Decommunization of the Mind: The Case of Mariupol
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Introduction: Decommunization in a historical context

In April 2015, the Ukrainian parliament issued four laws that became known as "decommunization laws" (Himka 2015a; Olszański 2017; Nuzov 2017). The set of laws is an important element in the complex social transformation that is taking place in Ukraine following the Euromaidan Revolution and the Donbas war, starting from 2014. While the law is intended to address the historical legacy of every totalitarian regime that ruled in Ukraine throughout the 20th century, according to John-Paul Himka, "for Ukraine this is really a decommunizing law" (Himka 2015a) because of its selective prohibition of Nazi propaganda, in contrast to the comprehensive ban on Soviet propaganda.

The text of the four laws is the following:

- no. 2538 "on the legal status and honouring the memory of participants in the struggle for the independence of Ukraine in the twentieth century"
- no. 2558 "on the condemnation of the communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes and the prohibition of propagating their symbols"
- no. 2540 "on access to the archives of the repressive organs of the communist totalitarian regime, 1917-1991"
- no. 2539 "on the perpetuation of the victory over Nazism in the Second World War"

The above legislative package addresses the problem of transitional justice, an issue that is crucially important in every society undergoing political transformation and struggling with the legacy of repressive regimes (Barahona de Brito 2001). The question of transitional justice has been exceptionally relevant in the countries of postsocialist Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet empire and the related ideological regime. In the newly democratizing countries, the question of how to address the contested and, in many cases, traumatic past was an essential component of social reconciliation and the basis of any future political development. However, the reality of transitional justice looked different in every country, depending on the type of transition, the political system adopted by the successor regime, and the power balance between different groups of the new elite (Barahona de Brito 2001, 13). While countries of Central Eastern Europe that belonged to the buffer zone of "friendly socialist countries" have all accepted some form of lustration policies and the opening of secret police files, in the former Soviet republics it was more difficult to implement a similar process. As the majority of the secret KGB materials was transferred to Moscow not long before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the measure of lustration using archival materials was not available in the former Soviet republics (Stan 2008, 9).

The attitude of Ukraine towards transitional justice has been ambiguous since the end of the Soviet times: while the majority of the population voted for independence in 1991, this never resulted in a clear break with the Soviet past, neither on the level of power nor the side of the citizens. The direction of transitional justice policies and official memory politics has always been influenced by the geopolitical inclinations of the current leadership, particularly their relationship to Russia (Nuzov 2017, 146). The most important milestones of Ukrainian memory politics in the first two decades of independence were the eradication, then reintroduction, of the concept of Great Patriotic War into national education (1991 and 1995, under Leonid Kuchma), the legal recognition of Holodomor as a genocide against Ukrainian people committed by the Soviet regime (2006, under Viktor Yushchenko,

denounced by Viktor Yanukovych in 2010), and a decree commemorating the establishment of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (2007, Viktor Yushchenko, cancelled by Viktor Yanukovych in 2010) (Nuzov 2017, 147).

Besides the pressure resulting from Ukraine's position in a geopolitical buffer zone between Russian and European spheres of power, the treatment of memory politics has also been heavily influenced by the conflicting imaginaries about the Soviet past that exist within the country. Tatiana Zhurzhenko refers to this phenomenon as the "Huntingtonization of the Ukrainian political discourse" that leads to the interpretation of the regional differences as a clash of civilizations (Zhurzhenko 2002). This categorization views Western Ukraine as the representative of "civic" and "European" values, and Eastern Ukraine as a stronghold of Soviet identity that presents an obstacle to progress and European integration. Scholars have repeatedly challenged this dichotomy as reductionist, proposing more nuanced category systems to comprehend the diversity within the Ukrainian nation (Portnov 2013; Richardson 2008; Himka 2015b). Igor Torbakov argues that the post-Soviet identity usually attributed to the population of the Eastern regions is characterized by political passivity, reliance on state paternalism, and a sympathy towards Russia's neo-Soviet historical narrative (Torbakov 2014). In this context, one of the main questions that arises in connection to the new laws is how decommunization policies will work among the realities of the Eastern regions (Himka 2015a): how top-down legislation will affect local memory constructions and daily rituals, and how different groups of citizens will relate to these changes.

