OLEKSIY GNATIUK
oleksii.gnatiuk@knu.ua
ORCID: 0000-0003-1818-2415
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv
Kyiv, Ukraine

VIKTORIIA ZAPOTOTSKA
vzapototska@knu.ua
ORCID: 0000-0001-9299-2585
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv
Kyiv, Ukraine

THE POLITICAL LIVES OF RURAL HODONYMS IN UKRAINE: A CROSS-REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

SUMMARY

Rural toponyms have a long history of research with an emphasis on their historical and cultural significance. However, insufficient attention has been paid specifically to the ideologically driven naming and renaming of rural places. This gap becomes even more noticeable concerning the post-socialist and, especially, post-Soviet spaces, representing one of the modern hotspots in the critical study of place names. In the paper, based on the information on the naming and renaming of rural streets in the three Ukrainian administrative regions, we analyse the recent reconfiguration of the contemporary system of Ukrainian rural hodonyms from a political standpoint. It has been demonstrated that rural street names in Ukraine are involved in the political life of the country almost as much as their urban counterparts, and their post-Soviet reconfiguration in cross-regional perspective generally resembles the processes and patterns relevant to the urban street names. The role of rural hodonyms as political instruments and symbolic markers should not be underestimated, at least, for certain geographical and socio-cultural contexts. At the same time, the active involvement of rural street names in the political life of the country raises concerns about their preservation as a part of local heritage and markers of local identity.

K e y w o r d s: rural hodonyms, critical toponymy, street renaming, cross-regional study, decommunisation, decolonisation

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural toponyms (rural place names) have a long history of research with an emphasis on their historical and cultural significance as a bearer of traditional ethnic values and as reflections of the natural and cultural landscape (Deepadung, 2003; Liu et al., 2024). In particular, rural toponyms record and transmit

cultural information through generations (Geršič & Kladnik, 2016; De Lange, 2019; Yanqing, 2022), often contain unique and profound cultural connotations and collective memories of social groups, playing a significant role in preserving the intangible cultural heritage of rural settlements (Zhao et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2024). When used as protected geographical indications, rural toponyms also serve institutional functions in food systems governance and rural development (Moran, 1983; Conneely & Mahon, 2015).

Nevertheless, rural toponyms change under pressing socio-cultural circumstances and take part in discursive performative practices similar to their urban counterparts. The written use of rural toponyms in public spaces contributes to both the construction of place-related identities and the manipulation of power relations (Loth, 2019). Although traditional rural toponyms carry essential cultural values, some of them are gradually being arbitrarily changed, renewed and replaced by modern naming methods due to rapid urbanisation in certain regions, causing significant damage to the intangible cultural heritage of rural areas (Son, 2015; Yanqing, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). Since fewer people are interested in traditional rural activities like farming or fishing, traditional rural place names are in danger of extinction (Geršič & Kladnik, 2016).

Also, rural place names can be used as symbolic linguistic tools within the political and ideological strategies to maintain control over the territory. Politically motivated renaming of places may lead to the complete disappearance of the original toponyms and thus local cultural heritage and identity (Schuppener, 2019). However, little attention has been paid specifically to ideologically driven naming and renaming of rural places. In particular, few works have been focused on the political lives of street names beyond urban locations. This research gap becomes even more evident in relation to the post-socialist and, especially, post-Soviet space, which has emerged over recent decades as a key area for critical toponymic studies (Basik, 2020; Kudriavtseva & Homanyuk, 2020; Basik, 2023; Rusu, 2024b). The vast majority of academic literature addressing the political power of naming in this region deals with urban toponyms, especially focusing on hodonyms (street names). At the same time, rural street names, which constitute a significant proportion of all rural place names in most global cultural contexts, remain understudied, including their dependency on local politics and ideology.

In this paper, armed with a critical toponymy theory on the one hand (Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2009; Rose-Redwood & Alderman, 2015; Giraut & Houssay-Holzchuch, 2016; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022) and a well-developed understanding of processes in Ukrainian urban toponymy during the period of post-Soviet transition on the other (Gnatiuk, 2018; Afanasiev, 2020; Kuczabski & Boychuk, 2020; Gnatiuk & Melnychuk, 2023; Schenk, 2023), we focus on the political lives

of rural street names (rural hodonyms) in Ukraine. We analyse the contemporary system of street names in Ukrainian villages and its recent (post-communist) reconfiguration from a political standpoint. The term "reconfiguration" is used in the article to refer to all changes in the toponymic system in Ukraine after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, including decommunisation and decolonisation (the latter covering both de-Sovietisation and de-Russification). Our specific research questions are the following:

(1) What has been the nature of rural street name changes in Ukraine during the post-Soviet period, and how do these changes reflect political processes in the country?

(2) Has the post-Soviet reconfiguration of rural street names followed similar patterns across different regions of Ukraine, and if not, what factors account for these differences?

(3) Is there a correlation between the reconfiguration of urban and rural street names in Ukraine in terms of toponymic processes, policy implementation, and chronology?

2. RURAL HODONYMS AS A CLASS OF TOPONYMY

In this article, we focus on socio-geographical urbanonyms, which, according to the classification by Titarenko (2013), include hodonyms (names of linear features in settlements, such as streets, avenues, embankments, boulevards, etc.) and agoronyms (names of squares). For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to all such urbanonyms as hodonyms throughout the text.

