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THE INFLUENCE OF THE DECOMMUNIZATION POLICY ON THE FORMATION OF UKRAINIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: *The article examined the impact of the decommunization policy in Ukraine on national identity formation. The objectives of the article were to determine the main reasons and consequences of decommunization in Ukraine. A historical approach to determine the causes of decommunization and justify its necessity is applied in the article. Sociological studies and expert opinions on decommunization are analyzed. Based on synthesis, analogy, and abstraction methods, the elaborated material is summarised, and the article's conclusions are formulated. As a result, the conclusion has been drawn that decommunization could not contribute to the formation of national identity in Ukraine. The outcomes of decommunization had a positive effect only in combination with other efforts (educational process, dialogue with society, language policy). However, given Ukraine's regional characteristics, it took time to unite the population around a shared historical memory, common symbols, and traditions. The policy of decommunization primarily contributed to the strengthening of regional identity. Moreover, improving the material well-being of Ukrainians and creating favorable conditions for living and working in Ukraine will unite the residents of all regions of Ukraine. These actions will significantly enhance the effect of decommunization in forming national identity.*

Keywords: *Ukraine; Decommunization; National Identity; Derussification*

INTRODUCTION

In the former Soviet Union, the term "national" was rarely used in official documents. The Soviet people were recognized as a new historical community, a supranational entity. Ukraine's presence within the Soviet Union did not facilitate the formation of a Ukrainian national identity due to the policy of the Soviet leadership. Except for a short time from 1923 to 1930, known as "Ukrainization" in Ukrainian history, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union pursued a strategy of eradicating national differences and did not value national diversity. As part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine experienced mass deportations of the local population and numerous punitive actions of the totalitarian regime. According to various estimates, the famine of 1932-33 alone cost Ukraine from three to seven million lives (Davies and Wheatcroft 2009, xiii-xiv).

Considering that, questions of national identity and filling the historical gaps are extremely topical for Ukraine. This article describes the results of decommunization in Ukraine since 2015. On this basis, it assesses the impact of decommunization on shaping the Ukrainian national identity. A historical approach to determine the causes of decommunization and justify its necessity is applied in the article. Sociological studies and expert opinions on decommunization are analyzed. Based on synthesis, analogy, and abstraction methods, the elaborated material is summarised, and the article's conclusions are formulated.

This article considers national identity according to the Western model of national identity, where nations are seen as cultural communities whose members are united, if not made homogeneous, by common historical memories, myths, symbols, and traditions (Smith 1991, 11).

RESULTS

Reasons for Decommunization

The past demonstrates that crucial or significant moments in a nation's history frequently serve as the impetus for processes like the decommunization of Ukraine. Nearly every cultural revolution rejects the past and starts to combat it. With the start of the French Revolution in 1789, the policy of several governments in France was given a name that sounds similar to the phrase "decommunization" - "dechristianization" (Tallett 1991). For Ukraine, the reasons that triggered the decommunization process were the occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the subsequent operation to destabilize the situation in eastern Ukraine.

Russia persistently spreads the myth that Ukrainians and Russians are one nation and that Ukraine is not a state but a part of the Russian Federation (Petukhov 2008; Smolin 2014; Chesnokov 2016). The Russian Federation tries to impose this view in its state, Ukraine, and abroad. At one time, responding to this interpretation of history, the then president of Ukraine published a book with the eloquent title "Ukraine is not Russia" (Kuchma 2003). It is necessary to realize that the struggle for influence over Ukraine and its separate geographical parts is conducted by Russia, among other things, at the historical level. Ukraine is trying to defend itself. Adopting the Russian approach to history will replace the Ukrainian identity with a regional version of the Russian identity. To accept this would be to question the existence of Ukrainian statehood.

Decommunization of 2015

In April 2015, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted four laws called laws on decommunization. They referred to access to the archives of the repressive bodies of the communist totalitarian regime of 1917-91, condemnation of the communist and national-socialist totalitarian regimes in Ukraine, and prohibition of propaganda of their symbols, legal status, and honor of the memory of fighters for Ukrainian independence, the commemoration of the victory over nazism in the Second World War (Law of Ukraine 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). The contents of the laws mentioned above are in some respects covered in many publications, including those listed in the introduction. This article focuses on the results of decommunization.

The most widespread results of decommunization are associated with the renaming of places and street names associated with the communist regime. The need for such a decision is vividly illustrated by the situation when streets in many Ukrainian cities were named after a Russian revolutionary who killed the family of the last Russian tsar with particular cruelty (Information Portal 2015).

Fifty-one thousand four hundred ninety-three (51,493) toponymic objects, 991 villages, 26 districts, 75 educational institutions, over 33 railway facilities, and two seaports have all had

their names changed as of April 2020. As for monuments and memorial signs, 2,409,000 were dismantled or removed from public spaces. Of these, 1,324 are monuments to Lenin (UINP 2020). Most of the names that disappeared from the map due to renaming were in honor of the October Revolution of 1917, Vladimir Lenin, Soviet figures, and members of the Communist Party. As a result of renaming, more than 300 historical names have been restored. About 70 belong to the cultural heritage of Ukraine's indigenous peoples and national communities - Crimean Tatars, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Jews. Five settlements were renamed to honor their natives, namely, soldiers who died while serving in the Antiterrorist operation zone in eastern Ukraine (Korolenko et al. 2017, 138-139).