Methodology and case background

The present paper addresses the same question by looking at how policies of decommunization law concerning the symbolic aspect of the Soviet past are perceived and debated by the citizens of Mariupol, a mid-sized industrial city on the East Ukrainian front line. The symbolic aspects of the policy are covered by Law n.2558 "on the condemnation of the communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes and the prohibition of propagating their symbols". On the level of practice, this means three main measures: the removal of Soviet monuments from public space; the erasure of Soviet toponyms; and the reform of the Ukrainian holiday calendar. Based on ethnographic evidence collected in Mariupol between 2015 and 2018 during my one-year fieldwork and shorter field visits, the paper presents an account of how the three above policy measures have been experienced by different groups of the local society, and what the main issues were that arose in relation to the new laws.

Mariupol, a city of half a million inhabitants on the coast of the Azov Sea, had been the centre of the Soviet metallurgical industry until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Due to its peripheral economic and geopolitical position within independent Ukraine during the 1990s, the financial investments and cultural influences of the postsocialist transformation had a much less significant effect on urban space and everyday life than in more central localities of postsocialist Eastern Europe. As a result, the material and cultural legacy of the Soviet period has been preserved to a large extent, constituting Mariupol as a place of contrasting temporalities. The outbreak of the Donbas conflict served as an unexpected catalyst of change: the temporary occupation of the city by Russian-backed separatist forces in 2014 had shifted the perception of Mariupol within the country, attributing symbolic importance to the city in the Ukrainian national identity, and presenting local residents with a new imperative to reflect on the future of their hometown. My research investigates how various elements of this transformation are executed, perceived and questioned by members of the local community, asking how spatial and temporal forms of Soviet legacy are reinterpreted in a period of political crisis and social change. Decommunization laws and their ethnographic implications is one of the possible entry points to analyse the interplay of nation-wide social transformations and local interpretations of history.

Leninopad: The fall of Lenin in the Mariupol public space

As a consequence of the Euromaidan movement, more than 500 Lenin statues were dismantled in the winter of 2013/2014 in major Ukrainian cities and smaller settlements, mainly in spontaneous actions led by pro-European protesters (Olszański 2017, 10). The popular movement titled "Leninopad"[1] was an episode in the series of recurring attempts to eradicate Soviet symbolism from Ukrainian public space. The process started in the Western regions of Ukraine early on after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and reached the central and Eastern parts of the country in waves starting from the 2000s (Gaidai 2017; Olszański 2017). Mariupol, similarly to other cities in the easternmost regions of Donetsk and Lugansk countries, had largely avoided by such decommunizing tendencies until the outbreak of the Donbas conflict in 2014. Therefore, the three main Lenin statues (one in the city centre and two others in the two steel factory districts) have been standing undisturbed by the advent of decommunization laws. The volatility of the official standpoint is reflected by the statement of Yuriy Khotlubey, the mayor of Mariupol at the time, on February 24, 2014 (the day after President Viktor Yanukovych had fled the country) regarding the Lenin monuments in the city. Having passed an order to protect the monuments with a round-the-clock security service against any possible act of vandalism similar to the ones happening around the country, the mayor stated in the local press: "There is nothing to do with Lenin here! If the question of removing the monument becomes timely in the city, we will solve the problem with a referendum."[2] A little more than a year later, Petro Poroshenko, the newly elected president, issued the decommunization laws in April 2015, and the statue of Lenin in the centre of Mariupol was dismantled overnight in August 2015. In 2016, Khotlubey, mayor of 20 years, was replaced by a new administration comprised mainly of former members of the local factory management. When I talked to one of the new local officials in 2018, he summarized the same story this way: "We removed all Lenins, and now everything is fine. People don't miss it, don't discuss it."

