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HODONYMS AS POLITICAL SIGNS: FROM DE-SOVIETIZATION TO DE-RUSSIFICATION IN UKRAINE

ГОДОНІМИ ЯК ПОЛІТИЧНІ ЗНАКИ: ВІД ДЕКОМУНІЗАЦІЇ ДО ДЕРУСИФІКАЦІЇ В УКРАЇНІ

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Toponymy is a tool of forming new reality, national identity and political culture. The article's scientific goal is to track Ukrainian hodonyms (the street names) as political signs within the compass of the historical events between 2013–2025, based on the Euromaidan Revolution (2013–2014) and the Russo-Ukrainian War (2022–nowadays). Hodonyms are the voices of nation's attitude to the ruling regime, acknowledging their own affiliation to European views and values. The street names are a history storage medium which reflect mentality, national consciousness and historical awareness. The process of renaming hodonyms is a complicated social and linguistic phenomenon which requires a huge amount of time. The street names are underrated in their vital meaning in national creation, they are a declaration of will and eyewitnesses of the political changes. The study presents fifteen hodonyms collected from around Ukraine with the aim to show tendencies and key milestones in giving the new titles. Hodonyms react to political changes immediately, this subcategory of toponyms is the symbol of a democratic era in Ukraine. The present titles are based on a conventional refusal of Soviet and Russia's imperial past, at the same time they glorify everything Ukrainian (cultural figures, proponents, countries). There is the rehabilitation of the old street names as well as the establishment of new titles. The hodonyms are examined to meet the standards of the Ukrainian language. The accelerated procedure of changing the street names was established due to full-invasion in 2022. Hodonyms are more than political signs, they are the reformers of social changes, they are a mirror image of nation, they are national and mutual choices. The renaming of the street is a battlefield for civilians and their contribution to the nation revival and symbolic shift as a consequence.

Key words: hodonyms, national awareness, de-sovietization, de-russification, political symbol.

Топоніміка – це інструмент формування нової реальності, національної ідентичності та політичної культури. Наукова мета статті полягає в аналізі українських годонімів (назв вулиць) як політичних знаків в контексті історичних подій 2013–2025 років, Євромайдан (2013–2014) та Російсько-українська війна (2022 – дотепер). Годоніми – це голос нації до правлячого режиму, визнання власної приналежності до європейських поглядів та цінностей. Назви вулиць – це носії історії, які відображають менталітет, національну свідомість та історичну обізнаність. Процес перейменування годонімів – це складне соціально-лінгвістичне явище, яке є до того ж довготривалим. Значення назв вулиць є недооціненим в державотворчому контексті, годоніми є декларацією волі та очевидцями політичних змін. У дослідженні представлено п'ятнадцять годонімів, зібраних з усієї України, з метою показати тенденції та ключові віхи у наданні нових назв. Годоніми миттєво реагують на політичні зміни, цей вид топонімів є символом демократичної епохи в Україні. Сучасні назви базуються на традиційному запереченні радянського та російського імперського минулого, водночас вони прославляють все українське (культурних діячів, ключових прихильників, країн-партнерів). Відбувається реабілітація старих назв вулиць, а також встановлення нових назв. Годоніми перевіряються на відповідність стандартам української мови. Прискорена процедура перейменування вулиць відбулася у зв'язку з повномасштабним вторгненням у 2022 році. Годоніми – це більше, ніж політичні знаки, вони є реформаторами соціальних змін, дзеркальним відображенням нації, народним та взаємним вибором. Перейменування вулиць – це поле битви для цивільного населення та його внеску у відродження нації та, як наслідок, змін в культурних цінностях, нормах та поведінці суспільства.

Ключові слова: годоніми, національна свідомість, декомунізація, дерусифікація, політичний символ.

Urgency of the problem. The authoritarian past has always the consequences, especially when country changes a system of government. Ukraine is an example of a transition from "power of a person/a small elite" (authoritarianism) to "power of the people" (democracy) ". There were two splashes of renaming toponyms, based on scientific sources, these processes are called "de-sovietization" or "de-communization" and "de-russification" or "de-colonization". We study this question by analyzing the street names as political indicators of the historical period from 2013 to nowadays. Even when the titles are changed fast, the reshaping of the public space can take more time. Toponyms form new national awareness, record public moral, react to political changes and, moreover, preserve history.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The dilemmas are often risen after the country's change of politician direction: how to deal with the vestiges of the past, even if it is authoritarian past. Firstly, what should be done with the inherited bureaucratic apparatus? Then, should the culprits of the previous regime be brought to justice? Or should it be allowed to have the presenters of the old government in a new one; should they run for office or work in civil service? Finally, what should be done with their wealth of these small elites which they managed to accumulate during their reining period? Should it be redistributed? All these issues are within scientific attention of a significant number of scholars [1; 2; 3].

