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Gaining Mnemonic Agency: Donbass in Conflicts of Historical Memory

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Abstract. The dynamics of mnemonic interactions in the Donbass region in the late Soviet period, after the declaration of Ukraine's independence, and in the period 2014–2025 provide grounds for identifying several stages of the substantive transformation of memory politics in the region. Since the beginning of independence of Ukraine, the processes of formation and consolidation of regional identity intensified, largely becoming a reaction to the rise of Ukrainian ethnonationalism. Even before the events of 2014, a specific historical narrative, mnemonic and symbolic policies were formed, in which the memory of historical events of the Soviet era played a significant role, emphasizing the connection with the Russian historical and cultural heritage. In the context of the political crisis of 2013–2014 and after the proclamation of independence of the DPR and LPR, processes of further convergence of the historical narratives of the people's republics and Russia unfolded. The example of Mariupol shows the dynamics of the practices of commemoration and symbolic policy under the temporary control of the city by the Kyiv regime and after the return of the city to the DPR in 2022. These processes can be interpreted as the acquisition of mnemonic agency by the Donbass republics and their integration into the semantic and symbolic system of the memory politics of the Russian Federation.

Keywords: memory politics, Donbass, DPR, LPR, Mariupol, Ukraine, historical narratives, ethnonationalism, regional identity, historical memory conflicts, mnemonic actors, symbolic politics, monuments

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Обретение мнемонической субъектности: Донбасс в конфликтах исторической памяти

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Аннотация. Динамика мнемонических взаимодействий на территории Донбасса в позднесоветский период, после провозглашения независимости Украины и в период 2014–2025 гг. дает основания выделить несколько этапов содержательной трансформации политики памяти в регионе. После провозглашения независимости Украины интенсифицировались процессы формирования и консолидации региональной идентичности, во многом ставшие реакцией на подъем украинского этнонационализма. Еще до событий 2014 г. сформировались особый исторический нарратив, мнемоническая и символическая политики, в которых значимую роль играла память об исторических событиях советской эпохи, акцентирование связи с российским историко-культурным наследием. В условиях политического кризиса 2013–2014 гг. и после провозглашения независимости ДНР и ЛНР развернулись процессы дальнейшего сближения исторических нарративов народных республик и России. На примере г. Мариуполь показана динамика практик коммеморации и символической политики в условиях временного контроля города киевским режимом и после возвращения города в состав ДНР в 2022 г. Данные процессы могут быть интерпретированы как обретение мнемонической субъектности республиками Донбасса и их интеграция в смысловую и символическую систему политики памяти Российской Федерации.

Ключевые слова: политика памяти, Донбасс, ДНР, ЛНР, Мариуполь, Украина, исторические нарративы, этнонационализм, региональная идентичность, конфликты исторической памяти, мнемонические акторы, символическая политика, памятники

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Introduction

In his well-known essay, “Does Ukraine Have a History?” Mark von Hagen begins his argument with a political answer to the question posed: if Ukraine has a future, it will have a history [Hagen 1995]. This explanation struck von Hagen as trivial, and he deemed it unnecessary to comment on it in detail. However, today, thirty years after the essay’s publication, such statements or similar answers (for example, if Ukraine has no future, it will also lose its history) no longer seem obvious. The construct formed over these three decades, which can very loosely be called a product of working with the historical past, will likely not disappear even if Ukrainian statehood ceases. This, too, is a serious political problem, with generational and geographical dimensions.

After correctly predicting the direction of the formation of the dominant historical narrative of independent Ukraine — “the teleological triumph of an essentialist, pre-existing Ukrainian nation” [Hagen 1995], von Hagen emphasized the specific circumstances of the development of historical research in the West after the collapse of the USSR, when many Sovietologists/Russianists simultaneously established themselves as specialists in Ukrainian history (he himself was a prominent exponent of this trend). Today, in Russia, we may conclude that this was not the worst-case situation. When political circumstances necessitated a high demand for expert information on Ukraine, it became evident that nearly any Russian researcher (not necessarily from the social sciences or humanities) might qualify as a Ukrainianist. It is fair to argue that any regional studies competence in Russia is currently “sagging”, and the future for Russian studies in Russia are uncertain. However, the failure to provide expertise on Ukraine has come at a great cost. As a result, one of the most critical challenges for Russia’s national security is the establishment of an exceptionally competent expert community focused on Ukrainian issues (particularly their regional aspect, regardless of the future state affiliation of certain territories).

This article will focus on Donbass — the territory of the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics within the administrative borders of the former Donetsk and Lugansk Oblasts of the Ukrainian SSR/Ukraine. Von Hagen’s question remains relevant in relation to Donbass. At the very least, we need to understand whether Donbass, having chosen integration into Russia, had/does have a Ukrainian history beyond memories of its administrative-territorial affiliation with the Ukrainian SSR/Ukraine. And what is Donbass itself, and which of its many representations (“the heart of Russia”, “a haven for people with difficult fates”, “a space of negative freedom”, “a reserve of patron-client relations”, a frontier zone, etc.) stands the test of time?

