The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance in Kyiv
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In December 2019 Anton Drobovych, a relatively unknown historian, was appointed as new head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. His appointment came as a surprise to many observers of Ukraine's historical and public history scene and could mean a shift in the post-Euromaidan politics of memory in Ukraine. The article assesses first statements by Drobovych and discusses them against the backdrop of past memory-related policies and legislation.

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Towards Liberal Memory Politics? Discussing Recent Changes at Ukraine's Memory Institute

On 11 December 2019, Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers appointed Anton Drobovych to head the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINP). This latest political appointment possibly marks a major change in Ukrainian memory politics since the Euromaidan protests in 2014. Founded in 2006 by the government of then president Viktor Yushchenko as an agency for historical research and education, the UINP turned into an active memory agent after the Euromaidan protests. As I will briefly discuss in this article, the institution has ever since been deeply embroiled in the country's efforts to deal with the legacies of the repressive Soviet past. Under its previous head, historian Volodymyr Viatrovych (2014-2019), it successfully pushed for the 'de-communization' of the public space and a reform of archival regulations. Yet, the UINP also often received negative media attention for its memory politics. These mostly concerned what was perceived by many in Ukraine and abroad to be a rather condescending approach to some episodes of recent history, in particular regarding the actions of Ukrainian nationalists during the German occupation of Soviet Ukraine's western territories during the Second World War. Against the backdrop of Ukraine's post-Euromaidan memory politics, this article will discuss the recent change of UINP leadership and ask what it might mean for the future of state-sanctioned 'policies of history'.

Memory Politics and Legislation in Ukraine

Under president Viktor Yanukovych's government (2010–2014) the UINP's competencies had been much curtailed and the country turned explicitly towards a pro-Russian memory politics and aligned with official Russian interpretations of history. The institute was turned into a mere research centre, deprived of its former administrative capacities and of any executive agency. This move in 2010 also signified a break away from the more nationalistic memory politics under Yanukovych's predecessor, President Viktor Yushchenko.

The revolutionary change of the Ukrainian government in 2014 was followed by a number of policy moves, among them the re-organization of the UINP in the spring of that year. Historian Viatrovych was appointed head of the UINP, and the old status of the UINP as a state agency for dealing with historical matters was once again restored. Under Viatrovych's leadership, the UINP managed to consolidate its mandate and increase its public visibility. In 2015, the institute drafted and campaigned for a policy of 'de-communization' involving the eradication of communist regime symbols from the public space. It also helped to reform regulations for accessing former KGB archives. Moreover, it successfully reinvigorated the process of legal rehabilitation of the victims of Soviet-era political repression.

In spring 2015, the new Verkhovna Rada (parliament) voted for a batch of de-communization laws. These laws were drafted by pro-Euromaidan experts and activists and associates of the Reanimation Package of Reforms (RPR), an expert group created during Euromaidan in Kyiv. These experts, as well as the re-organized UINP, were concerned with the pro-Russian turn in the public memory sphere under President Viktor Yanukovych and offered a legal framework for what they saw as a more appropriate way of dealing with the past in Ukraine. One of the 2015 laws, the Law "On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Regimes, and Prohibition of Propaganda of their Symbols" outlined procedures for renaming objects (such as streets, squares, buildings etc.) that carried Soviet (communist) names and for removing monuments from that era. The intention behind the de-

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communization of public space was deemed a necessary act to ban symbols that glorified the Soviet totalitarian regime. The UINP was charged with overlooking the implementation of the law. In 2015–2016, a report by the institute showed that 2,500 monuments dedicated to Soviet leaders (mostly, Lenin statues) had been successfully removed and 987 towns and settlements were renamed as well as almost 52,000 squares and streets across Ukraine.

Moreover, the new legal framework allowed access to the personal files of the Soviet repressive bodies administered by the Security Service of Ukraine and other governmental agencies. Previously, the country did not have a functioning system for gaining access to such files, the material being thus largely hidden from the public eye. In fact, the archival law of 2015 stipulated the creation of a new institution in Ukraine within the structures of the UINP: the "Sectoral State Archive of the UINP", as it is formally called, is tasked with overseeing the records of the Soviet state security agencies. Thus, materials that are currently stored in the state archive of the Ukrainian Security Service, the archive of the Ministry of the Interior and of a number of other institutions are to be joined in this new archive. As of December 2019, the statute of the new archive has been finally adopted and a building in Kyiv allocated to host the new institution.

