

Ukraine and Russia: Wars Over the Past

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, MAY 20 2016

The recent commemorations of victory in World War II illustrate the growing divide between Russia and Ukraine, one that mirrors their current conflict over Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. Whereas Russia celebrated the traditional May 9 with ceremony and military swagger, in Kharkiv, Ukraine, clashes broke out between pro-Russians and young Ukrainian nationalists.^[i]

A rift between Ukraine and Russia has been growing for the past two years. Opinion polls show that attitudes towards Russia have changed markedly for the worse even in regions of Ukraine traditionally friendly and Russian speaking. The change of attitude is largely a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, but it is also about interpretations of the past and defining national identity. World War II figures prominently as an area of acute dispute and propaganda, on both sides.

This paper will discuss Ukraine's relations with Russia in two distinct ways. First, it will look at the current ramifications of the Minsk Protocols, which brought an end to full-scale fighting, and the extent to which they are likely to be fulfilled. Second, it will analyse the "Decommunisation" campaign in Ukraine that is under the control of the Institute of National Memory (INM). The ostensible goal is to eradicate any vestiges of Communist influence in Ukraine, but the program has taken on a distinctly anti-Russian hue that will clearly have an impact on bilateral relations.

The underlying question is: Could Ukraine sever relations with Russia completely, which appears to be the theme of the current changes embraced by the March 2015 "Memory Laws" and the enforced abolition of leftist political parties that originated in the Soviet period or shortly thereafter? And if so, what would be the chances of success in building a new pro-European path? Is Decommunisation a valid, or even advisable route to take?

The Minsk Protocols and Their Fulfilment

The Minsk Protocols were signed in two stages under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in September 2014 and February 2015. The text of the second in many ways repeated the principles of the first and the signatories were Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE, and the two separatist "republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk (DNR and LNR).

The September meeting in Minsk was preceded by the battle of Ilovaisk, in which regular Russian Army troops surrounded Ukrainian battalion volunteers and carried out a massacre. The losses sparked a political crisis and induced Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to accede to a demand for a ceasefire. Earlier his ATO ("Anti-Terrorist" Operation) forces had gradually been regaining Ukrainian territory from the separatists. Thus, the Minsk meeting took place with Ukraine in a very weak position. Likewise but to a lesser degree, the final signing of Minsk-2 followed a separatist victory at Debaltseve, a vital rail link between the two main cities in rebel hands, Donetsk and Luhansk.

The terms of the protocols not only forced Ukraine into responding to earlier decentralisation demands with a new programme that recognises the special status of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, but also it "de facto" offered some form of recognition to the existence of the "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) and "Luhansk People's Republic"

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(LNR). The two separatist regimes officially lack recognition from any state, including the Russian Federation, thus in many ways the Minsk Protocols provided them with a lifeline.^[iii]

As a result of these treaties, one opposition leader and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, declared that the changes would destroy the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state and its territorial integrity. She added that decentralisation represented “behind the curtain deals between the Kremlin and Ukraine’s ruling elite”.

The Protocols also stipulated that the Ukrainian authorities should schedule local elections by the end of 2015 based on the law of Ukraine and the constitutional reforms, after which within 24 hours, Ukraine would reinstate “full control of the state border” with permanent laws in place for the “special status” of Donetsk and Luhansk. That deadline passed almost five months ago and perhaps unsurprisingly the separatist authorities have delayed elections, though they did agree last October not to hold them “autonomously”.

In similar fashion, changes to the Ukrainian Constitution await ratification. The removal of Arsenii Yatsenyuk as Prime Minister and his replacement in April by former Speaker Volodymyr Groysman has produced what one Ukrainian observer refers to as a “government of shame”, made up of oligarchs and enhancing further the powers of the president. Yet the government is having difficulties revising the Constitution and a referendum may be needed to induce parliament to push through the changes mandated by the Minsk Protocols. Russia has remained adamant that these amendments are the only means to reach a more permanent solution, but according to the US Mission to the OSCE, there were over 1,000 violations of the ceasefire by the pro-Russian separatists on May 8th alone.

