EMOTIONAL GEOPOLITICS OF TOPONYMIC (DE)COMMEMORATION: THE CASE OF BELARUS-RELATED STREET NAMES IN UKRAINE

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With 6 figures and 2 tables
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Summary: Drawing on works in emotional geopolitics and critical toponymy, this paper explores the contested spatial politics of emotionally and geopolitically motivated processes of toponymic de-commemoration and commemoration, using examples from Belarus-related street names in Ukraine. The study relied on a diverse set of materials, including archival records, municipal council decisions, and reports from online media outlets, through the lens of an indicative survey of university students in Kyiv university as well as analysis of the toponymic semantics (meaning), public feedback, and spatial distribution of Belarus-related street names from 1991 to 2025 with an emphasis on the period of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022 – 2025. The paper brings to light that such street names serve as emotional, symbolic, and place-embedded geopolitical signals that reflect society's emotional and moral judgments rather than systematic governmental memory politics. The study reveals that Ukrainians' attitudes toward the 'Belarusian' street names are influenced by their perceptions of Belarus as a state and the Belarusian people, reflecting an emotional, impulsive, and often exaggerated personal reaction to the contemporary and historical context of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations. This paper contributes to the ongoing disciplinary debates regarding the forms of emotional geopolitics and the emotional aspects of political toponyms.

Keywords: Critical toponymy, emotional geopolitics, Ukraine, Belarus

1 Introduction

The rapidly growing literature on emotional geographies in recent decades (Drozdzewski et al. 2026) has resulted from the recognition of emotions as "an intensely political issue" (Anderson & Smith 2001: 7) following the so-called 'emotional turn" in geography (Bondi et al. 2016). Intrinsically geopolitical phenomena such as identity, nationality, and nationhood are inextricably linked to the emotional realm (Davidson & Milligan 2004). Consequently, inspired by feminist geopolitics scholarship (Hyndman 2001, Massaro & Williams 2013), the framework of *emotional geopolitics* has emerged, where the emotions are "situated, historicized and relational – already formed and always changing – and affecting politics, as much as they are affected by politics, at a range of scales" (Pain 2009: 478). The studies in emotional geopolitics "critically reflect on how geopolitical events and discourses affect feelings" and "consider that emotions, in turn, may stimulate action and affect the practices, progress, and shape of politics at different scales" (Pain et al. 2010: 973), which is crucial in a dramatic geopolitical context such as the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. However, despite growing interest in the field, the emotional geopolitical dimension of urban street names has received relatively little scholarly attention (e.g., Rose-Redwood et al. 2018).

Currently, the geopolitically motivated symbolic landscape transformations in Ukraine, linked to the devastating Russo-Ukrainian war, have begun to be analyzed by geographers (e.g., Gnatiuk & Homanyuk 2023, Homanyuk & Ashutosh 2024, Gentile 2025). These transformations include two phases. First, the annexation of Crimea and the hybrid, undeclared war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 accelerated and legally formalized what had previously been a sluggish, inconsistent, and fragmented process of decommunization – namely, the removal of Communist ideological markers, including street names, from the country's public symbolic landscape (Kuczabski & Boychuk 2020). Second, the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, which began in 2022, triggered the removal of Russian and, to some extent, Soviet cultural markers from the country's symbolic space (this time including explicitly non-Communist ones) – a policy termed *decolonization* (reinterpreting the Soviet period of Ukrainian history as colonial), which in practice has largely taken the form of *de-Russification*, as its primary targets have been toponyms and monuments associated with Russia's history, culture, and geography (Gnatiuk & Melnychuk 2023).

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Unavoidably, the multiple traumatic effects of war have been reflected in emotional encounters of everyday life (e.g., Wolfe et al. 2024, Lautermann & Reuber 2026). The goal of the paper is to explore the emotional geopolitics of one specific element of the Ukrainian symbolic landscape – the urban street names associated with Belarus and the related contested processes of toponymic (de) commemoration. Belarus has been considered a close ally of Russia, the aggressor, which started a full-scale war following the military exercises on the territory of Belarus in 2022 (Security Council – The United Nations 2022). This situation led to a dramatic shift in official policies and everyday relationships between Ukrainians and Belarusians. In turn, street names associated with Belarus in Ukraine largely emerged during the periods of Russian imperial and Soviet rule, mostly imposed from above as ideological markers of the state's spatial unity and the unity of the so-called 'Soviet people'. At the same time, some of these names had a purely utilitarian origin (for example, a street leading toward a Belarusian city could be named accordingly) and reflect the long-standing ties between Ukrainian and Belarusian lands over many centuries: the Ukrainian–Belarusian border is quite extensive, stretching 1084 km.

