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Changes on Ukraine's Historical Front: The Law on State Policy of National Memory

Russia's full-scale invasion prompted the Ukrainian authorities to rethink their national memory politics. The most recent innovation was the adoption on 21 August 2025 of the law on state policy in the field of national memory, which defines, in particular, the purpose, main principles, tasks, and legal foundations of this policy, as well as its subjects and their powers. The document enshrined, for the first time at the legislative level, the official name of the current Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict as the "War for Ukraine's Independence".

Preparation and Adoption. The development of the draft law "On the Principles of the State Policy of National Memory of the Ukrainian People" began at the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM) back in 2016. However, due to the lengthy preparation process and the need to coordinate the final text with the Cabinet of Ministers, the proposed bill was registered in the Verkhovna Rada only on 12 May 2025. On 16 July, parliament supported it at the first reading, and on 21 August, it was adopted with 273 votes in favour and none against¹. On 29 August, the law was signed by the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and entered into force the following day².

It is symbolic that the adoption of the law coincided with a change in the leadership of the UINM. On 27 June 2025, Oleksandr Alfiorov was appointed to replace Anton Drobovych, who had been dismissed on 13 December 2024. Unlike his predecessor, Alfiorov is a historian and a research fellow at the Institute of the History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. He is an advocate of national conservatism and a sympathiser of Ukrainian interwar nationalism. After Russia's aggression, he became an officer of the Special Operations Forces "Azov-Kyiv" and, after the regiment reformed, an officer of the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade. The appointment of the new head of the UINM undoubtedly accelerated the adoption of the discussed law and highlighted the growing importance of the politics of memory in state politics.

Content. The law is of a framework nature: it defines the basic concepts, principles, and directions of national memory politics, as well as the tasks of government and self-government bodies aimed at its implementation. In addition, it introduces a number of amendments to the existing legislation, including the following laws: "On the Rehabilitation of Victims of the Communist Totalitarian Regime of 1917–1991" (1991), "On the Protection of Cultural Heritage" (2000), "On the Holodomor of 1932–1933 in Ukraine" (2006), "On the Legal Status and Honouring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine's Independence in the 20th Century", "On Perpetuation of the Victory over Nazism in World War II of 1939–1945", "On Access to the Archives of Repressive Agencies of the Communist Totalitarian Regime of 1917–1991", "On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols" (2015), and "On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and the Decolonisation of Toponymy" (2023).

¹ The minimum number of votes required to pass a law in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine is 226. Formally, MPs can vote "for", "against", or "abstain", but in practice they often do not press any button ("did not vote") or remove their card from the electronic voting system ("absent"). This allows them to avoid confrontation, but at the same time may prevent the adoption of a law if the required number of votes "for" is not reached.

² Закон України № 4579-IX від 21.08.2025 р. „Про засади державної політики національної пам'яті Українського народу”, „Голос України”, 29 серпня 2025, № 171 (423), pp. 1-8.

The new law defines the goal of the national memory politics as shaping a common understanding of the past through the restoration and preservation of national memory, supporting research on the history of Ukraine, and promoting it in order to strengthen the unity of the Ukrainian people. Among the principles of this politics are scientific rigor and adherence to historical accuracy; freedom of academic discussion and social dialogue; preventing the justification of genocide, crimes against humanity, aggression, war crimes, and human rights violations; recognition of the criminality of totalitarian regimes, Russian imperial policy, and Rashism; and recognition of the continuity of the struggle for Ukraine's independence.

Main provisions of the law:

- Restoration of the special status of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance as an executive body, together with a change in its subordination – from the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. The Institute is tasked with forming and implementing state policy in the field of national memory³.
- Recognition of the preservation of national memory, the protection of the state language, and cultural heritage as one of the priorities of Ukraine's national interests and an important component of national security.
- Alignment of World War II memorial sites – including grave structures located in burial places and honorary burial grounds (previously not covered) – with decommunisation and decolonisation laws. This entails the removal of all symbols of Soviet and Russian imperial policy, such as the St. George's ribbon, the Victory Banner, state awards, and other distinctions from the Soviet era, as well as inscriptions referencing the "Great Patriotic War" and its chronological framework. A ban will also be introduced on the use of the titles "hero city" or "city of military glory" in relation to settlements located on the territory of an aggressor state or occupying state.
- Setting a six-month deadline for local councils to remove "symbols of Russian imperial policy" from public spaces. Failure to meet this obligation would result in the task being transferred for three months to the heads of *hromadas* (municipalities), and then to the heads of regional state administrations, i.e., the appointed representatives of the authorities. This provision reactivates the mechanism introduced by the 2023 decolonisation law, which provided for the renaming of toponyms and the dismantling (relocation) of monuments associated with Russian or Soviet culture and history by the end of July 2024. However, this was not fully implemented everywhere, partly due to covert resistance⁴.
- Adjustment of the names of territorial *hromadas* (municipalities) to match the names of their administrative centres.
- Prohibition on local councils changing the names of streets, squares, and other toponymic objects for 10 years if they have been changed as part of decolonisation.
- Recognition of the awards of the Ukrainian People's Republic⁵ and the Ukrainian Supreme Liberation Council⁶, awarded to independence fighters before 1991, as state awards.

³ The status and competences of the UINM have changed four times. The Institute was established on 31 May 2006 as a specially authorised central executive body responsible for restoring and preserving the national memory of the Ukrainian people. On 12 January 2011, it was reorganised into a state-funded research and scholarly institution under the government, tasked with ensuring the formation of state policy on national memory. On 9 July 2014, the Institute regained the status and powers of a central executive body for the implementation of state policy in the field of restoring and preserving national memory, with its activities directed and coordinated by the government through the Minister of Culture.

