

Decommunization in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine

LAW AND PRACTICE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No.
January 2016

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Ukraine's infamous decommunization legislation, enacted in May 2015, may be less divisive than it initially appeared. The laws ban positive public expression toward the Soviet past and mandate the renaming of thousands of localities with Soviet-era names. Critics have said that the laws will prohibit open discussion of Ukraine's complex history and may deepen societal divisions. Thus far, however, the process has not led to any sizeable protests, and parties that vocally opposed the laws have not been able to convert their stance into any actual mobilization. At the same time, there is no evidence of widespread support for decommunization within society, with the reasoning being more economic than ideological. In the end, Ukraine's decommunization efforts may turn out to have a modest yet significant effect: the successful shedding of the Soviet symbolic legacy.

A New Order

On May 15, 2015, President Petro Poroshenko enacted four new laws that have become collectively referred to as "decommunization laws." They are:

- [Law No. 2558](#): "On the condemnation of the communist and national socialist (Nazi) regimes, and prohibition of propaganda of their symbols."
- [Law No. 2538-1](#): "On the legal status and honoring of fighters for Ukraine's independence in the 20th century."
- [Law No. 2539](#): "On remembering the victory over Nazism in the Second World War."
- [Law No. 2540](#): "On access to the archives of repressive bodies of the communist totalitarian regime from 1917-1991."

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The laws were submitted to parliament only a few days before they were adopted in their first and final reading (without public or parliamentary debate) last April. Immediately afterward, the debate and criticism began and from a variety of fronts, including the [Russian Foreign Ministry](#), [Communist party leaders](#), former Party of Regions/[Opposition Bloc](#) members, [Ukrainian](#) and [international](#) rights groups, Ukrainian [academics and public figures](#), and Western [experts](#).

Critics said the laws would aggravate domestic divisions in Ukraine by alienating the south and east from the rest of the nation, and that this would have potentially explosive consequences at a time of territorial conflict with Russia and economic crisis. Indeed, most places that require re-naming are in the southern and eastern regions of the country. According to the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, [877 localities](#) needed to be renamed by November 21, 2015. Leading the list are three eastern regions: Donetsk with 10 cities, 27 towns, and 62 villages; Dnipropetrovsk—3 cities, 10 towns, 71 villages; and Kharkiv—27 towns and 70 villages. Next on the list are eastern and southern regions: Crimea—1 city, 11 towns, 54 villages; Odessa—2 cities, 4 towns, 49 villages; and Luhansk - 6 cities, 25 towns, 23 villages.

Other critics said the laws would stifle historical study and debate. The laws banned publicly expressing any “wrong” opinions about the Communist era, communist leaders, or certain individuals and organizations who were “fighters for Ukraine’s independence,” such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Still others said the laws would lead to significant financial costs due to the mandated renaming and removal of many thousands of Soviet-era monuments and place names.

Did Trouble Brew?

Now that the implementation of the laws has been rolling forward, we can see if they have been as divisive as was claimed. To date, they did not lead to rampant domestic instability. While decommunization is actively and often [heatedly](#) discussed in the press and in local council meetings, there have not been any sizeable protests against the measures or street actions taken when monuments are physically removed. The main Ukrainian groups that opposed the laws—the Opposition Bloc and the Communist Party—never translated their rhetoric into action or gained from their opposition to the laws.²

At the same time, there is also no evidence of widespread support for decommunization in society. Available polling data shows that the majority of the population is lukewarm (or opposed) to decommunization. One [poll](#) found that only 10.5 percent support

² According to a [July 2015 poll](#) by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, the Opposition Bloc had a 7.2 percent support rate, less than the 9.5 percent they had in the October 2014 elections, and the Communist Party had 1.9 percent, less than the 3.9 percent it had in October 2014.

decommunization and 89 percent do not (with 34.5 percent strongly opposed to it and 54.6 percent moderately opposed). Local polls from [Kirovohrad](#) and [Poltava](#), two cities in central Ukraine, show that no more than a third of the population fully supports decommunization.

Why So Blasé?

