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**Ukraine’s Policy of Memory
in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War**

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The policy of decommunization, which included opening of the archives of the secret services of the totalitarian regime, a broad public discussion of its crimes, political condemnation at the level of parliamentary decision-making and the restoration of justice for its victims, sometimes also lustration, was implemented in most post-communist states shortly after the fall of communism in the early 1990s. It became an important element of change that allowed for the democratic development of these countries and later for their integration into the EU and NATO.

Among the former Soviet Republics, only the three Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, which have also become members of the EU and NATO, have undergone such a change of system. However, in most other post-Soviet countries, similar policies were fragmentary or not even initiated at all. As a result, democratic political procedures often only serve as a cover for continuing authoritarian practices. And the states themselves still resemble the Soviet republics.

In Ukraine, too, there were no attempts to implement such a policy on state level during a long period after the restoration of independence in 1991. This is obviously due to the fact that the political elite had changed only slightly and has still been largely composed of former members of the communist leadership. Discussions about the crimes of communism, the need to uncover the whole truth about the perpetrators, and the rehabilitation of the victims of oppression were exclusively conducted at the level of the public and individual scholars dealing with the subject.

The situation only changed after the Orange Revolution of 2004 when, under public pressure, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was founded and the KGB archives were systematically opened. The former president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, was one of the proponents of decommunization. However, he received little support for full implementation from parliament where the Communist Party and other pro-Russian forces were still strongly represented, standing in his way. At the same time, the opposite occurred in Russia: archives were closed and the communist totalitarian regime was rehabilitated, which included the glorification of Stalin. Under the leadership of Putin, who publicly described the collapse of the USSR as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe in history, a radical turn in humanitarian policy began. Nongovernmental organisations such as Memorial, which made the crimes of communism public, first lost the support of the state and then were persecuted by it, culminating in the criminal conviction of some of their activists. The updated communist myths and Soviet traditions about the Great Patriotic War, which is how the Second World War has again been referred to, were perceived as the basis for the unification of society. And not just in relation to Russian society: this model of remembering the past war was to serve as an instrument for restoring Russian influence in the entire post-Soviet space and re-unifying the entire world of the homo sovi-

eticus. The symbol of this influence has been the annual military parades in Moscow on May 9, in which the leaders of the former Soviet republics had to participate.

For Russia, the reassessment of the Soviet past in Ukraine that began under President Yushchenko, meant a loss of influence, a turn away from Russia and a rapprochement with Europe. This was perceived as a threatening change in the geopolitical course. The Kremlin tried to stop these processes by not only playing on the nostalgic feelings of the older generation but also by pursuing an active information campaign among the younger generation to glorify the USSR. Therein, the cult of the Day of Victory, which used the latest media, cinema, and music to revive Soviet traditions among the generation born after 1991, played a significant role. Events such as the parade of the descendants of World War II veterans, the “Immortal Regiment”, were actively supported by Russian authorities far beyond the borders of their country.

Russia waged an aggressive war of information against Ukraine's attempts to inform the world about one of the greatest crimes of communism, the Holodomor of 1932-1933. The memory of this tragedy destroyed the myth of the wonderful Soviet era. Russia called on Ukraine to stop opening the KGB archives, as they contained information that was classified as secret in Russia and hindered the rehabilitation of the crimes of the various Soviet governments.

When the pro-Russian protégé Viktor Yanukovych came to power in 2010, attempts to come to terms with Ukraine's communist past rapidly diminished. Archives were closed and history books rewritten in pro-Soviet terms. The executors of this policy in Yanukovych's team were Russian agents like Dmytro Tabachnyk, the then Minister of Education, who is now a Russian citizen, was declared a traitor to Ukraine by a court and an active collaborator in the territories occupied by Russia. The Institute of National Memory was led by a protégé of the Communist Party, Valerii Soldatenko, before it was dissolved. Olga Ginzburg, a representative of the same political force, became the head of the Ukrainian archive. The reassessment of the past led to changes in contemporary politics. Ukraine began to curtail democracy and persecute civil rights activists and political opponents. Attempts were made to even imprison the historian Ruslan Zably for using documents from the former KGB archives. In other words: the events that had taken place in Russia a decade earlier were repeating themselves.

However, this Ukrainian reorientation towards Russia quickly collapsed. Yanukovych's attempt to announce the curtailment of Ukraine's European integration and its turn towards Russia triggered a large-scale protest, the “Euromaidan” or “Revolution of Dignity”, which lasted for several months between 2013 and 2014. One of the elements of the protest was the “fall of Lenin” – a spontaneous wave of demolitions of Lenin monuments across the country. It symbolized the rejection of the authorities' attempts to return the country to the Soviet past with their anti-democratic approaches.

Yanukovych tried to disperse the protests with violence, resulting in mass shootings of peaceful protesters, but this only led to an expansion of the protests which developed into a nationwide uprising.

Consequently, Yanukovych fled to Russia in the spring of 2014, and the new government decided to take up the spontaneous wave of decommunization and turn it into state policy. The Ukrainian Institute for National Memory, which resumed its work after the change of government, drew up a report with contributions of European and Ukrainian experts as well as the public, and Parliament passed four laws on decommunization in April 2015. These laws were designed not only to contribute to research and come to terms with the communist past (to this end, all archives of the communist secret services were eventually reopened), but also to restrict and stop Russian attempts to use communist myths and traditions in order to bring Ukraine back into its sphere of influence. Since other participants of this conference have commented on these laws in more detail, I will not go into them here.