One may argue that rural hodonyms should not differ substantially from urban hodonyms since villages and cities are simply two categories of settlements that primarily differ in terms of population size. Nevertheless, both empirical findings and theoretical considerations challenge this assumption. Mezenko (2019), investigating the system of intra-settlement names in Belarus, emphasises the revealed linguistic and cultural differences between urban and rural hodonyms. In particular, she argues that urban hodonyms tend to reference national or even international and planetary contexts, whereas rural hodonyms are more reflective of regional and natural zonal features. Additionally, while urban hodonyms primarily relate to architectural structures and their characteristics, rural hodonyms are more closely linked to land and territories that hold economic significance for rural residents. Zheng and Guo (2021) revealed the differences in the methods of naming places between urban and rural areas in China and the cultural connotations reflected therein. In particular, they found a relatively higher proportion of urban names derived from mountains and rivers and of rural names referencing animals and plants. Furthermore, urban place names predominantly reflected

historical, economic, religious, and other social factors, whereas rural and small-town place names exhibited a stronger national character.

There may be several factors for different naming practices in urban and rural environments. Broadly speaking, the differences in naming methods reflect the differences in economy, politics, values and customs between urban and rural areas (Zheng & Guo, 2021). The system of place names in rural environments acts as a part of the broader onomastic picture and reflects the perception of the environment by the linguistic personality more than in the urban environment (Mezenko, 2019). While urban culture is largely mass-oriented and globalised, rural culture retains many more links with local and national traditions. Rural residents experience more intense, frequent and essential interactions with their natural environment, and as a result, rural place names show the high demand of the traditional inhabitants for the environmental elements of their existence (Deepadung, 2003; Yanqing, 2022).

Also, it is known that the axiological value of a specific place does matter for identity and memory politics, and thus naming politics of a place depends on its symbolic significance, which in turn depends on its location within the city and relative significance among the other places (Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Palmberger, 2017; Gnatiuk & Glybovets, 2020; Rusu, 2021; Buchstaller et al., 2024; Rusu, 2024a). Similarly, urban ranking, as another dimension of centrality and axiological importance, matters as well (Rusu, 2024a). Continuing in this line, we may suppose that rural settlements possess even lower levels of centrality and therefore less symbolic importance than ordinary towns, and thus rural street names should be less ideologically charged and less frequently subject to renaming for ideological reasons.

3. TOPONYMIC RECONFIGURATION IN POST-SOVIET UKRAINE

Recent studies of urbanonyms demonstrate that their emergence and formation are closely linked to general sociocultural trends in societal development, state ideology, and the manifestations of the national mentality of residents in a particular region (Titarenko, 2013). The case of Ukraine provides a rich empirical basis for studying the process of post-socialist toponymic reconfiguration due to its transitional nature, ongoing status, and the good availability of data (Kudriavtseva & Homanyuk, 2020). After the fall of communism and the declaration of Ukrainian independence in 1991, three distinct stages of toponymic reconfiguration can be identified, each characterised by specific socio-political circumstances, legal frameworks, key actors and drivers, toponymic processes, and regional patterns.

The first stage covers the period until the outbreak of the Euromaidan in 2013–2014 (Kovtûh, 2017; Šulʹgan, 2017). The intermittent and deeply controversial

politics of national memory in Ukraine in that period was in many respects an improvisation that reflected fluctuations between competing ideological narratives, as well as the search for a strategy that would legitimise the newly independent Ukraine and its post-Soviet elite without provoking a national, linguistic, and/or religious conflict (Shevel, 2011; Portnov, 2013). During that period, the renaming of streets was voluntary and depended solely on the discretion of local governments. Most changes involved the removal of communist names — so-called decommunisation — a phenomenon typical for most of post-socialist Europe (Rusu, 2024b, p. 279). Due to the voluntary nature of decommunisation and strong socio-cultural regional differences in Ukraine, the first stage of post-Soviet toponymic reconfiguration exhibited clear regional patterns. In the western part of Ukraine, especially in the historical region of Galicia, almost all names related to the communist regime were eliminated (Hrytsak & Susak, 2003). In the central part of Ukraine, the renaming was more limited, mainly affecting streets in city centres and those named after the most notorious figures of the communist regime, whereas in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, with some exceptions, communist toponymy was largely preserved (Rìznik, 2007).

The second stage of toponymic reconfiguration started after the Revolution of Dignity and the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian hybrid war in 2014. Decommunisation was no longer seen merely as a cultural or humanitarian policy but increasingly as a matter of national security (Fedinec & Csernicsko, 2017). In 2015, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the so-called Decommunisation Law Package, providing the criteria for communist toponymy that should be removed, recommendations for the newly introduced toponymy, and legal details of the renaming procedure. This legislation triggered a second wave of communist street name changes that was much more massive and covered the entire territory of Ukraine due to its mandatory nature (Kovtûh, 2017; Gnatiuk, 2018; Kuczabski & Boychuk, 2020). Nevertheless, this second wave of toponymic decommunisation also exhibited distinct regional patterns, both in terms of the speed and consistency of renaming and the semantic structure of the newly introduced toponymy (Gnatiuk, 2018; Afanasiev, 2020; Kuczabski & Boychuk, 2020). That happened essentially due to the still strong regional identities and different public attitudes to the decommunisation politics and the new Ukrainian nation-centric politics in general (Gnatiuk, 2018). More specifically, they reflected a significant gap between the officially declared values and the real ideological preferences of the majority of Ukrainians that required a search for the balance between various ideological influences, powers, stakeholders and decision-makers at both national and local levels (Shevel, 2016; Afanasiev, 2020; Kovalov, 2022).

