



DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2026-28-2-431-446
EDN: VFNKSZ

Research article / Научная статья

Symbolic Politics in Eastern Ukraine after Maidan: Changes in the Toponymy of Mariupol in 2014–2016

Kirill S. Panin¹ , Alexei I. Miller^{1,2}

¹ European University at St. Petersburg, *St. Petersburg, Russian Federation*

² Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences,
Moscow, Russian Federation

✉ Millera2006@yandex.ru

Abstract. The presented case of symbolic politics considers the confrontation between the central government and the local community in the field of memory management in post-conflict Mariupol. The starting point of the study is the establishment of control of military units loyal to Kiev over the city. The package of memorial laws adopted by the Verkhovna Rada enshrined the glorification of the OUN and UPA (recognized in the Russian Federation as extremist organizations and banned) as the main direction of state memory policy and created the legal basis for “voluntary-forced” decommunization. The research question is what methods the central government uses to impose alien ideological attitudes on local communities and what forms of resistance the latter uses under legislative pressure. The methodological basis of the work is the case stage, combined with a toolkit of symbolic policy and institutional analysis, including the study of administrative practices, grassroots initiatives, and acts of sabotage. The work shows that local elites minimized nationalist propaganda in the renaming processes, which contradicted the position of the Kiev regime, which tried to manipulate public opinion through marginal public organizations and parties. As a result of dismantling and renaming (including decisions of the city council and the head of the regional administration), a model is fixed where the central government uses legislative novels and administrative pressure, and the local community uses available forms of sabotage of this policy.

Keywords: Ukraine, Mariupol, decommunization, toponymy, politics of memory, symbolic politics

Authors' contribution: The authors have made an equal contribution

Acknowledgements. The research was carried out with the support of the Russian Science Foundation grant No. № 25-18-00464, implemented in INION RAS

© Panin K.S., Miller A.I., 2026



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

For citation: Panin, K.S., & Miller, A.I. (2026). Symbolic politics in Eastern Ukraine after Maidan: Changes in the toponymy of Mariupol in 2014–2016. *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, 28(2), 431–446. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2026-28-2-431-446> EDN: VFNKSZ

Символическая политика на востоке Украины после Майдана: изменения в топонимике Мариуполя в 2014–2016 гг

К.С. Панин¹ , А.И. Миллер^{1,2} 

¹ Европейский университет в Санкт-Петербурге, *Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация*

² Институт научной информации по общественным наукам РАН, *Москва, Российская Федерация*

✉ Millera2006@yandex.ru

Аннотация. Представленный кейс символической политики рассматривает противостояние центральной власти и локального сообщества в сфере управления памятью в постконфликтном Мариуполе. Исходной точкой исследования служит установление контроля лояльных Киеву военных формирований над городом. Принятый Верховной Радой пакет мемориальных законов закрепил глорификацию ОУН и УПА (признаны в РФ экстремистскими организациями и запрещены) как магистральное направление государственной политики памяти и создал правовую основу для «добровольно-принудительной» декоммунизации. Исследовательский вопрос заключается в том, какими методами центральная власть обеспечивает навязывание чуждых идеологических установок локальным сообществам и какие формы сопротивления использует последнее в условиях законодательного давления. Методологическую основу работы составляет кейс-стади в сочетании с инструментарием символической политики и институционального анализа, включая изучение административных практик, низовых инициатив и актов саботажа. В работе показано, что местные элиты минимизировали националистическую пропаганду в процессах переименования, что вступало в противоречие с позицией киевского режима, который пытался манипулировать общественным мнением через маргинальные общественные организации и партии. В результате демонтажа и переименований (включая решения городского совета и главы областной администрации) фиксируется модель, где центральная власть использует законодательные новеллы и административное давление, а локальное сообщество — доступные формы саботажа этой политики.

Ключевые слова: Украина, Мариуполь, декоммунизация, топонимика, политика памяти, символическая политика

Вклад авторов: Авторы внесли равнозначный вклад.

Благодарности. Работа А.И. Миллера над этой статьей выполнена в рамках проекта Российского научного фонда № 25-18-00464, реализуемого в Институте научной информации по общественным наукам РАН.

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Для цитирования: Панин К.С., Миллер А.И. Символическая политика на востоке Украины после Майдана: изменения в топонимике Мариуполя в 2014–2016 гг. // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Политология. 2026. Т. 28. № 2. С. 431–446. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2026-28-2-431-446> EDN: VFNKSZ

Introduction

The concept of “symbolic politics” was first presented by M. Edelman [Edelman 1971] more than half a century ago and has gained popularity in our century [Alexander, Mast 2006]. In recent years, research into symbolic politics has been actively developed in Russia [Malinova 2012; Potseluev 2012; Johnson, Malinova 2020], particularly in the section where symbolic politics meets with the problematic of memory politics studies [Malinova 2012]. The material discussed in this article is particularly interesting for researchers studying the intersection of symbolic politics and memory politics. We observe how state officials develop a legislative framework and administrative levers to impose their toponymic policy on the local community of Mariupol, as well as how Mariupol inhabitants confronted this strategy in 2015–2016. This resistance can be regarded unsuccessful in the sense that the changes were “pushed through”, but the local community’s resistance prevented the Kiev authorities’ intentions from being fully fulfilled. Considering this process through the lens of an actor-based analysis helps us to see the local population’s resistance under actual occupation.

