

## Ukraine: from decommunisation to derussification

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the brutal manner in which it is being waged have united Ukraine's society and government in its efforts to derussify many spheres of public life. Pro-Russian parties have lost almost their entire electorate and have been banned, Russian historical figures and symbols are being eradicated from the public space, the Russian language and culture are being removed from school curricula and public spaces, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is facing a crisis and trying to reduce its ties with Moscow. The majority of Ukrainians are rejecting Russian culture, viewing it as a tool their enemy is using to build its imperial status and to shape a Russian-centric, colonial consciousness. This is accompanied by an increase in national pride and identity – the popularisation and affirmation of Ukrainian symbols, historical figures and cultural legacy, and the restoration of those who were removed from the public space during the communist period and remained forgotten after regaining independence. Society is uniting in these aspirations and values, and previous regional divisions have largely been bridged. As in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, the impetus to accelerate the formation of a new anti-Russian identity for Ukrainians was provided by Russia itself. However, the unprecedented scale of ongoing aggression means that the scope of these aspirations is incomparably greater today. From decommunisation, which began on a larger scale after the occupation of Crimea, Ukraine is moving towards a "full-scale", final derussification, covering all spheres of life, including its history and the vision of its future.

### Steps towards derussification

On 3 May, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a law that bans political parties whose actions deny or justify Russian armed aggression, portray it as a civil war, or glorify or justify its participants. This event was preceded by the March decision of the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) to suspend the activities of pro-Russian groups<sup>1</sup> and the dissolution of the parliamentary grouping of the Opposition Platform – For Life (OPZZh) in April. The legal decisions merely sanctioned the progressive disintegration of parties favourable to Moscow, led by the OPZZh, whose MPs left the country en masse after the fighting began, and one of its leaders, Viktor Medvedchuk (detained after escaping from house arrest), became a public enemy in Ukraine. The government's action was also

<sup>1</sup> This included the Opposition Platform – For Life, the Opposition Bloc, the Party of Shariy, Nashi and the Left Opposition groups.



a response to the expectations of citizens: polls show widespread support for pro-Russian groups<sup>2</sup> to be banned and the collapse of their social base. On 22 May, the NSDC passed a law banning the promotion of any symbols associated with the Russian aggression (symbols of the Russian state and armed forces, including the letters “V” and “Z”) by both parties and social organisations (they can only be demonstrated in museums, exhibitions and textbooks).<sup>3</sup>

The process of derussifying toponymics is underway in Ukraine: following the public mood,<sup>4</sup> city authorities are renaming streets or

**” Pro-Russian parties have been banned in Ukraine, a derussification of toponymics, school curricula and libraries is underway.**

squares associated with Russia to those connected with heroic pages of Ukrainian history. In Kyiv, public consultations are underway on the renaming of metro stations (named after the Fraternity of Peoples, Leo Tolstoy, but also Minsk, the latter set to be changed to Warsaw) and several hundred streets associated with the Russian state and its culture. In Dnipro, 30 streets have been renamed (there is now a “Poland Street”). The same is happening all over the country, from Kharkiv to Uzhhorod. Soviet monuments are being dismantled: in the centre of Kyiv, a sculpture commemorating Ukraine’s accession to the USSR was removed from under the Fraternity of Peoples’ Arch, and the arch itself was renamed the Arch of Freedom. In Dnipro, Lutsk, Odesa, Mukachevo and other centres numerous monuments and symbols from the Soviet period were removed. At the same time, this process shows that, despite the ongoing decommunisation of the memorial space in the country since 2014, many Soviet symbols and commemorations still remain. In May, the Ministry of Culture, along with the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, launched a project entitled “Derussification, decommunisation and decolonisation in public space”, which began with a series of debates dedicated to reflecting on the past and the policy towards the heritage of Russia and the USSR in the form of street and square names. Decisions to rename them are the responsibility of local governments, but the ministry is proposing to set up a special council that could resolve problematic cases where residents’ votes may be divided.<sup>5</sup>

