

De-Communization Won't Help Ukraine

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On April 20, a group of Western scholars of Ukraine published an open letter calling on Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to veto a package of proposed laws banning both Communist and Nazi symbols in Ukraine.

Passed by the Ukrainian parliament on April 9, the laws would require a slew of monuments to Soviet heroes and other symbols of the Communist regime to be torn down and many streets and squares to be renamed.

They would also make it illegal to question the legitimacy of World War II-era nationalist and anti-Soviet groups like the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in the "struggle for the independence of Ukraine in the 20th century."

This move to "de-communize" Ukraine's national narrative is undoubtedly aimed at adding a modicum of clarity to the country's complicated and often contentious history. Yet it also detracts from the more pressing issues facing Ukraine.

Instead, it is an excessively costly and impractical move at a time of near economic collapse —

Ukraine has many Soviet-era monuments, so tearing them down will be no small task — and a potentially provocative and divisive step for a country currently united in an existential struggle against Russia-backed separatists in the Donbass.

Complicating the matter, after parliament passed the law a group of men tore down several Soviet monuments in Kharkiv. The "Kharkiv Partisans," a pro-Russian militant group that claims responsibility for a series of bombings in the Kharkiv region, responded by threatening to execute five Ukrainians for each monument destroyed.

Banning Communist and Nazi symbols may be a popular move in some segments of Ukrainian society: After all, Russia increasingly glorifies its Soviet past and uses the Soviet war against Nazi Germany as an archetypal trope to frame the Donbass separatists' struggle against Ukraine's allegedly fascist government. And no one likes to succumb to the threats of terrorists like the "Kharkiv Partisans."

But legally equating Nazism and communism and banning their symbols will ultimately prove to be an unproductive venture in a country where, in some regions, attitudes toward the Communist past are, at best, mixed.

These laws raise a serious question: Is there a better, more democratic approach to overcoming the Communist past? Indeed there is.

Signatories of the open letter highlight several serious concerns about the laws: they were passed with minimal discussion and many deputies abstained from the vote, they potentially restrict freedom of speech and they could restrict Ukrainians from criticizing the UPA's massacre of tens of thousands of Poles and the OUN's cooperation with Nazi Germany during World War II and involvement in anti-Jewish pogroms.

Of course, historical ethnic violence, anti-Semitism and Nazism must all be vigorously condemned. Yet, the danger of these laws is less that they ignore the crimes of the 20th century than that they shut down critical discussion in a country where history remains such a divisive issue.

The task for Ukraine today should not be to decide whether the OUN and the UPA were patriots or extremists or whether the Soviet Union was exclusively a negative force in Ukrainian history. Rather, its goal should be to create a climate in which individuals of differing viewpoints can come to understand one another.

Greater understanding is not a lofty goal in today's Ukraine; it is a practical one. As the country fights against Russia-backed rebels in the Donbass, Ukrainians across the political and cultural spectrum have united in support of their country.

As Viktor Alanov, a pro-Kiev resident of Donetsk noted in RFE/RL's fascinating "Letters from the Donbass" series, people from the east have a different way of loving their country and some weren't supporters of the Euromaidan protests that toppled former President Viktor Yanukovich.

But today, he added, many are discovering a common patriotism: "In occupied Donetsk, former 'anti-Banderas' supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity shake hands with

'Banderas'; advocates of dual-language status shake hands with supporters of Ukrainian as the sole official language." It would be foolish to allow official ideology to impede this growing national unity.

That is not to say that the desire to remove Soviet symbols from Ukraine is illegitimate; there are, in fact, a glut of dull Soviet monuments across the country. But rather than a top-down ban on all Soviet symbols, Ukraine needs a better, more equitable approach to the problem.

One solution would be to create a legal and political framework for removing or replacing monuments and place names deemed outdated. Unlike the laws in question, such a framework could engage local perspectives and expert opinions when deciding whether to replace a monument or rename a street, giving the process greater buy-in from the population of the country's diverse regions and municipalities.

And, whereas making Soviet symbols illegal implies that they need to be removed quickly, a framework to replace them would allow the process to be carried out at a pace more reasonable for a country struggling with other, more immediate issues.

A country's national narrative and historical memory are important. Yet mandating one restrictive view in a diverse society and punishing those who disagree is hardly an ideal approach.

A more helpful ideology to move Ukraine beyond the past is compassion. Both the Soviet Union and mid-20th century Ukrainian nationalists committed crimes showing great disregard for human life. Ukraine should recognize the multiplicity of narratives in its history, but also acknowledge their flaws.

While the current anti-Communist drive seems intent on putting a clear and simple label on the past and replacing an old ideology with a new one, any steps toward "de-communization" should instead aim to move the country beyond old ideological divides.

In this regard, there is one law from the series that is distinctly positive: the parliament's decision to open the Ukrainian KGB archives. What historians and researchers discover in these archives — facts, not ideology — will be a bigger blow to the Soviet regime than any law the legislature can pass.

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