Before the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the toponymic reconfiguration in Ukraine was represented almost exclusively as decommunisation, while

de-Sovietisation and de-Russification remained marginal phenomena, with systematic implementation occurring only in the western regions of the country. Indeed, for many years after the collapse of the USSR, most of Ukrainian society tolerated Soviet and Russian symbols in the cultural space, provided they had no direct connection to communist ideology (Rìznik, 2007; Schenk, 2023). Nevertheless, following Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainians began to reassess their attitudes toward Soviet and Russian cultural markers, including toponymy. This reassessment initiated the third post-Soviet reconfiguration of Ukrainian toponymy, driven by a widespread desire to eliminate both Soviet (de-Sovietisation) and Russian (de-Russification) imperial legacies. Both these processes may be considered forms of decolonisation (Gnatiuk & Melnychuk, 2023) and they are commonly referred to by this exact term in Ukrainian political discourse.

During the first year of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, toponymic decolonisation was spontaneous and voluntary. However, in March 2023, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the Law "On Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and Decolonisation of Toponymy", which together with subsequent legislative acts, provided a legal framework for decolonisation, established effective mechanisms for its implementation, and specified which Soviet and Russian symbols should be removed from public spaces. The de-Russification of Ukrainian hodonyms took place across nearly all government-controlled territories of Ukraine. However, a remarkable regional contrast emerged, with the western and central parts of the country showing greater engagement in the process, while the southeastern regions lagged behind (Gnatiuk & Melnychuk, 2023).

4. DATA, METHODS, WORKING HYPOTHESES

Three regions in different parts of Ukraine were selected for the study to capture intra-regional differences in toponymic processes and patterns: Ternopilska oblast in the western part, Vinnytska oblast in the central part and Dnipropetrovska oblast in the eastern part of the country (Fig. 1).

In May-June 2023, requests have been sent to local self-government bodies (local councils) in these three regions, asking them to provide information on streets that have been named or renamed since 1991. For these requests, the villages with the largest number of streets were selected in the respective regions. The location of villages that provided information for the study is presented in Fig. 2. The total number of streets analysed was as follows: 927 streets in Vinnytska oblast, 934 streets in Dnipropetrovska oblast, and 247 streets in Ternopilska oblast.
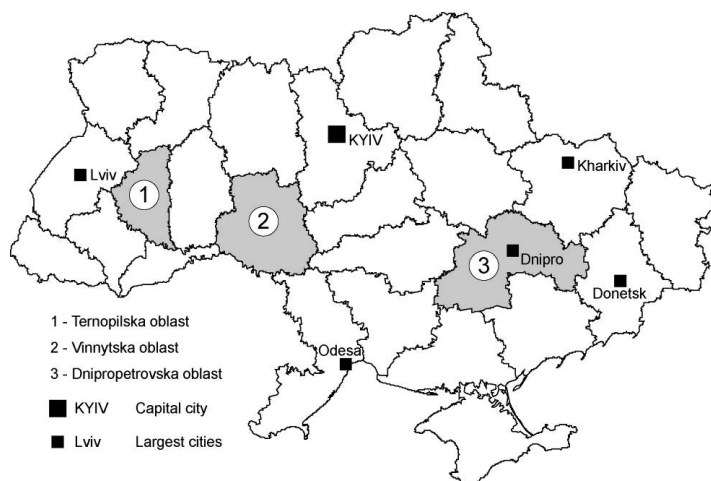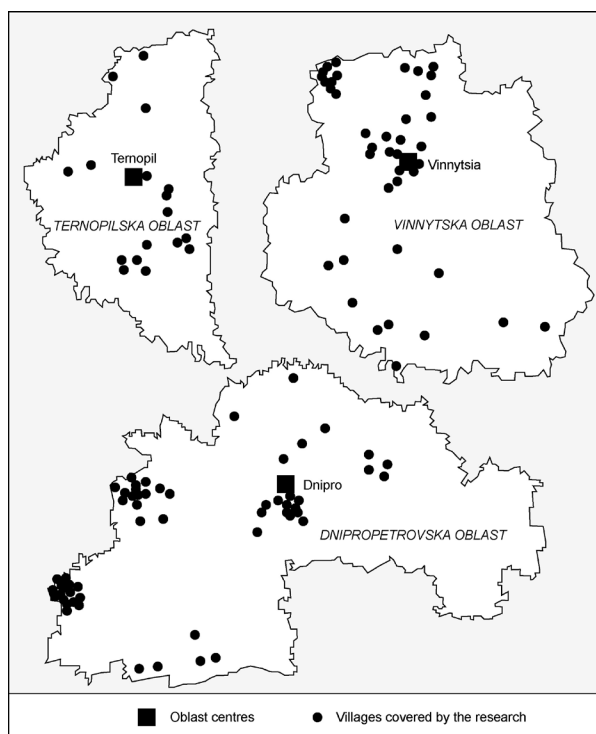
Fig. 1. Regions selected for the study