My ethnographic inquiries showed a somewhat different picture. While the question about the destiny of Lenin statues was a fundamental component in all of my interview guides, eliciting the issue even when the respondents would not find it relevant by themselves, most of my informants were keen on discussing the topic and had explicit opinions about it. The most common reaction was the same in every generation: "It is part of our history! Why do they have to erase it completely?" However, the same statement had slightly different undertones for young people than for pensioners. Talking to retired steelworkers who spent their lives in a factory named after Vladimir Ilych Lenin, and were deeply embedded in the collective practices and the ideological environment of the socialist workplace before and after their retirement, I expected the sense of disorientation and resentment over the official rejection of the symbols that served as a basis of their identity. More interestingly, most of my informants in their 20s and 30s also expressed clear disapproval of the removal, despite their articulated disinterest or neutrality regarding the person of Lenin as a historical figure. While the idea behind decommunization laws conceives of these monuments as contagious foreign objects in the body of Ukrainian society which continue to spread the ideology of the long-deceased oppressor state, the reality shows that the figure of Lenin became invisible in the public space and largely deprived of its original meanings. The witty comment of Alesya, a 24-year-old interpreter, perfectly summarizes how distant the historical trauma of the Soviet times feels to most of her generation: "I was okay with Lenin, he didn't do any harm to me!" As Vova, a 28-year-old doctor formulated: "Looking at him, I didn't think of Lenin, Stalin, Soviet Union, or that I want to go back... I just thought, yes, it's Lenin, it's okay". However, this neutrality should not be taken for an obvious sign of powerlessness: the invisibility of Lenin can be interpreted in the framework of "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995) (in this case, rather "banal socialism"). According to Michael Billig, the author of the concept, hidden or trivial symbols of an ideology are never completely innocent, as they remain unquestioned and unchallenged, and as such, they help to naturalize the ideological discourse they represent towards an off-guard population (Billig 1995, 8).

Speaking to my informants, however, did not suggest a lack of alertness about hidden ideological messages; instead, an explicit desire of understanding and conversation. Some of them simply

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[1] The word *Leninopad* is a neologism that translates to "Leninfall" (see vodopad = waterfall etc.)

[2] «Ленин тут не при чем! Если в городе назреет вопрос по сносу памятника, то его мы будем решать на референдуме» n.a. 2014 "В Мариуполе судьбу памятника Ленину решат на референдуме" 0629.com.ua, 25 February, https://bit.ly/2yoVMJG

objected to the destructive nature of the removal policy, arguing that the mere demolition of a monument does not improve society in any constructive way, but the most important critique pointed to the lack of any basic social consensus regarding the evaluation of the Soviet past, Lenin, and the new national heroes. In this view, the erasure of Lenin from public space represents an absolute denial of a historical period, a policy that does not allow either the processing or a better understanding of traumatic aspects of the past, therefore it cannot lead to any positive social outcome. There was a general consensus among my young informants that the removal policy is an externally imposed, superficial political measure that does not address the underlying social problem, the existence of which was never debated in our conversations. As Alina, a 26-year-old woman working in the contemporary art centre put it: "Yes, they removed Lenin. But in your mind, you didn't remove anything. This is a problem. Decommunization of the mind didn't happen." In order to achieve that, she argued, the issue of the Soviet past should be addressed in the Ukrainian state education in a nuanced and objective manner, and other forms of social dialogue should be given space and publicity.

The lack of dialogue was especially noticeable in connection to the successor of Lenin in the Mariupol public space. Four months after the Lenin statue in the city centre was dismantled in August 2015, a new statue of Svyatoslav the Brave, the First Kievan Prince, appeared in its place in December 2015. The popular perception of the new monument was fairly unequivocal: Mariupol residents were most often shaking their heads with an ironic smile when I asked about it, admitting they have no idea who the person was standing in the place of Lenin. The introduction of new heroes is an important element in the nationalizing policy of post-Maidan Ukraine, and as such, it is articulated in the decommunization laws as well (Himka 2015a). However, the social consensus around these new national heroes is similarly weak in regard to the Soviet symbolism it replaces. In this particular case, the statue was presented to the city by the father of a member of the Azov Battalion, a Ukrainian military unit that started out as a voluntary organization and played a significant role in the recapturing of Mariupol from the pro-Russian separatist troops in the spring of 2014. The fact that almost nobody was sure who the subject of the new statue was, shows that the emergence of new heroes is not the result of an organic process based on open dialogue between different groups of the local society. Olga, a 29-year-old journalist suggested that the lack of debate evokes precisely the Soviet way of externally imposed heroes: "I don't like this new monument because of the way they put it there. They didn't ask anyone! The same way the Soviet Union did with Lenin!"

