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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Filev, M. V., & Kurganskii, A. A. (2022). Dismantling monuments as the core of the post-2014 'decommunisation' in Ukraine and Poland. *Baltic Region*, 14(4), 146-161. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2022-4-9>

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DISMANTLING MONUMENTS AS THE CORE OF POST-2014 'DECOMMUNISATION' IN UKRAINE AND POLAND

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Received 10.08.2022
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2022-3-9
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Drawing on a wide range of sources (Polish and Ukrainian legal acts, Russian and international media), this study looks at the 'monument fall' in Ukraine and Poland as part of the post-2014 memory wars. The purpose of this article is to identify the main patterns associated with the demolition of Soviet and Russian monuments in the two countries. The 'decommunisation' of public space is an element of Ukraine's and Poland's politics of memory, enshrined in legal acts. Its driving force is the Institutes of National Remembrance, whose priorities include dismantling Soviet and pre-revolutionary Russian monuments, which came into full swing after the beginning of Russia's special military operation to denazify and demilitarise Ukraine. The official narratives allot Poland and Ukraine the role of victims of 'two aggressors' in World War II, which found themselves under 'communist occupation'. Therefore, the politics of memory of the two countries seek to get rid of the 'Soviet legacy' as the legacy of the 'occupying country'. Whilst Poland pursues 'residual decommunisation' focused on dismantling the remaining memorials to Soviet soldiers-liberators, Ukraine is committed to transforming 'decommunisation' into full-scale 'derussification'. At the same time, the process of 're-Sovietisation/Sovietisation' has been launched in the liberated territories of Ukraine. It consists in restoring previously destroyed monuments or installing new ones.

Keywords:

monument fall, decommunisation, politics of memory, collective memory, symbolic Policy, Ukraine, Poland

Speaking about the relationship between history and memory in his 2011 interview, Pierre Nora, the author of the concept of memory space, noted that memory, unlike history, is emotional: rooted in real or imaginary recollections, it is subject to manipulations, changes, suppression and disregard [1, p. 75]. According to Lorina Repina, 'the memory of events, people and phenomena of the past, which we call collective memory, not only differs between social strata and is selective, but is also variable, with a tendency towards substantial and even radical changes' [2, p. 14]. Therefore, political changes leave their mark on the symbolic structure of the urban environment, such as monuments, which may be erected or dismantled. Alterations in memory infrastructure are the key elements of the politics of memory [3, p. 48].

To cite this article: Filev, M. V., Kurganskii, A. A. 2022, Dismantling monuments as the core of post-2014 'decommunisation' in Ukraine and Poland, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 14, no 4, p. 146–161. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2022-4-9.

The key to Ukraine's and Poland's politics of memory is the 'decommunisation' of public space. According to the Ukrainian historian Georgy Kasianov, the concept of 'decommunisation' spans a range of political actions aimed to remove the cultural codes of the Soviet past from the symbolic, political and cultural space of Ukraine, as well as to stimulate the 'the elimination, marginalisation and public condemnation of political and social groups perceived as a legacy of that regime or showing real or imagined sympathy for it' [4, p. 175]. This definition holds for Poland, where the Constitution prohibits political parties and organisations whose programmes appeal to 'the totalitarian methods and practices of Nazism, Fascism and Communism'.¹

At the core of 'decommunisation' is the so-called 'monument fall', i.e. mass dismantling of Soviet and Russian monuments. Russia's special military operation to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine was a catalyst for another round of 'monument fall' in both countries analyzed. The phenomenon has been widespread since the spring of 2022, with regular reports of monuments being dismantled or vandalised.

Recent Russian historiography has focused heavily on collective memory [3; 5; 6], with special emphasis on Poland. Yet the topic of the 'monument fall' is not central to the research [7; 8].

Many historians have addressed the symbolic transformation of public space in Ukraine [9–12]. Particularly noteworthy is the monograph by Kasianov [13]. He takes a critical stance on 'decommunisation', drawing attention to pluralism being rejected by Ukrainian society, as well as to the ensuing of 'memory wars' [13, p. 270]. The historian Oleksandr Hrytsenko, on the contrary, positively assesses 'decommunisation', noting that this policy meets public demands and sentiments [14, p. 267]. In general, Ukrainian researchers tend to approve of the politics of memory pursued by their state.