Clearly, the intense transformation of the dominant regional identity resonates with Russian identity, but does it retain any connection to a “pure” Ukrainian identity (interestingly, von Hagen bluntly called such an identity a chimera)? Undoubtedly, we are dealing here with the unfolding interaction of several (at least three) group identities across historical space and time. Such interactions can be examined

from various theoretical and methodological perspectives, but the validity of the conclusions requires an approach devoid of preconceived notions and methodological guile, such as when, for example, one identity is viewed through the lens of social constructivism, while another is presented in a purely essentialist light. In particular, one can take as a basis the thesis that Donbass represents an imaginary community (per B. Anderson), which does not claim the status of a nation, but in which regional specificity and the peculiarities of socio-cultural experience are dominant [Korzhov 2006].

In this context, it is important to consider that the emergence of Donbass as a regional imagined community is occurring in interaction with other imagined communities, among which Ukraine aspires to nationhood. Strictly speaking, Donbass itself is crucial to Ukraine's emergence as such, and the leading actors in Ukraine's national consolidation have chosen a path of discrimination and complete rejection of Donbass identity. As a result, Ukraine and the Ukrainian national idea still occupy a significant place in the identity of Donbass residents, but this place is no longer that of "their own" but of "theirs", whose hostility and categorical unwillingness to interact on the basis of mutual respect have accelerated the transformation of Donbass's regional identity in a certain direction.

Identity and the Politics of Memory in Donbass from Perestroika to the Proclamation of People's Republics

If we begin with Gorbachev's perestroika rather than the official announcement of Ukrainian independence, we can see that multiple pathways of the growth of the region's dominating identity exist. In particular, a distinctive feature of the Donbass miners' participation in the 1989 miners' strikes, which severely shook the entire late Soviet political system, was their demand for the transfer of mines and enterprises to the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian SSR, and subsequently, support for Ukraine's economic autonomy and state independence. The Donbass strike movement, while remaining primarily a socially oriented movement [Petro 2023], collaborated with the People's Movement of Ukraine (hereafter, the Rukh), including on the issue of the status of the Ukrainian language. For the miners, distancing themselves from the Soviet Union center and supporting demands for Ukrainian independence were conditioned by the expectation that Kiev would exploit the Donbass less than Moscow [Kuromiya 1998].

However, the collaboration between the miners' strike movement and the Rukh was neither long-lasting nor sustainable. It petered out after Ukrainian nationalists (the relatively moderate portion represented by the Rukh) deemed it sufficient to exploit the miners' movement for their own political ends. Lvov historian Y. Gritsak writes quite frankly about the fleeting nature of the rapprochement between the workers' and nationalist movements:

“For a brief period, Lvov and Donetsk came into political alignment. The basis for this rapprochement was a shared desire to break free from the dictates of the all-Union center. In fact, the alliance between national Lvov and workers largely explains why, after the failed communist coup in August 1991, Ukraine managed to gain independence relatively easily and declare its secession from the USSR. This alliance, however, was based on pragmatic interests rather than specific values. With the disappearance of a common enemy, this alliance disintegrated, and yesterday’s comrades-in-arms turned into bitter rivals” [Gritsak 2007].

Donbass miners had questions about the future intentions of activists in the Ukrainian independence movement. The nationalists’ regional opponent, the Inter-Movement of Donbass, founded in 1989 with the support of the Donetsk regional authorities, operated largely autonomously after 1990 and initially lacked significant popular support. The situation began to change rapidly between 1992 and 1994. Significant shifts in the mood of Donbass residents emerged, linked both to the growing socioeconomic difficulties, greatly exacerbated by the collapse of the USSR and the disintegration of the unified Soviet economic complex, and to the rise of ethno-nationalist rhetoric, one of whose features was the *de facto* division of Ukrainian citizens into two classes based on linguistic, cultural, and political preferences. The Inter-Movement drew noticeably closer to the miners’ movement and gradually exerted a transformative influence on its political program. By 1992, demands for the federalization of Ukraine and the restoration of close economic and political ties with Russia had become dominant in the programs of most political forces and social movements in Donbass. The evolution of regional identity at that time did not yet signify complete antagonism to the dominant tenets of independent Ukrainian statehood; however, it did move toward an awareness of the cultural, historical, and socioeconomic characteristics of the region, which significantly distinguished it from most other territories within Ukraine.

Equally significant was the strengthening of the regional elites’ positions and their seizure of control over the industrial potential of the Donbass, which provided them with strategic advantages across Ukraine. In essence, regional elites largely encouraged the formation of a distinct identity for the Donbass, hoping, however, to use its bearers as an important resource in competition with elites/oligarchic groups based in other regions of Ukraine, as well as in relations with the central government in Kiev. The issue of further intra-elite struggle is crucial for understanding the essence of the conflict, which cannot be viewed solely in terms of the Kiev-Lugansk and Kiev-Donetsk confrontations, nor in the context of the geopolitical interests of the Russian Federation. In addition to the upper strata of the regional elite, which formed the backbone of oligarchic groups and party structures on a national scale (the Party of Regions, the Communist Party of Ukraine), it is necessary to consider the activities of representatives of the mid-level elite and various social groups, which demonstrated a relatively high level of independence and exerted significant influence

on the cultural and political self-determination of the residents of the Donbass. Taking this circumstance into account gives grounds to interpret the events of 2014 as a civil war “within the Russian world” [Arel, Driscoll 2023].