To reach the goal of this study, two key research questions should be answered:

1. Why did Belarus-related street names in Ukraine become a specific, emotionally motivated spatial-geopolitical phenomenon requiring (de) commemoration, and which factors affect the spatiality and the type of the (de)commemoration of Belarus-related toponyms?

2. How did the emotional component of (de) commemoration change the existing geopolitical dimension of everyday life in the Ukrainian urban settlements?

Following the recent calls "to understand how emotions are deployed, played out and felt in geopolitical events and phenomena" (Pain 2010: 235; see also Jones 2026) and for "more complete inclusion of the kaleidoscope of emotions and memories" in critical toponymy (Houssay-Holzschuch & Giraut 2022: 267), this paper contributes to the fields of emotional geopolitics and critical toponymy, expanding the scope of research toward the emotional geopolitical aspects of place naming.

This paper begins with a theoretical background, including a brief review of the literature that relates emotional geopolitics to the emotional aspects of place naming. Then, we consider the contemporary context of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations. Following the Data and Methods section, we present the key findings of the research. We are finalizing our paper by discussing how the geopolitical place renaming produced emotionally motivated symbolic landscapes of everyday life in Ukrainian urban settings, with some concluding remarks regarding the toponymic dimension of future Belarusian-Ukrainian relations and the potential development of the emotional component in critical toponymy, namely, the future of 'Belarusian' place names in Ukraine after the war, depending on developments in the geopolitical situation.

2 Theoretical background

In this paper, we merge the theoretical approaches of emotional geopolitics (Pain 2009, 2010) and critical toponymy (Berg & Vuolteenaho 2009, Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2016, Rose-Redwood et al. 2018) as a conceptual foundation for our study, building on existing literature in these subfields. Notably, among the growing body of the recent works on the intersection of emotion and geopolitics (e.g., Benwell 2019, Hughes et al. 2020, Jones 2022, Mostafanezhad et al. 2023, Saddington & Hills 2023; Hur 2025), there is a study of the emotional and affective geopolitics in the post-conflict city of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the street signs and street names have been mentioned among the elements that form the city's emotional landscape and the geopolitics of daily life (Laketa 2016: 676, 680).

Toponyms themselves "can evoke powerful emotions within individuals and groups" (Berg & Kearns 1996: 103-104). People may develop strong positive or negative emotional connections to place names (e.g., toponyms as the markers of cultural memory, Heikkilä 2016), and the emotional dimension of toponymic meaning opens new avenues for understanding place attachment and community well-being (Kumala et al. 2025). The recent burgeoning literature on toponymic commemoration elucidates how "different social and political groups engage in struggles over whose memories and values should prevail in the public realm" (Rose-Redwood et al. 2022: 449). Among them are Palestinian (re)naming practices in Ramallah as geopolitical counter-memory (Brocket 2019), the Islamization of toponyms in Gaza implemented during Hamas rule (Helles et

al. 2024), and Brazil's post-dictatorial politics of toponymic memory (Quintão Guerra 2025).

Additionally, several critical works have noted or focused on the emotional dimension of place names and place (re)naming practices (e.g., Kearney & Bradley 2009; Basik 2024: 8-9). For example, among the recent, there are the attempts at Stalin's re-commemoration despite the traumatic history (Kangaspuro & Lassila 2017), toponyms related to WWII in Minsk that reflect the national emotional trauma and have been used by the current regime for legitimization (Basik & Rahautsou 2018: 113-114), the emotional symbolic memorial functions of informal signage (Bigon & Ben Arrous 2022: 203), the traumatic memories of Chile's dictatorships and victim memorialization (Infante Batiste 2024), or place naming as an option to overcome societal mafia-related trauma in Italy (Muti & Salvucci 2024). From a methodological perspective, the study focusing on everyday street name use (see, e.g., the post-socialist context in Creţan & Matthews 2016; Ochman 2025; Zhiyenbayev et al. 2025) in the aftermath of large-scale toponymic cleansing carried out within the frameworks of decommunization and de-Russification in Ukraine paid particular attention to emotional attitudes toward and attachments to street names (Gnatiuk et al. 2023).

