Place names, or toponyms, which were traditionally considered the geographical markers, the “addresses” on the maps, and were used mostly only as a source of encyclopedic linguistic, historical, and geographical information, can act as an immensely effective political instrument. From the standpoint of contemporary critical geography, they promote and legitimize the ideological values and interests of a political system and elite. Notably, a place name serves as a feasible political tool for the authorities during the periods of socio-economic and geopolitical transformations when political power changes the society’s memorial priorities. As Maoz Azaryahu (1996) pointed out in his classic work on commemorative place names, the process of streets’ renaming is “a conventional manifestation of a stage of liminal transition in history, when the need of the new regime for legitimacy and self-representation is especially high” (Azaryahu, 1996, p. 319). Importantly, the spatial politics of the local authorities in the sphere of place naming creates a complex toponymic system, a palimpsest, which often combines contested or mutually exclusive place names with various ideological messages and connotations in the symbolic landscapes.

The main goal of this special issue of the Journal of Geography, Politics and Society is to discuss some new themes and patterns in contemporary toponymic systems of the post-Soviet countries through the combination of multidisciplinary methods in social sciences, the traditional methods of toponomastic research, the theoretical ideas of the national scientific schools, and the emerging, mostly Anglophone, critical toponymy approach (Vuolteenaho, Berg, 2009; Rose-Redwood et al., 2017). Besides, it also aims to analyze the contemporary political aspects of place naming as the reflection of the authorities’ political discourse and explore how political power is changing the memorial priorities of people and, as a result, is transforming the identities of the post-Soviet societies.

In recent years, the post-Soviet realm has been an object of the growing number of political toponymic studies based on a wide range of the theoretical perspectives and conducted in English on the examples of various countries of the region both
by the Western (Anglophone) authors and some of the post-Soviet researchers (see, for example, Murray, 2000; Saparov, 2003, 2017; Gill, 2005; Horsman, 2006; Dabaghyan, 2011; Balode, 2012; Marin, 2012; Yanushkevich, 2014; Manucharyan, 2015; Kangaspuro, Lassila, 2017; Light, Young, 2017; Shelekpayev, 2017; Malikov, 2018; Gnatyuk, 2018; Basik, Rahautsou, 2019; Kasijci, 2019; Gnatyuk, Glybovets, 2020; Dala Costa, 2020; Kudriavtseva, 2020). The region serves a model hotspot of geopolitical transformations in the 20–21 centuries with the different examples of, first of all, hegemonic toponymic practices ranging from erasing and cleansing to restoration, memorialization, and even promotional branding. Consequently, all of these processes lead to new ideological reality, modified national (or regional) identity, and the transformed politics of memory. Importantly, most of these studies concentrate on the political aspects of urban place names of the capitals or the large cities. Still, some of these works include analysis of other types of toponyms such as the names of physical geographical objects or various settlements. Sadly, however, for the comparative perspective on political toponymy, many works of the post-Soviet researchers related to the political dimension of toponyms which rooted in national theoretical and methodological approaches, and, in some cases, applied the elements of critical toponymic analysis, can remain unknown for the Anglophone academic community as they were conducted in regional languages. Among many of them, it is worth to mention Sacukevič (2010, 2013), Timofeev (2012), Lomakin (2014), Nemcev (2014), Terent’ev (2015a, 2015b), Galaktionova (2016), Demska (2016), Gardžėau (2017), Thakahov (2019), and several recently published non-English papers on Ukraine (see the brief English descriptions in Kudriavtseva, Homanyuk, 2020). The current special issue of the Journal of Geography, Politics and Society also fills this gap and expands the horizons of international scientific collaboration.

The authors of this special issue represent different countries and fields of social sciences and explore the variety of topics, ideas, and methodological approaches to analyze the various forms of connections between space, the toponymic landscapes, political power, and societies on the example of several post-Soviet states, including Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The article by Sergei Basik, which opens this special issue, explores the critical patterns in hegemonic toponymic politics and its remnants in the 20–21 centuries Belarus from the standpoint of the post-colonial approach. The author argues that the top-down toponymic practices implemented in Belarus by the Soviet political regime adopted similar goals, methods, and technologies as the colonial powers in different parts of the world, and, therefore, the theoretical post-colonial perspective on toponymic research can be applied for the post-socialist states. The second paper by Karli Storm interrogates the functions of the ultimate toponyms of Sakartvelo (Georgia) and Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan) through the prism of the theoretical concept of national imaginary. The author also analyzes the role of the local toponym Borchali, which is used as a critical element of regional national identity by the Georgian Azeri-Turks. The third paper by Nikita Lomakin scrutinizes three miscellaneous renaming cases from the Russian cities of Perm, Kazan, and Volgograd and identifies the key stakeholders of toponymic changes. Consequently, the author unveils three different (re)nam ing trends and connect them to the main political actors involved in the process. The next article by Marina Golomidova focuses on the municipal toponymic policy in Kazan (Russia). The case study interprets the role of regional identity as a fundamental element of local toponymic branding politics in a specific ethnic region of the country, Republic of Tatarstan. The paper by Denis Kutsenko, the final segment in this special issue, provides the analysis of two urban case studies in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The investigation reveals how the regional actors, such as the local authorities and elites, manipulated the politics of memory using Ukrainian decommunization law to achieve their political goals and receive economic benefits.

To conclude, it would be essential to encourage academics, researchers, and other professionals interested in this emerging topic to join and continue working on the political toponymy of the post-Soviet region. Some future themes of interest may include contemporary toponymic policy and practices, the toponymic system as a symbolic foundation of national identity, regional geopolitics of toponymy, (geo)political patterns in contemporary (re)nam ing, decolonization of toponymic landscapes, the regional patterns of toponymic commodification, and toponymic aspects of the people’s everyday life. One more critical goal is to expand the geographies of scholarship and include the cases from the former USSR’s underrepresented regions. Past and current socioeconomic and geopolitical shifts in the region provide a wide variety of topics and options to continue political toponymic studies in the post-Soviet realm.

Finally, as a Guest Editor, I had the privilege of working with a brilliant cohort of authors and reviewers, and I would like to express my gratitude to all of them for their professionalism and commitment during the stressful time of the global
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