The political crisis that had been developing in Ukraine since the fall of 2013 led to armed clashes on the Maidan, bloodshed, and the flight of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. The opposition came to power in Kiev, and the influence of radical nationalists on the government increased sharply. In the east of the country, the demands of the Kiev Maidan were not supported. Mass rallies against the coup took place in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine.

In March 2014, the pro-Kiev administration in Mariupol came under pressure from forces opposed to the new government’s policies. In mid-March, a referendum was held in Crimea, and Crimea and Sevastopol were admitted to the Russian Federation. On April 7, the Donetsk, Lugansk, and Kharkov People’s Republics were proclaimed. That same day, Acting President of Ukraine O. Turchynov announced the start of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in the Donetsk, Lugansk, and Kharkov Oblasts. Armed forces from the western and central regions were dispatched to suppress protests by supporters of federalization. In Kharkov, resistance from Kiev’s opponents was quickly suppressed, but armed confrontations erupted in the Donetsk and Lugansk Oblasts.

At that time, the richest man in Ukraine, Renat Akhmetov, played an important role in Mariupol, owning the largest enterprises located in the city (Azovstal, Ilyich

Iron and Steel Works, Azovmash, and others). The port of Mariupol was also of great importance to Akhmetov's holding company. Akhmetov remained loyal to Kiev but tried to prevent armed clashes.

In early May, the first attempt to suppress urban resistance by force was made. On May 4, 2014, the Azov Battalion¹ was created in Berdyansk. Immediately after its formation, it actively participated in suppressing opponents of the coup in Mariupol. On May 7, Azov² militants carried out a violent attack at the Primorsky District Department of Internal Affairs in Mariupol; on May 8, together with the Dnipro 1 Battalion³, at the City Council building. On May 9, volunteer battalions dispersed a demonstration in honor of Victory Day and fired on the local police station. Having encountered massive resistance from civilians in Mariupol, the Kiev regime's military units were withdrawn from the city.⁴

On May 11, a referendum on the formation of the Donetsk People's Republic was held. In Mariupol, nearly 90% of voters voted for the DPR's independence⁵, with a turnout of 27.38%⁶ of the total number of registered voters. This low turnout was partly due to the fact that only four polling stations were open, one in each district of the city. However, this was a relatively high turnout, considering that two weeks later, on May 25, during the early presidential elections in Ukraine, even with the election commissions fully operational, the turnout was 14.47%.⁷

On July 13, 2014, militants from the Azov Battalion⁸ destroyed the Mariupol defense headquarters of the DPR, establishing control over the city by military units loyal to Kiev. Immediately afterward, repressions against DPR supporters began.⁹ The

¹ The Ukrainian paramilitary nationalist association "Azov" (other names used: "Azov" battalion, "Azov" regiment) is recognized as a terrorist organization in Russia.

² Azov Battalion is recognized as a terrorist organization in Russia.

³ Dnipro 1 Battalion is recognized as a terrorist organization in Russia.

⁴ Investigative Materials: What is Known about the Bloody Events in Mariupol on May 9, 2014. *TRK "Zvezda"*. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2022426124-YKnLM.html>

⁵ How Mariupol Residents Went to the Referendum, and Why the "DPR" was Created. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/2756745/11-maa-2014-go-kak-mariupolcy-na-referendum-hodili-i-pocemu-poavilas-dnr-foto>

⁶ The Donetsk Referendum Turnout Exceeded 71%, According to the DPR Central Election Commission. *Interfax*. Retrieved July 20, 2023, from <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/south-and-north-caucasus/sobytiya-na-ukraine/yavka-na-doneckom-referendume-prevysila-71-zayavlyayut-v-cik-dnr>

⁷ Extraordinary presidential elections in Ukraine on May 25, 2014. Protocol of the Central Election Commission. About the results of the presidential elections in Ukraine. Kiev, 2014 [Позачергові вибори президента України 25 травня 2014 року. Протокол Центральної виборчої комісії. Про результати виборів президента України. Київ, 2014].

⁸ Azov Battalion is recognized as a terrorist organization in Russia.

⁹ Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and Ill-Treatment in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Eastern Ukraine 2014–2021. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *OHCHR*. Retrieved July 18, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/arbitrary-detention-torture-and-ill-treatment-in-the-context-armed-conflict>

city developed a distinctive frontline atmosphere. Various military units and radical groups gained significant influence, using Mariupol as a supply base for the nearby troop group operating during the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) against DPR forces. Along with Kramatorsk, Mariupol became the key administrative center of the part of Donbass that remained under Kiev's control.

In September 2014, an agreement was signed in Minsk providing for a ceasefire in Donbass. These agreements stipulated that Donbass would remain part of Ukraine, while Mariupol, part of the Donetsk Oblast, would remain outside the DPR, under Kiev's control. Under these circumstances, the authorities sought to strengthen their control over the city, including symbolic control, without provoking hostile locals with overly drastic symbolic moves.

