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Ukraine Erases Communist Reminders Amid Efforts to Shake Soviet Yoke

By The Moscow Times

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A giant 'Mother of the Motherland' monument decorated with a symbolic wreath of red poppies is seen at the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Kiev, Ukraine, May 8, 2015.

A hulking steel statue of a victorious female warrior bearing aloft sword and shield looms in dour majesty over the Ukrainian capital. The Motherland Monument's shield bears the communist hammer and sickle, but maybe not for much longer.

Ukraine's leaders are eager to be seen as reinventing the nation. And erasing all visible reminders of the communist past, they say, is an important step toward that goal.

"Elimination of communism has to happen in people's heads and consciousness," said Kiev deputy mayor Oleksiy Reznikov. "Symbolism irritates some people and creates a certain aura that we need to get rid of."

Parliament opened the way last month by backing a package of laws that included a loosely

formulated ban on communist, as well as Nazi, imagery and ideology. The provisions, which still require approval from President Petro Poroshenko, will make it illegal to show symbols from the Soviet era, such as the logo of the Communist Party, or play Soviet-era anthems. It will also become an offense to deny the criminal nature of the Soviet regime.

Taking down all the communist symbols will take time, money and a fair dose of acrobatics, especially in the case of objects like the 100-meter (330-foot) tall Motherland Monument.

"We will find alpinist patriots, like the famous ones who painted a star at the top of a Moscow hotel the blue-and-yellow (of the Ukrainian flag)," Reznikov said. "We will ask for help from brave guys like that to get this work done."

Eager Ukrainian nationalists have for the past year been racing ahead of the authorities by pulling down dozens of statues of Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik revolutionary and founder of the Soviet Union. The sight has typically been greeted with a mixture of glee, indifference or, among mostly older people, dismay.

The thrust of what has been dubbed de-communization has sharply divided views. Supporters argue it has been long in the waiting and will set the stage for Ukraine to leave its history behind.

"I would have got rid of it all years ago. It simply doesn't reflect the mood of the Ukrainian people," said Kiev resident Vasily Babkov. "We have to build up that which is truly in the blood of Ukrainians."

But others, like Halyna Coynash, a journalist and member of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, said some measures risk reverting to the censorship of the communist era. She sees particular danger in a measure that forbids any positive assessment of the Soviet era.

"They have ended up with a law that seriously endangers freedom of speech," Coynash said.

Dismantling Soviet emblems and renaming streets named in honor of figures known to have been part of the Soviet Union's machine of repression has garnered a wide approval. But misgivings abound.

"Saying that people cannot themselves wear a red star or even have a hammer and sickle on their clothing," Coynash said, "is really quite absurd."

Repeated violations could result in prison sentences lasting several years, also a source of anxiety.

"Imprisonment for up to five years for any display of Nazi or communist symbols is manifestly and undeniably in breach of international human rights standards," Volodymyr Yavorsky, an expert with Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, wrote in an article analyzing the laws.

The campaign against the anti-communist laws has been joined by the several dozen signatories to a letter to Poroshenko pleading with him to reject the bill, which sailed through parliament with little debate.

"However noble the intent, the wholesale condemnation of the entire Soviet period as one of occupation of Ukraine will have unjust and incongruous consequences," said the letter, which was signed by dozens of international and Ukrainian historians.

The letter argues that the legislation is so loose as to possibly punish anybody writing approvingly of any policies implemented over 74 years of communist rule.

"Anyone calling attention to the development of Ukrainian culture and language in the 1920s could find himself or herself condemned," the letter said.

One especially thorny provision makes it illegal to justify historical instances of repression of Ukrainian independence movements in the 20th century.

Those include the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists headed by WWII-era insurgent leader Stepan Bandera, who briefly allied himself with the Nazis. Efforts by Bandera-led forces to carve out an independent territory for Ukraine led them to perpetrate hideous atrocities against Soviets, Poles and Jews alike.

Bandera's name is tantamount to a curse word among many ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in Ukraine's east, where government troops have since last year been battling Moscow-backed separatists in a war that has already claimed more than 6,000 lives.

And Russia has warned darkly of more trouble for Ukraine should the anti-communism measures go ahead.

"Attempts by Kiev to distort the country's past and to disregard the achievements made in Russian and Soviet periods will only lead to a deep split in society," the Foreign Ministry in Moscow said in a statement in April. "Doing that by imposing nationalist ideologies will only further cast into doubt the prospects of Ukraine's statehood."

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