



Journal of Geography, Politics and Society

2020, 10(3), 1–4

<https://doi.org/10.26881/jpgs.2020.3.01>



PLACE NAMES AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT IN THE POST-SOVIET REALM: INTRODUCTION

Sergei Basik

School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Conestoga College, 299 Doon Valley Drive, Kitchener N2G4M4, Canada, ORCID: 0000-0002-5952-7515
e-mail: sergei.basik@gmail.com

Citation

Basik S., 2020, Place names as a political instrument in the post-Soviet realm: introduction, *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society*, 10(3), 1–4.

Received: 20 August 2020 **Accepted:** 30 August 2020 **Published:** 30 September 2020

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 toponymic 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; Gnatiuk, 2018; Basik, Rahautsou, 2019; Kaşikçi, 2019; Gnatiuk, 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), Tererent'ev (2015a, 2015b), Galaktionova (2016), Demska (2016), Ġardzeâu (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 Azerbayçan (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) naming 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) naming, 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

pandemic. I would also like to thank the Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Tomasz Michalski, for this unique opportunity to organize this special issue, his constant support and kind attention during the process.

Sergei Basik

References

- Azaryahu M., 1996, The power of commemorative street names, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14(3), 311–330. doi: 10.1068/d14 0311
- Balode L., 2012, Place-names in the urbanonymy of Riga – mark of identity, *Studii și Cercetări de Onomastică și Lexicologie (SCOL)*, 5(1–2), 17–28.
- Basik S., Rahautsou D., 2019, Toponymic politics and the symbolic landscapes of Minsk, Belarus, *Geographia Cassoviensis*, 13(2), 107–120. doi: 10.33542/GC2019-2-02
- Dabaghyan A.A., 2011, Place Renaming Practices in Post-War Karabakh/Artsakh, *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, 56(2), 403–427. doi: 10.1556/AEthn.56.2011.2.9
- Dala Costa A., 2020, Toponymy and the issues of memory and identity on the post-Soviet Tbilisi cityscape, *Ideology and Politics Journal*, 15(1), 148–171. doi: 10.36169/2227-6068.2020.01.00007
- Demska O., 2016, Sučasnyj toponimnyj landšaft Ukraïny: miž pam'ättü I spogadom (Eng. Modern Toponymic Landscape of Ukraine: Between Memory and Remembrance), *Slavia Orientalis*, 65(3), 601–611.
- Galaktionova N.A., 2016, Sociokul'turnyj oblik regiona čerez prizmu toponymičeskoj politiki (kejs Tümeni i Naberežnyh Čelnov) (Eng. Socio-cultural image of a region in terms of toponymic policy [the case study of Tyumen and Naberezhnye Chelny]), *Regionologija*, 1, 152–163.
- Ġardzeäu Ü., 2017, Urbananimičnyj diskurs u pastsaveckaj Belarusi (Eng. Urbanonymic discourse in the post-Soviet Belarus), *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, 41, 212–250. doi: 10.11649/abs.2017.009
- Gill G., 2005, Changing symbols: the renovation of Moscow place names, *The Russian Review*, 64(3), 480–503. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9434.2005.00371.x
- Gnatiuk O., 2018, The renaming of streets in post-revolutionary Ukraine: regional strategies to construct a new national identity, *AUC Geographica*, 53(2), 119–136. doi: 10.14712/23361980.2018.13
- Gnatiuk O., Glybovets V., 2020, Do street status and centrality matter for post-socialist memory policy? The experience of Ukrainian cities, *Geographia Polonica*, 93(2), 139–161. doi: <https://doi.org/GPol.0167>
- Horsman S., 2006, The politics of toponyms in the Pamir mountains, *Area*, 38(3), 279–291. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-4762.2006.00697.x
- Kangaspuro M., Lassila J., 2017, From the Trauma of Stalinism to the Triumph of Stalingrad: The Toponymic Dispute Over Volgograd, [in] J. Fedor, M. Kangaspuro, J. Lassila, T. Zhurzhenko (eds.) *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. 141–170. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8_5
- Kaşikçi M.V., 2019, The Soviet and the Post-Soviet: Street Names and National Discourse in Almaty, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(8), 1345–1366. doi: 10.1080/09668136.2019.1641586
- Kudriavtseva N., 2020, Reconfiguring identities within the cityscape: ideologies of decommunization renaming in Ukraine, *Ideology and Politics Journal*, 15(1), 63–82. doi: 10.36169/2227-6068.2020.01.00004
- Kudriavtseva N., Homanyuk M., 2020, Contested names in the toponymic landscape of the post-Soviet space. Introduction, *Ideology and Politics Journal*, 15(1), 4–10. doi: 10.36169/2227-6068.2020.01.00001
- Light D., Young C., 2017, The politics of toponymic continuity: the limits of change and the ongoing lives of the street names, [in] R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman, M. Azaryahu (eds.), *The political life of urban streetscapes: naming, politics, and place*, Routledge, Abingdon – New York, 185–201.
- Lomakin N., 2014, Pät' let večnosti. Reglamentaciâ toponimiki Rossijskih gorodov v 1990–2000h godah (Eng. Five years of eternity. The regulation of toponymy in Russian cities in 1990–2000th), [in] I.I. Kurilla (ed.), *Istoričeskaâ razmetka prostranstva i vremeni*. (Eng. Historical marking of space and time), Izdatel'stvo VolGU, Volgograd, 19–43.
- Malikov A., 2018, The politics of memory in Samarkand in post-Soviet period, *International Journal of Modern Anthropology*, 11(2), 127–145. doi: 10.4314/ijma.v2i11.6
- Manucharyan N., 2015, The reflection of communist ideology in the street renaming policy in Soviet Yerevan (1921–1939), *Analytical Bulletin*, 8, 122–155.
- Marin A., 2012, Bordering time in the cityscape. Toponymic changes as temporal boundary-making: street renaming in Leningrad/St. Petersburg. *Geopolitics*, 17(1), 192–216. doi: 10.1080/14650045.2011.574652
- Murray J., 2000, *Politics and Place Names: Changing Names in the Late Soviet Period*, University of Birmingham, Birmingham.
- Nemcev M., 2014, O neizmennosti toponimiki postsovetskogo Novosibirsk (Eng. About the invariability of toponymy in post-Soviet Novosibirsk), [in] I.I. Kurilla (ed.), *Istoričeskaâ razmetka prostranstva i vremeni*. (Eng. Historical marking of space and time), Izdatel'stvo VolGU, Volgograd, 68–76.
- Rose-Redwood R., Alderman D., Azaryahu M., 2017, The urban streetscape as political cosmos, [in:] R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman, M. Azaryahu (eds.), *The political life of urban streetscapes: naming, politics and space*, Routledge, Abingdon – New York, 1–24.
- Sacukevič I., 2010, Nazvy vulic i ploščau Minska âk ġistoryka-kul'turnaâ spadčyna (Eng. The names of the streets and squares of Minsk as a historical and cultural heritage), *Arche*, 90(3), 324–341.
- Sacukevič I., 2013, Tapanimika Menska âk lûstërka ġistaryčnaj palityki uladau u 20 – pačatku 21 stadoddžâ (Eng. Toponymy of Minsk as a mirror of the historical politics of the authorities in 20 – early 21 centuries), *Arche*, 119(2), 239–254.