In one of his now-classical works in critical toponymy, Azaryahu (1997: 479; 482) analyzed an "emotionally laden" process of East Berlin's toponymic changes and explained the place renaming act as "a twofold procedure," which includes both de-commemoration (the eradication of the existing names) and commemoration (the replacement of a former name). Significantly, though public commemoration through toponyms is "frequently controversial" (Gentile 2025: 2), particularly important for this study are examples of both types of toponymic (de)commemoration that have emerged during the Russo-Ukrainian war in various forms, such as de-Russification, a form of toponymic decolonization, performative toponymic gifts in Ukraine, as well as toponymic retaliation and symbolic reterritorialization in the occupied territories by the Russians (Gnatiuk & Basik 2023, Gnatiuk & Melnychuk 2023, Homanyuk & Ashutosh 2024). Ultimately, integrating two theoretical approaches, we will pave the way for a new theoretical avenue, focusing on the emotional geopolitics of the Ukrainian urban memorial landscapes, a domain in "which social and political conflicts are enacted" (Rose-Redwood et al. 2022: 458).

3 Ukrainian-Belarusian relations context

The East Slavic nations of Belarus and Ukraine have been culturally very close and have shared a political history since the medieval state of Kyivan Rus. Later, most Belarusian and Ukrainian lands were part of the multinational Grand Duchy of Lithuania, sharing the same official language, Ruthenian (different from the language of Muscovites), later, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and later, as a result of the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century, the territory of contemporary Belarus and a significant part of Ukraine became part of the Russian Empire (Kotljarchuk & Zakharov 2022). The first official Belarusian-Ukrainian interactions occurred in 1918, when the Belarusian People's Republic established diplomatic representation in Kyiv with the Ukrainian People's Republic (Kazharski et al. 2023).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine was the first country to establish formal diplomatic relations with Belarus as an independent, internationally recognized state (Kazharski et al. 2023: 47). Importantly, as independent states, Ukraine and Belarus did not have any interstate conflicts and had stable bilateral relations, in particular, in the economic sector, despite the opposite foreign and internal political vectors, especially after the autocrat, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, took power in Belarus in 1994 (Kazharski et al. 2023). Moreover, Lukashenka had good working relations with all five Ukrainian presidents (Kotljarchuk & Zakharov 2022). Significantly, before the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, Ukraine was a crucial economic and political partner for Belarus on the international stage, "a mediator between the West and autocratic Belarus, and a supporter of Belarus' endeavors to diminish its dependence on Russia" (Kazharski et al. 2023: 51).

In 2014, Lukashenka seized an opportunity to break his regime's international diplomatic blockade and play a key role as a peacemaker, hosting the Minsk talks in the Normandy Four format to find solutions to the ongoing hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine. Crucially, the Belarusian regime did not formally recognize the annexation of Crimea, though it criticized the Ukrainian authorities for not fighting (Kazharski et al. 2023) and refrained from recognizing the entities of 'LNR' and 'DNR' (Lozka & Marples 2025). Notably, Lukashenka was the most popular foreign leader in Ukrainian society, partly due to his ability to maintain neutrality in the Ukrainian crisis. In 2019, Ukrainian sociologists re-

corded his rating at 66%, the highest among leaders of other countries (Ratinggroup.ua 2019).

However, the mass protests in Belarus in 2020, following the contested, rigged presidential election, and their brutal crackdown, destabilized Lukashenka's regime, accelerating further integration with Russia (Kluczewska & Silvan 2025). Consequently, the imitated "multi-vector foreign policy" was ended (Moshes & Nizhnikau 2022: 489), and the regime "faced a precarious situation where Russian economic and political support became vital for its survival" (Lozka & Marples 2025: 42). Crucially, the Belarusian peaceful anti-authoritarian revolution in 2020 was "the single critical juncture event" (Gentile & Kragh 2022: 979) that influenced the situation with the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

On February 24, 2022, following the military exercises on the territory of Belarus, the Russian army crossed the state border between Belarus and Ukraine, the shortest route to the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, and launched a horrendous offensive (Fig. 1). Technically, the Lukashenka regime facilitated the use of the country's territory "as a launching pad for missile attacks" (Voice of Belarus 2023). The Belarusian state offered "logistical and medical support" to the invaders, and it was reported that Russia delivered the tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus in 2023 following the 'request' from the Belarusian regime (Lozka & Marples 2025: 42, Shuster 2025).