⁴ Local authorities often delay the decolonisation process, citing formal or objective reasons for not changing toponyms or for postponing the removal of Soviet monuments.

⁵ The Ukrainian People's Republic existed from 20 November 1917 to 29 April 1918 and from 14 December 1918 to November 1920.

⁶ The Ukrainian Supreme Liberation Council (USLC) was the highest governing body of the Ukrainian independence movement, created in July 1944 in Galicia at the initiative of the revolutionary faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists



- Inclusion of memory politics in the mandatory activities of educational, scientific, cultural, and archival institutions, as well as government and self-government bodies.
- Adoption by the government of a State Strategy for the Restoration and Preservation of the National Memory of the Ukrainian People and an Action Plan for its implementation.

New terminology. The document introduces a number of new terms into the applicable law, including: “War for Ukraine’s Independence”, “places of memory of the Ukrainian people”, “crimes against the Ukrainian people”, “Rashism”, “historical anti-Ukrainian propaganda”, “national memory”, and “state policy of national memory of the Ukrainian people”. The struggle for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of Ukraine’s borders against the aggression of the Russian Federation, which began on 19 February 2014, is defined as the War for Ukraine’s Independence. The text of the law also identifies the primary cause of the conflict – namely, Russia’s consistent imperial policy aimed at denying and destroying Ukrainian statehood and the identity of the Ukrainian nation. In this way, the war is presented as the natural outcome of Russia’s long-standing policy of denying Ukrainians the right to their own state. The law distinguishes several stages of the current war from the temporary occupation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, and the hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, to the defence of the state following the launch of the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation.

At the legislative level, the definition of the term “Rashism” has also been introduced. It is defined as a type of totalitarian ideology and practices that combine Russian chauvinism, imperialism, and the practices of communism and Nazism. It is worth noting that the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine officially recognised Rashism as the state ideology of Russia for the first time in a resolution of 2 May 2023, addressing the UN, the European Parliament, and other international organisations, as well as foreign governments and parliaments, with an appeal to support the condemnation of the ideology, policies, and practices of Rashism.

Conclusions. In the context of Russia’s armed aggression, the Ukrainian authorities have been increasingly engaged in regulating historical memory through the passing of new laws and amendments to existing legislation (see above). The law adopted on 21 August 2025 aims to comprehensively regulate the formation and implementation of the state policy of national memory as an element of national security, as well as to support the systematic organisation of the public space.

The most important provision in the document is the restoration of the special status of the UINM and its direct subordination to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. Strengthening its institutional capacities will allow the Institute not only to implement but also to shape the state policy of national memory, including the memorialisation of the events of the current Russo-Ukrainian war. This will most likely entail an increase in staffing⁷ and higher funding⁸.

The law will evidently trigger a new wave of toponymic changes, monument removals, and revisions of public space. At the same time, it largely legalises processes that have been actively unfolding over the past decade (see [„Komentarze IEŚ”, nr 1371](#)). An illustrative example is the Lviv region, where all Soviet monuments have already been dismantled and the decommunisation of toponymy completed; in the city of Lviv itself, the exhumation of Soviet-era military personnel burials at Lychakiv Cemetery and on the Hill of Glory has recently been completed.

The adopted law introduces into the legal sphere a number of new terms, including the category of “historical anti-Ukrainian propaganda”. Its appearance is intended to serve as a tool to counter the dissemination of deliberately false narratives about the history of Ukraine; however, it raises certain practical and legal concerns. Clear criteria defining this phenomenon are lacking, such as what will be considered as anti-Ukrainian

(OUN-B). The UHWR was intended to represent the interests of all Ukraine on the international arena; however, in practice, it remained under the control of OUN-B, including Roman Shukhevych.

⁷ As of September 2023, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory employed 61 people. According to a government resolution of 29 December 2023, the maximum number of staff positions at the Institute is 70.

⁸ The UIPN budget for 2025 was set at 69.9 million UAH (approx. 1.7 million USD).



propaganda, and what will fall under academic discussion or scholarly criticism. Such ambiguity creates a risk of arbitrary interpretation and political manipulation of the norm. Therefore, the development of transparent expert procedures to ensure objectivity in its application will be crucial.

The appointment of the head of the UINM after a six-month break and the adoption of the law on state policy on national memory are signals of the growing importance of the history and politics of memory for Ukrainian authorities. The content of this policy will be largely determined by the political views of the new head of the Institute. It can be expected that the importance of memory will also grow in the state's foreign policy. In particular, this may bring historical questions back to the centre of Polish-Ukrainian relations, and fierce disputes over historical memory will continue. One example is the adoption by the Verkhovna Rada of a law recognising as deportees those Ukrainians who were forcibly resettled between 1944 and 1951 from the territory of the Polish People's Republic to the USSR. Although the draft law was registered in parliament as early as September 2019, it was adopted only on 16 July 2025, as a kind of response to Poland's recent establishment of 11 July as the National Day of Remembrance of Poles – Victims of the Genocide committed by the OUN and UPA⁹ in the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic. Symbolically, the law was passed on the same day on which the parliament, in its first reading, adopted the law "On the Principles of the State Policy of National Memory of the Ukrainian People".

⁹ The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) was an armed formation operating between 1942 and 1954, subordinate to the OUN-B and, from July 1944, formally to the USLC.