The authorities have announced changes to curricula with a view to reducing the proportion of the Russian language and literature. The Minister of Education, Serhiy Shkarlet, has come out in favour of replacing Russian lessons in schools with other subjects from 1 September, but has stressed that decisions should be made by the schools and parents’ councils themselves. His idea is supported by language ombudsman Taras Kremin and education ombudsman Serhiy Horbachov, who want to increase the number of Ukrainian, literature, history, mathematics and English lessons in school curricula. In April, a nationwide project called “United” was launched – a free 28-day language course designed to enable participants to overcome the barrier of switching from Russian to Ukrainian for everyday communication. In turn, the Library Development Council approved recommendations to ensure its collections do not include works of Russian literature which are considered to be propaganda by replacing them with Ukrainian-language works. According to the developed criteria, items that in any way undermine Ukraine’s independence, glorify Russia’s aggressive policy, promote war and national and religious hostility will be removed. On 19 June, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a law

<sup>2</sup> 90% of respondents were in favour of stripping pro-Russian parties of their seats in parliament, 86% were in favour of banning these groups. See ‘Восьме загальнонаціональне опитування: Україна в умовах війни’, Рейтинг, 6 April 2022, [ratinggroup.ua](http://ratinggroup.ua).

<sup>3</sup> See Пропозиції Президента України до Закону «Про заборону пропаганди російського нацистського тоталітарного режиму, збройної агресії Російської Федерації як держави-терориста проти України, символіки воєнного вторгнення російського нацистського тоталітарного режиму в Україну», Верховна Рада України, [itd.rada.gov.ua](http://itd.rada.gov.ua).

<sup>4</sup> According to the above-mentioned survey, 76% of Ukrainians support changing street names associated with Russia.

<sup>5</sup> See ‘Стартували круглі столи на тему «Дерусифікація, декомунізація та деколонізація у публічному просторі»’, Міністерство культури та інформаційної політики України, 11 May 2022, [mkp.gov.ua](http://mkp.gov.ua).

(authored by politicians of rival parties – Servant of the People and European Solidarity)<sup>6</sup> providing for restrictions on the presence of Russian music in the media and public space and a ban on broadcasting the works of all performers who held Russian citizenship after 1991.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in its hitherto existing form is also disintegrating. For years, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church functioned as a de facto instrument of the Russian Orthodox Church, but after the invasion it began to lose its believers and became a focus for social discontent, as a result of which it attempted to become independent from Moscow.<sup>7</sup>

## The derussification of consciousness

The consensus in the desire to extricate Ukraine from the Russian and Soviet legacy is reflected in public opinion polls.<sup>8</sup> Ukrainians almost unanimously reject the concepts promoted by the Russian government and the propaganda apparatus. As many as 91% of respondents disagree with the thesis that Ukrainians and Russians are one nation (a year ago this was 55%), and this statement is denied by 70% of inhabitants of the eastern part of Ukraine, 91% of the south, 93% of the centre and 97% of the west of the country.<sup>9</sup> 89% of respondents consider the invasion the genocide of the Ukrainian people (86% in the east of the country, 85% in the south, 91% in the centre and 92% in the west). A negative attitude to Lenin was declared by 78% of respondents, and to Stalin by 84%. The percentage of Ukrainians speaking only Russian in their everyday contacts is also decreasing rapidly – in 2012, it was about 40%, at the beginning of the war it was 18%, and at the end of April it was 15%. On the other hand, the number of people using both languages on a daily basis has been increasing (currently at 33%), which means that some citizens have started to use Ukrainian in their everyday conversations.<sup>10</sup> The percentage of respondents in favour of the obligatory use of Ukrainian in the service sector increased from 72% in February to 85% in May, with the highest increase among inhabitants of central Ukraine (from 57% to 91%).<sup>11</sup>

Polls also show that hostility towards today's Russia is fundamentally changing the attitude of Ukrainians towards their shared past – decreasing numbers of

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them identify with the Soviet legacy, and Soviet historical and ideological myths are being desacralised. Only 11% of respondents regret the collapse of the USSR (down from 46% in 2010; in Russia in this period there was an increase from 55% to 63%). The collapse of the Soviet empire is not regretted by 87% of Ukrainians and they constitute an absolute majority in all regions (80% in the east, 81% in the south, 89% in the centre and 94% in the west). The attitude to the USSR unites respondents of all ages: its collapse is not regretted by 81% of those over 51, 91% of those aged 36–51 and 92% of those aged 18–35. The so-called Victory Day of 9 May is becoming

<sup>6</sup> See Проект Закону про внесення змін до деяких законів України щодо підтримки національного музичного продукту та обмеження публічного використання музичного продукту держави-агресора, Верховна Рада України, [itd.rada.gov.ua](http://itd.rada.gov.ua).