Although regional elites and oligarchic groups in Donbass were focused on integrating into Ukraine’s political and economic landscape and, to the extent possible, reformatting this landscape to suit their own needs, their attempts to manipulate the mood of the region’s residents ultimately contributed to the strengthening of Donbass’s distinct identity. A significant change in Donbass was marked by the holding of consultative referenda in the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts on March 27, 1994, simultaneously with the nationwide parliamentary elections. In Donetsk oblast, voters were asked questions about enshrining a federal-regional structure in Ukraine’s constitution, granting Russian the status of a second official language, and Ukraine’s participation in existing interstate integration formats in the post-Soviet space (authorities in Lugansk oblast chose not to include the question of Ukraine’s transition to a federal structure on the ballot). Donbass voters answered all questions positively by a margin of 79 to 90% of their votes [Flynn 1996].¹

The 1994 referenda in Donbass contributed to the electoral success of L. Kuchma, who, however, after taking office as President of Ukraine, undertook efforts towards significantly greater centralization of political power while simultaneously strengthening the positions of oligarchic groups at the regional level. The Kuchma regime itself can be viewed as a variant of a neo-patrimonial system of power organization [Fisun, Movchan 2023], based on an informal coalition of several oligarchic groups (primarily from Dnepropetrovsk and Donetsk), with the President of Ukraine acting as an informal arbitrator. The western regions of Ukraine, which found themselves on the periphery of the system of access to resources and their redistribution, received a kind of “compensation” through the *de facto* recognition of their leading role in ethnocentric identity politics. The fact that L. Kuchma and the head of his administration (adviser in 1996–2003) D. Tabachnyk’s efforts to curb the most destructive manifestations of ethnonationalism created a peculiar effect, whereby representatives of Western Ukraine, while setting the main vector of educational and cultural policy, simultaneously viewed themselves as an opposition to the presidential government, which was allegedly making too significant concessions in favor of the Russian-speaking electorate.

Although the Kuchma regime made significant efforts to limit the initiative of Donbass public forces and ensure the loyalty of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions to Kiev, it was from the mid-1990s onward that the notion of Ukraine’s political and identity bipolarity, with Donbass and Galicia as the poles of conflict, took hold. While this opposition of “two poles” is arbitrary (In territorial terms, Ukraine before

¹ Makovtsev, A. (Mart 22, 2017). Donbass — Prerequisites and Prehistory of the People’s Republics. *REGNUM*. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from <https://regnum.ru/article/2252676>

2014 represented a much more nuanced picture of political, linguistic, and cultural preferences), this divergence continued to intensify throughout the 1990s and 2000s. At the same time, a characteristic asymmetry between Donbass and Galicia was also observed, which was also documented by sociological surveys (based on surveys in Donetsk and Lvov). While ethnic self-identification, projected onto the entire country, dominated in Galicia's largest center, for residents of Donetsk, territorial affiliation played a crucial and increasingly important role. Against this backdrop, the rise in popularity of Ukrainian national identity in Donbass was insignificant, while self-identification as Soviet or ethnic Russian declined rather rapidly.²

In other words, under conditions of increasing Ukrainization pressure, regional identity served as a temporary substitute for Russian ethnic self-awareness, as well as a replacement for self-identification associated with the USSR. Naturally, no rapprochement with Ukrainianism in the Galician version took place; no systematic attempt was made to build a Ukrainian political nation or — in the version of A. Stepan, presented after the “Orange Revolution” — a state-nation [Stepan 2005]. If we consider the publication of L. Kuchma's book “Ukraine is not Russia” (2003) as an effort aimed at overcoming the conflict of identities, this effort turned out to be clearly belated; it was less oriented toward a domestic audience, since the main addressee was the Russian reader, whom the author sought to convince of the need to accept Ukrainian independence as a historical inevitability. In fact, on the eve of the “Orange Revolution”, internal divergence was growing, only reinforced by the narrative of “two Ukraines” [Ryabchuk 2003], in which Donbass became an object of stigmatization.

At the critical moment of the Orange Revolution, a high degree of radicalization emerged among the rather diverse social forces of Donbass. However, they demonstrated a willingness to act in solidarity based on their rejection of the ideology and program of the first Maidan. Previously, the population of Donbass had been actively exploited as an electoral resource by the Party of Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine. Rinat Akhmetov and other representatives of the Donetsk oligarchy could confidently claim that their main asset was not only their production capacity, but, above all, the dozens of thousands of workers at the enterprises they controlled. However, during the emergency First All-Ukrainian Congress of People's Deputies of All Levels convened in Severodonetsk on November 28, 2004, it became clear that many of its participants were prepared to take more decisive steps than those the leaders of the Party of Regions were prepared to take. The political isolation of Ukraine's southeastern regions and other decisions, which the Party of Regions leaders envisioned as a powerful means of pressuring their opponents in the Orange camp, could have become a reality with irreversible geopolitical consequences.

² Dvornikov, V. (May 16, 2024). Regional Identity and its Influence on the Historical Choice of Donbass. *Profobrazovanie*. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from Profobrazovanie <https://prof-obp.ppf/blog/2024-05-16-2118>

As a result, Viktor Yanukovych was forced to urge congress participants to adopt a more compromising position that would preserve the possibility of continued political bargaining between the Party of Regions and the leadership of the first Maidan.