Fig. 2. Villages covered by the research

The majority of street renaming cases were classified as manifestations of one of the four toponymic processes observed in post-Soviet Ukraine:

1. Decommunisation — change of street names subject to the decommunisation law. In particular, these are names in honour of communist personalities, events, organisations and symbols included in the "black list" of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory. For example, vul. Zhovtnevoi Revoliutsii 'October Revolution St.', vul. Lenina 'Lenin St.'.

2. De-Sovietisation — change of street names that do not directly fall under the law on decommunisation, but (in Ukrainian context) have a clear semantic connection with Soviet political regime or communist ideology. For example, street names honouring typical Soviet holidays such as March 8 and May 1 (it should be stressed that these holidays, related to leftist ideology, are strongly perceived in modern Ukraine as a part of the Soviet legacy, while similar place names can be found in other states that cannot be suspected of Sovietisation), as well as Soviet military leaders of World War II, involved in the liberation of the territory of Ukraine from the Nazis.

3. De-Russification is the change of street names related to Russian history, culture and geography, and at the same time not directly related to the Ukrainian context. In particular, the renaming of streets named after Russian state and military figures, prominent personalities of culture, science, education and religion, as well as Russian geographical landmarks. For example, vul. Pushkina 'Pushkin St.', vul. Moskovska 'Moscow St.'.

4. Linguistic normalisation — bringing street names, formed according to the norms of the (mostly) Russian language or subjected to the (mostly) Russian linguistic influence, to the lexical and grammatical norms of the Ukrainian language. For example, renaming vul. Profsoyuzna to vul. Profspilkova 'Trade Union St.' or vul. Zheleznodorozhna to vul Zaliznychna 'Railway St.'. To illustrate the scale of this issue: during the Soviet period, between 1% and 10% of names of settlements in Ukraine (depending on the region) contradicted the established norms of the Ukrainian literary language and the principles of proper naming (Šul′gan, 2017).

Toponymic changes that did not fit into any of the above categories were classified as "other".

Since some cases of street renaming can be interpreted as simultaneous manifestations of multiple toponymic processes, the following priority of them was determined: decommunisation, de-Sovietisation, de-Russification, language normalisation.

When analysing the empirical data, we focused on the following aspects: (1) chronological analysis of naming and renaming; (2) the scale of toponymic change; (3) the extent to which policies underlying individual toponymic processes

were implemented; (4) semantic classification of hodonyms, employing classification scheme previously used in the studies of Ukrainian urban street names (Gnatiuk, 2018; Afanasiev, 2020; Kudriavtseva, 2020).

Based on theoretical considerations of rural toponymy and known patterns of urban toponymic restructuring in Ukraine, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis I: Rural hodonyms are more resistant to ideologically driven changes and are less frequently used as political instruments compared to urban hodonyms. Therefore, a smaller proportion of ideologically charged names is expected among rural hodonyms compared to the urban ones in the respective regions.

Hypothesis II: The intensity and structure of political processes reconfiguring rural namescapes are expected to mirror those transforming urban street names in the respective regions, albeit with a more or less noticeable delay.

Hypothesis III: Rural hodonyms are expected to be more deeply embedded in the local socio-cultural context and are likely to more vividly reflect the dominant narrative of memory politics in each region compared to urban hodonyms.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The significantly higher proportion of rural street names subject to official toponymic policies was found in Vinnytska and Dnipropetrovska oblasts compared to Ternopilska oblast (Fig. 3). This shows that communist ideological intervention into the rural street toponymy was substantially weaker in the western part of Ukraine. Anyway, in all three regions the percentages of ideologically affected street names in rural areas appear to be even higher than in their largest urban centres (Afanasiev, 2020; Kudriavtseva, 2020; Gnatiuk, 2022; Kocherhin, 2022). This observation dismisses Hypothesis I in relation to the communist period and demonstrates that in the Soviet era rural street names in Ukraine were even more influenced by the dominant ideology than urban ones. Regarding street names potentially subject to linguistic normalisation, in the centre (Vinnytska oblast) their proportion was expectedly lower than in the western (Ternopilska oblast) and eastern (Dnipropetrovska oblast) parts, with significant Polish and Russian linguistic influences, respectively.

All regions have almost completely implemented the mandatory decommunisation of rural street names. At the same time, the levels of de-Sovietisation and de-Russification vary significantly across selected regions (Fig. 3). These results can be interpreted as follows: the western part of Ukraine exhibits strong intolerance towards any Soviet-era heritage, while in central and eastern parts the attitude

towards Soviet heritage is more tolerant provided it is not explicitly linked to communist propaganda or crimes of the communist regime and relates to Ukrainian Soviet (rather than Russian Soviet) heritage. At the same time, tolerance to Russian cultural markers remains relatively high in the eastern part of Ukraine, while it is significantly lower in the west and in the centre. Similar results have been obtained for the decolonisation of the urban toponymy (Gnatiuk & Homanyuk, 2023; Gnatiuk & Melnychuk, 2023; Schenk, 2023), which supports Hypothesis II.