The attitude of local authorities towards monuments and the related social debate is ambiguous. As members of the new Ukrainian leadership, they repeat the official narrative about Ukrainian national values and the denouncing of the Soviet past, but they cannot ignore the reality that a significant part of their electoral base lives in different realms of traditions and value systems. This results in contradictory situations, when the mayor of Mariupol participates in the inauguration ceremony of Svyatoslav the Brave in the winter, and conducts the Victory Day celebrations with Second World War veterans on the 9th of May. Other than the similar re-enactments of the Ukrainian nationalist and neo-Soviet ideological standpoints, city hall officials showed openness to more organic and localized versions of commemorative practice. One of the directors in the cultural department described to me their plan to erect a statue in the city for George the Winner, Crimean Greek hero, in reference to the local Greek community. However, similar projects still do not facilitate any social dialogue that would include different groups of the local population.

In this political and cultural environment, there was one event that stood out strikingly by its conscious objective to reflect on the Soviet legacy and create a space for discussion: the DECOM Picnic organized by Platforma TIO, the only contemporary art space in Mariupol. The DECOM Picnic was held for the first time in 2016, the same year when TIO started its operation, on April 22, the birthday of Lenin. It was a public gathering in the backyard of the local history museum where a number of discarded Lenin busts and other Soviet personalities have been placed after the decommunization laws came into force. Participants created collages and posters related to the topics of Lenin, the Soviet past and the recent turn of memory politics, using old communist-themed postcards, Soviet liquor labels, recycled interior objects and the discarded monuments themselves. In the next year, the DECOM Picnic was held in the venues of TIO, in form of a dress up party combined with the screening of "Leninopad", a short movie discussing the spontaneous toppling of Lenin statues in the winter of

2014. One of the workers of ТЮ, the 23-year-old Iskra, emphasized intergenerational dialogue as the most important feature of these occasions: “So many people came who usually don’t visit our events, including people who actually lived in the Soviet Union, so we could share our impressions.” The example of the DECOM Picnic shows how bottom-up forms of social dialogue can work in practice, filling the void left by the lack of state initiatives to address the question in depth.

Set in Steel: Ideology and infrastructure behind toponyms

We were sitting in the office of Lyudmila Leonidovna, the director of Ilych Factory Museum. Factory museums, at least those like Ilych Museum, are a Soviet genre, and they are still present in large numbers around the industrial cities of Eastern Ukraine. Their very existence is a clear indicator of how Soviet ideology viewed the role of industry and labour in the country. Contrary to certain neoliberal discourses that construe blue collar labour as outdated, dirty and inferior to other, higher status jobs, the Soviet system regarded industrial workers as the economic and political basis of the communist state, and created the adequate forms of representation accordingly (Kideckel 2008; Petrovici 2011). Factory museums retell the history of the plant in a way to reaffirm its central role in the substantive economy *(khoziaistvo)* of the Soviet city (Collier 2011, 82), and to articulate the importance and status of the workers in both the national and local contexts. Thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, these places stand as memorials of a long disappeared political value system, but in many cases, they are also put in the service of the new economic interests and the related ideologies. The Ilych Museum today, similarly to a couple of other factory museums in the region, is a peculiar heterotopian construction that preserves the heritage of Soviet industrial culture, while also being used in the creation of a new type of corporate identity. It is probably the last public space in Mariupol where Lenin survived, and still occupies a central place in the exhibition display. They did not defeat Ilych here, or so it appears. Lyudmila Leonidovna commented on this situation in the following way: “In the Soviet times, there was a great amount of Lenins everywhere, but now he is only on one wall, in connection to the year of 1947 when the factory was named after him.” This statement sounded somewhat surprising, in view of the fact that Lenin does not appear only at the renaming, but the whole exhibition starts with his image in the middle of the entrance wall. The second surprise came right after that, when Lyudmila Leonidovna added: “Now the factory was renamed again, after Zot Ilych Nekrasov, so it does not bear the name of Lenin anymore.” Me and my friend, a native of Mariupol, asked again, equally puzzled: “After whom?” Lyudmila Leonidovna explained that the factory, in its official name *Mariupol Metallurgy Plant Ilych* (Мариупольский металлургический комбинат имени Ильича) has also fallen under the effect of the decommunization law in 2015, but the renaming would have caused serious economic disadvantage for the management.