Spontaneous Decommunization and Stages of Regulatory Consolidation

The period from the summer of 2014 to the spring of 2015 can be described as a time of quasi-spontaneous decommunization. On August 15, 2014, unknown individuals toppled the largest Lenin monument in Mariupol, located at the intersection of Lenin and Stroiteley Avenues, from its pedestal.¹⁰ City authorities decided to dismantle the remaining four Lenin monuments due to the threat of vandalism.¹¹ Later the same fate met the monuments to G. Ordzhonikidze and K. Apatov.¹²

In December 2013, radical Maidan supporters in Kiev arbitrarily destroyed a Lenin monument, despite requests from Maidan leaders Viktor Klitschko and Andrei Yatsenyuk to refrain from such actions. This action, and the subsequent torchlight march on January 1 in honor of Stepan Bandera's birthday, allowed for a sudden radicalization of the opposition's symbolic politics. By August 2014, the unauthorized actions of vandal activists had already been part of a plan coordinated with the authorities — their actions provided city authorities with a plausible pretext for removing monuments, even though a significant portion of the city's residents disapproved.

In April 2015, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a package of four memorial laws prepared by the team of Volodymyr Viatrovych, director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINR), who is closely associated with the Bandera section of the Ukrainian émigré community. It took the Rada less than an hour to adopt all four

¹⁰ A Lenin Monument Has Been Torn Down in Mariupol. *KP.UA*. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://kp.ua/politics/466071-v-maryupole-snesly-pamiatnyk-lenynu>

¹¹ The Mariupol City Council has Decided to Demolish all Lenin Monuments. *Vzglyad*. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://vz.ua/news/37716-gorsovet-mariupolya-reshil-snesti-vse-pamyatniki-leninu>

¹² Decommunization of Mariupol: How it was and what was achieved. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 17, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1620375/dekommunizacia-mariupola-kak-eto-bylo-i-cto-dostignuto>

laws [Kasianov 2023; Myshlovska 2018]. These are the Laws of Ukraine “On the Legal Status and Perpetuation of the Memory of Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the Twentieth Century” (No. 314-VIII), “On the Perpetuation of the Victory over Nazism in World War II 1939-1945” (No. 314-VIII), “On the Perpetuation of the Victory over Nazism in World War II 1939-1945” (No. 315-VIII), “On Access to the Archives of the Repressive Organs of the Communist Totalitarian Regime of 1917-1991” (No. 316-VIII), “On the Condemnation of the Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and the Ban on the Propaganda of Their Symbols” (No. 317-VIII). Only the last one directly pertains to the renaming of toponyms.

These laws not only made the glorification of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists¹³ and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army¹⁴ the mainstream of Ukrainian memory politics but also created a clearly defined legal basis for “voluntary-compulsory” decommunization. They gave local authorities a strictly limited time to rename settlements, streets, and other toponymic objects. The renaming procedure was prescribed in the Law of Ukraine “On Geographical Names.” It required the mandatory consideration of “the opinion of the population living in the territory where these objects are located, through public consultations regarding proposed changes”.¹⁵

If the issue was not resolved within the established deadline, it was transferred to higher authorities, and thus local authorities lost control over the process of renaming. The “List of Persons Subject to the Decommunization Law” was established and subsequently expanded repeatedly by the UINP.¹⁶

¹³ The Russian Supreme Court has Declared Three Ukrainian Organizations Extremist and Banned Them. *Interfax*. Retrieved April 25, 2026, from <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/86284>

¹⁴ Russian Federation. Supreme Court. Decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation of November 17, 2014 No. AKPI14-1292S “On recognizing the Ukrainian organizations Right Sector, Ukrainian National Assembly — Ukrainian People’s Self-Defense (UNA-UNSO), Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Stepan Bandera Tryzub, and Brotherhood as extremist and prohibiting their activities on the territory of the Russian Federation”. *Consultant*. Retrieved April 25, 2026, from <https://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc&base=ARB&n=414233#9umWoHVTNwecuOxS>

¹⁵ About Geographical Names: Law of Ukraine dated 22.04.2005 No. 2604-IV.

¹⁶ Subject to renaming were “the names of regions, districts, populated areas, city districts, squares, boulevards, streets, lanes, passages, avenues, maidans, embankments, bridges, and other toponymic objects of populated areas, enterprises, institutions, and organizations that use the names or pseudonyms of persons who held leadership positions in the Communist Party (from the post of secretary of the district committee and above), the highest organs of power and administration of the USSR, the Ukrainian SSR, and other union and autonomous Soviet republics, or worked in the Soviet state security agencies, as well as the names of the USSR, the Ukrainian SSR, and other union and autonomous republics and their derivatives, names associated with the activities of the Communist Party (including party congresses), the anniversaries of the October Revolution of October 25 (November 7), 1917, the establishment of Soviet power on the territory of Ukraine or in individual administrative-territorial units, and the persecution of participants in the struggle for the independence of Ukraine in the twentieth century (except for names associated with the expulsion of Nazi occupiers from Ukraine or with the development of Ukrainian science and culture)”.