In Ternopilska oblast, in contrast to the other two regions, we can observe a significant number of "other" toponymic changes (Fig. 3). To conduct a proper evaluation of these cases of renaming, their memorial significance, associative character, qualitative aspect, and locative aspect should be taken into account. These primarily involve renaming streets already dedicated to prominent Ukrainian figures or bearing ideologically neutral names in order to commemorate "more deserving" national heroes, including historical figures who fought for Ukrainian independence and soldiers in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. For instance, in Ilavche, the neutral name *vul. Tsentralna* 'Central St.' was changed to *vul. Shevchenka* 'Shevchenko St.' after the greatest Ukrainian poet and writer. However, in Malyi Khodachkiv, *vul. Tarasa Shevchenka* 'Taras Shevchenko St.' was renamed to *vul. Ivana Sirka* 'Ivan Sirko St.' to commemorate a Cossack military leader instead of a more neutral artist's figure. In other case, *vul. Bohdana Khmelnytskoho* 'Bohdan Khmelnytsky St.' was renamed to *vul. Symona Petliury* 'Symon Petliura St.': a famous Cossack Hetman was considered as controversial historical figure due to his treaty (1654) with the Tsardom of Russia (now seen as fatally detrimental to Ukraine) and should have freed up space for the leader of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1919–1921 as a more deserving figure for commemoration. Some rare transitions from ideologically neutral to another neutral name also occurred, mostly because the new street name better fitted the specific location of the street within the village. For instance, *vul. Vyshneva* 'Cherry St.' was renamed to *vul. Parkova* 'Park St.' on the proposal of the street residents due to the location near the local village park. Thus, similar to urban street names (Gnatiuk, 2018; Afanasiev, 2020), rural hodonyms in the western part of Ukraine are much more susceptible to changes driven by the grassroots initiatives (of ordinary residents, local public activists, etc.) and far more frequently are given commemorative, including ideological, function, compared to the rest of the country. These findings, which emphasise the difference between the toponymic reconfiguration between the western regions of Ukraine and the rest of the country, support Hypothesis II.
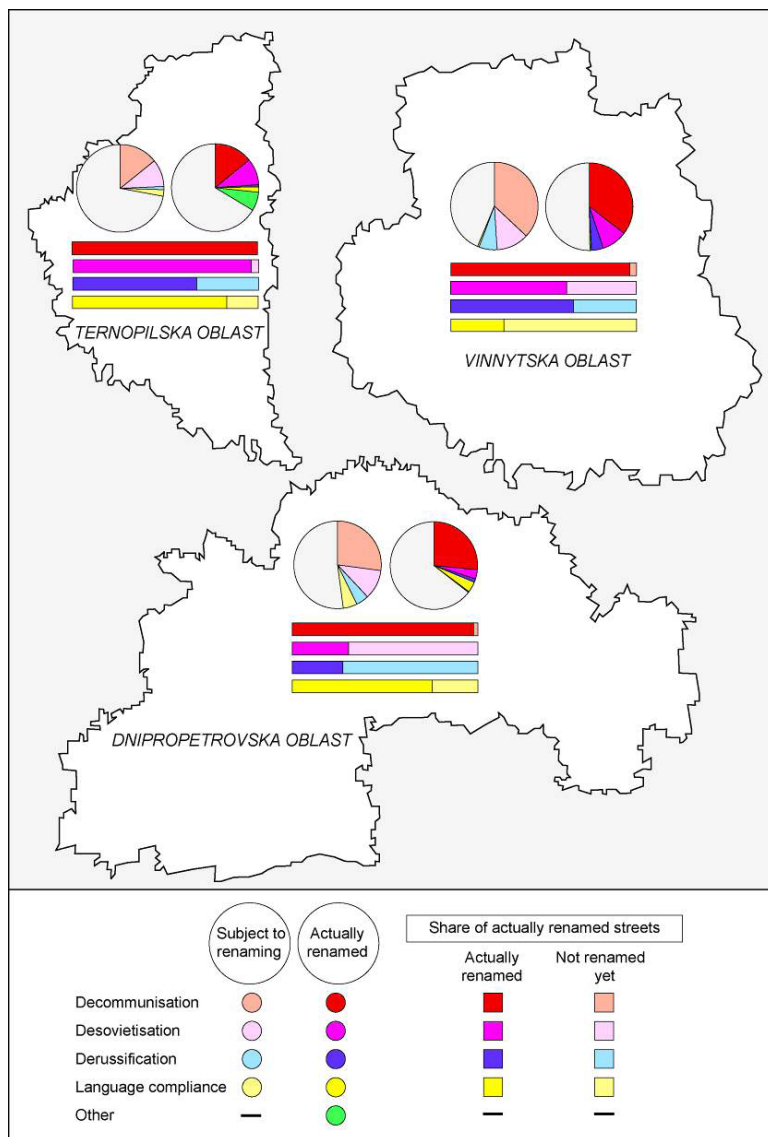
Fig. 3. Toponymic processes: potential and actual volumes of renaming

Looking at the semantic structure of newly emerged rural hodonyms (Fig. 4), and comparing the share of commemorative rural hodonyms with findings from research on urban street names (Kudriavtseva, 2020; Gnatiuk, 2022), it can be concluded that, in general, the percentage of ideologically neutral street names

is higher in villages and small towns than in big cities. Nevertheless, the proportion of military-political commemorative names seems to be the same for both rural and urban street names. This finding partially supports Hypothesis I for the post-Soviet period, but simultaneously partially contradicts it.