The Severodonetsk congress did not lead to the secession of Donbass and other regions of eastern and southern Ukraine, but it did indicate a direction for resistance to the rise of ethnonationalism. Among the congress's participants were figures who, ten years later, would contribute to the creation of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. Beyond its political and organizational component, resistance to the "Orange Revolution" significantly intensified ideological struggle and activity in the field of historical memory. Particularly significant for the acquisition of mnemonic subjectivity by Donbass was an appeal to the history of the creation of the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic. The most important contribution to this work was made by leading figures of the Donbass Inter-Movement, brothers Dmitry (1962–2002) and Vladimir Kornilov. The latter published the book "Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic. A Dream Shot" [Kornilov 2011], the publication of which lifted a nearly century-long taboo on the broad discussion of this topic. Of course, this did not limit itself to filling a gap in historical knowledge. In effect, the Kornilov brothers succeeded in creating the "founding myth" of the future DPR and LPR. Subsequently, on February 9, 2015, the DPR People's Council adopted a memorandum on the legal succession of the DPR and LPR. But beyond the historical and legal foundations of the DPR's legitimacy, the reference to the DPR also made it possible to construct a fairly coherent narrative, in which the following semantic components can be identified:

- an independent state tradition, separate from those non-Soviet projects of Ukrainian statehood that today serve as the Ukrainian founding myth;
- historical, cultural and socio-class specificity, determined by the rapid industrialization "from scratch" in the second half of the 19th century against the background of the insignificant influence of rural (farm) culture or the culture of old urban centers based on the tradition of Magdeburg Law;
 - internationalism, preference for social and territorial values over ethnic ones;
 - orientation towards Russia while simultaneously defending local interests;
 - resistance to foreign invasion.

This narrative viewed the liquidation of the DKSR as a disastrous mistake by Moscow. At the same time, subsequent events and processes fit neatly into it — the labor heroism of Donbass workers during Stalin's industrialization, the resistance to the Nazi invaders, the post-war reconstruction, the deep-rootedness of Soviet sociocultural patterns, the strike movement in the second half of the 1980s, and resistance to ethnonationalist pressure after Ukraine's independence. At the same time, a kind of upgrade was taking place in the list of Donbass heroes, led by DKSR leader Artem (F. Sergeev) and other figures from that republic; the list continued with Stakhanovite shock workers, heroes of the Great Patriotic War, members of the

Young Guard, Soviet statesmen of the post-war period (especially the first secretary of the Donetsk regional committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine in 1963–1976, V. Degtyarev), internationalist soldiers and liquidators of the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster, and figures of science and culture associated with Donbass who gained nationwide fame.

It should be noted that some important components of the regional historical narrative and symbolic politics began to emerge even earlier, in the second half of the 1990s (more intensively during the period when Viktor Yanukovich headed the Donetsk Regional Administration). This was essentially part of a discursive counteroffensive aimed at consolidating the electorate of Donbass and the entire southeastern Ukraine. The number of historical and local history publications devoted to various settlements in Donbass or the region as a whole increased significantly. In terms of preserving the toponymic and memorial heritage of previous eras, Donbass, like the entire southeastern Ukraine, represented a direct contrast to the western regions, where a widespread campaign was unfolding to reject typical Soviet toponyms, demolish monuments to Vladimir Lenin and other communist-era figures, and glorify the OUN-UPA³ and other forces and representatives of the Ukrainian nationalist pantheon.

The reconstruction and construction of new memorial sites in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions further revealed the following trends:

- emphasizing the connection with the heritage of the Orthodox spiritual culture, historical events and the literary tradition of Ancient Rus (monument to Cyril and Methodius in Donetsk (2011); monument to the author of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* in Lugansk (1994); monument to Prince Igor Svyatoslavovich and his squad near Stanitsa Luganskaya (2003; restored in 2022), from where, according to legend, his campaign against the Polovtsians began; sculptural composition in Donetsk dedicated to Prince Alexander Nevsky (2011); monument to Peter and Fevronia in Donetsk (2013));
- commemoration of the organizers of large industries and founders of a number of cities in Donbass in the second half of the 19th century (monument to D. Hughes in Donetsk (2001); monument to P. Gorlov in Gorlovka (1999); bust of K. Gascoigne in Lugansk (1995); monument to F. Yenakiyev in Yenakiyevo (2010); bust of N. Kholodilin in Lugansk (1996); monument to A. Alchevsky in Alchevsk (1995));
- demonstration of the outstanding contribution of Donbass natives to science and culture of the imperial and Soviet periods (monument to V. Dal in Lugansk (2010); opening of the memorial museum of V. Nemirovich-Danchenko in the village of Neskuchnoye (1993); opening of the museum of S. Prokofiev in the village of Krasnoye (1991); naming the Donetsk airport after S. Prokofiev (2012); monument to M. Matusovsky in Lugansk (2007); monument to P. Luspekaev in the image

³ OUN and UPA are recognized as extremist organizations and banned in Russia.

of customs officer Vereshchagin in Lugansk (2011); monument to A. Solovyanenko in Donetsk (2002); monument to I. Kobzon in Donetsk (2003);

- installation of new monuments to soldiers and commanders of the Great Patriotic War, honoring the memory of the victims of the crimes of the Nazi invaders and their accomplices (monument to the victims of the Holocaust in Donetsk (2006); monument to N. Vatutin in Donetsk (2009); monument to the victims of the OUN-UPA⁴ in Lugansk (2010));

- commemoration of victims of political repression (monument at the site of the execution of victims of political terror of the 1930s-1940s in Donetsk (2005);

- a demonstration of respect for the merits of Soviet, party and economic figures of the post-war period (monument to V. Degtyarev in Donetsk (2001); monument to A. Astrakhan in Donetsk (2007)).