This article presents the underestimated subcategory of toponyms – toponyms and its symbolic impact on shaping new politician space and nation. What is their mission after the regime breaks down? How does a society react to the quick removal of street names: mobilize or demobilize? How much does it cost to get rid of an authoritarian past and level up? It took Ukrainians 23 years to start rapidly renaming toponyms and changing a worldview.

Any amendments have implications, the symbolic shift as well. Symbols have been used to give explanation to a variety of complicated phenomena, involving elite manipulation [4, p. 45–86], group conflict and cohesion [5, p. 320–357], identity construction [6], mobilization and political legitimization [7, p. 553–561] and political communication [8, p. 173–196]. Previous studies have shown the social history of symbolic politics and the use of political symbols in authoritarian regimes [9; 10] as well as democracies [11]. Thus, it can be concluded that political symbols can be admitted as the peculiar tools of opinion manipulation, because they serve the function of placating the mass public's point of view. Here toponyms perform the main function of political symbols to reveal nation's viewpoint and depict the mood towards the regime.

Autocrats often aim to project their authority by populating the public space with political monuments and imagery, by naming cities, streets and squares after authoritarian political figures [3]. This system limits citizen participation and does not take into consideration their point of views.

Democrats' principles are based on majority rule and individual rights, with the government accountable to all citizens, the inhabitants have freedom of speech. The choice of the street title which it should be renamed is a collective decision, there are quite often independent institutions where people can vote.

Purpose and main objectives of the study. Toponyms are important components of any urban environment and reflect the historical, cultural, political and linguistic situation of this country. Fred Tarpley and Willy Van Langendonck treat this topic as a separate branch of onomastics. Tarpley [12] offers the following definition of the toponyms: "these are some names selected randomly without regard to a system and others are chosen deliberately to aid in their location. Street names are sometimes bestowed to reflect the region's personality or of the namegiver. As with the patterns of language, architecture, religion, food, and other social elements, street names may be used to delineate areas of cultural geography". Van Langendonck [13] regards the notion "name field" as the structuralists' application in post-war onomastics. A name field is a type of lexical field that groups together names situated in the same appellative conceptual sphere.¹

¹ Viktoriia Husak. The Significant Impact of Cognitive Linguistics on the Urbanonyms as Imprints of Cultural Memory on the Examples of the Cities Kyiv and Vilnius. Odesa, 2024. P. 14. Accessed at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389830926_THE_SIGNIFICANT_IMPACT_OF_COGNITIVE_LINGUISTICS_ON_THE_URBANONYMS_AS_IMPRINTS_OF_CULTURAL_MEMORY_ON_THE_EXAMPLE_OF_THE_CITIES_KYIV_AND_VILNIUS

The purpose of the study is to present toponyms as political signs of Ukrainian state formation from de-sovietization (2013–2021) to de-russification processes (2022–nowadays).

The following objectives were set to achieve the purpose of the research:

- to create a database of the street names which were renamed within de-sovietization time frame (2013–2021) and de-russification (2022–nowadays);
- to describe the semantic criterion of toponyms;
- to analyze common and differing features of toponyms in various historical time frames.

Presentation of the main research material. The process of de-communization officially started in 1991, just after the dissolution of the USSR². But the first attempts to rename some toponyms were made significantly later, for example, Проспект Радянської України | Soviet Ukraine Avenue was renamed to Проспект Георгія Гонгадзе | Heorhiy Honhadze Avenue (Kyiv) in 2007. Heorhiy Hongadze was a famous journalist who protested against then-president of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma. In 2000 he was kidnapped and murdered near Kyiv. That resonant death caused resentment and in general attacked the Ukrainian patriotic emotions.