Ukrainian analysts also maintain that it is Russia, rather than Ukraine that is violating the Protocols. Oleksii Haran (Kyiv Mohyla University), for example, responds to European critics with a question: how can Ukraine be expected to implement, for example, point 11 of the agreement—constitutional reform leading to a new Ukrainian Constitution that includes reference to the status of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts—when point two and three have not been fulfilled yet. That reference pertains to the withdrawal of heavy weapons by both sides in the conflict and effective monitoring and verification of the ceasefire agreement by the OSCE. Haran expresses his scepticism toward the latter organisation, which, he says, has no experience of running military missions.

The Minsk Protocols have thus placed Ukraine in a complex situation. It was obliged to sign them because of its weak military position, but cannot fulfill them without prior moves by its separatist opponents. The OSCE, however, lacks “unfettered access” to separatist enclaves and, as demonstrated by events such as the May 9, 2016 Victory Day commemoration in Luhansk, the separatists possess many modern heavy weapons, especially sophisticated tanks, that were manufactured in Russia.

The DNR and LNR hence pose questions for the Ukrainian government that are no nearer to resolution than they were in February 2015. On the other hand, if a situation were to develop in which elections took place in these regions and they acquired the much-heralded special status, how much control over them would Kyiv actually have? Decentralisation, a process welcomed by the EU, weakens the central government and raises the possibility of other regions of Ukraine expressing similar sentiments and demands for local control.

Decommunisation

Simultaneously, the country has embarked on a campaign to fulfill the so-called Memory Laws introduced in March 2015 to eliminate all vestiges of Communism and Nazism in Ukraine. This “crusade”, pioneered by Volodymyr Viatrovykh, head of the Institute of National Memory (INM), might be dismissed as secondary to the actual conflict, but the way in which it has been implemented seems guaranteed to exacerbate problems with Russia and divide Ukraine.

Indeed, Decommunisation is intrinsically and unabashedly directed against Russian influence in Ukraine. When the parliament passed an updated decree “On renaming some settlements and districts” on February 4, 2016, Andrii Parubii, Deputy Speaker of Parliament (he is now the Speaker) referred to the decree on his Facebook page as “exorcising the demons of Ruskiy Mir.” Communist names, in his view, are symbols of humiliation and enslavement

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of Ukrainians.”

Viatrovykh has claimed that the demand for name changes, as well as the dismantling of Soviet-era statues, first and foremost those of Lenin, is linked to changes of interpretation of the past, and particularly the perception of “heroes” such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), cited in the Memory Laws as among the builders of an independent Ukraine. The leaders of these organisations, particularly Stepan Bandera (leader of an extreme faction of the OUN from 1940), are to acquire streets in their names in all major cities of Ukraine.

For example, in Kyiv, if accepted by the City Council, the new Bandera Street would replace Moskovskyi Street (it also houses the Russian Embassy!). The avenue of General Nikolay Vatutin, who was assassinated by Ukrainian nationalists, would be known as Roman Shukhevych Avenue, thereby commemorating the leader of the assassins. The anti-Russian symbolism of the change could hardly be missed. Viatrovykh insists that disputes over the past between Ukraine and Russia are not simply arguments, but military confrontations because “today’s Russia is built on imperialism.”

At the same time, the local role is limited to discussing names proposed by the Institute of National Memory, not alternatives or the retention of the original name. The INM faces a problem with Kirovohrad (named after Sergey Kirov, who was leader of Leningrad until assassinated in late 1934), where according to a poll of April 2016 a majority of the citizenry (56.9%) prefers to keep the current name, 30.6% want the former name of Ielysavethrad (after Saint Elizabeth, i.e. former Empress of Russia and thus offensive to Viatrovykh), and only 4.2% back Kropyvnytskyi, the name recommended by the profile committee of the Parliament.