> “Ilych Steel is a brand! We have a product certificate that is accepted all over the world. This is why we are able to sell our steel for a higher price. We respond for the quality. This is a brand, and we were threatened to lose that brand. It is written there, we give MMKI steel. And if it was written something like we give MMKO... it could have changed everything. It would have been simply a catastrophe for us that this law was created. Because everyone already forgot what kind of Ilych is that, Vladimir Ilych or someone else. But this is the name of the company.”

Following the above considerations, the management came up with the idea to rename the plant after a ferrous metallurgy engineer from Dnipropetrovsk, Zot Ilych Nekrasov, who conducted research during the 1970s in the factory about the quality improvement of cast iron, and happened to have the same middle name as Lenin. This way they were able to save a part of the renaming costs, and most importantly, preserve the brand in order not to disrupt the operation of international business.

This story demonstrates how the law about renaming affects local life not only on the level of temporary inconveniences and symbolic struggles, but it intervenes in the material and practical textures of everyday life in profound ways. To formulate it eloquently: you can discard a name, but you cannot discard a hundred million tons of steel that stands behind that name and its history. By a hundred million tons of steel, I refer to the ways in which the Ilych plant is embedded in the

materiality of everyday life. First, the factory is an active business operation that provides employment to a significant percentage of the local population and, no less importantly, generates profit to its owners and management. Second, the factory occupies a central role in the identity and imagination of local citizens as a place of labour, kinship, collectivity and material livelihoods. Third, the factory in its physical materiality determines the urban landscape in fundamental ways, including public utilities, urban infrastructure and ecology. Looking at this complex ensemble of material and symbolic structures connected to the steel plant, it is easy to understand that the simple removal of the name Ilych would have hardly shaken the foundations of a whole lifeworld that had been constructed around the ideology represented by the name of Lenin. The case of the Ilych factory demonstrates what Caroline Humphrey called "the ideological role of infrastructure" (Humphrey 2005, 40), describing the subtle and indirect ways in which the built environment contributed to the creation of specific Sovietized subjectivities.

The inertia of material infrastructure that Sephen Collier called "the intransigence of things" (Collier 2011, 202) is illustrated by the case of another public institution in the city: the *Palace of Metallurgists*, commonly referred to as *DK Metallurgov*, has been also renamed recently from its original name, *Palace of Metallurgists of Ilych Plant* (Дворец Металлургов комбината имени Ильича) to *Ukrainian House* (Украинский дом). Palaces of culture, in vernacular speech referred to as *DKs,* are another type of Soviet cultural institutions that survived until the present day and are looking for their new role among the radically altered cultural environment. In the Soviet times, palaces of culture served as partner institutions of the factories, extending workplace collectivity to the sphere of leisure and free time. DKs fulfilled a variety of cultural functions: they hosted official celebrations of state and factory holidays, theatre and music events, and the amateur art collectives of factory workers and their children. Today their role is varied in each institution, depending on the source of maintenance and the type of management. DK Metallurgov was originally a culture house of the Ilych factory, and it stayed in factory maintenance well after the postsocialist turn, until it was transferred to the cultural department of the Mariupol city hall in 2016. In the words of Ivan Rodionovich, the long-established director of the DK, the renaming was facilitated not only by decommunization law, but also by the changing function of the culture house: "In the city hall they said that the DK does not only fulfil its old function as a palace of culture for metallurgists anymore, but it works for the whole city now. So, they decided to rename it to Ukrainian House, in relation to our current political situation."

When asked about the difficulties in relation to the renaming, Ivan Rodionovich stated that they did not have any major problems similar to the Ilych factory, besides the time-consuming process of rewriting every contract with business partners and utility providers. However, in the end of my visit he mentioned the conflict with a couple of pro-Ukrainian activists who repeatedly expressed their discontent over the old sign on the top of the building still advertising the name "Ilych".

> "These so-called patriots come and complain that it is a disgrace to have that sign on, and it is against the law, so they will take legal action. I always say, tell me how to remove those letters? They are from iron and stainless steel, they were produced in the factory thirty years ago. They weigh hundreds of kilos, it would cost a fortune, and currently we have more important items in our budget. I am asking, what kind of patriots are you if you have nothing better to do than fight against some letters on a building? We are working in this building every day to promote Ukrainian culture, help to educate people and provide them the opportunity to develop themselves – maybe this is patriotism, not the crying about the letters?"