All these laws were published on May 20, 2015 in the Verkhovna Rada newspaper “Voice of Ukraine” No. 87, and came into force the next day after publication.¹⁷

Law 317-VIII (further in the text, “law”) provided for the dismantling of monuments and the renaming of toponymic objects named in honor of “the names and pseudonyms of persons who held leadership positions in the Communist Party (the position of secretary of the district committee and higher), the highest organs of power and administration of the USSR, the Ukrainian SSR, other union or autonomous Soviet republics, worked in the Soviet state security agencies, as well as the names of the USSR, the Ukrainian SSR, other union or autonomous Soviet republics and their derivatives, names associated with the activities of the Communist Party (including party congresses), the anniversaries of the October Revolution of October 25 (November 7) 1917, the establishment of Soviet power on the territory of Ukraine or in individual administrative-territorial units, the persecution of participants in the struggle for the independence of Ukraine in the 20th century (except for names associated with the expulsion of Nazi occupiers from Ukraine or with the development of Ukrainian science and culture)”.¹⁸

Within six months of the law’s entry into force, local governments were required to remove monuments and rename streets that met these criteria. If the deadlines were not met, the authority to rename streets was transferred to the heads of local administrations for a three-month period. After this period, this authority was transferred to the head of the regional administration.¹⁹ This created a mechanism to overcome local resistance to renaming.

De-Sovietization Practices in Mariupol

When setting the deadline for implementing the law, parliamentarians either failed to take into account or ignored the fact that local elections were scheduled for October 25, 2015. This cast doubt on the technical feasibility of timely compliance with the law’s requirements, as officials changed during the six-month period. In Mariupol, the elections were postponed until November 29, 2015, meaning there was even less time

¹⁷ The Newspaper “Voice of Ukraine” Published Laws on Decommunization. *Interfax-Ukraine*. Retrieved July 17, 2023, from <https://ru.interfax.com.ua/news/political/266677.html>

¹⁸ On the condemnation of the communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and the ban on the propaganda of their symbols: Law of Ukraine dated 09.04.2015 No. 317-VIII. Art. 1, paragraph 4.

¹⁹ On the condemnation of the communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and the ban on the propaganda of their symbols: Law of Ukraine dated 09.04.2015 No. 317-VIII. Art. 7, paragraph 6.

to fully implement the renaming process than in other municipalities, especially given the complete change of city government.

The vote resulted in the election of a new mayor. He was Metinvest top manager V. Boychenko, and seats on the city council were distributed as follows: 45 of the 54 seats on the city council were taken by representatives of the Opposition Bloc (83.3%), five from the People's Power party (9.3%), and four from Our Land (7.4%).²⁰ All parties that made it to the city council were affiliated to some degree with R. Akhmetov and Metinvest, but only the Opposition Bloc was openly pro-mayor.

Due to the pre-election process and the transfer of power as of November 22, 2015, not a single toponym was renamed in Mariupol, although by November 2015, 86 toponymic objects covered by the law had been identified.²¹ On December 11, 2015, V. Boychenko announced the creation of the “Commission for Renaming Streets, Squares, Cultural and Social Objects, and Cultural and Historical Heritage of Mariupol and Its Environs” (hereinafter referred to as “commission”). The commission's primary task was to conduct procedures related to renaming the city's toponyms and, based on their results, submit a draft resolution for consideration by the city council.²² The commission included city council members, historians, cultural figures, and representatives of public and veterans' organizations.²³

²⁰ Who did Mariupol Vote for? *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1051654/za-kogo-golosoval-mariupol>

²¹ Krivolapov, M. (November 22, 2015). Decommunization in Ukraine: Toponymic Manipulations and a Bit of Sabotage. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1037441/dekommunizacia-v-ukraine-toponimiceskie-manipulacii-i-nemnogo-sabotaza>

²² A Commission for Renaming Streets Will Be Created in Mariupol. (December 11, 2015). *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1058390/v-mariupole-sozhdut-komissiu-po-pereimenovaniu-ulic>

²³ Meeting of The Commission for Renaming Streets of Mariupol. *Youtube/Veridical*. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://youtu.be/C0olXrbTXUo> The Commission included: Chairperson I.V. Dudina (deputy of the Opposition Bloc, TV presenter), Deputy Chairperson R.P. Bozhko (Deputy Director for Research of the Mariupol Museum of Local History), Secretary O.A. Demidko (postgraduate student of the Department of Cultural Studies and Information Activities of Moscow State University, former candidate for deputy in the 33rd district of Mariupol from the PP “The Power of People”), Pas’ko M.I. (Head of the Legal Department of the Mariupol City Council), A.V. Chain (employee of the Drama Theater), E.I. Ptushko (Deputy Head of the Department of Urban Construction and Architecture), S.L. Burov (local historian), N.I. Koshonenko, V.N. Romantsov (Associate Professor, Professor of History, Head of the History Department of Moscow State University), L.V. Balaban (Director of the City Center for Extracurricular Activities), K.S. Kurkchi (Chairman of the Council of Veterans of the Ilyich Maritime Museum), Kharlamov Yu.A., Zolotareva E.N. (English teacher at Perm State Technical University, assistant to the deputy of the Power of People party).