After the reunification of Crimea with Russia, a new stage of 'memory wars' began. It is manifested in the elimination of Soviet memory narratives, the most intense in the history of Ukraine [13, p. 137]. Kasianov writes that '2014 was a turning point for Ukraine as a nationalising state' [15, p. 123]. Similar processes are underway in Poland, where Russia is traditionally perceived as an 'aggressive and backward country' papering over any controversy in its history, whilst Poland seeks truth and a 'reckoning with the past' [16, p. 139].

This article aims to identify the main patterns in the demolition of Soviet and Russian monuments in Ukraine and Poland as part of the post-2014 'memory wars'. The study draws on Polish and Ukrainian legislative acts, as well as materials in the Russian and international media.

¹ Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1997, *SEJM Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, URL: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/polski/kon1.htm> (accessed 30.06.2022).

Ukraine. The ‘memorial’ laws

From 2013 to 9 April 2015, ‘decommunisation’ was carried out in Ukraine mostly by nationalistic and far-right organisations, which were not prosecuted by law [11, p. 196]. The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted a series of four ‘memorial’ laws, taking the campaign to eliminate Soviet monuments to the state level and thus launching a radical transformation of Ukraine’s symbolic space and cultural memory [17, p. 41]. According to the law On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and the Prohibition of Propaganda of their Symbols, the term ‘symbols of the communist totalitarian regime’ covers any image, monument, memorial sign or inscription dedicated to people or events associated with the communist party. In exceptional cases, the use of the symbols of the ‘communist totalitarian regime’ is allowed: for example, on tombstones located on burial sites and honour graves, original battle flags or documents issued before 1991.²

The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory has a leading role in ‘decommunisation’. It works towards the ‘restoration of the national memory of the Ukrainian people, the prevention of the use of symbols associated with totalitarian regimes and raising awareness worldwide about the contribution of the Ukrainian people to struggle against totalitarianism’.³ In 2015, the Institute was reinstated as a national executive agency (it was a research institution under Viktor Yanukovich); its funding increased fourfold in 2015–2019 [4, p. 179]. And the then director, Volodymyr Viatrovich, lobbied hard for the ‘memorial’ laws [12, p. 132].

Along with the Institute of National Memory, ‘decommunisation’ is promoted by commissions under local authorities, whose task is to prepare proposals for a total revision of toponymy and ‘the demolition of monuments and memorial sites associated with the communist regime’ [13, p. 210].

The ambiguity of attitudes to decommunisation amongst the Ukrainians has been noted in the literature: most opponents of the policy reside in the south-east of the country [18, p. 122]. Surveys show the growing indifference to and disapproval of the nationalist narrative of memory amongst respondents [15, p. 134–136]. Kasianov cites several cases when locals displayed ingenuity in

² Про засудження комуністичного та націонал-соціалістичного (нацистського) тоталітарних режимів в Україні та заборону пропаганди їхньої символіки, закон України № 317-VIII від 09.04.2015, 2015, *Український інститут національної пам’яті*, URL: <https://uinp.gov.ua/dokumenty/normatyvno-pravovi-akty-rozrobleri-v-institutu/zakony/zakon-ukrayiny-pro-zasudzhennya-komunistychnogo-ta-nacional-socialistychnogo-nacystytskogo-totalitarnyh-rezhymiv-v-ukrayini-ta-zaboronu-propagandy-yihnoyi-symvoliky-no317-viii-vid-09042015> (accessed 18.06.2022).

³ Положення про Український інститут національної пам’яті, 2020, *Український інститут національної пам’яті*, URL: <https://uinp.gov.ua/pro-institut/pravovi-zasady-diyalnosti> (accessed 18.06.2022).

preserving monuments. For instance, members of the city council of Volnovakha in the Donetsk region, who did not want to demolish the monument to Chapaev, renamed it the Cossack Monument [13 p. 212].

The central component of the ‘memorial’ laws is the elimination of the nostalgic Soviet memory narrative from the memorial symbolic space and its replacement with a nation-centric/nationalistic one [17, p. 39] — a narrative that has become the leitmotif of Ukraine’s politics of memory after 2014. All this sped up the process of ‘decommunisation’, the first part of which was Leninopad — the dismantling of monuments to Lenin.

The fall of Lenins

The war against monuments to Lenin has a long history in Ukraine. The first demolition took place in Chervonohrad in the Lviv region as early as 1990. In the same year, the monuments were dismantled in Ternopil, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and some other cities and towns of Western Ukraine [13, p. 148—149]. The selective monument demolition policy continued: in 2009, President Viktor Yushchenko signed a decree striking off all monuments to Soviet leaders from the national cultural heritage register [10, p. 43].