The story of iron letters shows that names, institutional practice and material infrastructure can change in a different pace, producing conflicting temporalities and peculiar constellations of meanings.

12PM Moscow Time: The decommunization of the holiday calendar

I spent the 2017 New Year's Eve as a real Mariupolean, sitting in the dimly lit living room in full makeup, drinking sweet champagne, and chatting with Lilya, my local friend, while *Ironiya Sudby* was

playing on the television. Ironiya Sudby (in full title: *The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath!*) is a movie about a man who drinks too much vodka during the New Year *banya*[3] visit, and the next day he finds himself in Leningrad instead of Moscow by mistake. Due to the uniformity of Soviet urban design, he does not recognize the difference until he enters his apartment, where he finds a woman different from the one he expected. Ironiya Sudby can be best described as the *Love Actually* of the post-Soviet region. Since its debut on the screens on December 31, 1975, the film has become the traditional New Year's Eve movie, intended to add a sparkle of fairy tale romance to the festive season. Sitting in front of the television, Lilya told me that Ukrainian authorities wanted to ban the movie from the New Year's Eve programme after the conflict with Russia started, but unlike Lenin statues or street names, this tradition has not yet been eradicated during the de-Sovietisation efforts of the Ukrainian state. Lilya also told how the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has changed the structure of New Year celebrations:

> "Before the war with Russia, we celebrated New Year two times. First according to Russian time, as midnight is one hour earlier there: we listened to the Russian President's speech, then the *kurante* (chimes) from Kremlin. After that came the Ukrainian midnight, Ukrainian President's speech, and the next kurante. It was also a chance to drink champagne twice!"

This symbolic manifestation of living in parallel time zones was an idea that stayed with me after that night, and made me think about the role of holidays, temporality and celebratory practices in the time of social transformation. The decommunization of the Ukrainian holiday calendar started in the 1990s with the elimination of some less important Soviet holidays such as Soviet Constitution Day (December 5), or the renaming of Soviet Army Day (February 23) to Ukrainian Army Day (Wanner 1999, 113). By the end of the 1990s, the Ukrainian state holiday calendar contained the following holidays:

1 January	New Year's Day
7 January	Orthodox Christmas
8 March	Women's Day
Variable	Easter Monday
1-2 May	International Labour Day
9 May	Victory Day
28 June	Ukrainian Constitution Day
24 August	Ukrainian Independence Day
7-8 November	Great October Socialist Revolution

Among these nine days there are two religious holidays, two Ukrainian national holidays introduced after the beginning of independence, and the remaining five are Soviet holidays. The holiday of the Great October Socialist Revolution was first renamed to the Day of National Reconciliation in 1999, then abandoned altogether (Wanner 1999, 113). Consequently, the majority of Soviet holidays was still included in the state calendar by the time decommunization laws were introduced. The only holiday directly affected by the law is Victory Day: starting from 2015, Ukraine introduced May 8 as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation, following the European tradition to celebrate the end of the Second World War on May 8 instead of May 9. However, May 9, the Soviet version of the holiday also remained an official day off under the same name of Victory Day (Himka 2015a). The rest of the holidays were left intact by the law, but proposals to cancel Women's Day or Victory Day repeatedly appeared in the Ukrainian parliament, meeting general opposition from the side of the population.

How did the citizens of Mariupol perceive these major and minor disruptions in their cycle of ritual time? The most frequent reaction was the feeling of puzzlement and displeasure about the top-down intervention in their long-established habits. This was the most apparent in the case of Women's Day and Labour Day. Both of these holidays started out as fundamental components of the Soviet ritual