Against the backdrop of this far from exhaustive list of symbolic and memorial policies initiated by local authorities and public groups, the influence of attitudes characteristic of the mnemonic and symbolic agenda of western Ukraine was limited and, more often than not, encountered rejection from civil society. In 2001, a memorial plaque was installed on the façade of the Philology Faculty of Donetsk State University to the poet V. Stus, who studied there and was arrested in 1972 on charges of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda and died in 1985 in the Perm-36 labor camp. In 2012, a Stus museum opened in the N. Krupskaya Donetsk Universal Scientific Library. For many city residents, the commemoration of Stus, who was far from a patriot of the Donbass, provoked a negative reaction. However, a real surge of protests was sparked by an attempt to name Donetsk National University after him, based on a student group's appeal to Ukrainian President V. Yushchenko. In February 2009, the majority of students, followed by a conference of DNU staff, rejected this initiative by an overwhelming majority (283 out of 284 votes); the Verkhovna Rada abstained from renaming the university by its resolution.⁵ The memorial plaque was removed in 2015, and the museum was closed. Meanwhile, the so-called Donetsk National University in Exile (formed with the participation of some DNU employees who relocated to Vinnytsia after the proclamation of the DPR) was finally named after Vasyl Stus in 2016.

A leading trend in the 2000s was the growing tensions between the mnemonic actors in Donbass and the authorities in Kiev, who actively promoted a number of controversial memorial initiatives during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko. The installation of monuments to the victims of the Holodomor⁶ in several Donbass

⁴ OUN and UPA are recognized as extremist organizations and banned in Russia.

⁵ Dovnar, V. & Kolgushev, Ya. (February 20, 2009). The name of Vasyl Stus will Remain Untarnished. *Kommersant*. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1123502>

⁶ The official position of the Russian Federation is that the Holodomor is not a genocide of the Ukrainian people. According to this interpretation, the famine of 1932–1933 was a common tragedy for the entire multinational population of the USSR.

cities was the result of pressure from the presidential team (they were later dismantled in territories that came under the control of the People's Republics). In turn, the heads of regional administrations, directly subordinate to the president, blocked some local initiatives, such as plans to erect a monument to Catherine the Great in Lugansk (it is significant that representatives of the “orange” government themselves willingly participated in events commemorating non-Russian monarchs: for example, in 2008, Verkhovna Rada Speaker A. Yatsenyuk laid the foundation stone for a monument to the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph in Chernovtsi [Portnov 2013]). At the same time, regional authorities encouraged or covertly supported other initiatives that directly challenged Kiev's memory policy. Against the backdrop of President Yushchenko awarding the titles of Hero of Ukraine to Stepan Bandera⁷ and Roman Shukhevych, the unveiling of a monument to the victims of the OUN-UPA⁸ in Lugansk was a clear challenge.

Despite the generally conservative approach to Soviet-era monuments in Donbass, some have undergone a peculiar “recoding”. For example, the monument to Taras Shevchenko, erected in 1955, became a symbolic attractor in the first decade of the 21st century for opponents of the Party of Regions, who attempted to organize the Donetsk Euromaidan around it in 2013–2014. Accordingly, the monument to V. Lenin became a center of attraction for supporters of the Communist Party of Ukraine, as well as those city residents who actively advocated for closer ties with Russia. The Lenin monument has also been vandalized several times [Mikheeva 2025]. The “Lenin Fall” — an important component of the events of the nationalist coup of 2013–2014 — was perceived in Donbass with particular acuteness, as it pointed to the inevitability of a violent reshaping by forces alien to the region of not only the familiar symbolic landscape, but also of regional identity itself.

Overall, there is sufficient reason to conclude that even before the events of 2014, during the period of control of Donbass by the Party of Regions, not only was a consolidation of regional identity taking place, largely reinforced by the need to resist ethno-nationalist pressure, but also Donbass acquired a mnemonic subjectivity. The established historical narrative and the corresponding symbolic policy were not anti-Ukrainian, but Ukrainian history (especially in its ethnonationalist version) proved to be of limited relevance, primarily under pressure from the Kiev authorities. The historical narrative of Donbass was largely based on the perception and adaptation of the historical legacy of the Russian Empire and, especially, the Soviet Union.

⁷ The official position of the Russian Foreign Ministry is that the figure of Stepan Bandera is recognized as a Nazi and a war criminal. In particular, the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova commented on the CIA archive document about Stepan Bandera: “Ukrainian fascist and Hitler's professional agent”: The Russian Foreign Ministry commented the CIA archive document on Bandera. *RT in Russian*. 24.01.2020. (In Russian). Retrieved August 11, 2025, from <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/711231-cru-arhiv-bandera-posobnik-gitler?ysclid=mqnvh40vhp123579121>

⁸ OUN and UPA are recognized as extremist organizations and banned in Russia.

