The Destruction of 'Colonial Remnants' in Ukraine

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In late November 2016, Radio Svoboda held a programme on Ukraine's 'post-colonial status' that featured comments from supporters and practitioners of decommunisation. Its most notable feature was the sentiment that in spite of the progress made in 2016, many Ukrainians remain ignorant of their own history and trapped in a colonial mind-set imposed during the Soviet period. Before examining the comments in more detail, the current progress of the campaign to decommunise Ukraine is worth noting. First of all it appears to be quite popular. Information provided on the Facebook site of the Ukrainian Institute for the Future reveals that over 54% of Ukrainians – one wonders if this is distinct from residents of Ukraine – supports the process being conducted by the Ukrainian authorities.[1]

In the year 2016, as part of this campaign, 1,320 monuments to Lenin were dismantled and 51,493 streets renamed. A further 1,069 monuments linked to other Soviet figures were also removed and 987 towns and villages renamed.[2] Thus the face of Ukraine has undergone a remarkable transformation, so much so that Volodymyr Viatrovych, the head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM), was able to report that 'the past year was the year of Ukraine's total decommunisation' and the completion rate is 90%.[3]

Seemingly not everything went smoothly. The biggest remaining Lenin monument, following the destruction of the one in Kharkiv city centre, was in Zaporizhzhia, which was almost 20 metres in height. Several protesters, described as 'mostly pensioners' tried to defend it and were accosted by Ukrainian activists who pelted them with eggs. It finally fell on 17 March.

The changing of the name of the city of Kirovohrad went through several stages, entailing six months of public debates, and the local administration missed the 21 November 2015 deadline to submit its proposals to the Ukrainian Parliament. As a result, explained UINM's Serhii Riabchenko, the Parliament stepped in and chose one of the names under discussion, Kropyvnytskyi.[4] In Riabchenko's view, the arguments opposing the new name are emotional rather than legal and the decision is unlikely to be reversed.[5]

In eastern Ukraine, 76 renamed settlements are under the control of separatist rebels, as is also the case for 75 in Crimea, and thus these changes remain on paper only. There is also the question of funding for a programme that entails changes of address for thousands of businesses at a cost of 'billions of hryvnia'. This issue is practically ignored by the UINM, since the expenditure devolves to local councils, which have to come up with ways of finding the money. Evidently some have funded the changes brought by decommunisation by selling off the removed Lenins to the highest bidder.[6]

Radio Svoboda's discussion, as noted, was less a debate on the merits of decommunisation than a series of comments on the mentality of Ukrainians today by supporters of the process. It cites initially the comment of the

former political prisoner (and one-time Ukrainian Ambassador to Canada) Levko Lukianenko that 'Ukraine is a post-genocide, postcolonial nation – for 340 years Russia murdered Ukraine, russified it'. [7] Such a sweeping statement hardly contributes to reasoned debate.

A more sophisticated approach is that of writer Mykola Riabchuk, who distinguishes Ukraine from Asian and African colonies because the difference 'between dominant and subordinate groups was linguistic and cultural, not racial in nature'. Currently the country is building a new nation that 'recognises and honours the Ukrainian ethno-linguistic and cultural core of the political nation'. That indeed is what is happening, which appears to indicate the end of any attempt to construct a civil society.

The reasons for such an approach, one that is in line with the goals of the UINM, are encapsulated by the founder of the historical society Kholodnyi Yar, Roman Koval. He argues that unless Ukraine takes steps to change the educational system and de-Russify the country, millions of Ukrainians will remain mired in the Soviet past. Koval was horrified by his visits to schools in Odesa and Mykolaiv, especially in rural areas, which demonstrated to him that a generation of children and their teachers were completely ignorant of their own history.

Vasyl Filipchuk of the International Centre for Policy Studies also believes that the 'post-colonial syndrome' dominates the minds of Ukrainians, which he attributes to 'several hundred years' of control by foreign empires, and most significantly the USSR. Ukraine is thus living in a state of 'alternative reality' that distinguishes it from other developed countries. Thus, this colonial remnant must be eradicated.