Another round of the large-scale war on monuments to Lenin began in 2013. In December, a group of supporters of the nationalist Svoboda Party pulled down a monument in Kyiv, which was erected in 1946. Before the end of the year, several more monuments were dismantled in the Odessa, Volyn and Cherkasy regions [10, p. 49].

The dismantling of the Lenin monument in Dnipropetrovsk (Dnipro since 2016) on 22 February 2014 drew a sharp response (local authorities and the city’s law enforcement officials took no action to prevent the unlawful act). On the same day, city council deputies voted to rename Lenin Square as Heroes of Maidan Square [9, p. 32].

The adoption of ‘memorial’ laws accelerated Leninopad. In August 2017, the director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory Viatrovich declared that ‘Lenin is completely absent on the Ukrainian-controlled territory’. He provided statistics, according to which 2389 monuments were removed during the campaign, 1320 of which were Lenin statues. Nevertheless, he added in the same interview, some monuments may have survived in the rural areas and at industrial facilities;⁴ Leninopad continued. The data published on the Lenin Statues website suggest that another 60 monuments were taken off between Viatrovich’s interview and June 2002.⁵

⁴ All monuments to Lenin demolished in Ukraine, 2017, *Interfax*, URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/575246> (accessed 25.04.2022).

⁵ Monuments to Lenin dismantled in Ukraine since December 2013, 2022, *Lenin Statues*, URL: <http://leninstatues.ru/leninopad> (accessed 14.06.2022).

From ‘decommunisation’ to ‘derussification’

Viatrovich, when holding the position of the director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, also used the term ‘decolonisation’ to describe the country’s attempts to detach itself from the Russian legacy: it was applied not only to Soviet monuments but also to statues of Russian pre-revolutionary personages. A vivid example is the demolition of the monument to Alexandr Suvorov on the premises of the Ivan Bohun Military High School (earlier, the Suvorov Military School) in January 2019. The acts of the general were labelled as ‘ambiguous’ because of his role in suppressing the uprising of Cossacks and peasants in Right-bank Ukraine in 1768–1769, exterminating the Nogais in the 18th century and putting down the Kościuszko Uprising in 1794 [19].

As Russia’s special military operation began on 24 February 2022, the Ukrainian ‘decommunisation’ campaign turned into a ‘derussification’ crusade, marking a new and more radical stage in the war of monuments: mass demolition has extended from Soviet monuments to everything reminiscent of the Russian past. In April 2022, deputies of the Kyiv City Rada representing the caucus of the Servant of the People and Holos parties suggested destroying 60 monuments and plaques commemorating Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Bulgakov, Sergey Vitte and even the characters of the film *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* Gleb Zheglov and Vladimir Sharapov [20].

In June 2022, Ukraine’s Ministry of Culture proposed to establish a council overseeing the ‘derussification’, ‘decommunisation’ and ‘decolonisation’ of the republic. A priority task of the new body is monument demolition. Local authorities will be charged with the fate of monuments, which they have to decide ‘in dialogue with society’.⁶

A concrete manifestation of the policy pursued by the Ukrainian authorities was the removal of Pushkin statues in Mukachevo, Ternopil, Uzhgorod and Mikolaiv. The head of Ternopil, Serhiy Nadal, when commenting on the incident, said that ‘all things Russian have to be dismantled, including the monument to the Russian author’.⁷ The mayor of Mikolaiv, Oleksandr Senkevich, adopted a less radical stance, noting that the monument had to be pulled down to prevent acts of vandalism.⁸

⁶ Ukraine’s Ministry of Culture to create Derussification Council, 2022, *Izvestiya*, URL: <https://iz.ru/1346467/2022-06-07/minkult-ukrainy-zakhotel-sozdat-v-strane-sovet-poderusifikacii> (accessed 11.06.2022).

⁷ Pushkin statue pulled down in Ternopil, 2022, *TASS*, URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14332683> (accessed 22.04.2022).

⁸ Mayor of Nikolaev explains pulling down Pushkin statue from pedestal, 2022, *RBC*, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/21/05/2022/62891c339a79473cd1b5157b> (accessed 11.06.2022).

Another instance of ‘derussification’ was the demolition of the monument to Grand Prince Alexander Nevsky in Kharkiv on 19 May 2022.⁹ Remarkably, the statue became the target of vandalism in 2015; back then, the Kharkiv police filed a case against the perpetrators.¹⁰ Seven years later, there was no reaction.