However, the massive change of symbolic landscape implemented by Lenin's statue all over the country dates back to the Euromaidan Revolution | the Revolution of Dignity (regarded by Ukrainians), the wave of demonstrations in winter 2013–2014. The most noticeable reason for the revolution was the defeat of the new (the post-Soviet) political authorities in reforming Ukraine and building up a new country. The first removal of Lenin's statue happened on December 8, 2013 in the centre of the Ukrainian capital, in Kyiv. The removals of Lenin's monuments, locally, named as the Leninopad. This action was a spontaneous decision of protesters without significant control from authorities, which spread to the other Ukrainian regions, as result around 504 Lenin's statues were demolished during the next year.

The second reason of massive street renaming process is driven by the Russo-Ukrainian War. There is another side of the consequences of Euromaidan: illegal annexation of the Crimea peninsula and occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The political analysts of the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies admit that the Russo-Ukrainian War has already started in February 2014 [14, p. 2–10]. The main trigger of the conflict was again Ukraine's aspiration to move in the direction of Europe, the constant debates over Ukraine's incorporation into NATO. The Russian Federation fear was based on the fact that Ukraine would be one more Russian border state to join it. It was the first time in the history that the European Council made a decision about an accelerated procedure to grant Ukraine the status of candidate for membership in the European Union [15, p. 30–49].

In January 2015 the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine set an organized removal of Soviet statues, then the government of Ukraine (the Cabinet of Ministers) submitted 4 bills on de-communization to the parliament on March 31, 2015, which were passed on April 9³. The program of de-communization was aimed to break with the Soviet past by renaming Soviet toponyms, removing Soviet symbols and destroying Soviet memorials.

According to the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, between 2014 and 2021, more than 51 000 toponyms were renamed, including almost a thousand settlements, 26 districts, 75 educational institutions, near 30 railways and seaports.

In a single year 2022, a further 10 000 toponyms got new titles. This fast renaming accelerated significantly after the full-scale invasion in February 24, 2022, moving from 'de-communization' to 'de-colonization' and 'de-russification' to exclude the influence of Russia's imperial past. There is one approach to get rid of toponyms which may glorify Russian imperial policy or be dedicated to individuals who held leadership positions in state structures; were employees of Soviet state security bodies at all levels; publicly supported Russian imperial policy.

² De-communization – the process of breaking up with the Soviet authoritarian past.

³ The text of the law can be accessed at the official web-page of the Ukrainian parliament: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/317-19#Text>

On March 21, 2023 the Law of Ukraine ‘On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and Decolonization of Toponymy’ was enacted by the Ukrainian government (the Verkhovna Rada)⁴. The key provisions of the law include the prohibition of propaganda, symbol ban, de-colonization of toponymy and monument removal.

Due to the Ukrainian Transparent Cities program (an online platform which promotes transparency, accountability, and integrity in Ukrainian cities; works to reduce corruption by assessing and ranking cities based on their openness, providing recommendations for improvement, and fostering dialogue between local authorities and citizens through tools like an online platform) database between March 2022 and May 2024 covered 23 regions, the number of renamed toponyms is 7 800.

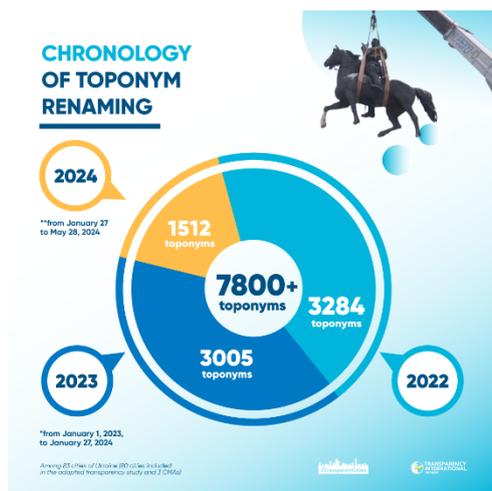


Fig. 1. Chronology of toponym renaming⁵

The change of hodonyms is not just about changing signs, but about restoring Ukrainian identity and forming national consciousness. Ukraine is a witness of two crucial events for the last twelve years, hodonyms overcome this period as well depicting geographical, historical, political and linguistic realities in their titles which are based on Ukrainian contemporary life. Eventually, the option of street name is mutual will of Ukrainian people, because it concerns everyone who made choice to stay in Ukraine and overcome this grand historical stage together being a part of this process.