<sup>7</sup> For more details see J. Rogoża, 'Ucieczka do przodu: Ukraiński Kościół Prawosławny Patriarchatu Moskiewskiego wobec wojny', OSW, 6 June 2022, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>8</sup> When analysing the polls, it is important to take into account the limitations which the ongoing war imposes on opinion polling organisations – above all, the difficulty of reaching some of the respondents (both those internally displaced or who have moved abroad and those remaining in occupied territories). Sociologists estimate that as a result of these migrations about 1–2% of the adult population of the country is unable to participate in the research. Their results are also distorted by the likelihood that people with ingrained pro-Russian attitudes may be less willing to provide honest answers.

<sup>9</sup> In July 2021, 41% of respondents held this opinion, while in April 2022 only 8% did. See 'Восьме загальнонаціональне опитування: Україна в умовах війни', *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> 'Десяте загальнонаціональне опитування: Ідеологічні маркери війни', Рейтинг, 27 April 2022, [ratinggroup.ua](http://ratinggroup.ua).

<sup>11</sup> Survey 'Боротьба в інформаційній та культурній царинах: що думають українці про державну мовну політику та пропаганду на тлі агресії РФ', Фонд Демократичні ініціативи ім. Ілька Кучеріва, 2 June 2022, [dif.org.ua](http://dif.org.ua).

a relic of the past in the country: in 2018 it was important for 80% of those surveyed, and today it is important for 34% (36% consider it a relic and 25% consider it an ordinary day). Even among those over 51 who have celebrated the event for most of their lives, those who today regard it as an ordinary day or a relic (48%) outnumber those who see it as genuinely important (44%). Incidentally, the country has been celebrating two dates for several years now: 8 May, in line with the European tradition, is celebrated as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation for Those Who Lost Their Lives during the Second World War, while 9 May is celebrated as the day of victory over Nazism. Moreover, in April, a bill was submitted to the parliament to completely abandon the celebrations on 9 May.

Furthermore, research shows that Ukraine is trying to reinterpret the Soviet past in the spirit of its own empowerment: 78% of respondents highly value their nation's contribution to the triumph over fascism, and 67% even believe that their country had the greatest share in the victory in World War II. Figures imposed by decades of Soviet propaganda and forming part of the natural pantheon of the post-Soviet man have been toppled and remain stigmatised as the ones supporting Russia's imperialist policy. Against this backdrop, the status of important Ukrainian symbols and historical figures, including Bohdan Khmelnytsky (92% positive ratings compared to 73% in 2018) or Mykhailo Hrushevsky (up to 83% from 68%), is rapidly rising in prominence.

In addition to this, the war is bridging regional divisions previously visible in citizens' attitudes to political, historical and ideological issues. Events, figures and formations that were controversial and divisive in the past are now accepted by the absolute majority of society, and the differences between the inhabitants of individual regions (and between Russian and Ukrainian speaking citizens), although they do exist, have significantly diminished. As many as 81% of respondents recognise the OUN-UPA as participants in Ukraine's struggle for independence (since 2015, this indicator has doubled, and has quadrupled since 2010). Opinion on this previously contentious issue is hardly affected by place of residence: the thesis is supported by 89% of residents of the west, 82% of the centre, 73% of the south and 72% of the east of the country.

Figures that were once controversial for some citizens – Stepan Bandera (the leader of Ukrainian nationalists) and Symon Petlura (the leader of the People's Republic of Ukraine who fought against

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the Bolsheviks in alliance with Poland) – also enjoy greater recognition now. The former is viewed positively by 74% of Ukrainians (in 2012 this figure was 22%, in 2018 it was 36%; in the east of the country, this percentage currently stands at 65%), the latter is viewed positively by 49% (in 2016 it was 26%, in 2018 it was 30%).<sup>12</sup> This sentiment is also accompanied by a growing sense of pride in their country and an interest in their history, cultural and natural heritage. After the outbreak of the invasion and the demonstration of effective defence on the battlefield, residents began to express pride in their homeland much more frequently (the situation in the country was positively assessed by 25% of respondents in February, and already in April by 80%; in February, 45% considered that the state was effectively fulfilling its functions, while in May this figure had reached 89%).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> 'Десяте загальнонаціональне опитування...', *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> 'Дванадцять загальнонаціональних опитувань: Динаміка оцінки образу держави', Рейтинг, 18–19 May 2022, rating-group.ua.