The war has increased Belarus's dependence on Russia, both economically and politically (Moshes & Nizhnikau 2022); however, the Belarusian regime has avoided at all costs any connections to the war or involvement of the Belarusian army in it. For instance, in an interview with the Japanese TV channel TBS in March 2022, Aliaksandr Lukashenka stressed that not a single Belarusian soldier is fighting in Ukraine, "we don't attack Ukraine, we don't bomb Ukraine," and "we advocate negotiations" (BelTA 2022). Notably, Belarus hosted talks on a peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine on February 28, 2022, four days after the start of the full-scale war, and twice again in March in the Ukraine-Belarus borderland (in the Homieĺ and Brest regions). Additionally, Lukashenka has consistently urged the international community not to label Belarus as Russia's co-aggressor (Shraibman 2022). In February 2025, Lukashenka once more offered

Fig. 1: Geospatial context of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations at the beginning of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022

to facilitate peace talks between Ukraine and Russia during an interview with American blogger Mario Nawfal (Preiherman 2025). However, despite such attempts, many members of the international community still considered Belarus involved in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Recently, the Council of the European Union complemented the sanctions package on Russia with 'further measures' against Belarus (Council of the European Union 2025).

One of the reasons for the Belarusian regime's 'pro-peace' position is the high unpopularity of the war among the Belarusian population (Moshes & Nizhnikau 2022, Kotljarchuk & Zakharov 2022, Lozka 2023). Despite the variety of restrictions (including 'the fear factor') and issues with the real representative polls in the authoritarian Belarus, the 2022 surveys show only between 6 % and 11 % support for sending the Belarusian army to Ukraine (Shraibman 2022), and "the overwhelming majority of Belarusians" were against this military action (Ioffe 2024: 42). However, a more recent Chatham House poll indicates that 36 % support and 38 % do not support Russia's 'military operation' in Ukraine (Chatham House 2023), because "disillusionment and fear loom large, contributing to a sense of caution and de-politicization among a segment of the population" (Lozka 2023: 31).

Strikingly, though Russian propaganda narratives dominate the media space in Belarus, the public has so far "proven to be surprisingly resilient overall" (Huterer & Sahm 2024: 6-7). For example, in late February 2022, more than 1,100 people were detained in Belarus (with a population of 9.5 million) for protesting the war, while, in comparison, at the same time in Russia (with a population of more than 140 million), 2,000 people were detained, which reflects a significant difference in societal attitudes toward the war in these countries (Lozka 2023: 27-28). Various forms of resistance and solidarity with Ukraine, brutally repressed by the regime, have emerged within Belarus. They included the 'railway partisans' sabotaging and disrupting Russian strategic military-related equipment (three 'railway partisans' were sentenced to imprisonment for 21–23 years), the Cyberpartisans, a group of hackers inside and outside of Belarus that launched the cyberattacks on the online logistics and railway infrastructure, different demonstrations of support for Ukraine by displaying Ukrainian flags, solitary pickets, massive gatherings, or even the Ukrainian songs performances (for example, a young lady was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for performing a Ukrainian song in August 2022 in Minsk) (Kazharski & Lozka 2026: 67, Lozka 2023, Nikolayenko 2025: 68-70).

Importantly, Belarusians have been fighting for Ukraine since 2014, when about 100 Belarusians were initially mobilized to support the Maidan (Josticova & Aliyev 2024). The number of Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine was estimated at around 1500 in 2022 (Kazahrski & Lozka 2026: 68). Currently, Belarusians represent one of the largest cohorts of the international 'legion' fighting for Ukraine, including the most well-known military unit, the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment (Lozka & Marples 2025).

According to Ukrainian sociologists, in January 2024, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians demonstrated a negative attitude towards Belarus (87% of respondents) and Aliaksandr Lukashenka (92%) (Razumkov Centre 2024), representing a dramatic shift from the 2019 popularity ratings. Such an emotionally motivated turn during the ongoing war is correlated with "changing collective memories and the evolution of war memorialization in Ukraine" (Gentile 2025: 3). The war motivated this 'emotional divorce' (Moïsi 2025) between Ukrainians and Belarusians, which was reflected in the transformed functions of Belarus-related toponymic markers in the symbolic landscapes of Ukrainian cities.

4 Data and methods

We focus on Belarus-related street names in Ukraine, specifically those derived from concepts directly related to Belarus as a state, country, and nation, including (but not limited to) geographical locations, prominent individuals, and historical events. Under the general term 'street name,' hereinafter we understand the names of streets, lanes, squares, avenues, embankments, and other objects of the street and road network, as well as metro stations.