The new post-Euromaidan policy of history continued with another legislative act: in 2018, the Verkhovna Rada significantly revised the rehabilitation law of 1991, which had been adopted shortly before Ukraine became independent in December 1991, and was thus still under a Soviet-communist government. New procedures for legal rehabilitation were outlined and the scope of those defined as 'repressed persons' considerably widened. The UINP actively campaigned for the law and organized its implementation by creating a national commission on rehabilitation under the Institute's auspices. As of December 2019, the commission had granted 46 rehabilitation acts and continues to review the applications coming to Kyiv from regional commissions on rehabilitation.

Public Perception and Debate of Recent Memory Legislation and of the UINP

Given its central role as both initiator and main executor of the government's memory and justice policies, the UINP and its long-time head Volodymyr Viatrovych drew considerable critique over the years, both from domestic parties as well as internationally. Domestically, polling data shows that de-communization measures were disapproved among some parts of the country, especially in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine.[1] Territorial communities and local self-government bodies often sabotaged the execution of the law coming from Kyiv. In June 2019, for example, the city council of Kharkiv, a predominantly Russian-speaking city in the eastern part of the country, decided to return the old Soviet name, Marshal Georgiy Zhukov, to one of the city's avenues. The council thus undermined a previous decision by the region's Kyiv-appointed governor. A judicial dispute ensued and ended several months later with an abrogation of the council's decision by the appellate court in Kharkiv, much to the disappointment of the elected city representatives.[2] The dispute caught the attention of the national media and exemplifies the considerable amount of regional discontent with Kyiv's memory politics.

Internationally, the adoption of the de-communization laws also sparked intense debate, mostly among the academic community. This was mainly because one of the 2015 de-communization laws contained a controversial punitive norm protecting the memory of some historical figures of recent Ukrainian history who fought for an independent state during the 1930s and 1940s. In today's official history, they are seen as freedom fighters and national heroes. The new Law "On the Legal Status and Honouring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine's Independence in the Twentieth Century" not only established the legal

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status of the freedom fighters, but also proclaimed that the

public denial of the legitimacy of the struggle for independence of Ukraine in the twentieth century is recognized as [an] insult to the memory of [the] fighters for independence of Ukraine in the XX century, [it is a] disparagement of the Ukrainian people and [it] is unlawful.[3]

By thereby declaring the public denial of a certain historical interpretation unlawful, this legal act stands with other such 'memory laws' in the region, such as the so-called IPN law in Poland, the 2018 amendment which also triggered considerable international controversy. However, in the Ukrainian case, the passage of time has proven that concerns about possible repercussions of the law for academic freedom and historical debate, voiced by international observers, were unjustified.[4] The legal act remains largely declarative and is rather more reminiscent of a similar normative act passed in 2006 by the Verkhovna Rada, which recognized the state-made famine perpetrated by the Stalinist regime in Soviet Ukraine in 1932–1933 as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people and prohibited its public denial.[5] No individual has so far been punished or sanctioned in any way for denialist speech. Still, the 2015 law regarding the freedom fighters drew attention to the issue of memory politics in post-Euromaidan Ukraine and since then the UINP's activism in this context has become the focus of controversy both within and outside the country.[6] Other genocide declarations followed: in 2015 the Verkhovna Rada declared the mass deportations of Crimean Tatars in 1944 as an act of genocide perpetrated against this indigenous community of Crimea.[7] Three years later, in 2018, the parliament proclaimed to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the forced population transfers perpetrated in communist Poland between 1944 and 1951. Although the legislators did not apply the term genocide to the historical actions, the legal act came close through its use of terminology associated with the crimes of genocide. It framed the issue of the forced re-settlement of Polish Ukrainians as an atrocity against an "autochthonous" Ukrainian minority that was suffering under (Polish) "colonizers".

This post-Euromaidan memory politics, together with new legislation in other policy areas such as language (making Ukrainian the only state language), were seen by some as forming central pillars of a new identity politics that was driven by political elites who had come to power in 2014.[8] The recent move by newly elected President Volodymyr Zelenskyi's government to release Viatrovych, therefore, made many observers of Ukraine's memory politics wonder whether this would signify a reversal, or at least a major revision, of the post-Euromaidan state history policy. Considering that previous Ukrainian presidents played a crucial role in setting up and supporting the institution and have been responsible for major shifts within the domain of memory politics, these concerns have some rationale behind them.