The creation of the People's Republics in Donbass signified both a break with the regime in Kiev, established after the victory of the Euromaidan, and a change of power in parts of the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, previously dominated by the Party of Regions. However, in terms of memory politics, a high degree of continuity was maintained; rather, one can speak of an intensification and radicalization of memory politics, a refusal to compromise in favor of a nationalist version of the Ukrainian historical narrative. A. Voronovici, comparing the politics of identity and historical memory in the Donbass republics and the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, used the term “internationalist separatism”, implying that these three unrecognized state entities, to justify their own legitimacy, appealed to the multiethnic composition of their populations, which is a significant value opposed to the ethnonationalist attitudes of the “parent” states [Voronovici 2020]. In the case of the Donbass republics, ethnic Ukrainians are viewed as a full-fledged and integral part of the multinational people of the DPR and LPR, enriching it with their cultural traditions. In fact, at various stages of the DPR and LPR's existence as unrecognized states (2014–2022), there were repeated oscillations between an emphasized internationalism and an appeal to Russian irredentism and the discourse of Novorossiia [Babkina 2020], conditioned by the rather intense internal political struggle in the Donbass republics, the influence of Russian political actors, and the dynamics of the confrontation with the Kiev regime.

The Mariupol Case

Several aspects of memory politics in Donbass can be explored using the example of Mariupol, the second-most populous city in the DPR and a key industrial and port center. As is well known, in 2014, the DPR authorities failed to maintain control of the city, after which, until the summer of 2022, Mariupol was effectively occupied by Kiev regime security forces and ultranationalist paramilitary forces. Consequently, after Mariupol's return to the DPR, the republican authorities are forced to overcome the legacy of the regime's actions in Ukraine following the 2014 coup.

Mariupol under Kiev's Control (2014–2022)

An examination of the mnemonic landscape of Mariupol between 2014 and 2022 is crucial for understanding the challenges facing the DPR leadership and Moscow in terms of memory politics. It is important to consider, first and foremost, that during this period, after the post-Maidan authorities lost control of Donetsk, Mariupol was the largest urban center in Ukraine's Donetsk Oblast, housing regional legislative bodies and security forces (the regional state administration was relocated to Kramatorsk in October 2014). Financial flows linked not only to the business empires of Rinat Akhmetov and Vadym Novinsky, but also to the government in Kiev, passed through

the city. Following Minsk II agreement, Petr Poroshenko's regime undertook a series of efforts to transform Mariupol into a showcase for the policy of Ukrainization of the Donbass. The city, which retained the distinctive appearance of a Soviet-era industrial center but gradually declined in the new era of Ukrainian independence, became the object of ostentatious activity by authorities at various levels after 2014. Building façades in the city center were renovated, public transportation was modernized, and funds were allocated to develop recreational areas. Mariupol was heavily affected by internal migration processes associated with the military actions of 2014–2015. Following Kiev and major regional centers of Ukraine, Mariupol attracted a significant number of people from Donetsk and other settlements who remained loyal to the post-Maidan authorities. This circumstance contributed to the expansion of the local labor market, a slight increase in entrepreneurial activity, and the development of pro-Ukrainian cultural initiatives [Balazs 2018]. The latter trend was fueled by targeted support from various non-governmental organizations based outside the Donbass, as well as grants from the European Union, USAID, and other Western structures that provided politically motivated funding.

However, the assertion that Mariupol was in an “active search for its identity” between 2014 and 2022 [Zubar, Afanasieva 2023] appears disingenuous. If this was indeed a search, it was in only one direction, under the *de facto* exclusion of the urban majority, which in May 2014 voted in support of the sovereignty of the DPR (more than 92% of those who participated in the vote). In fact, it was only after 2014 that the Ukrainization of the urban space, which had remained typically Soviet throughout the preceding years of Ukrainian independence, began.

One of the first symbolically significant steps was the demolition of the V. Lenin monument in August 2014. This was carried out not by official government order, but rather as an “initiative of a group of unknown individuals”, following three unsuccessful attempts to topple the monument from its pedestal under cover of night using a metal cable and a car. It can be assumed that the monument's removal, officially ordered by the authorities, may have provoked protests by residents, some of whom had resisted the seizure of Mariupol by Ukrainian armed forces several weeks earlier. Graffiti condemning the actions of the Kiev regime and predicting the return of the city to the control of the DPR subsequently appeared on the pedestal of the demolished monument.⁹ This occurred a short distance from the base of an ultranationalist paramilitary unit, the so-called Azov Regiment.¹⁰ In turn, representatives of the latter, even without permission from local authorities, erected a monument to Prince Svyatoslav (oddly retaining some external resemblance to the leader of the world proletariat) in place of the Lenin monument. However, the monument was dismantled during the square's reconstruction

⁹ Guselnikov, A. “Lenin is alive...”. *URA*. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from <https://ura.news/news/1052211464>

¹⁰ Azov Regiment is recognized as an terrorist organization in Russia.

in 2019. Thus, Azov¹¹ acted as a mnemonic actor, seeking to impose its narrative on all other actors in the local memory space. These collisions can easily be interpreted as a clash between collective memory and the counter-memory of various groups. However, this is a conflict in an acute stage, precluding the possibility of compromise or any kind of memorial synthesis [Land 2023].

In 2016, a large-scale campaign to remove Soviet toponymic legacy was undertaken, targeting 75 streets and squares in Mariupol. Some streets were restored to their historical pre-revolutionary names; a number of new names recalled the significant role of the Greek community in the city's life; and several streets were renamed in honor of cultural figures such as Ivan Franko and Mykhailo Hrushevskiy, who apparently did not offend the city's native residents, intended to strengthen Mariupol's Ukrainian identity.