The renaming process went through a multi-tiered approval process. Initially, residents of specific streets subject to legal renaming were surveyed. These were conducted by Population Self-Organization Committees (PSCs). Public hearings were scheduled next, but were held before the elections, on September 18, 2015, for each of the city's four districts separately but simultaneously.²⁴

Based on the hearings, the commission prepared a draft resolution, which was approved by the city council. Before approval, the street renaming project was published in local media. The first version of the project was published in mid-January 2016, and a decision was made to hold repeat public hearings on some of the proposed names.²⁵

76 properties, the new names of which raised no objections, were accepted as a general list at the City Council session on January 28, 2016, while 37 properties were sent back for revision²⁶, which involved a repeat public survey through the KSN, online voting, and repeat public hearings. The final decision on renaming was to be agreed upon by February 21 and adopted at the next City Council session, which was done on March 3, 2016, at the 5th session of the City Council of the 7th convocation.²⁷

In total, 112 toponyms were renamed as part of Law 317-VIII, including 3 district names and 108 names of streets, passages, lanes, and other places.²⁸ One street was renamed twice, and two — Tkachenko-Petrenko Street and Lane — were deemed exempt from decommunization. The typology of Mariupol toponym renamings during the period under review is presented in Table 1.

This demonstrates the desire of the majority of Mariupol's population, members of the Mariupol City Council, and the Commission to avoid controversial historical themes in the city's new toponymy, as well as the desire of the elected city authorities to find a compromise with the residents of specific streets whose names were forced to change at the insistence of the Kiev authorities.

²⁴ Meeting of The Commission for Renaming Streets of Mariupol. (June 9, 2016). *YouTube*. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://youtu.be/C0olXrbTXUo>

²⁵ Decommunization in Mariupol is Coming. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 17, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1113673/dekommunizacii-v-mariupole-byt>

²⁶ In Mariupol, the City Streets were Renamed (List). *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1104233/v-mariupole-pereimenovali-ulicy-goroda-spisok>

²⁷ V Session of the Mariupol City Council of the VII Convocation. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/live/3IU65PNsCSU?feature=share>

²⁸ Yu. Franzheva. Complete List of Renamed Toponymic Objects of Mariupol. *VK.com*. Retrieved July 17, 2023, from https://vk.com/wall64106460_1055

Table 1. Typology of renaming toponyms of Mariupol

Renaming type	Key Historical Figures / Examples	Notes
Streets named after local figures (directly associated with Mariupol)	L.D. Yarudsky (local historian), V.I. Chukarin (gymnast), A.I. Kuindzhi (artist), V.A. Nilson (architect), I.K. Matsuk (surgeon), V.A. Saenko (head of the traffic police, died in 2014), N.V. Radin (factory director, repressed)	7 out of 108 streets were renamed
Conflict renaming (with cancellation of the decision)	Ilyicha Ave. → in honor of V.S. Boyko (director of MMK), then → Nikopolsky Ave	The Boyko family objected. The new name derives from the pre-revolutionary name of the Nikopol Mariupolsky plant
Decommunization through a change of initials (keeping the last name, changing the identity)	1. Poletaeva (was a Bolshevik N.G.) → F.A. Poletaeva (Hero of the USSR, participant in the Resistance). 2. Furmanova (was D.A., author of “Chapaev”) → A.M. Furmanova (Hero of the USSR). 3. Ostrovsky (was N.A., author of “How the Steel Was Tempered”) → A.N. Ostrovsky (playwright)	4 objects (streets and alleys). A technique of formally “replacing” communist figures with neutral ones or Soviet heroes
Homonymous renaming (change of meaning through language)	Gracheva Street (In honor of I.P. Grachev, Soviet figure) → Gracheva / Grachevaya (In honor of the rook bird in Ukrainian)	Ilyich plant (Lenin) → Ilyich plant (metallurgist Zot Ilyich Nekrasov)
Unrenamed streets (despite the recommendations of the UINP)	Tsibulko, Dundicha, Kondrashina, Shepotilenko	Decommunization “was not total”
Preserved Soviet narratives	Sacco and Vanzetti, the Paris Commune, Sofia Perovskaya	They were not on the UINP lists, but they clearly carry communist connotations
Neutral names (as apolitical as possible)	Austrian, Family, Shakespeare, Zoological, Fun	The main trend in selecting new names
Ukrainian nationalist narrative	M. Hrushevsky, Philip Orlyk, Yaroslav the Wise, I. Franko, Ukrainian, Kobzar, Kazatsky lane, street and avenue of Ukrainian Cossacks	A minority of the total number of renamings
Special case (date/symbol)	1 May Ave. → Unity Ave. Pervomayskiye Street and Lane are preserved	They did not consider it necessary to change the name “Pervomayskie”, despite its connection with May 1st

Source: compiled by Alexei I. Miller and Kirill S. Panin based on the research results.