Indeed, many commentators today feel reminded of the changes to the institution that were made in 2010, when then president Yanukovych significantly curbed the activities and powers of the UINP. The current concerns were exacerbated by the fact that Anton Drobovych, who was appointed to lead the institute in December, is something of a newcomer to the debates on history and public memory in Ukraine. In the final stages of the selection process for the position of head of the institute, managed by the state agency on civil service, Drobovych ran against Vasyl Yablosnkyi, a 54 year-old political scientist and former official in President Viktor Yuschenko's administration (2005–2006), who spent the last decade working in the National Institute for Strategic Studies. According to some media reports about the competition, Drobovych won out in this competition by only a small margin. He gained more points in the categories of "resilience to stress", leadership and communication skills.[9]

Anton Drobovych is a 34 year-old lecturer of cultural studies at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, and remains a largely enigmatic personality for circles of professional historians and

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intellectuals in Kyiv who have been embroiled for years in debates over memory. Beyond teaching experience, his most noticeable past experience pertains to cultural management. In 2013–2016, Drobovych worked as an assistant to the general director at Mystetskyi Arsenal, a national art museum in Kyiv, as thereafter as head of the service on planning and strategy. Before assuming the new leadership position at the UINP, Drobovych supervised educational programs at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center for a year. In comparison, at the time of his appointment as head of the UINP, Volodymyr Viatrovych was a well-known figure among historians and a visionary of de-communization long before the Euromaidan changes.

Drobovych's Visions for the UINP and Future State Policy of History

Judging by a number of recent public statements, the new head of the UINP still seems to be struggling to add substance to his statements about society and memory in Ukraine and to differentiate his own policy visions from those of his predecessor. Upon taking up his new position, Drobovych gave two, confusingly contradictory statements about the role of UINP within Ukrainian society. During the final round of questions put to the candidates in the competition for the leadership of the UINP and published by Istoryczna Pravda, Drobovych promised to make official memory politics "more balanced and liberal".[10] Yet, in an interview he gave to the Ukrainian section of the Deutsche Welle a few weeks later, he claimed that the de-communization process could not be finished due to some Soviet "type of mentality" that still predominates in society and which, by implication, should be changed with the help of de-communization.[11] It is hard to understand how the latter statement corresponds to the liberal inclination of the former.

With regard to practical matters, it seems that Drobovych disagrees on the implementation tactics, but not on the basic strategy of the current state history policy. Commenting on the Kyiv-led campaign to rename cities and settlements named after Soviet personalities or events, Drobovych insisted that the 2015 law should be executed without exceptions. Yet at the same time, he maintains that the previous tactics of implementing de-communization could have been more inclusive, deliberative, and less conflict-prone.[12] By the same token, Drobovych does not disavow the efforts to honour Ukrainian nationalists from the Second World War but claimed in an interview he gave the YouTube channel ISLN that commemoration is a matter of "proportionality" and that the state should grant recognition to some of the less controversial and divisive figures in Ukraine's recent history. In continuing some of the policies of his predecessor, Drobovych promised during a press conference in December 2019 to push for the swift opening of the new, unified archive hosting all records of Soviet Ukraine's state security agencies.

Based on his recent statements, Drobovych also intends to raise the issue in parliament of the legal recognition of the Stalinist-era deportations of Armenians, Bulgarians and Greeks from Crimea in 1944 as an act of genocide. If such an initiative was to go through, the UINP would continue its past habit of initiating memory legislation. The new legal act would continue the series of memory-related legislative acts and resolutions that have been passed by the Verkhovna Rada since the 2006 act that declared the Holodomor an act of genocide. It is to be expected that under Drobovych the efforts to memorialize historical atrocities by way of law, as well as to push for recognition internationally, will continue. In particular, Drobovych has already promised to re-invigorate the public debate about the Holodomor and, thereafter, to advocate for the recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide by foreign parliaments.

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Liberal Memory Politics? Concluding Remarks

What are liberal memory politics? So far, apart from declaring a need for greater inclusiveness in the public conversation in Ukraine, Anton Drobovych has not given a conceptually clear answer in his limited statements on the topic. However, the question clearly has traction in the scholarly community, all the more so because the issue of historical memory and truth are an important aspect in the recent proliferation of illiberal politics across the former communist region. Already some time ago, American transitional justice scholar Ruti Teitel explored the "liberalizing potential of history".[13] According to her, societies construct "shared truths" about the past during the process of advancing a sense of historical justice following political regime change.[14] While the particular forms of pursuing justice may vary, ranging from criminal trials to official history writing and public commemoration, the underlying idea of her account is that the liberalizing potential of history is associated with an advancement of public knowledge about the past, with historical inquiry serving as a basis for a newly renegotiated 'truth regime' in a given society. Needless to say, that a further exploration this issue – of the relationship between history and power and the particular role historians play in democratic politics – goes beyond the scope of this article.