One of the suppositions of Decommunisation is that in a few areas of Ukraine, and especially the “Donbas”,^[iii] a “*sovok*” mentality prevails. The term is derogatory and refers to those people indoctrinated by the Soviet Union that have retained the former Soviet mindset. By implication it is an “incorrect” attitude, and Viatrovykh and others regard it as something that needs to be eradicated. Haran and analyst Svyatoslav Pavlyuk agree that: “*sovok* dwells not in monuments to Lenin, but in our motivations and actions.”

Interviewed on Ukraine’s Channel 5 (May 3, 2016), Viatrovykh declared that: “occupied Donbas is an island of *sovok*, and *sovok* is the main reason behind the war that happened there. The Donbas is a successful example of the Soviet-era attempts to create a ‘Soviet Man’.” Donbas and Ukraine represent two different worlds, in his view: one that tries to live in the 1970s and 1980s and one that has returned to its “national, religious, and European roots.” The isolated community of *sovok* in the Donbas presages the “beginning of the end of Russia in its present form”. It would be difficult to find a more emphatic dismissal of a region that only four years ago was Ukraine’s most powerful economic sector, the leaders of which comprised most of the Cabinet of Ministers.

Defects of Decommunisation

On February 24, 2016, German historian Karl Schloegel commented that the dangerous aspect of the Ukrainian approach to Decommunisation was the monopolist position of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, which has too much control over a process that should be pluralistic and involve the general public, historians, and academic institutions. It is essential in his view “not to turn decommunisation or desovietisation into a battleground for political games and not to enforce it from top to bottom”. Yet that is precisely what appears to be happening, with threats increasing to those mayors (including incidentally Kyiv’s Vitalii Klychko) who make arguments in favour of the retention of monuments of artistic value.

On a broader level, Decommunisation has resulted in a ban not only on the Communist Party, which failed to gain representation in Parliament in the most recent elections, but also the Socialist Party (only created in late 1991 after the Communist Party was banned) because of alleged violations of the law banning totalitarian symbols, which were the subject of an analysis by a commission of the Ministry of Justice. The Commission reached the conclusion that the party program falls within the new regulations, but the party symbols, which include the hammer and sickle, represent a violation. The conclusion was based on the “expertise” of the Ukrainian Heraldic Society headed by

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Andrii Hrechylo.

Conclusion

Thus at this stage of the Viatrovych-led program, an observer might question the methods used to introduce changes, which are imposed from above, with minimal discussions, and as historian Georgiy Kasianov notes, reminiscent ironically of the way in which Communist names were imposed earlier. One goal, which is frequently stated explicitly, is to move Ukraine away from Russia and eliminate any vestiges of symbols of cooperation, with perhaps the sole remaining exceptions being the Rodina-Mat (Motherland) monument and the Museum of the Second World War. Another is to glorify two nationalist movements representative of a small area of western Ukraine—the imposition of a regional narrative to the entire history of the country, which is both misleading and divisive. Regions of Ukraine have their own singular histories and what is lacking is a unifying narrative and common “heroes” during a time of prolonged crisis.

The discipline of history, also, has never been black and white; there is no single correct version of events, and the attempt to construct one, depicting Russia as the evil “other”. represents a mode of thinking ironically as one-sided as the earlier Soviet interpretations. Whereas Russia is conducting a hybrid war against Ukraine, the INM has responded with a propaganda war that not only attempts to cleanse the country of everything Soviet, but also anything linked to Russia. Decommunisation is thus a means to take Ukraine out of the Russian orbit and to create and infuse a new nationalist mindset. It is not unique since similar practices have taken root in Poland and the Czech Republic, and other states. But, it will of necessity and intent have a negative impact on relations with the Russian Federation that may continue long after Vladimir Putin has left political office.

[i] The author wishes to extend thanks to his PhD student Ernest Gyidel for assistance and ideas used in this paper.

[ii] South Ossetiya, itself a disputed region of Georgia, is to date the only entity to recognize the DNR. See <http://tass.ru/en/world/738110>.

[iii] The term is inaccurate in that the Donbas is most often used to refer to the coalfield that also extends into the Rostov region of Russia. Here, it pertains both to the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk that have fallen under separatist control and also to those areas that are still controlled by the Ukrainian government, as well as to Russian-occupied Crimea.

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