In 1982, the monument to People’s Friendship was put up in Kyiv’s Khreshchatyi Park. The bronze sculpture depicted a Ukrainian and a Russian worker holding a ribbon with the Order of People’s Friendship suspended from it; the pedestal had an inscription in the Russian and Ukrainian languages: ‘In commemoration of the reunification of Ukraine and Russia. The monument became a stumbling stone in 2015 when its demolition first appeared on the agenda. The move from words to deeds was made in April 2022. Now the Kyivan authorities plan to remove the sculpture of the workers and light up the arch in the colours of the Ukrainian flag.’¹¹

Demolition of Great Patriotic War memorials

A characteristic feature of Ukraine’s national politics of memory is the revision of the history of the great Patriotic War, perceived as World War II or even the Soviet-German War [21, p. 10]; Ukraine is presented as the victim of a ‘fight between two totalitarian regimes’ [22, p. 42–43]. At the heart of Ukraine’s policy is the demolition of Soviet military monuments, a process that intensified after 24 February.

In June 2002, the Verkhovna Rada approved the law on withdrawal from the Agreement on Enshrining the Memory of Bravery and Heroism displayed by the Peoples of CIS Member States in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, signed in 2011 in Dushanbe.¹² It sought to ‘protect and maintain war graves and memorials’ in the countries of the agreement.¹³

⁹ Alexander Nevsky statue demolished in Kharkiv, 2022, *RIA Novosti*, URL: <https://ria.ru/20220519/pamyatnik-1789426015.html> (accessed 11.06.2022).

¹⁰ Monument to Grand Prince of Kyiv Alexander Nevsky taken dismantled in Kharkiv, 2022, *RBC*, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/62860ade9a7947cdc8589646> (accessed 11.06.2022).

¹¹ Klichko announces partial demolition of Friendship of Peoples monument in Kyiv, 2022, *RBC*, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/04/2022/626689319a794785e9293132> (accessed 26.04.2022).

¹² Ukraine denounces agreement on enshrining memory of bravery displayed by CIS peoples in war, 2022, *TASS*, URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14695879> (accessed 11.06.2022).

¹³ Agreement on Enshrining the Memory of Bravery and Heroism displayed by the Peoples of the CIS member states in the Great Patriotic War, 2013, *Official Legal Information Portal*, URL: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201301300008> (accessed 11.06.2022).

Nation-centric/nationalistic narratives of remembrance, which traditionally prevailed in western Ukraine, [13, p. 23] have gained fresh momentum. Many widely discussed demolitions of Great Patriotic War monuments took place in the western regions of the republic.

The memorial on the Hill of Glory, erected in 1970, suffered a peculiar fate. Several commissions were convened after 1992, agreeing to dismantle monuments or individual elements of the 'communist symbols'. In 2016, deputies of the Lviv City Council asked the city's mayor to demolish the monument. Next year, the decision was reached, justified by the 'critical condition' of the memorial [23]. A gradual dismantling began and continues to this day: in April 2022, the hammer and sickle sign and the Soviet star were removed from the Hill of Glory memorial¹⁴. As early as 2014, the authorities of the town of Stryi in the Lviv region initiated the removal of the statue of the Soviet Soldier the Liberator holding a child in his hands. The stele commemorating the liberators was left intact at the time but was pulled down in April 2022.¹⁵

Such incidents are a common sight in other Ukrainian regions as well. In June 2019, nationalists dismantled the Zhukov statue in Kharkiv. However, the head of the city intervened, and the monument was restored a month later.¹⁶ This story continued in 2022: on 17 April, the Zhukov bust was dismantled once again, this time by militants of the Kraken nationalist unit, part of the Azov battalion (recognised as an extremist organisation and banned in Russia).¹⁷

At the same time, the return of the Lenin statue to the central square of the town of Genichesk in the Kherson region [24] and the restoration of the monument to liberator soldiers in Lugansk¹⁸ marked the beginning of the opposite 'resovietisation' process, which involves re-erecting Soviet monuments. On 9 May 2022, Russia's Deputy Minister of Defence Aleksandr Kirilin reported the mass demolition of Great Patriotic War monuments in Ukraine.¹⁹ At the same time, Minister of Culture of the Donetsk People's Republic Mikhail Zheltyakov announced the restoration and return to the initial sites of monuments removed by the Ukrainian authorities in Mariupol, Volnovakha and other towns [25].

¹⁴ Soviet star dismantled from Glory Hill memorial in Lviv, *RIA Novosti*, URL: <https://ria.ru/20220416/lvov-1783900163.html> (accessed 22.04.2022).

