towns) had their names officially changed. Bills containing the proposed new names for the remainder have been registered with the Parliament of Ukraine and are waiting to be passed. Their adoption has been delayed due to the generally poor organisation of parliamentary work. The renaming initiatives are subject to consultation with local authorities (aside from the territories outside Kyiv's control). In around 40 cases the name change raised controversy (mainly centred around disputes as to whether the specific name was indeed associated with the Communist regime; for example names such as Petrivka/Petrivtse could have been inspired by St Peter or Bolshevik Grigory Petrovsky).

The proposed renaming of two big cities, Dnipropetrovsk and Kirovohrad, and the respective regions, remains in the realm of plans and the last will require the constitution to be amended, as it contains the list of all regions. In both cases, restoring of these cities' historical names is out of the question, as these are connected with Russian rule over Ukraine (Ekaterinoslav – to commemorate Empress Catherine the Great, and Elisavetgrad – to commemorate Empress Elizabeth of Russia, respectively). As far as Dnipropetrovsk is concerned, the popular abbreviated name Dnipro (Dnieper) will most likely be adopted. The authorities of Kirovohrad, on the other hand, are striving to restore the city's historical name, suggesting that it was derived from St Eliza-

both. The UINR has objected to this and initially proposed the name Inhulsk (from the river Inhul on which the city is located), and then the name Kropyvnytski (from the name of the Ukrainian 19th-century writer and actor who lived in the town). Neither of these names was approved by the city's residents and the matter is likely to trigger further disputes.

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In most cases, the renaming involves restoring a historical name (for example Artemivsk became Bakhmut again, and Volodarsk-Volynskyi became Khoroshiv). If no historical names are available, new names are invented, derived from rivers and other geographical landmarks. New commemorative names are very rare (only 10 such names have been proposed, none of which refer to events which took place in the 20th century¹).

The number of streets, etc., subject to renaming has reached into the tens of thousands. The renaming initiatives are the task of local government and therefore no comprehensive figures regarding this matter are available. What is known, however, is that the process has been completed in numerous towns and in the Zakarpattia region. In early May 2016, the head of the UINR announced that 2,500 streets have been renamed. In the case of streets, restoring historical names is rarely possible, so new

commemorative names are used instead, connected mainly with Ukraine's struggle for independence (including actions by OUN-UPA) and with the Revolution of Dignity and the war in the east of the country (these are mainly the names of individuals killed in war, adopted in the towns from which they originated). The introduction of names referring to the struggle for independence frequently meets with resistance on the part of local residents, who prefer neutral-sounding names.

The situation is much worse in the case of removing the names of Communist-era figures from the official names of industrial plants and other institutions. Here, similarly, no comprehensive data is available. However, it seems meaningful that the military shipbuilding company in Kyiv is still referred to as 'Leninska Kuznya'. The process of removing the statues of Lenin and other Communist leaders had been progressing well in the central part of the country until 2013 (from 5,500 Lenin statues which existed in 1990 only 2,200 were left in December 2013; no figures are available for other statues covered by the removal process). During the Revolution of Dignity and directly afterwards there was a surge in the initiatives focused on removing such statues (in 2014 alone as many as 504 were removed). In 2015, the process continued, sometimes causing resistance on the part of local government (as in Dnipropetrovsk, where in January 2016 a huge statue of Petrovsky, the city's Communist 'patron', was removed upon the initiative of local activists). In mid-March 2016, on territories controlled by Ukraine's central government there were still several hundred Lenin statues (including 10 in Kyiv); most of these are located on the premises of industrial complexes etc. These statues are being gradually removed (for example, in early April 2016 in Mariupol a statue of Ordzhonikidze was removed; earlier in Zaporizhzhya statues of Lenin and Dzerzhynsky were removed). It should be expected

¹ The renaming of Komsomolske (in Kherson region) to Dontsove can be seen as an exception; the historical name of this village was Shkarlupky. There is no evidence to verify whether the new name has been derived from D. Dontsov (ideologist of Ukrainian radical nationalism, unrelated to the region) or had a different source.

that this aspect of de-communisation will be completed in time, that is by 21 May 2016. This will be facilitated by the fact that on 4 April the Minister of Culture deprived 794 such statues of the status of historical monuments (some of them had already been removed by that time). The de-communisation law directly prohibited the use of the word 'Communist' in organisational names. This was tantamount to a ban on the activity of the Communist Party of Ukraine. The Communists, severely weakened by the annexation of Crimea and the rebellion in Donbas (these were the regions where most of the Communist party voters, as well as activists, lived) and their party's absence from parliament following the 2014 elections, attempted to oppose this decision. However, first they were prevented from running in local elections in 2015, and then the activity of their party was banned by a legally valid court decision.

Implementation of the remaining acts

The act changing the official narrative regarding World War II has been fully implemented. A large portion of the implementation initiatives was carried out prior to when the act came into force. In 2015 and 2016, celebrations of the anniversary of the end of World War II were organised both on 8 May (Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation) and on 9 May (Day of Victory over Nazism), and the term 'Great Patriotic War' was eliminated from the official narrative. It was replaced with the term 'World War II', which was intended to popularise the participation of Ukrainians in the ranks of various armies (including the Polish Armed Forces), with special emphasis on the significance of the war with Japan. The UINR has been involved in a wide-ranging initiative to popularise the new narrative, according to which Ukraine was an independent participant in this war and one of the allies (the fact that it collaborated with the Third Reich has been omitted, similarly to

the crimes perpetrated by UPA). This explicit heroic interpretation of the past is in line with the needs of a country which is waging a war.

The implementation of the de-communisation laws is visibly changing Ukraine's political landscape, both in its physical aspect (the removal of statues etc.) and its intellectual-moral aspect (eliminating the remains of the Soviet historical and social narrative from popular awareness).

Back in 2015, this interpretation was not being officially challenged, whereas in 2016 in some towns supporters of the 'old' narrative emphasising the Great Patriotic War used the opportunity of anniversary celebrations to openly demonstrate their views.

The implementation of the act relating to archives, pursuant to which the UINR was to take over the entire archives of all law enforcement bodies of the former USSR from the years 1917–1991, is underway. The first stage of this implementation, involving compiling an inventory of the resources by their current administrators, is expected to be complete by May 2016. At present, it is not known whether these resources will be grouped together in a new site or will remain in their current home institutions.

Closing remarks

The implementation of the de-communisation laws is visibly changing Ukraine's political landscape, both in its physical aspect (the removal of statues, etc.) and its intellectual-moral aspect (eliminating the remains of the Soviet historical and social narrative from popular awareness). The authorities in Kyiv (mainly the leadership of the UINR and President Poroshenko) are actively promoting the new narrative of historical remembrance, whose main motive is no longer

martyrdom (centred around the memory of Holodomor), but the heroic struggle against invaders (Russia in particular, but also Poland and Hungary). What is important in this context is that, in the new vision of World War II, emphasis is placed on the joint struggle by residents of Ukraine of different nationalities. This narrative responds to the needs of a country which is waging a war and facing the task of integrating the ethnically divided society into one

political nation. It should not be expected that Kyiv will abandon this narrative, regardless of the difficulties that the fact of emphasising the memory of the struggle by Ukrainian nationalists may provoke in Ukraine's relations with Russia and Poland. The former are considered a natural element of the present conflict, while the latter seem to be viewed as an unavoidable, minor 'by-product' of the patriotic consolidation of the nation.

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