The "Port of Cultures" project, implemented by a team of Ukrainian and Polish mentors, was intended to provide some polyphony in the discussion of the issues of identity and the historical and cultural heritage of Mariupol. Not expecting the success of a purely Ukrainocentric narrative, the project participants emphasized the European, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional nature of the city's identity, while, as far as possible, camouflaging the fact that such an identity was directly linked to the Russian Imperial authorities' particular approach to the development of these territories. At the same time, efforts were made to counter the generally accepted version of the city's founding in 1780 (following the resettlement of Crimean Greeks to the area in accordance with a rescript of Catherine the Great) with a "Ukrainocentric" version, emphasizing the supposed establishment of a guard post at the mouth of the Kalmius River by Zaporozhian Cossacks in the late 16th century, which was destroyed in 1769 during a Crimean Tatar raid. In particular, a special architectural competition was held, the subtext of which was to consolidate the Ukrainian historical priority in the corresponding location of modern Mariupol [Zubar, Afanasieva 2023].

The most significant step in the Ukrainocentric symbolic policy in Mariupol was the reconstruction of Freedom Square. Essentially, this was a deliberate effort to symbolically anchor this urban space within the domain of the official version of Ukrainian national memory [Zubar, Afanasieva 2023] that took hold after the 2014 coup. Specifically, the sculptures of 25 doves served as visual images not only of peaceful life but also of the same number of regions of Ukraine (with the obligatory inclusion of Crimea, Donetsk, and Lugansk oblasts). The square's ensemble was also "supplemented" with a monument to the victims of the Holodomor of the 1930s and a memorial sign honoring Ukrainian servicemen who died during the so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation in 2014. A laser show was organized on Freedom Square every evening, designed to enhance the visual and emotional impact of the urban transformation.

¹¹ Azov Regiment is recognized as an terrorist organization in Russia.

Overall, however, the changes from 2014 to 2022 were rather superficial. Most local residents perceived the city as a powerful industrial center, whose symbolic space and identity were formed primarily during the Soviet era. The rather thin veneer of visual “Ukrainianness” was viewed more as an inevitable tribute to the politically prescribed rules of the game by which Mariupol residents were forced to exist and operate, especially given the ever-increasing presence of ultra-nationalist groups and armed formations in the city.

Mariupol as Part of the DPR and Russia

The bloody and destructive military battles in Mariupol in the spring of 2022, which culminated in the expulsion of the Kiev regime’s armed forces from the city, the restoration of control by the DPR authorities, and, on September 30, 2022, the incorporation of Mariupol, along with the entire DPR, into Russia, also marked a turning point in terms of memory politics. The first changes were associated with the new symbols of the Special Military Operation: back in early May 2022, while fighting continued in the city’s Azovstal area, a monument to the “grandmother with a red flag” was unveiled in Leninsky Komsomol Square in the presence of S. Kiriienko, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation. As is well known, the factual basis for this new symbol was an incident in early April 2022, when Anna Ivanova, an elderly resident of a Kharkov suburb, walked out with a USSR flag toward a group of military personnel, believing them to be Russian soldiers. In reality, they were Ukrainian Armed Forces soldiers, one of whom snatched the flag from the woman’s hands and trampled it. In response, Anna Ivanova rejected the visitors’ offer to leave her food. Later, Ukrainian propagandists, taking advantage of the woman’s presence in Kiev-controlled territory and the intense psychological pressure she was under, filmed a series of videos featuring her, intended to devalue the symbolic significance of her actions. Nevertheless, murals and monuments commemorating this event have appeared in the Donetsk People’s Republic, Lugansk People’s Republic, Crimea, and several Russian regions, emphasizing the generational connection between the USSR’s fight against fascism and the mission of the Special Military Operation.

In Mariupol, as in all settlements returning to DPR control, all toponymic changes made between 2014 and 2022 were undone. Specifically, Freedom Square was renamed after Lenin, which it had been given during Soviet times. This approach posits the invalidity of the decisions of the Ukrainian authorities formed after the 2014 coup, while maintaining the possibility of subsequent toponymic changes. In practice, the implementation of this approach often resembles re-Sovietization, complemented in some places by the restoration of monuments to communist leaders. This effect is traditionally exploited by Ukrainian propaganda, but it often generates critical statements within the Donbass republics themselves. For example, the return

of Freedom Square to Lenin provoked rejection among those supporters of integration into Russia who disapprove of communist ideology and the role played by the Bolshevik leadership in extending Ukrainian political and administrative control to the territory of Donbass.¹²

Mariupol's effective integration into Russia's semantic and symbolic space began with the elimination or transformation of the politically induced changes to the city's appearance that had been implemented under the Poroshenko and Zelensky regimes. In 2022, Lenin Square was reconstructed, during which the monument to the victims of the Holodomor, the memorial sign honoring the Ukrainian servicemen who died in 2014, and several other architectural and artistic elements were dismantled. The central position in the reconstructed square ensemble was taken by the monument to Prince Alexander Nevsky, erected in September 2022, symbolizing Russia's traditions of military glory and resistance to foreign invaders. The installation of the monument to Alexander Nevsky marked an important milestone in the process of integrating Mariupol into the sphere of historical memory, significant for all of Russia.