## Waves of derussification

During its three decades of independence, Ukraine has been balancing between strengthening its relations with Russia on the one hand, and manifesting its European aspirations and cutting itself off from the legacy of its eastern neighbour on the other. The first attempt at a partial decommunisation took place immediately after the collapse of the USSR – the basics of communist ideology were removed from the curricula of schools and universities, busts of Lenin and other communist activists were removed from schools and businesses (mainly in the west of the country) and the names of many businesses and institutions were changed. The next step took place during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), who focused on commemorating the Great Famine (Holodomor), which had been passed over in silence by Soviet historiography, and on showing greater appreciation to the merits of OUN-UPA national formations in their fight for Ukraine's independence. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was also established during his leadership.

Another wave was triggered by Russia's aggression in 2014.<sup>14</sup> It then accelerated the process of constructing a consciousness tuned to Western values and the heroic attitudes of citizens and to valuing Ukraine's independence aspirations (including important roles played by the nationalist formations). In 2015, a number of laws were adopted to provide a legal framework for decommunisation<sup>15</sup> and the dismantling of Soviet monuments, commemorations began on a larger scale, and streets and even cities were renamed (for example, Dnipropetrovsk was renamed Dnipro). Formal decisions actually legalised social actions – in 2014, spontaneous demolition of Lenin monuments began across the country, which became known as "Leninfall". Although this spontaneous decommunisation was a natural reflex of a large part of society, the actions of the then president Petro Poroshenko, who built his political capital on patriotic rhetoric, roused opposition from some citizens, especially the Russian-speaking residents of the eastern regions.

The 24 February invasion provided the strongest impulse in the history of independent Ukraine to carry out a deep and comprehensive derussification, namely to eradicate not only the legacy of the Soviet period, but also everything that is perceived as an instrument of Russian influence in the country. A number of measures have already been taken in this area, and the scope and depth of further changes are the subject of intense discussion. Many of the demands made in this context are radical in nature – the rejection of Russian culture in its entirety, viewing it as imbued with the ideas of Russia's imperial policy and a dismissive and patronising attitude to neighbouring states which it reduces to the status of colonies, echoing the works of both contemporary writers and literary classics – from Alexander Pushkin to Iosif Brodsky.<sup>16</sup> The approach is at times extreme and counter-historical, demanding an unambiguous identification with Ukraine even from historical figures who lived at a time when contemporary national categories were only just emerging.

Also in relation to today's realities, many Ukrainians advocate a wholesale disengagement from Russia and its society, rejecting the validity of its division into supporters of the invasion and the Russian government and the so-called "good Russians" trying to oppose them. The ongoing debates can be seen as the final stage in the quest for emancipation from the strong influence of their neighbour – not only political, but also cultural, permeating many spheres of life. A similar path was taken in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the Baltic states, which were then beginning to dismantle the Soviet

<sup>14</sup> See T. Olszański, *The great decommunisation. Ukraine's wartime historical policy*, OSW, Warsaw 2017, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>15</sup> I.a. "On the condemnation of Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and banning the dissemination of their symbols", Про засудження комуністичного та націонал-соціалістичного (нацистського) тоталітарних режимів в Україні та заборону пропаганди їхньої символіки, *Відомості Верховної Ради (ВВР)*, 2015, no. 26, p. 219, Верховна Рада України, [zakon.rada.gov.ua](http://zakon.rada.gov.ua).

<sup>16</sup> See, among others, О. Довженко, 'Дерусифікація України — це не вибіркова помста росіянам за підтримку Путіна', Детектор медіа, 1 June 2022, [detector.media](http://detector.media).

legacy and shape a new identity, which gave rise to strong anti-Russian and nationalist attitudes. Today, Ukraine is undergoing this process intensively and, it seems, irreversibly.

The war has sharpened civic attitudes and revealed fundamental identity differences between Ukraine and Russia, particularly in relation to systems of power, the role of the individual and the value of human life, the nature of social bonds, the ability to undertake grassroots activity and the sense of empowerment. The determination of Ukrainians to distance themselves from Russia is linked to two phenomena. The first is the unprecedented interest in Ukraine on the international arena and its empowerment as an autonomous state, culturally and politically distinct from its neighbour. The second is the visible activation of the aspirations of the Ukrainian government and society to have a permanent transition to the Western space in both symbolic and political-institutional dimensions. In the coming years, Ukraine will develop and combine these two trends – striving to strengthen its own national identity and to develop ties with the West, with an important element of this being the extension of cooperation with Poland, which it sees as a crucial and proven ally.