The legislation was prescribed so that by the summer of 2016, all names associated with totalitarianism had to be changed. In the future, there were cases of renaming certain settlements in Ukraine, but they were isolated. Such a short timeframe set for renaming left no room for delaying the implementation of the legislation and prevented the process of decommunization from dragging on for many years.

Archive materials have also become a tool in search of historical truth and the formation of national identity. Therefore, access in Ukraine to the archives of the repressive organs of the communist totalitarian regime of 1917-1991 for historians, journalists, relatives of the repressed, and ordinary citizens was important to facilitate understanding of the past. Ukrainians got an opportunity to finally debunk the historical myths of the Soviet era and become more familiar with the crimes of the communist regime. In turn, this allows citizens to distance themselves from the legacy of the Soviet Union and to identify themselves with Ukraine.

Different approaches can assess the decommunization policy's overall impact on forming a common national identity. One of them is sociological research. According to Rating's study (2016):

> almost half of the respondents (48 percent) support banning communist ideology in Ukraine, 36 percent are against it, and 16 percent are indifferent. 41 percent of respondents support dismantling all Lenin monuments in Ukraine. At the same time, almost half of the respondents (48 percent) are against this initiative, and 11 percent are indifferent. In the West of Ukraine, 72 percent support this idea most of all; in the Center, this index is almost twice as small and constitutes 41 percent; in the South, it is almost three times smaller - 26 percent, and in the East, it is four times smaller and constitutes 18 percent. The prohibition of communist ideology was most supported by the advocates of nationalist parties - over 80 percent. The greatest number of opponents of this idea was among supporters of pro-Russian parties - 70 percent. The same is the situation of support for the dismantling of Lenin's monuments.

The renaming of Soviet cities and streets in Ukraine:

> was rather unsupported by 57 percent. At the same time, assuming that renaming can occur selectively, the attitude to the initiative has significantly softened. The number of supporters exceeds the number of opponents (49 percent *vs.* 44 percent). Renaming is perceived most

> positively in the West of Ukraine while predominantly negatively in the East and South. At the same time, the higher the level of education of respondents, the higher the support for renaming Soviet names of cities and streets. Among residents of villages, the idea of renaming has more support than among residents of cities. This can be explained by the fact that the Ukrainian peasantry was a victim of the Holodomor and collectivization (the creation of large collective farms and the destruction of private property along with its owners). Thus, the historical memory of these crimes of the Soviet authorities determines the support of the decommunization policy among the inhabitants of rural areas (Rating 2016).

The figure of Stepan Bandera - the leader of Ukrainian nationalists at the beginning of the XX century - was viewed as:

> positively by 35 percent of respondents and negatively by 46 percent. The positive attitude towards Bandera increased in comparison with the indicators of 2012 (22 percent). The positive assessment of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great was equal to 50 percent. The positive attitude to Stalin and Lenin was 22 and 25 percent, respectively, cannot but surprise and convince once again of the correctness of the decisions on decommunization initiation in 2015. In the West, there is a positive attitude toward Ukrainian figures, while in the East, there is a positive attitude toward Tsar Peter, Lenin, and Stalin (Rating 2016).

In general, younger respondents were more supportive of decommunization initiatives. The higher the respondents' education level, the more pronounced their positive attitude toward Ukrainian figures. The same attitude is observed among those living in the village. The lower the respondents' education level, the more pronounced their positive attitude toward Lenin and Stalin.

Another sociological survey was conducted four years later. At the same time, support for the decommunization policy was even lower in some aspects than in 2016. According to the study:

> 32 percent of Ukrainians approve of the decision to ban communist symbols. Almost the same number of citizens share a negative attitude toward this decision - 34 percent. About a quarter of citizens are indifferent. The share of positive attitudes towards this decision is slightly larger in the Western (45 percent) and Central (33 percent) regions compared to the South and East - 22 percent and 24 percent, respectively. Notable, about a quarter of citizens in all regions are indifferent to this issue. As for the respondents' age, those over 60 have a less positive attitude toward the ban on communist symbols. A sizable portion of the younger respondents (under 40) do not care whether communist symbols are allowed to be displayed. 30 percent of Ukrainians support renaming

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> their cities, villages, and streets named after Soviet leaders, while 44 percent feel negative about it, and about 20 percent are indifferent. Positive attitudes towards renaming toponyms prevail only in the Western region (44 percent for and 30 percent against). In the East and South, about half of the citizens have a negative attitude toward this idea. Trends in the age distribution are similar to those toward the ban of communist symbols: older people (47 percent for the 60-69 age group and 56 percent for people over 70) feel more negatively about renaming the toponyms. In contrast, young people are more indifferent (DIF 2020).