The restoration of monuments to the heroes of the Great Patriotic War is a priority for memorial and symbolic policy in Mariupol, as, indeed, throughout the Donbass, Zaporozhiye, and Kherson regions. This restoration entails not only removing traces of physical damage associated with military action, but also returning the monuments to their original appearance — that is, eliminating the “amendments” made to their appearance after Ukraine regained independence, and especially after the 2014 coup. In some cases, this meant restoring the original inscriptions on monuments and memorial signs. However, in other cases (mostly in the Zaporozhiye and Kherson regions), more thorough cleaning was required after, for example, parts of a monument were painted in the yellow and blue colors of the Ukrainian flag, unrelated to the original design. Traces of even more sophisticated attempts to re-interpret the meaning of war memorials also had to be removed. In particular, such actions included the placement of the red poppy symbol, invented by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance in 2014, on Soviet war monuments [Gabowitsch, Homanyuk 2025]. The red poppy, which symbolizes the memory of the victims of all armed conflicts since the First World War in Great Britain and the countries of the British Commonwealth, in the Ukrainian version was intended to displace the “pro-Russian” St. George's ribbon in commemorative events, to emphasize their “pro-European” orientation, and to “equalize” all those who died in the Second World War, regardless of their affiliation with the Red Army or Bandera formations.

After returning to the DPR, City Day celebrations, as before 2014, were timed to coincide with the liberation of Mariupol from Nazi troops. Commemorative events honoring the heroes of the Great Patriotic War now naturally extend to the memory

¹² Mariupol News. Freedom Square to Lenin Square in Mariupol. (June 16, 2022). *Mariupol News*. <https://mariupol-news.ru/incident/2022/06/16/7434.html>

of the heroes of the DPR militia and the liberation mission of the Special Military Operation participants.

An important area of memorial policy is the restoration of Soviet monuments symbolizing the labor valor of the city's residents — monuments to metallurgists, steelmaker Makar Mazai, and others. This activity helps to cement the city's identity associated with Soviet industrialization; it also serves as an ideological impetus for the restoration and further modernization of Mariupol's industrial enterprises (In particular, the Ilyich Iron and Steel Works).

Mariupol has become the site of major restoration projects, launched amid the ongoing Second World War. Along with direct federal oversight, the administration of St. Petersburg, Mariupol's sister city, plays a crucial role in the restoration of housing and architectural monuments. St. Petersburg provides comprehensive support for initiatives related to the opening of new monuments, memorials, and museums. These include the monument to Alexander Nevsky and the "Mariupol — City of Military Glory" monument, erected in 2025. Importantly, the "Mariupol — City of Military Glory" monument, which includes a stele and four massive pedestals, artistically represents the city's current history from the second half of the 18th century to the present day:

"Mariupol was founded by Orthodox Greek immigrants from Crimea. This is reflected in the bas-relief with a medal of Empress Catherine II and a fragment of her charter. Five bas-reliefs depict events of the 19th century: the creation of the Azov Cossack Host, the Crimean War of 1853–1856, the restoration of the Mariupol district by Alexander II, the opening of the railway and port, and the establishment of large metallurgical industries. The 20th century is captured in six bas-reliefs, with a particular focus on the Great Patriotic War: the anti-fascist underground, the liberation, and the restoration of the city. Four more bas-reliefs are about the present day. They are dedicated to the protests of 2014, the May 9th confrontation of that year, the incorporation of the DPR into the Russian Federation, and the liberation of the city by Russian forces".¹³

Overall, the experience of changing the mnemonic landscape in Mariupol demonstrates that the DPR and LPR can be viewed as a unique testing ground for memory politics, where a wide range of initiatives can be implemented. A diverse thematic repertoire is emerging in the city and regional narratives of the Soviet past, including topics considered "inconvenient" since Khrushchev's thaw or Gorbachev's perestroika. These topics are embedded in a historical macronarrative that presents Mariupol and Donbass as part of a continuum and the internal interconnectedness of imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet history. This narrative leaves virtually no room for Ukrainian history, but only because its official canon is built on a different narrative, one aimed at alienating people from Russian/Soviet history.

¹³ Gavriilyuk, S. (May 2, 2025). Pushilin and Beglov Unveiled a Stele in Honor of the City of Military Glory Mariupol. *TASS*. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/23841589>

The Politics of Memory in Donbass — a Continuing Story. Conclusion

Ukraine and the historical narrative promoted by Ukrainian ethnonationalism made a decisive contribution to Donbass's acquisition of its mnemonic subjectivity. Kiev and Western Ukraine's rejection of the nation-state model left Donbass with no choice but to force the consolidation of regional identity, including through symbolic and memory politics. External (Russian) influence, not discussed in this article, facilitated this process but could not drive it. As a result, even before the rise of the Anti-Maidan movement and the declaration of independence of the People's Republics, a historical narrative had emerged that largely retains its constitutive significance for the politics of memory in the DPR and LPR. While quite complimentary to Ukrainian culture, it acts as an antagonist to the Ukrainian ethnonationalist narrative, and the memory of military events since 2014 defines its representation of Ukrainian statehood. However, the defining characteristic of the historical narrative and memory politics in the DPR and LPR is their connection to Russia, both historical and contemporary, achieved at the high cost of military heroism and the tragedy of civilians caught in the war zone. Following the DPR and LPR's incorporation into Russia as federal subjects, regional memory policies have become part of Russia's overall mnemonic policy, while retaining their own distinctive features and a relatively high degree of variability in specific decisions and actions. In a certain sense, it is in Donbass (as well as in Crimea, the Zaporozhiye, and Kherson regions) that new initiatives are being tested, some of which may later be adopted in other Russian regions and at the federal level. A new, powerful layer of historical memory continues to emerge, and working with it will be of paramount importance for Russian society and the state in the near and medium term.

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