There are three reasons why there has been so little protest against the laws, despite such low support. The first are the changes in public opinion spurred by the Euromaidan and the subsequent conflict with Russia. Since 2013, Ukrainians have become far less fond of the Soviet era and more supportive of Ukrainian independence. Pollsters [see evidence](#) of the active formation of a Ukrainian political nation, such as a sharp increase (from under 10 percent to 42 percent) in the number of respondents who name patriotic feelings as a factor uniting Ukrainian citizens. Support for “an independent Ukraine” are at the highest level they have been since 1991. Such sentiments show regional variation, however, being stronger in the west and the center, and weaker in the south and east—but even in the latter, substantial changes in opinion have taken place (opposition to NATO membership, for example, [declined](#) in the Donbas from 95 percent in 2010 to 60 percent in 2015). This increase in pro-Ukrainian patriotic sentiments has made society overall more “receptive” to cutting ties with the communist era.

The second factor making the decommunization process less contentious is the new political geography produced by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the insurgency in the Donbas. Many of the towns, villages, streets, and squares to be renamed are located outside of government-controlled territory, in Crimea and the separatist-controlled parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Of 54 localities to be renamed in Luhansk, [only 19](#) are in Ukrainian-controlled territory. In other words, where opposition to decommunization would have been strongest, the process is not going to take place due to the inability of the central government to enforce the law.

In the regions of Ukraine where decommunization will take place, the process will be somewhat unsystematic because there were already spontaneous decommunization movements before the laws were adopted. In December 2013, as the Euromaidan protests were going on in Kyiv, an iconic monument to Lenin in the center of Kyiv was torn down by nationalists. In the following months, the spontaneous felling of monuments to Lenin (called “*Leninopad*,” or “Lenin falling”) unfolded across much of central and some of southern and eastern Ukraine (in western Ukraine most of the Lenin monuments were already removed in the 1990s). According to the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, [504 Lenin monuments](#) were torn down in Ukraine after December 2013, with 436 of them removed between December 2013 and September 2014—all before the adoption of the decommunization laws. These activist-led decommunization

efforts were not a reflection of broad public support. Still, low opposition to the process arguably eased the way for a quick enacting of the official decommunization laws.

Another reason why the lack of popular support for Ukraine's decommunization laws has not spurred public protest (nor bolstered the standing of political actors who oppose the undertaking) is the non-ideological nature of much of the opposition to decommunization. [Polls](#), media interviews with [citizens](#), and records of [town hall meetings](#) show that people often oppose decommunization not for ideological reasons (like having positive views of the Soviet era) but because of the perceived financial costs of renaming and deconstruction and the feeling that decommunization will not have any impact on their socioeconomic status. Such non-ideological opposition leads to a certain public passivity rather than physical protest.

In the end, decommunization is simply not a high priority issue for citizens. There have been relatively low levels of participation in public discussions on the issue. In Kyiv, for example, where some 120 streets are to be renamed to comply with the law, the city administration opened an [online portal](#) where citizens can suggest new names. Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk operated similar online platforms. On average, only a few hundred people took part in online voting and far fewer actually submitted new names.

Nonetheless, as hundreds of villages and towns are forced to come up with new names for streets and squares, the public is drawn into a civic participation process, which is beneficial. The decommunization process in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, offers evidence of this dynamic. By participating in legally-mandated local hearings on decommunization, local activists prevented authorities from undermining the spirit of the law with [plans](#) to preserve some street names such as Dzerzhinsky and Frunze by simply re-dedicating them, for example from Felix Dzerzhinsky to his brother Vladislav Dzerzhinsky, a doctor. In [another example](#) of civil society's effectiveness, state employees who were made to attend public hearings on decommunization in a Kharkiv district ended up voting for the proposals offered by attending activists rather than the proposals made by local authorities.

Conclusion

Ukraine's May 2015 decommunization laws were strongly criticized for the expense involved, for curtailing discussion about Ukraine's history, and for deepening societal divisions and prompting violence. However, they did not cause the expected strife, due to post-Euromaidan attitudinal changes and the exclusion of the most "pro-Soviet" regions (Crimea and Donbas) from the national campaign. And even though the laws did not increase pro-Ukrainian feelings and reduce support for separatism, as [supporters](#) of the laws expected, they did give citizens and activists a say in the process. As a result, the decommunization process may well strengthen civil society in Ukraine while helping it shed wide swathes of its monumental and toponymic Soviet legacies.

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