From De-Sovietization to Desacralization of the Great Patriotic War: The Case of G.K. Zhukov

This approach met with resistance from certain public activists and city council members. This culminated in the provocation of renaming Marshal Zhukov Avenue. On March 3, 2016, before the City Council voted to approve the final list of city toponymic objects subject to renaming, M. Borodin, head of the Power of People faction of the PP, made a proposal to rename Marshal Zhukov Avenue, which, he claimed, was covered by the law, to ATO Heroes Avenue.²⁹

In the motivational part of his address, he emphasized the need for a street in the city named in honor of the soldiers participating in the war in eastern Ukraine, which he called the ATO. This proposal met predictable resistance from the mayor and council. The official reason for denying immediate renaming was that renaming without following prescribed procedures violates the provisions of Ukrainian Law 2604-IV “On Geographical Names”. The unofficial reason was the perception by the Opposition Bloc electorate of G.K. Zhukov as the embodiment of the victory over Nazism, and of ATO participants, particularly volunteer battalions, as the embodiment of neo-Nazism. The organizers of the provocation understood that G.K. Zhukov, as of March 3, 2016, was not covered by the decommunization law and was not included in the UINP’s list of recommendations, and that residents of the avenue would not support this initiative. Nevertheless, they continued to insist on an immediate decision on the renaming.

People introducing themselves as residents of Marshal Zhukov Avenue, ATO participants and veterans, and public activists were brought to the city council meeting. Pressure was exerted on the city council by both self-proclaimed representatives of the public and military personnel, who resorted to accusations of “everyday separatism”. (In 2015–2016, outdoor advertising was placed throughout Mariupol calling for information about “everyday separatism” to be reported to the SBU hotline and threatening criminal prosecution for “everyday separatism” under Article 110 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine). The discussion of renaming Marshal Zhukov Avenue took 55 minutes of the total 295 minutes of the session; the decision to rename the remaining sites took about a minute. As a compromise, the decision to rename Marshal Zhukov Avenue was postponed until the next session.

M. Borodin’s assertion that Marshal Zhukov Avenue was covered by the law as of March 3, 2016, was incorrect. At the same time, P. Zhebrivsky, Chairman of the Donetsk Regional State Administration, announced at a joint press conference

²⁹ V Session of the Mariupol City Council of the VII Convocation. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/live/3IU65PNsCSU?feature=share>

with Mariupol Mayor Boychenko that he had sent a letter to the Ukrainian Institute of National Religious Affairs (UINR) to clarify this issue.³⁰

The issue of Zhukov's "decommunization" had previously been raised in other regions. In the fall of 2015, A. Zinchenko, advisor to the director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, explained in an interview on Kharkov television that streets named after G.K. Zhukov were not covered by the law, as he had actively participated in the fight against Nazism.³¹ The first mention of Zhukov in the context of mandatory renaming can be found in a response published on March 24, 2016, to a written inquiry from the "Power of People" party dated March 9, 2016.³² Thus, as of March 3, 2016, when the City Council session was held, Zhukov was not on the list of individuals subject to decommunization, but the campaign to include him on this list was already in full swing.

The head of the OVGA, P. Zhebriksky, called Zhukov a "marshal-killer of Ukrainians", since he put 330,000 Ukrainians "into the Dnepr" because he wanted, together with N. Vatutin, to take Kiev by November 7, 1943.³³

Several attempts have been made to name city streets in honor of ATO participants in general or individual figures. However, each attempt met with either resistance from local residents or military dissatisfaction with the location and size of the proposed streets. For example, representatives of the "Power of People" party, K. Vishnyakov and E. Zolotareva, at a meeting of the 5th session stated that on all the streets that they tried to name in honor of the "ATO heroes", the people living on them objected to this.³⁴

The failure of activists to fill Mariupol's urban space with nationalist names likely prompted the choice of renaming the city's central avenue. D. Gerasimenko, commander of the 23rd Separate Motorized Infantry Brigade³⁵, said that the name "Heroes of the

³⁰ Zhebriksky and Boychenko on Decommunization in Mariupol and the ATO Heroes' Street. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 12, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjT7_ay89uYZhebriksky on Marshal Zhukov Avenue. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 13, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTAAbFXNcp4E> The Avenue of the Murderer Marshal in Mariupol will be Renamed. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 1, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1157028/prospekt-marsala-ubijcy-v-mariupole-budet-pereimenovan-zebrivskij-video>

³¹ Which Objects in Kharkov will be Renamed. *YouTube*. Retrieved August 2, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QA7jJOct_GM

³² The Region is Ready to Rename Zhukov Avenue in Mariupol. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 17, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1181849/oblast-gotova-k-pereimenovaniu-pr-zukova-v-mariupole-dokument>

³³ The Avenue of the Murderer Marshal in Mariupol will be Renamed. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 1, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1157028/prospekt-marsala-ubijcy-v-mariupole-budet-pereimenovan-zebrivskij-video>

³⁴ V session of the Mariupol City Council of the VII Convocation. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/live/3IU65PNsCSU?feature=share>

³⁵ A Melitopol Resident Became the Youngest Battalion Commander in the ATO. *NewsLocal*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from https://www.mv.org.ua/news/97098-melitopolec_stal_samym_molodym_kombatom_v_ato.html

ATO” should be given to “not some dead-end street like Baba Yaga 13, but a proper street or avenue”.³⁶