[3] Traditional Russian public bath

cycle, loaded with strong ideological contents, and gained new, personal meanings in the course of time. Catherine Wanner notes that the alienating and emptied out character of Soviet state holidays resulted in a counter-reaction from the side of the population to fill the official rituals with personal meanings: "Soviet citizens refashioned Soviet holidays by reforging meaning into them that was highly individualized and expressed in a highly atomized way" (Wanner 1999, 111). When asking about the changes in the holiday calendar, many of my informants argued that the disputed ideological contents of the given holiday faded away in the popular consciousness long ago, and they have been replaced by more personal symbolic contents. Women's Day, which was made into an official holiday in the time of Lenin, and a non-working holiday under the office of Brezhnev in 1965, originally celebrated the female communist heroes who fought for equality and emancipation. During the last decades of the Soviet period, it gradually became a day to appreciate women in everyday spheres of life, the home and the workplace. In contemporary Mariupol, Women's Day is a serious business. Growing up in the neighbouring Hungary, where the holiday is not a day off, and it did not mean much more than a couple of red carnations given by classmates or male colleagues to the female co-workers, I was astonished by the effort that Ukrainian people invested in the holiday preparations. A couple of days before March 8, shops and supermarkets were filled with flowers, chocolates and a large variety of decorative bags to carry the presents. In the beauty salon I was told, in a somewhat condescending tone, that it is hopeless to get an appointment for the next few days: "We are all booked for Women's Day…" One day before March 8, I visited a local museum of folklore in a neighbouring village, the management, consisting of three middle-aged women, was in excited anticipation for the holiday. While having tea in their office, they shared their opinions about the prospect of cancelling the holiday: "They better not do it! We deserve a day that is finally about us, we are congratulated, getting flowers and enjoying some rest. I don't understand why does this hurt anyone." The similar experiences clearly demonstrate how the political content of a holiday targeted by government policies often turns out to be a mis-hit, provoking anger and resistance in the population. As one of my male informants, a man in his early 60s, formulated: "The 8 of March is not about Clara Zetkin or Rosa Luxemburg, it is about spring, mimosas, tulips, no, tulips are more in May. It is the holiday of spring, we congratulate our women, women flourish, everything is beautiful. For whom is 8 March associated with some tabooed past?"

At the same time, just like during the Soviet times, holidays are not static symbolic objects but exist in a constantly changing social context and their meaning is constantly renegotiated even without the intervention of top-down commemorative policies. This is best shown by the case of Women's Day in contemporary Ukraine. Besides the majority attitude that I described above, there was another type of movement associated with the holiday. In March of 2018, similar to a number of Ukrainian cities, Mariupol also hosted a demonstration of feminist activists which used this day to raise awareness about the pressing gender inequalities in Ukrainian society, and the hypocrisy of a state holiday that celebrates women without addressing the aforementioned inequalities. The feminist march titled "More Than Wives" (Ukrainian: Більше, ніж дружини) was a reaction to the emergence of far-right paramilitary organizations that, besides promoting nationalist and xenophobic ideas, also expressed chauvinistic views about "traditional female roles". The march was organized by the crew Platforma ТЮ, the contemporary art centre that also organizes actions related to human rights issues. I participated in the demonstration held in the main square of the city. It was a strange and poetic scene: a small group of queer and feminist activists, dressed in fake paramilitary outfits, black face masks and glitter, and in front of us, a group of women with a rose in their hands, standing up for "traditional values". The male audience was also present in the square, in the form of nationalist counter-protesters waiting in the corner of the side-streets, and a line of riot police intending to protect us from the possible attacks. We were luckier than protesters in other Ukrainian cities: when the extremist did try to attack eventually, the police were there and protected the demonstration, while in other cities they retreated, leaving the space for a number of physical attacks against participants of the feminist marches. Casualties like this, and the symbolic picture of women standing opposed to each other on the main square, shows that the contested meanings around a public holiday are created in a complex system of private routines, political interests and conflicting value systems.

Conclusion

The 2015 package of decommunization laws has been criticized at a number of points. John-Paul Himka argues that the laws “attempt to legislate historical truth” (Himka 2015a), imposing a prescribed narrative of the past from above and, therefore, debilitating any form of social debate regarding the question. Ilya Nuzov adds to this criticism by mentioning that symbolic policies in themselves, without other more comprehensive justice measures, cannot achieve the desired results of social reconciliation (Nuzov 2017, 151). All of the above concerns are reflected in the ethnographic accounts of the Mariupol people. In their own interpretation, the main issues related to the decommunization laws were the externally imposed nature of new narratives, the lack of social dialogue, the lack of in-depth measures to facilitate change, and the disregard of people’s existing traditions and value systems. Participant observation also reveals how laws are implemented, resisted or subverted among the local structures, showing the limits of legislative action in the complicated material, ritual and practical textures of everyday life.

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