The process of de-communization had a purpose to demolish the names of the Soviet revolutionaries from their titles: Вулиця Леніна | Lenin Street (a Russian revolutionary, politician, the inspirer of government of the Soviet Union) was renamed into Вулиця Євгена Харченка | Yevhen Kharchenko Street (a soldier who died in the battle of Plovaisk) in Kyiv, 2016; Вулиця Фелікса Держинського | Felix Dzerzhinsky Street (a Soviet revolutionary) was renamed into Вулиця Володимира Вернадського | Volodymyr Vernadsky Street (one of the founders and the first president of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences) in Dnipro, 2015.

The de-russification agenda is focused on the removal of the Russian Empire figures: Вулиця Пушкіна | Pushkin Street (a Russian writer) – Вулиця Юліана Матвійчука | Yulian Matviichuk Street (a military service member, who died in Russo-Ukrainian War) in Poltava, 2023; Московський Проспект | Moscow Avenue (the capital of the Russian Federation) – Проспект Героїв Харкова | Kharkiv Heroes Avenue (the defenders of Kharkiv during Russo-Ukrainian war) in Kharkiv, 2022.

⁴ The text of the law can be accessed at the official web-page of the Ukrainian parliament: <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billinfo/Bills/Card/39367>

⁵ The text of the Ukrainian Transparent Cities Program at the official web-page: <https://ti-ukraine.org/en/blogs/decolonization-related-changes-in-ukrainian-urban-space-in-the-past-two-years/>

The similar approach of renaming hodononyms within de-communization and de-russification | de-colonization is based on the returning the historical names to the streets: Вулиця Фрунзе | Frunze Street (a Soviet revolutionary, politician, army officer and military theorist) – Вулиця Кирилівська | Kirilivska Street (it was named firstly in 1869 after the Kirilivsky Monastery it heads to). There was one attempt to return the title in 2011 at the session of the Kyiv City Council, but the project did not receive the sufficient number of votes, thus the historical name was brought back only in 2015; Вулиця Володимира Кудряшова | Volodymyr Kudriashov Street (a Soviet partisan) – Вулиця Мокра | Mokra Street (a name of the river the street was watered by in the past) in Kyiv, 2023.

The government also implements the renaming hodononyms after Ukrainian cultural figures, such as writers, composers, singers and religious figures, civil rights and social activists: Вулиця Клубна | Club Street (a common name, no semantic load) – Вулиця Марії Приймаченко | Mariia Prymachenko Street (a famous 20th-centure Ukrainian folk artist) in Mykolaiv, 2024; Вулиця Некрасова | Nekrasov Street (a Russian writer) – Вулиця Юрія Руфа | Yurii Rupha Street (a Ukrainian writer and a soldier, who died during 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine) in Lviv, 2024. The glorification of Ukrainian famous personalities has attained even the astronauts: Проспект Юрія Гагаріна | Yurii Naharin Avenue (a Soviet astronaut) was renamed as Проспект Леоніда Каденюка | Leonid Kadeniuk Avenue (the first astronaut of independent Ukraine) in Kyiv, 2023.

Finally, the change to Ukrainian hodononyms even adheres to the standards of the state language: Молдавська Street | Вулиця Молдавська – Moldovska Street | Вулиця Молдовська, Ovrazhna Street | Вулиця Овражна – Yaruzhna Street | Вулиця Яружна, Richna Street | Вулиця Річна – Richkova Street | Вулиця Річкова in Kamianske, Dnipro region, 2025.

The restoration of justice in the territory of Ukraine aims to correct the legacy of cultural colonization and build a new identity separate from historical influences. All these changes are consequences of the particular historical events, the hodononyms honor them, perpetuating in the titles: Вулиця Красіна | Krasyna Street (a Russian Soviet politician) – Вулиця Героїв АТО | Heroes of the ATO Street (Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone is a term which identified Ukrainian territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions under the control of Russian military forces from 2014 till 2022) in Poltava, 2016; Вулиця Пушкіна | Pushkin Street (has been mentioned) – Вулиця захисників України | Ukrainian Defenders Street (to honor all heroes who sacrificed their lives for Ukrainian Independence) in Terнопil, 2022.