Meanwhile, from the beginning of the war against Ukraine, Russia tried to take instrumentalise the totalitarian legacy. The hybrid nature of the military conflict was intended to conceal the direct involvement of Russian soldiers in the fights on Ukrainian territory, trying to portray these fights as an outrage on the part of the population of southern and eastern Ukraine, who were supposedly defending their beloved Soviet values against Kyiv. For this reason, the so-called “Russian Spring” initiatives organized by Russian agents were held near Lenin monuments. Their participants used as symbol of recognition so-called “ribbons of St. George”, which evoked memories of the Great Patriotic War or the red Soviet flags. Russian propaganda echoed the rhetoric of the Soviet propaganda from the Great Patriotic War, referring to the Ukrainian government as a “fascist regime”, the Ukrainian military as “tormentors” and Nazis and those who fought against them as “militias”. But the “Russian Spring” failed. Moscow’s puppet regimes were able to survive in parts of the Luhans’k and Donetsk’ regions only. The PRL and PRD terrorist groups that emerged there, existing thanks to Russian military support only, have developed into caricatures, smaller copies of the USSR, reviving Soviet traditions, even including pioneer groups in schools. Russia is pursuing a similar policy in occupied Crimea, which includes the persecution of the activists of the Crimean Tatar national movement.

In Ukraine, as part of the large-scale decommunization process, not only thousands of communist names were removed from the map and communist monuments from the cities. A comprehensive public debate about the past was initiated, too. Examples of the resulting consensus are the recognition of the Holodomor as genocide, which is now accepted as such by over 90% of Ukrainians, the introduction of new concepts for remembering World War II, and the understanding of today’s independent Ukraine as the successor to earlier forms of state existence, including the Ukrainian Peo-

ple's Republic of 1917-1921. The latter is particularly important in the light of the narrative actively promoted by the Kremlin, according to which Ukraine is an accidental geopolitical entity that has emerged from the ruins of the USSR and has never had its own history of statehood.

This narrative became the basis of Vladimir Putin's pseudo-historic articles and speeches and his attempts to justify the war against Ukraine by "restoring historical justice". He repeated the core theses of this narrative before the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. Putin named "denazification" as one of the goals of the war. The Russians demonstrated the meaning of this term in the territories they subsequently conquered. They began to rename settlements with the old communist names, restore Lenin memorials, dismantle monuments and memorial plaques to the victims of the Holodomor, destroy Ukrainian historical literature in libraries and replace it with books brought from Russia, and plunder the treasures of Ukrainian museums. In other words, these were attempts to re-communize and de-Ukrainize the temporary occupied territories. The aim of this policy is obvious: to erase any trace of Ukrainian identity from these territories, to prove that Ukraine never existed and therefore never will. "Russia is here forever" – posters with this slogan were pasted over occupied Ukrainian towns and villages. Considering that this policy was complemented by the massive physical elimination of Ukrainian activists and the mass deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, there is every reason to speak of this war against Ukraine in terms of genocide. Putin is not only interested in seizing territory, but also in destroying Ukrainians as an independent national community with its own language, traditions, culture and view of the past. The very existence of a Ukrainian identity is an obstacle for his plans to restore the Russian Empire.

On the other hand, in the areas liberated from Russian invaders, the restoration of Ukrainian national memory has become a significant mobilising factor that now unites society. Ukrainians view the current war as a continuation of their struggle for independence. For this reason, symbols that link the current fighters with previous generations play such an important role. This is particularly evident in the Armed Forces of Ukraine where military units are named after Rus-era princes, Cossack hetmans, or military leaders of the Ukrainian People's Republic, where the salute of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army "Glory to Ukraine" has become official, and awards echoing the images of the insurgents have become awards of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Russia's attempts to invoke not only the Soviet but also the imperial past to justify its aggression (especially in the south of our country) have led to the initiation of decolonization processes in Ukraine, i.e. the removal of place names and memorials of the Russian Empire. Like decommunization, this process began spontaneously, but was eventually taken up by the state. Last year, in 2023, the parliament passed a decolonization law that provides for the renaming of several hundred settle-

ments, some of which will regain their historical names, as well as the removal of monuments of the builders or glorifiers of the Russian Empire.

The threat to the existence of Ukrainians as an independent national community, which emerged after the outbreak of a full-scale war, led to a real national revival in culture, including popular culture, the rejection of the Russian language in communication among thousands of Ukrainians, and a significant increase in interest in history. As a result, our society has become stronger and more united, and the ability of Russian propaganda to divide it has decreased significantly.

But Russia's ability to physically destroy Ukrainians, their towns and villages with missiles and bombs has not diminished. Some of them are deliberately aiming at civilian targets to kill as many ordinary citizens as possible. This is terror, aimed at breaking the will to resist. Bombs and missiles are used to destroy cultural values including museums. The Russians destroyed the museum of the artist Kateryna Bilokur in the Kyiv region, that of the philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda in the Kharkiv region and that of the UPA commander-in-chief Roman Shukhevych in the Lviv region. Valuable historical artefacts and works of art are taken away from the temporarily occupied territories and brought into Russia. This is the biggest looting of our cultural heritage since World War II.

Today, Ukrainians face the challenge of surviving this genocidal war. However, it is also important to tell the world the truth about it and its historical roots. This truth is an important warning against the danger of Russian imperialism not only for the Ukrainians, but for the entire free democratic world. Therefore, we thank Germany for its support so far in the armed confrontation with Russia, and hope that it will continue and expand its support to stop the Russian aggressive disinformation campaign aimed at distorting Ukrainian history in the world. I hope that this conference will contribute to this.

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