The military rejected the idea of renaming Boyko Avenue to “ATO Heroes” because it was located near factories.³⁷ Let us look at how the renaming of Ilyicha/ Boyko/Nikolsky Avenue took place. In September 2015, at public hearings on renaming Ilyicha Avenue, two options were voted on: in honor of V. Boyko and “ATO Heroes”. Of the 104 voters who voted, 0 (zero) votes were cast for the “ATO Heroes” option.³⁸ Based on this decision, on January 28, 2016, Ilyicha Avenue was renamed Boyko Avenue. However, V. Boyko’s family objected to the renaming. For this reason, public hearings, surveys of avenue residents, and online voting were repeated.³⁹

The website 0629.com.ua conducted a poll with suggestions for renaming Boyko Avenue (formerly Ilyich Avenue). Three names were proposed: European, Nikopolsky, and ATO Heroes. According to the poll’s results, 46% favored Nikopolsky, 46% favored ATO Heroes, but Nikopolsky received 30 more votes.⁴⁰ The result was clearly unreliable, as by 4:28 PM on February 15, 2016, 881 people had voted in the poll, and the voting looked completely different: 73.8% for Nikopolsky, 15.8% for ATO Heroes, and 10.4% for European.⁴¹ Only about 1,700 respondents participated in polls on much broader topics on the same website⁴², suggesting the poll’s unreliability due to anomalous activity.⁴³ Understanding this and relying on data from actual surveys of residents of the avenue, only 3 of the 11 Commission members present supported the name “ATO Heros”.⁴⁴ The renaming to Nikopolsky was approved.

On March 7, 2016, a meeting of the KSN was held on Marshal Zhukov Avenue to develop a list of options for renaming the avenue. Residents of the avenue spoke out

³⁶ V session of the Mariupol City Council of the VII Convocation. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/live/3IU65PNsCSU?feature=share>

³⁷ V session of the Mariupol City Council of the VII Convocation. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 7, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/live/3IU65PNsCSU?feature=share>

³⁸ Mariupol Renamed Illich Avenue in Honor of the great Vlasnik MMK. 29.01.2016.

³⁹ Relatives of Vladimir Boyko Spoke Out Against the Renaming of a Mariupol Avenue. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1120761/rodstvenniki-vladimira-bojko-vystupili-protiv-pereimenovania-mariupolskogo-prospekta>

⁴⁰ In Mariupol, It Is Recommended to Rename Ilyicha Avenue to Nikopolsky Avenue. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1140884/v-mariupole-prilica-rekomendovano-pereimenovat-v-prnikopolskij-fotovideo>

⁴¹ Screenshot from the author’s archive, Fig. 4.

⁴² Mariupol Maidan. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved September 7, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3259953/mariupolskij-majdan-foto>

⁴³ It is important to record this, since in the future it is precisely such votes that “representatives of the public” will insist on and, what is especially cynical, claim that they are “the most honest and unbiased”.

⁴⁴ In Mariupol, It Is Recommended to Rename Ilyicha Avenue to Nikopolsky Avenue. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1140884/v-mariupole-prilica-rekomendovano-pereimenovat-v-prnikopolskij-fotovideo>

categorically against any renaming. Video footage published following the meeting shows that the overwhelming majority of residents of Marshal Zhukov Avenue opposed the renaming.⁴⁵

Having confirmed that residents of Marshal Zhukov Avenue were against the renaming and were prepared to defend their position, M. Borodin, nevertheless, on March 9, 2016, submitted a letter to the head of the Donetsk Oblast Regional State Administration, P. Zherbivsky, requesting that Marshal Zhukov Avenue be renamed ATO Heroes Avenue, based on paragraph 6 of Article 7 of the Law of Ukraine “On the Condemnation of Communist Symbols”.⁴⁶ On March 30, 2016, M. Borodin received a response from the Donetsk Oblast Commission: “The regional commission for the implementation of the Law of Ukraine on decommunization recommended that the governor of the Donetsk Oblast, Zherbivsky, by his own decision, rename Marshal Zhukov Avenue to ATO Heroes Avenue”. This decision was made on March 24, 2016.⁴⁷

After G.K. Zhukov was retroactively added to the list of “decommunized” individuals, the street’s renaming became inevitable. This occurred despite mass protests by street residents, which escalated into an anti-fascist rally.⁴⁸

An order from P. Zhebrivsky in early June, however, softened the name from “ATO Heroes” to “Defenders of Ukraine”. Three more minor streets, not renamed by the city council, were also given new names, either through oversight or, like Marshal Zhukov Avenue, due to retroactive inclusion in the UINP list: Voikova Street became known as the Sich Riflemen’s Street, a Galician military unit during the revolutionary events of 1917–1920; Krupskaya Lane was named after Bohdan Tishchenko, a border guard sailor who died in August 2014; and Yaroslavsky Street was named after Junior Lieutenant Alexander Martynenko, who died near Debaltsevo in February 2015.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ MVI 5927. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from YouTube <https://youtu.be/V3dKiL66XWU> MVI 5928. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://youtu.be/uiNP8Du3JP4> MVI 5932. *YouTube*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f29nnTlqmRI>. Not available on the territory of the Russian Federation.