There are different approaches to decommunisation, which is being treated by the authorities as a social form of economic shock therapy: at breakneck speed and without much discussion, particularly among professional historians. In this respect, Viatrovych's role is that of state propagandist rather than one who is seeking some sort of objective analysis of the past based on primary sources. But likely there would be little chance of success otherwise – one recalls the lengthy debates on the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in the early years of the 21st century that essentially went nowhere in practical terms.

Yet it is likely that the new transformation will suffer the problems of the Soviet commemoration of the past, namely a refusal to examine events in depth, including the good and the bad, in an attempt to construct this alternative reality. Supporters of decommunisation generally look to Poland or the Czech Republic for models. One can suggest that these are not ideal – the political situation in Poland is beginning to resemble an anti-Communist witch-hunt. Wiser examples would be the countries of North America, which are still coming to terms with their pasts, particularly the treatment of aboriginal peoples.

Is decommunisation the end point of Euromaidan or the Revolution of Dignity? That is likely the ideal, but instead it may represent yet another failed attempt for Ukraine to emerge from its Soviet past. Riabchuk cites three examples: 1991, 2004, and 2014. Viatrovych is looking more to 1918 as evidence that Ukrainian independence is not something that suddenly happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

One issue is that the Revolution of Dignity was not only about ending Communist links. It was also about eliminating corruption, a topic that has a distinctly home base quite separate from that of Russian oligarchs and business empires. The subject is intrinsic to Ukraine's future economic progress and more difficult to resolve than the so-called sovok mindset among some Ukrainians. It is the reason why some frustrated radicals now threaten a 'Fourth Maidan' that will target the Ukrainian leadership under Poroshenko, to add to previous presidential targets Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovych.

Ultimately one can depend too much on interpretations of history in nation building and state consolidation, especially events that still remain in popular memory. More enduring historical myths could be built on writers and thinkers: Shevchenko, Drahomaniv, even Shumskyi and Dziuba, who would be less divisive than Mazepa or Petliura, and far less so than Bandera or Shukhevych.

The most unifying event of the Soviet period, and rightly so, is the Famine-Holodomor of 1932-33. And here there are

no heroes, only villains. It remains a cornerstone of the modern Ukrainian nation and yet we still have much to learn about it as all Famine scholars acknowledge. In this respect, the Memorial established under the leadership of Ukraine fourth president Viktor Yushchenko was a starting point.

Finally, even some Ukrainian scholars perceive the question of historical memory as a sideshow during a time of intense conflict. That may be correct. But it is also one reason why the conflict developed and why it has proven so difficult to resolve, aside from the roles of international players like the EU and the United States. Enshrining individuals or events as part of a national ethnos detracts from their study in greater depth and with absolute freedom to reach independent conclusions. And that question is surely unique to Ukraine of all post-Soviet states.

One should not belittle Ukrainian achievements. Its media is relatively free, and its elections are generally fair, in contrast to those of its two counterparts Russia and Belarus. Its 25 years of independence are a similarly impressive achievement, particularly given recent Russian encroachments and threats. These factors should all be borne in mind when dwelling on its corruption and bitter infighting.

Notes

[1] http://apostrophe.ua/news/society/2016-12-29/opublikovanyi-dannyie-ob-otnoshenii-ukraintsev-k-dekommunizatsii/82084

[2] http://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/28199678.html

[3] http://apostrophe.ua/article/society/2016-12-29/dekommunizatsiya-v-golovah-kuda-zaydet-borba-s-sovetskim-proshlyim/9192

[4] It is to be named after the 19th century writer and playwright Marko Kropyvnytskyi (1840-1910) who was born near the city, originally called Yelysavthrad (Elizabeth's city). That name was a candidate for a replacement for the name Kirovohrad as well. The city was the birthplace of leading Bolshevik Grigoriy Zinoviev (Hirsch Apfelbaum), executed during the Great Purge of 1936.

[5] http://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/28206004.html

[6] http://apostrophe.ua/article/society/2016-12-29/dekommunizatsiya-v-golovah-kuda-zaydet-borba-s-sovetskim-proshlyim/9192

[7] http://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/28148649

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