¹⁵ Stele dedicated to Soviet Soldier dismantled in the Lviv region, 2022, *RIA Novosti*, URL: <https://ria.ru/20220412/stela-1783039893.html> (accessed 12.06.2022).

¹⁶ Marshal Zhukov bust pulled down by radicals restored in Kharkiv, 2019, *RBC*, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5d26d14d9a79474c3bdbdbfd> (accessed 26.04.2022).

¹⁷ Zhukov Bust pulled down in Kharkiv, 2022, *RBC*, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/04/2022/625be2ba9a79474879213646> (accessed 22.04.2022).

¹⁸ *Izvestiya* correspondent shows Soviet monument restoration in LNR, 2022, *Izvestiya*, URL: <https://iz.ru/1325035/2022-04-23/korrespondent-izvestii-pokazal-vosstanovlenie-sovetskogo-pamiatnika-v-lnr> (accessed 11.06.2022).

¹⁹ Russia's Ministry of Defence: Ukraine dismantled hundreds of statues of Soviet heroes, 2022, *TASS*, URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/14582675> (accessed 09.05.2022).

Poland: the legal framework of Polish ‘decommunisation’

Conspicuous ‘decommunisation’ began in Poland as early as 1989, when a wave of street renaming and demolition of monuments to collaborators with the ‘communist regime’ swept across the country [26, p. 90]. Amongst others, the monument to Marshal Ivan Konev was dismantled in Krakow, along with the statue of Soviet and Polish Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky in Legnica [27]. In 1994 in Krakow, Russia and Poland signed the agreement On the Burials and Sites Commemorating Victims of Wars and Repressions, which provided for ‘the proper maintenance of commemorative sites and burials of servicemen and civilians slain, killed and martyred in the course of wars and repressions: Russian ones in the Republic of Poland, and Polish ones in the Russian Federation’.²⁰ In April 1997, the List of Sites Commemorating Soviet Defenders of the Fatherland Fallen on the Territory of the Republic of Poland was compiled. It contained 561 commemorative sites, including 415 memorials, 77 obelisks, 46 commemorative plaques and 23 units of military equipment. The list did not comprise burials located at military, municipal and church cemeteries.²¹

The Polish historian Antoni Dudek distinguishes two main strands of Poland’s politics of memory: liberal and conservative. The former implies that the state remains neutral as regards the formation of Poles’ historical consciousness; the latter requires the state to play a central role in the process, whilst politics of memory is considered a tool for strengthening the national community and an essential element of the country’s foreign policy [28, pp. 35–40]. The principal vehicle of the conservative politics of memory is Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), Poland’s national-conservative party formed in 2001. Its 2004 programme emphasised the importance of the politics of memory. The party ideologists insisted that there had been no politics of memory before, only ‘national amnesia’ [7, p. 171].

Having come to power in 2005, members of PiS proclaimed a ‘new politics of memory’, which meant a focus on historical and patriotic education in schools, instilling a sense of national dignity and the ‘historical calibration’ of how the Polish People’s Republic is perceived. Such calibration was aimed to ‘capture the essence of communism and the PPR’ [29 p. 105].

In 2015, PiS won the parliamentary election for the second time; its candidate Andrzej Duda became president of the country. Once again, the ruling party

²⁰ Agreement Between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Poland on the Burial Sites and Places Commemorating Victims of Wars and Repressions, 1994, *Electronic Legal and Technical Documents Archive*, URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/420349827> (accessed 01.07.2022).

²¹ List of Sites Commemorating Soviet Defenders of the Fatherland Fallen on the Territory of the Republic of Poland, 1997, *Russian Embassy to Poland*, URL: <https://poland.mid.ru/documents/3987513/23059461/Перечень+мемориалов.pdf/30cdfaf37-5a70-46f1-907d-07aff8625930?> (accessed 01.07.2022).

showed its commitment to a politics of memory rooted in nation-centric interpretations of history and the formation of a ‘patriotic and consolidated nation’ [30, p. 8], whose key element is ‘revealing the truth about the dark times of the Polish People’s Republic’ [29, p. 107].

The Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, IPN), established in December 1998 and operating since 2000), is a major vehicle of politics of memory in Poland. Since PiS came to power in 2015, the importance of the state-funded IPN has increased considerably. According to the Institute’s official website, its mission is to ‘research and popularize the modern history of Poland and to investigate crimes committed from 8 November 1917, throughout the Second World War and the communist period, to 31 July 1990’. Amongst the principles defining the work of the IPN is ‘the patriotic traditions of the Polish Nation’s struggles with its occupants, Nazis and communists’. A part of the Institute is the Office for Commemorating the Struggle and Martyrdom, whose tasks include ‘de-communising’ public space.²²

The legal framework for the ‘decommunisation’ of Poland is the law On the Prohibition of Propaganda of Communism or Other Totalitarian Systems, adopted in 2016 and initially aimed at banning proper names associated with ‘communism or other totalitarian systems’. In 2017, The Sejm adopted amendments to the law, including a new section titled On the Prohibition of Propaganda of Communism or Other Totalitarian Systems by Monuments. This new section banned memorials dedicated to people, organisations, events or dates ‘associated with totalitarian regimes’. The term ‘monuments’ has a very broad interpretation in the document, including burial sites, obelisks, commemorative plaques, etc. The law gave the green light to demolish practically any monument commemorating the socialist past of the Polish state. Just like in Ukraine, the law also imposes restrictions on the removal of monuments: statues located at cemeteries, those ‘not on public display’ or included in the state register of monuments are not on the list. It is the remit of local authorities to select monuments for removal; the final decision on demolition is made by the IPN’s Office for Commemorating the Struggle and Martyrdom.²³

Polish officials believe that the country does not violate the 1994 agreement in any way. In particular, such an opinion was voiced in 2022 by Adam Siwek of

²² The statutory tasks of the Institute of National Remembrance, 2006, *Institute of National Remembrance*, URL: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/about-the-institute/mission/2,Institute-of-National-Remembrance-Commission-for-the-Prosecution-of-Crimes-again.html> (accessed 30.06.2022).

²³ Ustawa z dnia 1 kwietnia 2016 r. o zakazie propagowania komunizmu lub innego ustroju totalitarnego przez nazwy jednostek organizacyjnych, jednostek pomocniczych gminy, budowli, obiektów i urządzeń użyteczności publicznej oraz pomniki, 2016, *SEJM Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, URL: <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20160000744/U/D20160744Lj.pdf> (accessed 30.06.2022).

the IPN.²⁴ The Russian party holds a different position. The website of the Russian embassy to Poland says that the 1994 agreement applies to ‘any monument to Russian soldiers fallen in armed conflicts’.²⁵ Since war graves are not subject to ‘decommunisation’, a possible compromise would be moving the remaining monuments to cemeteries. Yet, swift ‘decommunisation’, complete with radical methods of implementation, gives little hope for reaching some sort of middle ground.

Demolition of monuments to Soviet liberator soldiers

World War II is at the core of Poland’s politics of memory. The official narrative allots Poland the role of the ‘victim of two aggressors’: Germany and the Soviet Union. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 is viewed as a turning point in the war [8, p. 453]. Poland also has a special vision of the war’s outcome. Back in 2015, the head of the IPN, Lukasz Kamiński, called the end of World War II ‘the beginning of new occupation and terror’ in Eastern Europe (cited from [16, p. 140]).

One of the most prominent episodes involving the demolition of Soviet monuments in Poland took place in 2015, when the authorities of Pieniężno decided to dismantle the monument to General Ivan Chernyakhovsky, having previously run a fundraising campaign amongst local residents under the pretext of participating ‘in a symbolic act of restoring historical truth’.²⁶ Put up in the 1970s, the statue was that the target of several acts of vandalism, whilst Chernyakhovsky was labelled ‘the butcher of the Home Army’.²⁷ Fourteen years later, the decision to pull down the statue was justified in a similar way. In June 2016, the monument was fully dismantled.²⁸

After the amendments to the ‘decommunisation’ law came into force, the scope of the ‘war on monuments’ expanded. Even the COVID-19 pandemic could not stall the process. According to the Russian embassy, despite the strict restrictions, six monuments to Soviet soldiers were pulled down, and eight were damaged through acts of vandalism [31].

On 9 May 2022, the websites of the IPN published an article stating that ‘the activities undertaken by the USSR in 1944–45 were not the liberation of Poland but the re-annexation of nearly half of the territory of the Republic’. It also

²⁴ Polish authorities set out to dismantle monument to Red Army in south of county, 2019, *TASS*, URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14161033> (accessed 03.07.2022).

²⁵ On Russian-Polish relations regarding military memorial issues, 2016, *Russian Embassy to Poland*, URL: <https://poland.mid.ru/o-rossijsko-pol-skih-soglaseniah-po-voenno-memorial-nym-voprosam> (accessed 02.07.2022).