In the case of the UINP, the call for an impartial historical inquiries and negotiation as a motor of liberalization would mean that the institution would need to act less like a 'memory warrior' and serve more as a facilitator of debate and scrupulous analysis. Its focus should be on clarifying historical facts and records, while still allowing for alternative voices and perspectives to be heard, thereby strengthening the liberal and pluralistic (democratic) order. On the level of policy, one could argue that the archival reform in Ukraine may have the 'liberalizing' potential that Teitel discusses. Making archives accessible for a wider audience, including those of the former state security agencies, (all the while guaranteeing certain standards of data protection etc.) would significantly help not only to clarify historical situations, but also to increase the number of those who want to engage in historical interpretation and meaning-making. The domain of archival policy is arguably the least conflict-prone and controversial. There is relatively little disagreement regarding the potential of opening up the archives for advancing a cohesive sense of historical justice in a society.

It is however, not at all obvious how generating more laws that regulate how history is to be understood and commemorated would advance the goal of keeping up with liberal commitments. In fact, such 'memory laws' are increasingly associated with anti-liberal politics and the dismantling of democracy.[15 In particular, where such laws take a prohibitive and punitive turn aimed at ostracizing unwelcomed historical views, this negative potential of "governing memory" has become quite tangible in recent years.[16] If the new head of the UINP is serious about pursuing a more liberal memory politics, he should by all means avoid over-extending the law for the purpose of history writing.

If we take Drobovych at his word, that he intends to foster a more "inclusive and deliberative" public debate about Ukraine's recent past, the recent government decision to create regional branches of the UINP may be a good thing, as it could help to enhance the communication between the various parts of the country regarding matters of diverse historical experiences, memories and identities in society. Over the course of 2020, the four UINP's offices will be further consolidating and hiring professional staff. At this point, it is hard to judge what the set-up and activities of the regional offices will be. However, given the uneasy relationship between Kyiv and some of the regions in Ukraine, future regional offices may become useful platforms for accommodating local specifics or, at the least, for involving local historians and activists in the debate over national memory thus ameliorating the top-down, directive relationship between Kyiv and the regions in the realm of history and memory.

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Footnotes

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The new head of the UINP, Anton Drobovych
Author: unknown, Source: facebook, Anton Drobovych

Volodymyr Viatrovych, former head of the UINP (2014-2019)
Author: Київська міська рада [CC BY (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0)]

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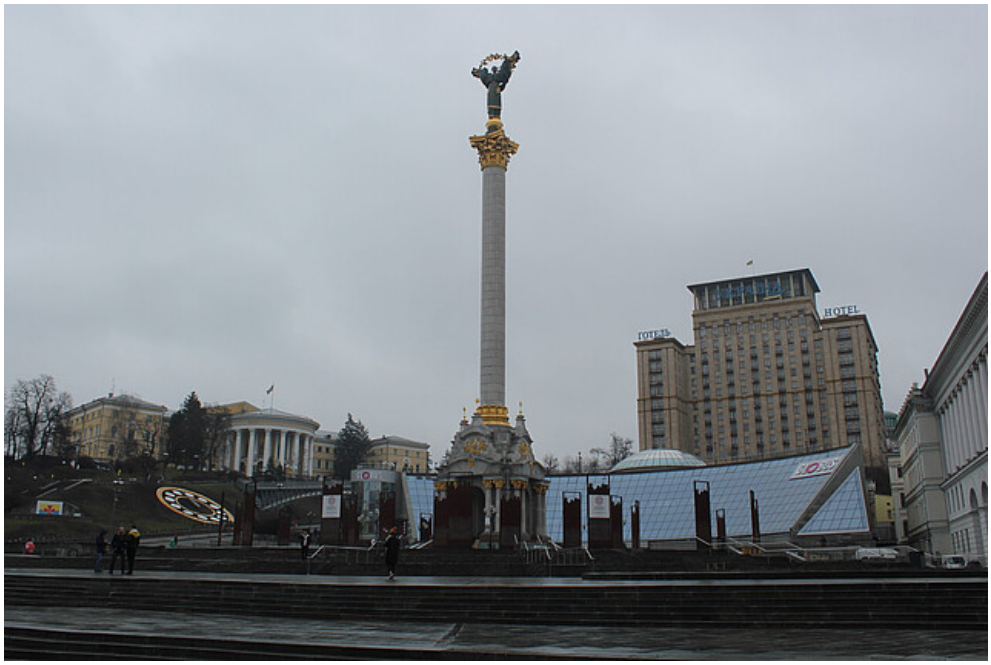

Maidan Nezalezhnosti Square in Kyiv
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View from Zhovtnevy Palace down towards the Maidan
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