⁴⁶ Zhebrivsky Promised to Consider the Issue of Renaming Zhukov Avenue to ATO Heroes Avenue. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1150884/zhebrivskij-poobesal-rassmotret-vopros-pereimenovania-pr-zukova-v-pr-geroev-ato>

⁴⁷ The Region is Ready to Rename Zhukov Avenue in Mariupol. *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1181849/oblast-gotova-k-pereimenovaniu-pr-zukova-v-mariupole-dokument>

⁴⁸ A Scandal Over Decommunization Has Erupted in Mariupol. *SvobodaRadio*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/27707219.html>

⁴⁹ Pavel Zhebrivsky Made a Strong-Willed Decision to Rename Marshal Zhukov Avenue in Mariupol (Updated). *0629.com.ua*. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/1248784/pavel-zhebrivskij-volevym-reseniem-pereimenoval-prospekt-marsala-zukova-v-mariupole-dopolnenno>

Conclusion

This marked the end of the decommunization process in Mariupol. 7 monuments were dismantled, and 115 urban toponymic objects were renamed: 111 by the city council and 4 by the head of the regional state administration. The difference in ideological content between the new names given by elected authorities and those appointed by the centrally appointed administrator is obvious. Local elites minimized nationalist propaganda in the renamings, which clearly displeased the Kiev regime. The new government ostensibly acted within the law, attempting to manipulate public opinion through marginal public organizations and parties. Mariupol residents reacted indifferently to the renamings as long as they affected individuals associated exclusively with the revolutionary events of 1917–1920 and the construction of the Soviet state apparatus. However, the victory in the Great Patriotic War and the figure of G.K. Zhukov associated with it evoked significant public resonance, despite the threat of repression and the general atmosphere of a frontline zone. On the eve of May 9, 2015, President Poroshenko attempted to define the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) as a new Great Patriotic War. Television broadcast videos of ATO fighters calling “Great Patriotic War veterans” and congratulating them on Victory Day. However, this propaganda ploy failed. In particular, the attitude of Mariupol residents toward the ATO forced the Ukrainian Civil Administration (VGA) to abandon its use in the city’s toponymy. At the same time, in 2016, “participation in the fight against Nazism” ceased to protect the names of Great Patriotic War heroes used in toponymy. Ukrainian memory politics shifted to the exclusive glorification of the UPA and OUN⁵⁰, as well as ATO heroes. However, in 2016, Ukrainian authorities increased pressure on symbolic policy in Kiev-controlled Donbass, even while still being forced to consider the resistance of the local population.

Thus, it can be emphasized that toponymic changes in Mariupol between 2014 and 2016 demonstrate a trend of increasing political pressure from state institutions on local authorities and civil society to advance de-Sovietization policies. This manifested itself in the removal of monuments and the renaming of a large number of city landmarks, but also created a number of ambiguous situations that were largely compromised. The overall trend, however, was a gradual desacralization of the Great Patriotic War and the historical figures directly associated with it, resulting in Ukrainian authorities perceiving them primarily as representatives of the Soviet regime and only then as participants in the war.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 17.02.2026

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 06.03.2026

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 15.03.2026

⁵⁰ The Russian Supreme Court has Declared Three Ukrainian Organizations Extremist and Banned Them.

References

- Alexander, J.C., & Mast, J.L. (2006). Introduction: Symbolic action in theory and practice. In *The Cultural Pragmatics of Symbolic Action* (pp. 1–28). Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press.
- Edelman, M. (1971). *Politics as symbolic action. Mass arousal and quiescence*. Chicago: Markham Publishing Company.
- Johnson, J., & Malinova, O.Yu. (2020). Symbolic politics in political science and Russian studies: Research on the political uses of the past in Post-Soviet Russia. *Political Science (RU)*, 2, 17–41. (In Russian). <http://doi.org/10.31249/poln/2020.02.01>.
- Kasianov, G. (2023). In search of lost time? Decommunization in Ukraine, 2014–2020. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71(4), 326–340.
- Kasianov, G.V. (2018). *Ukraine and its neighbors: historical politics. 1987–2018*. Moscow: New Literary Review. (In Russian).
- Lapin, V.V., & Miller, A.I., (Eds.). (2021). *Symbolic aspects of memory politics in modern Russia and Eastern Europe*. Publishing House of the European University in St. Petersburg. (In Russian).
- Malinova, O.Yu. (2012). Symbolic politics: Contours of a problem field. In *Symbolic politics: Collection of scientific papers. Issue 1: Constructing ideas about the past as a powerful resource* (pp. 5–16). INION RAS. (In Russian).
- Myshlovska, O. (2018). Establishing the “irrefutable facts” about the OUN* and UPA*: The role of the working group of historians on OUN-UPA*. Activities in mediating memory-based conflict in Ukraine. *Ab Imperio*, 1, 223–254. (*OUN and UPA are recognized as extremist organizations and banned in Russia).
- Potseluev, S.P. (2012). «Symbolic politics»: Towards the history of the concept. In *Symbolic politics. Issue 1: Constructing ideas about the past as a power resource* (pp. 17–53). INION RAS. (In Russian).

About the authors:

Kirill S. Panin — Independent researcher (e-mail: ksp0202@yandex.com) (ORCID: 0009-0001-6668-480X)

Alexei I. Miller — Professor European University at Saint-Petersburg, leading research fellow Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences, Russian Academy of Sciences (e-mail: millera2006@yandex.ru) (ORCID: 0000-0001-8139-0976)