²⁶ A fallen monument: Polish war on monuments to Soviet soldiers, 2015, *RIA Novosti*, URL: <https://ria.ru/20150917/1258230801.html> (accessed 03.07.2022).

²⁷ Pomnik kata AK, 2001, *WPROST*, URL: https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/14620/pomnik-kata-ak.html#an_980223801 (accessed 03.07.2022).

²⁸ Chernyakhovsky statue fully dismantled in Poland, 2016, *TASS*, URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3389839> (accessed 03.07.2022).

stressed that the monuments erected in Poland were ‘part of a coherent and intentional propaganda program’ to create an image of the USSR as a liberator’. The contribution emphasises that construction of the monuments was ‘ordered’ by the Soviet authorities to express ‘the local people’s gratitude for liberation’ (which did not exist in reality, according to the author of the cited article); it was merely ‘image-building activities intended to disguise Soviet imperialism’.²⁹

After 24 February 2022, the IPN stepped up its efforts to ‘decommunise’ public space. The IPN head Dr Karol Nawrocki made a statement saying that ‘the removal of names and symbols promoting communism is of utmost importance’, and ‘there can be absolutely no consent for any forms of commemorating the totalitarian communist regime and people serving it’.³⁰ In other words, another round of the ‘war on monuments’ was declared.

It did not take long before Nawrocki’s words were put into action. Seven weeks later, in the presence of the media, he participated in the demolition of the monument commemorating the Red Army in the village of Chrzowice, the Opole Voivodeship. ‘There is no room for such memorials and symbols marked with the red star in the public space ... because they symbolize the crimes of the communist system, the atrocities dating back to the interwar period’, said Nawrocki, commenting on the dismantling.³¹

In April 2022, the IPN held a briefing in the town of Siedlce, the Greater Poland Voivodeship, where Nawrocki called the tune. The event concluded with pulling down the statue of a Red Army soldier. Monuments were pulled down in other Polish towns on the same day.³² There were several acts of vandalism too.³³

At the same time, Poland is organising new symbolic spaces. For example, in May 2022, a monument to ‘victims of totalitarianism’ was opened in the town of Prószków, the Opole Voivodeship, in the presence of the deputy head of the IPN Karol Polejowski.³⁴

²⁹ The meaning of the term “liberation” in Soviet and Russian narratives on the Second World War, 2022, *Institute of National Remembrance*, URL: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9575,The-meaning-of-the-term-liberation-in-Soviet-and-Russian-narratives-on-the-Secon.html> (accessed 03.07.2022).

³⁰ Statement by the President of the Institute of National Remembrance on decommunization of the public space, 2022, *Institute of National Remembrance*, URL: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9335,Statement-by-the-President-of-the-Institute-of-National-Remembrance-on-decommuni.html> (accessed 01.07.2022).

³¹ From words to action! 2022, *Institute of National Remembrance*, URL: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9404,From-words-to-action.html> (accessed 01.07.2022).

³² IPN continues decommunization of the public space, 2022, *Institute of National Remembrance*, URL: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9505,IPN-continues-decommunization-of-the-public-space.html> (accessed 03.07.2022).

³³ Poland is exterminating monuments to the Red Army along with its own past, 2022, *FAN*, URL: https://riafan.ru/22031585-pol_sha_iskorenyaet_pamyatniki_krasnoi_armii_vmeste_s_sobstvennim_proshlim (accessed 03.07.2022).

³⁴ Unveiling of the monument commemorating the victims of totalitarianism — Prószków, Opolskie province, 2022, *Institute of National Remembrance*, URL: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9581,Unveiling-of-the-monument-commemorating-the-victims-of-totalitarianisms-Proszkow.html> (accessed 01.07.2022).

Overall, according to the Russian embassy to Poland, 125 monuments to Soviet liberator soldiers were pulled down from 2014 to April 2022; many of them were on the 1997 list.³⁵ As of 20 April 2022, there were 60 such statues in Poland. The IPN, however, is committed to ‘continu[ing] the campaign aimed at removing all the monuments commemorating Red Army soldiers’.³⁶

Part of Poland’s population, however, does not support ‘decommunisation’. Both concerned citizens³⁷ and organisation, such as Kursk, headed by Jerzy Tyc, endeavour to protect the monuments. Members of Kursk renovated over 50 memorial objects, saved several statues from demolition and held rallies and protests.³⁸ The attitudes of local authorities also vary: in May 2022, the mayor of Olsztyn Piotr Grzymowicz vetoed pulling down the monument of gratitude to Soviet liberator soldiers, citing the opinion of local residents who had spoken in favour of keeping the statue.³⁹