It can be seen that the share of commemorative toponyms decreases from west to east. Similar to urban street names, Ukrainian hodonyms are more actively used as tools of memory politics in the western part of the country compared to the eastern part, where local political elites and population are still reluctant to fully accept the new nation-centric historical narrative. Among newly emerged military-political commemorative toponyms, the names associated with the period of independence of Ukraine (since 1991) constitute the majority in all three regions. However, in Vinnytska and Dnipropetrovska oblasts this majority is absolute, while in Ternopilska oblast it is relative, and street names in honour of OUN-UPA figures and fighters for the independence of Ukraine in 1917–2021 are only slightly behind. For comparison, in Vinnytska and especially Dnipropetrovska oblasts there are significantly fewer names commemorating the fighters for the independence of Ukraine in 1917–2021, and no OUN-UPA names at all. At the same time, in Dnipropetrovska oblast, the share of names related to the Cossack epoch is almost twice as large as in the other two regions. The share of names related to the Polish-Lithuanian period is small and almost the same in Ternopilska and Vinnytska oblasts, while in Dnipropetrovska oblast there are no such names at all.

The identified features generally reflect real historical differences between the regions. For example: (1) Ternopilska oblast was major arena of OUN-UPA activity, while such activity was limited in Vinnytska oblast and marginal in Dnipropetrovska oblast; (2) Dnipropetrovska oblast, located not far from the historical Zaporozhian Sich centres and locations, constituted practically the heart of the Cossack state, while the influence of the Cossack state was not so decisive for Ternopilska oblast. In general, the revealed pattern for rural hodonyms is very similar to that of urban hodonyms in the largest cities of the respective regions, at least for Vinnytsia and Dnipro (Gnatiuk, 2018). However, there are eye-catching differences as well. During decommunisation in 2014–2018, in the five largest cities in Dnipropetrovska oblast, streets named after the fighters for the independence of Ukraine in 1917–1921 accounted for 20–25% of the total renamed streets (Gnatiuk, 2018), while among the newly emerged rural street names of the respective region this proportion is a few percent. We may conclude that a trend to seek for maximal ideological neutrality of newly introduced street names, detected in many researches for the cities of the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine (e.g. Kovtûh, 2017; Gnatiuk, 2018; Kudriavtseva, 2020; Gnatiuk & Homanyuk, 2023), is even more pronounced in rural areas of these regions. These findings confirm Hypothesis III.
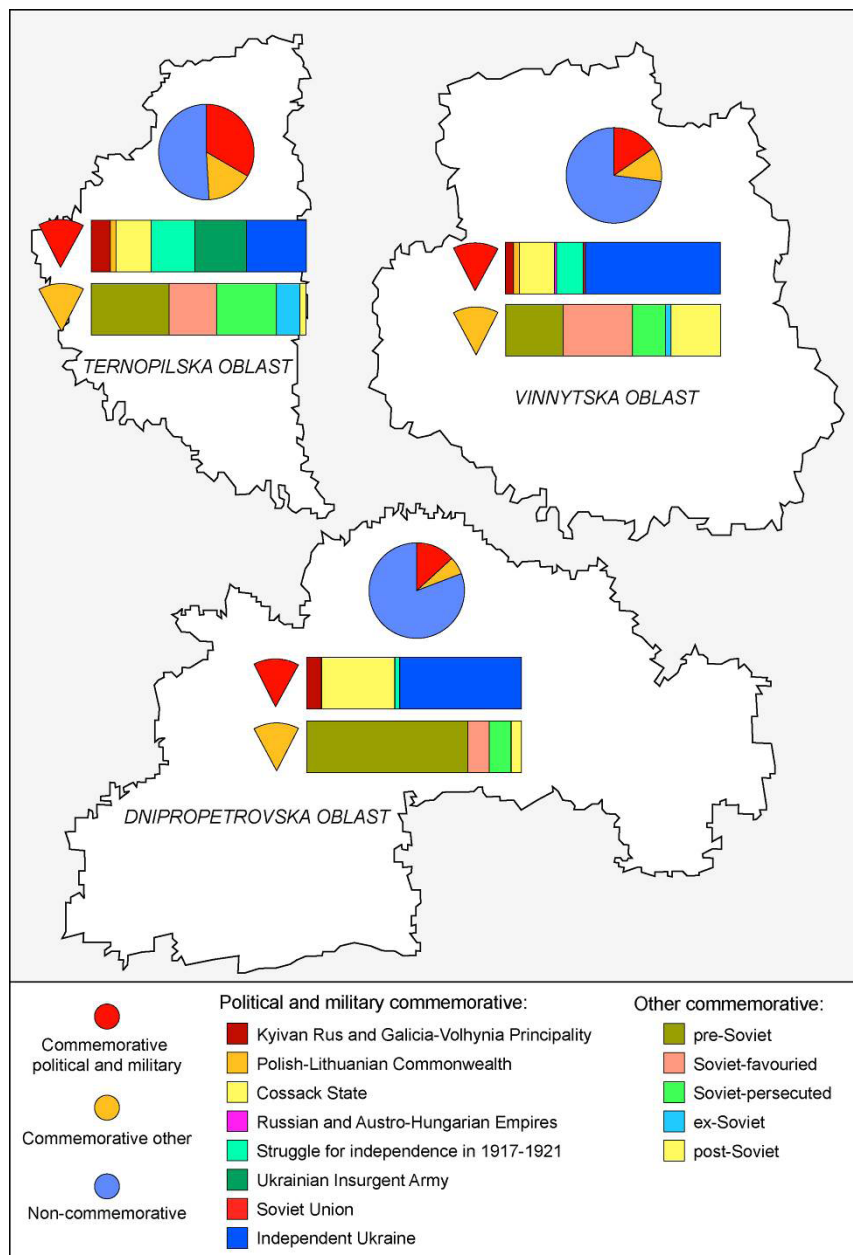
Fig. 4. Semantic structure of the newly emerged rural hodonyms