- Saparov A., 2003, The alteration of place names and construction of national identity in Soviet Armenia, *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 44(1), 179–198.
- Saparov A., 2017, Contested spaces: the use of place-names and symbolic landscape in the politics of identity and legitimacy in Azerbaijan, *Central Asian Survey*, 36(4), 534–554. doi: 10.1080/02634937.2017.1350139
- Shelekpayev N., 2017, Is Name Destiny? On Some Cases of Post-Soviet Street-Naming in Almaty and Astana, [in] J. Ira, J. Janáč (eds.), *Materializing Identities in Socialist and Post-Socialist Cities*, Charles University in Prague, Karolinum Press, Prague, 99–115.
- Terent'ev E.A., 2015a, Toponimičeskij aktivizm i "parvo na gorod": sociologičeskie zametki (Eng. Toponymic activism and "the right to the city"; sociological notes), *Vestnik Tomskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta. Folofofiâ. Sociologiâ. Politologiâ*, 29(1), 194–202.
- Terent'ev E.A., 2015b, Pereimenovanie sovetskih toponimov v Sankt-Peterburge: analiz publičnyh diskussij (Eng. Renaming of the Soviet toponyms in Sankt-Petersburg: the analysis of the public debates), *Žurnal sociologii i social'noj antropologii*, 18(2), 72–86.
- Thakahov V.K., 2019, Identičnost' i pamât' v urbanonimah Vladikavkaza (Eng. Identity and Memory in the Urbanonyms of Vladikavkaz), *Discourse*, 5(6), 108–119. doi: 10.32603/2412-8562-2019-5-6-108-119
- Timofeev M., 2012, Bes/z kommunizma: krizis ideologii v sovremennoj Rossii (analiz semiotičeskogo diskursa) [Eng. The demon of/without communism: the ideological crisis of contemporary Russia (the analysis of the semiotic discourse)], *Labirint. Žurnal social'no-gumanitarnyh issledovanij*, 1, 4–18.
- Vuolteenaho J., Berg L.D., 2009, Towards critical toponymies, [in:] L. Berg, J. Vuolteenaho (eds.), *Critical toponymies: the contested politics of place naming*, Ashgate Publishing, Farnham – Burlington, 1–18.
- Yanushkevich I., 2014, Semiotics of social memory in urban space: the case of Volgograd (Stalingrad), *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education*, 2(1), 43–50.