Table 1

Database

| № | Ukrainian name | English name | City | Year of renaming |
|----|--|---|---------|------------------|
| 1. | Проспект Радянської України – Проспект Георгія Гонгадзе | Soviet Ukraine Avenue – Heorhiy Honhadze | Kyiv | 2007 |
| 2. | Вулиця Леніна – Вулиця Євгена Харченка | Lenin Street – Yevhen Kharchenko Street | Kyiv | 2016 |
| 3. | Вулиця Фелікса Дзержинського – Вулиця Володимира Вернадського | Felix Dzerzhinsky Street – Volodymyr Vernadsky Street | Dnipro | 2015 |
| 4. | Вулиця Пушкіна – Вулиця Юліана Матвійчука | Pushkin Street – Yulian Matviichuk | Poltava | 2023 |
| 5. | Московський Проспект – Проспект Героїв Харкова | Moscow Avenue – Kharkiv Heroes Avenue | Kharkiv | 2022 |
| 6. | Вулиця Фрунзе – Вулиця Кирилівська | Frunze Street – Kirilivska Street | Kyiv | 2015 |
| 7. | Вулиця Володимира Кудряшова – Вулиця Мокра | Volodymyr Kudriashov Street – Mokra Street | Kyiv | 2023 |

Continuation of table 1

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|-----|--|---|--------------------------|------|
| 8. | Вулиця Клубна – Вулиця Марії Приймаченко | Club Street –Mariia Prymachenko Street | Mykolaiv | 2024 |
| 9. | Вулиця Некрасова – Вулиця Юрія Руфа | Nekrasov Street – Yurii Rupha Street | Lviv | 2022 |
| 10. | Проспект Юрія Гагаріна – Проспект Леоніда Каденюка | Yurii Haharin Avenue – Leonid Kadeniuk Avenue | Kyiv | 2023 |
| 11. | Вулиця Молдавська – Вулиця Молдовська | Moldavska Street – Moldovska Street | Kamianske, Dnipro region | 2025 |
| 12. | Вулиця Овразжна – Вулиця Яружна | Ovrazhna Street – Yaruzhna Street | Kamianske, Dnipro region | 2025 |
| 13. | Вулиця Річна – Вулиця Річкова | Richna Street – Richkova Street | Kamianske, Dnipro region | 2025 |
| 14. | Вулиця Красіна – Вулиця Героїв АТО | Krasyna Street – Heroes of the ATO Street | Poltava | 2016 |
| 15. | Вулиця Пушкіна – Вулиця захисників України | Pushkin Street – Ukrainian Defenders Street | Ternopil | 2022 |

Conclusions. The article presents Ukrainian hodonyms analysis at the intersection of two political processes "de-communization" | "de-sovietization" and "de-russification" | "de-colonization". It is an attempt to understand how street names take part in shaping national identity after the regime ceases to exist. The transition from de-sovietization to de-russification in Ukraine is the process of removing Soviet influence to sharper abolition of Russian cultural and political symbols, intensified by the full-scale invasion in 2022. It incorporates demolishing monuments, renaming toponyms, removing Russian propaganda, promoting the Ukrainian language, culture and historical memory that were suppressed during centuries of Russian and Soviet reigning. The difference is that "de-sovietization" process is focused on cancelling communist symbols, whereas "de-russification" targets narratives and signs associated with Russian imperialism.

The results show that "de-russification" is an extension of "de-sovietization" processes, they intersect having the same aim to get rid of Soviet and Russian past. While the previous researches have stated that symbols play an important role in different aspects of political life, the goal of this investigation is to show the vital role of hodonyms. They are not just spectators, but they are participants of the state creative process, because they carry the thoughtful meaning in each title, not randomly chosen names. The implication of this study is that hodonyms are political signs, because they are the product of political changes, their renaming is caused by national mobilization and political involvement. There are some tendencies in the current renaming process: 1) to exclude the names of the Soviet revolutionaries and representatives; 2) to eliminate the Russian Empire figures; 3) the returning the historical names to the streets; 4) the renaming hodonyms after Ukrainian cultural figures; 5) to comply with the Ukrainian language regulations; 6) to name in honor to historical events and military heroes.

Further exploration is needed to establish how exactly change of symbols affect hodonyms. Additional research should also be concentrated on the study of the street titles named after Ukrainian supporters (figures, cities, countries) and their meaning. Outside of Ukraine territory, it might be useful to take into the analysis the hodonyms which have been renamed in solidarity with Ukraine, particularly since the 2022 invasion as a symbolic protest.

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