Special attention should be paid to the names associated with the era of modern Ukrainian independence. Most of them are names directly commemorating the Independence of Ukraine (Independence St.), or perpetuate the memory of fallen participants of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, usually descendants of the corresponding village. A clear preference is observed for commemorating local descendants, who are not only national heroes but also local figures personally known to many residents. Considering the high share of this name category, especially in the centre and east of Ukraine, we find further confirmation of the point (Hypothesis III) that rural street names (including commemorative ones) tend to be more closely linked to the local cultural and geographical context than urban street names, which are often semantically detached from their locality (Mezenko, 2019).

As for other commemorative names which are unrelated to military and political figures, Dnipropetrovska oblast stands out against the other two regions with a high proportion of toponyms referring to the pre-Soviet period. This suggests that street name authors in this region deliberately sought to avoid controversial Soviet-era associations, instead appealing to a pre-Soviet "golden age", often associated, however, with the Russian Empire colonial legacy (cf. Kovtûh, 2017). In the remaining two oblasts, proportion of the Soviet-era associated street names is significant, with expectedly the weight of Soviet-favoured personalities being higher in Vinnytska oblast, and the weight of those Soviet-persecuted — in Ternopilska oblast, where local memory politics has long been built on an anti-communist and anti-Soviet narrative.

To additionally highlight the west-east gradient in ideologization of rural street names in the regional dimension, we identified newly introduced street names that that appear in at least every fifth village within each studied region. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Most widespread newly introduced rural hodonyms per region

Street name (English translation)	Frequency in villages, %	Political value	Comment on the name reference
Ternopilska oblast			
Independence St.	35.3	High	Ukrainian Independence (1991)
Bandera St.	29.4	High	Leader of the Ukrainian Nationalist Organisation (1909–1959)
Hrushevsky St.	29.4	High	Ukrainian historian and politician, President of the Central Council of Ukraine (1866–1934)

Table 1 cont.

Sich Riflemen St.	23.5	High	Military unit of the Ukrainian People's Army, which operated in 1917–1919
Chornovol St.	23.5	High	Ukrainian politician and Soviet dissident (1937–1999)
Shevchenko St.	23.5	Medium	Ukrainian poet, writer, artist, public and political figure (1814–1861)
Vinnytska oblast			
Central St.	36.6	None	-
Cozy St.	34.1	None	-
Sunny St.	31.7	None	-
Independence St.	26.8	High	Ukrainian Independence (1991)
Cherry St.	22.0	None	-
Hrushevsky St.	22.0	High	Ukrainian historian and politician, President of the Central Council of Ukraine (1866–1934)
Spring St.	22.0	None	-
School St.	22.0	None	-
Dnipropetrovska oblast			
Central St.	40.0	None	-
Cherry St.	37.8	None	-
Ukrainian St.	27.6	Medium	Ukraine as a state, country or nation
Viburnum St.	24.4	Low	Viburnum tree is among unofficial national symbols of Ukraine
Peace St.	20.0	Low	The idea of peace has a relation to ideology, but is merely universal

Analysis of the temporal dynamics of renaming (Fig. 5) reveals significant regional differences in the timelines of specific toponymic processes and their temporal correlations. First, we can observe that specific toponymic processes can be both synchronous or heterochronous across different regions. In the west of Ukraine, the removal of communist, Soviet, and Russian toponymic markers occurred almost synchronously throughout the period after the Soviet Union collapse. In the central and eastern parts of Ukraine, distinct phases are clearly distinguished: almost exclusively decommunisation in 1991–2013, decommunisation with elements of de-Sovietisation and de-Russification in 2014–2021, mostly de-Sovietisation and de-Russification with residual fading decommunisation after 2022. Second, there is a noticeable temporal delay in the implementation of individual toponymic processes, progressing from west to east.