Until 2014, the nationalistic interpretation of the past, which sought to ‘cleanse’ Ukraine of Soviet symbols, was just one of many discourses, and it was mainly supported by the Western Ukrainian elite. Since 2014, this discourse has been dominant, and, in 2022, it finally became the foundation for Ukraine’s historical concept developed by the Institute of National Memory. In Poland, the narrative of ridding the memorial landscape of Soviet legacy is part of the politics of memory as seen by the ruling PiS party and promoted by the Institute of National Remembrance.

In their official concepts of the past, Ukraine and Poland present themselves as the victims of ‘two aggressors’ in World War II, forced to live under ‘communist occupation’ afterwards. This vision is in line with the European thesis, which originates from the East of the continent, about the identity of the ‘two criminal totalitarian regimes’ (the Nazi and Communist ones). And this partly explains why the EU is certainly not opposed to the ‘monument fall’, if not pledging support for it.

Yet, there is a marked difference between the ‘historical and commemorative strategies’ of Poland and Ukraine. After the reunification of Crimea with Russia and the formation of the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics, about 6

³⁵ List of settlements in the Republic of Poland that dismantled statues of Soviet warriors-liberators, 2022, *Russian Embassy to Poland*, URL: https://poland.mid.ru/documents/3987513/23059461/Перечень+населенных+пунктов+где+снесены+памятники_рус.pdf (accessed 02.07.2022).

³⁶ IPN continues decommunization of the public space, 2022, *Institute of National Remembrance*, URL: <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9505,IPN-continues-decommunization-of-the-public-space.html> (accessed 03.07.2022).

³⁷ Pole saves monument to vanquishers of Fascism, puts it up in his yard, 2020, *TASS*, URL: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8085507> (accessed 12.07.2022).

³⁸ Kursk community (Poland), 2022, *Kursk*, URL: <http://kursk-surmowka.com/ru/содружество-курск-польша/> (accessed 12.07.2022).

³⁹ Mayor of Olsztyn refuses to dismantle Soviet military monumet, 2022, *TASS*, URL: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/14606479> (accessed 13.07.2022).

million people whose identity can be described as Russian/Eastern Ukrainian/internationalist post-Soviet dropped out of the Ukrainian political process. This allowed the Ukrainian state to embrace the Western Ukrainian set of symbols and narratives [32] and opt for such politics of memory that occasioned a massive wave of monument demolition. An external factor, i.e. the Ukraine events of 2014, accelerated the removal of Soviet memorials in Poland; the process, however, was not widespread until February 2022.

The beginning of Russia's special military operation was used by the elites of both countries to 'cleanse' the symbolic space. The 'de-Sovietisation campaign with a slightly disguised element of derusification' [32], which was run in Ukraine, has turned into full-blown 'derusification'. As a result, several monuments were removed that had no connection to the 'communist regime'. Poland, which does not have a substantial pre-revolutionary Russian legacy or a common Soviet past shared with Russia, is performing 'residual decommunisation' — a swift and massive removal of monuments to Soviet soldiers throughout the country.

Since the Soviet and Russian discourse is competitive in Ukraine (albeit not as much after 24 February 2022: the anti-Russian sentiment has become more radical in the country since then), the architects of the national politics of memory are trying to completely 'cleanse' the space of remembrance from any Russianness/Sovietness to establish a nationalistic concept of the past. It seems likely that the recoding of Ukraine's memory space will be even more radical than it happened in the Baltic States in the early 1990s. At the same time, the current stage of the 'monument fall' can be described as emotional: many Soviet and pre-revolutionary memorial sites are being demolished. Further developments will largely depend on the course of the special military operation. It seems quite possible that the Ukrainian authorities will take a more careful approach to this process when separating 'ours' from 'theirs'.

The Soviet narrative is not a major threat to Poland's official discourse: it is not competitive because it does not enjoy massive support in the country (and its few advocates are labelled as a fringe group). Therefore, one might expect a less radical 'decommunisation' campaign. Moreover, the Soviet memorial legacy may even have a somewhat positive role: serving as 'alien' elements, they facilitate the entrenchment, and support the hegemony, of the official vision of the past promoted by PiS.

This study was supported by Priority-2030 project "Collective Memory as a Factor in Geopolitical Security in Russia's Western Borderlands".

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