Thus, the results of sociological research show significant differences in attitudes towards communization in different regions of Ukraine. Based on this, we can conclude that decommunization can hardly be a factor contributing to forming a Ukrainian identity. It rather strengthens regional identity. At the same time, the fact that young respondents are more supportive of decommunization initiatives indicates that the positive impact of decommunization on forming a Ukrainian identity will probably increase in the future.

An expert assessment is one method of assessing the impact of the decommunization policy on shaping a common national identity. As part of a special Razumkov Center project (2017):

> 69 percent of experts believe implementing the decommunization policy positively impacts forming of a common national identity. Almost 90 percent of surveyed experts note that the formation of a common national identity is facilitated by the recognition of the Holodomor of 1932-1933 as the genocide of the Ukrainian people, 82 percent - by condemnation of the Nazi totalitarian regime, and 74 percent by condemnation of the communist totalitarian regime Honoring the memory of fighters for Ukrainian independence in the 20th century would have a positive influence on the opinion of 64 percent of experts (p. 84).

As we can see, experts are more positive about the influence of the decommunization policy on forming a common national identity. Such a discrepancy in experts' assessments and sociological research data can be explained by the fact that representatives of different political forces were not proportionally represented among the experts. At the same time, as the results of sociological studies testify, the higher the population's education level, the more they support the decommunization policy. It is simply impossible to have a low level of education for the experts. Consequently, they likely identified their personal attitude to the process of decommunization with the attitude of the entire population.

The processes initiated by the decommunization laws of 2015 were continued in 2018 (Law of Ukraine 2018). The law added persons who participated in all forms of armed struggle for the independence of Ukraine in the XX century to the list of participants in military actions. This development came about because everyone who took part in the military struggle for Ukraine's independence in the XX century was acknowledged for their contribution to the formation of the Ukrainian state. This decision has a strong moral component in addition to

some material benefits for these people (as few remain alive). This decision is important to their relatives and to all who pay tribute to these people. Their lives and ideas unite the citizens of Ukraine (especially in the western regions). In this case, we can speak of a positive impact on strengthening the regional Ukrainian identity.

CONCLUSION

Decommunization on its own was not capable of solving the task of forming a national identity. The results of decommunization can only have a positive effect when combined with other measures (educational process, dialogue with society, and language policy). However, given Ukraine's historical past and regional specifics, it is extremely difficult to unite the population around a common historical memory, common symbols, and traditions.

The desire to live in Ukraine is the only thing that can truly bring together residents of all regions of Ukraine. Creating good living and working conditions in Ukraine will greatly enhance the effect of decommunization.

In the Legatum Prosperity Index published in 2020, Ukraine is ranked 92nd out of 167 nations in the world's well-being rankings. This is the worst indicator among the countries of Eastern Europe (Legatum Institute 2020). In this context, we should mention the story of the referendum in Ukraine in 1991. The Ukrainian Referendum of 1991 on the proclamation of Ukraine's independence was held on 1 December 1991. The question of confirmation of the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine of 24 August 1991 was submitted to the referendum. 90.32 percent of voters supported independence. Results in the Crimea (54.19%), Donetsk (83.9%), and Luhansk (83.86%) as well as in Nikolaev region (89.45%), Odesa (85.38%), Kharkiv (75.63%), and Kherson (90.13%) regions - where parties and representatives with pro-Russian views typically received high support during elections - are quite revealing (CDAVO 2019). Such a sharp turn in public opinion can be explained by two reasons (no serious sociological studies were conducted in 1991). The first reason was a political attempt to preserve the USSR. The second reason, in our opinion, was the expectation of a higher standard of living in independent Ukraine. An agitation campaign preceded the referendum. One of the more powerful arguments that significantly impacted people's opinions (the author of the article remembers these events well) were the numbers that showed Ukraine's powerful economic role in the Soviet Union and envisioned Ukraine prospering outside of the USSR. If these expectations were reinforced by reality, events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 could have followed a different scenario. In the end, the gaps in the formation of a national identity were exploited by the Russian Federation. Furthermore, today financial well-being occupies one of the central places in the value orientations of Ukrainians. According to the results of one research in Ukraine, among the "most important life values, respondents most often named health (58 percent), a happy family life (41 percent), and a financially secure life (absence of financial difficulties) (39 percent)" (The Razumkov Centre 2017, 34). If we remember that health and happy family life in the real world are often closely linked, the material factor's importance increases even more for Ukrainian citizens. Relying on the results of such studies, experts believe that among the factors that can help to unite Ukrainians, overcoming the existing socio-economic problems, the improvement of well-being is the most important indicator and is equal to 94 percent (The Razumkov Centre

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2017, 84). Decommunization contributed to the fact that a certain number of citizens became interested in the local history of their area. Undoubtedly, this contributed positively to their understanding of their regional identity. There was a major moral component to the decommunization strategy as well. It finally paid respect to those who had battled against communist rule and had been tortured and killed by it. The Russian military invasion in February 2022 launched a process of "derussification" in Ukraine. The scale and impact of derussification on Ukrainian society can only be assessed over time. At the same time, it is already clear that the very fact of the Russian military invasion and its consequences have become a powerful factor in strengthening the Ukrainian national identity. These processes will most certainly be the subject of further research among Ukrainian and foreign scholars.

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