Fig. 5. Temporal dynamics of renaming in terms of toponymic processes

In the western part, the mass cleansing of communist toponyms began immediately after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, but in the central and especially in the eastern parts large-scale renaming only occurred after decommunisation became mandatory. The same applies to de-Sovietisation and, especially, de-Russification. In the western part these processes began in the 1990s, while in the central and

eastern parts, they became visible after 2014 and massive only after the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine in 2022. Once again, these regional patterns align closely with those observed in urban settlements of the respective regions, confirming Hypothesis II. However, contrary to Hypothesis II, no substantial delay has been found for the restructuring of rural street names compared to urban ones.

Finally, it should be noted that the pattern of street renaming during decommunisation and decolonisation in rural settlements, at least in some regions, followed the principles approved by the toponymic commissions operating in the respective regional centres (although, it is important to stress that these decisions did not have formal legal authority over other territorial communities within the region). For instance, in Vinnytsia, the main purpose of the local working group was to create a unique image of the city that would fit into the historical past and the national context. Commemoration policy in Vinnytsia was aimed at formation of national-state identity, but appealing to the identity of the local urban community on a first-priority basis. The working group members tried to work respecting the principles of tolerance (respect for different canons of historical memory), historical gravity (not only appealing to the past but also to the trends of the present and the goals for the future), education (promoting dialogue and collective memory of different social groups), and integrity (creation of an integral city image/brand). Thus, considering each place name, the received proposals for the renaming of particular street were discussed roughly as follows: (1) attempt to restore the historical name; (2) attempt to reflect local features of the area or people associated with it; (3) attempt to extend the logic of the surrounding place names, building an associative series; (4) appeal to local and regional identity; (5) search among the names of prominent Ukrainians (Karoêva, 2016, 2017; Gnatiuk, 2022). These approaches are traced in the case of renaming rural streets in the Vinnytsia region as well.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study, focusing on a prominent geopolitical hotspot such as modern Ukraine, sheds light on the political lives of rural hodonyms. Existing research has primarily emphasised the embeddedness of the rural place names into the local geographic and cultural context, portraying them as a product of the interaction between the rural population and the surrounding natural and traditional cultural environment (Deepadung, 2003; Geršič & Kladnik, 2016; De Lange, 2019; Mezenko, 2019; Zhao et al., 2020; Yanqing, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). This study confirms certain differences between naming practices in urban and rural environments (cf. Zheng and Guo, 2021). However, by focusing on rural street names, which constitute the majority of the Ukrainian rural toponymicon, we found that

the utilitarian and cultural functions of rural street names are often overshadowed by their role as political and ideological markers. Similarly to urban hodonyms, strong regional differences in the newly introduced rural street names in terms of their semantic load and underlying toponymic process/policy are explained, first of all, by the differences in the local political process. Moreover, naming practices applied to the streets in Ukrainian villages, compared to the Ukrainian urban toponymy, highlight even more clearly the fundamental characteristics of the regional political process. For instance, in western Ukraine, there has been an intensified construction of a new nation-centric memory and identity narrative (Hrytsak & Susak, 2003), whereas in the east, there is a notable tendency toward maintaining the highest possible level of ideological neutrality (Gnatiuk, 2018; Afanasiev, 2020; Gnatiuk & Homanyuk, 2023).

The research findings confirmed our working Hypothesis I for the modern post-Soviet period, as the percentage of ideologically neutral street names was found to be higher in villages than in large cities of the respective regions. However, this pattern did not hold for the Soviet period, when rural street names in Ukraine were even more influenced by the dominant communist ideology than urban ones. The research also supports working Hypothesis II, as the reconfiguration of rural namescapes generally mirrors that of urban namescapes in the respective regions. In particular, we found a strong west–east gradient in the preference for ideologically coloured versus ideologically neutral street names, as well as greater tolerance for the remnants of Russian cultural markers in the eastern part of Ukraine. However, contrary to Hypothesis II, no substantial delay was found in the restructuring of rural street names compared to urban ones — they changed almost synchronously in each region. Finally, we found that in recent decades, rural street names more strongly reflect regional peculiarities of identity and memory politics in Ukraine and are more closely linked to the local cultural, historical, and geographical context than urban street names. Thus, the role of the rural toponyms as political instruments and symbolic markers should not be underestimated, at least, for certain categories of toponyms (street names) and certain geographical and socio-cultural contexts (as a post-Soviet realm).

Nevertheless, the active involvement of Ukrainian rural street names in the political life of the country raises concerns about their role as bearers of the spiritual culture of the people. Contesting the traditional view that rural place names are less politicised than their urban counterparts, this research aligns with studies emphasising the need to preserve traditional rural place names as part of local heritage (Son, 2015; Geršič & Kladnik, 2016; Yanqing, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). It seems that politically-driven toponymic cleansing may be yet another factor together with urbanisation and economic transformation (Son, 2015; Geršič & Kladnik 2016; Yanqing, 2022; Liu et al., 2024) contributing to the erosion and

disappearance of the traditional system of rural place names. Given this, rural toponymy needs a more balanced and consistent approach aimed at the development and strengthening of local rural identities via creating opportunities for socio-cultural expression through street naming (Yankson, 2023).

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