The methodology of this research (Fig. 2) drew on several stages and respective data sources:

1. Analysis of the semantics, time of introduction, and geographical distribution of Belarus-related street names in Ukraine, which existed in the cities and townships of the country at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 (except for Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions uncontrolled by the Ukrainian government since 2015). For this purpose, we utilized archival city maps from different years, street registers published on the official websites of city councils, as well as an interactive resource for search-

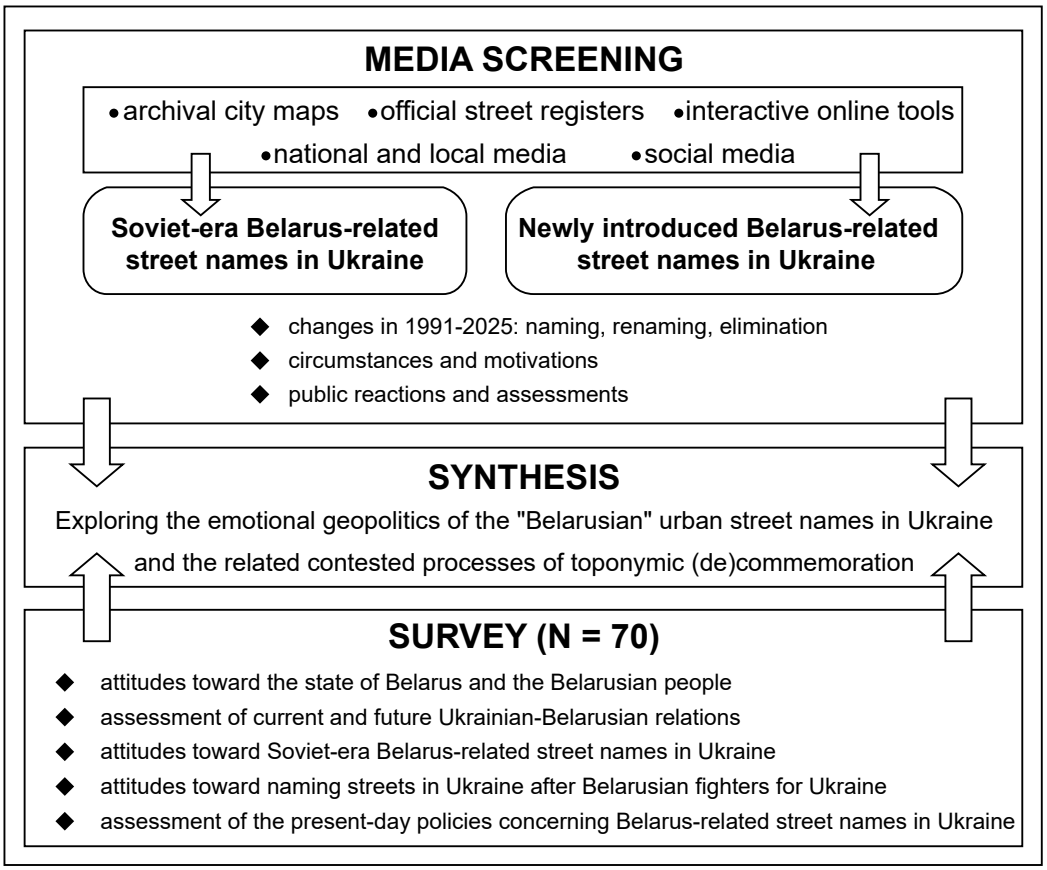

Fig. 2: Methodological flow of the study

ing streets in Ukrainian cities by a specific name; the database of the latter is up to date as of 2018, yet it meets the needs of our study (Texty.org.ua 2018).

2. Analysis of decisions of city councils and online media reports concerning the fate of the identified Belarus-related street names in 1991-2025, with particular emphasis on the period of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian war in 2022-2025. Specifically, we examined whether the respective names were preserved or changed. In the latter case, we investigated when and under what circumstances and motivations the renaming occurred, as well as the public reactions and assessments provoked by the renaming decisions (gauged through media reports).

3. Analysis of the semantics, time of introduction, geographical distribution, and public assessments of new Belarus-related street names introduced during 1991-2025 in Ukrainian cities and townships controlled by the Ukrainian government, with special attention to the period of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian war in 2022-2025. The final date of our analysis was 30 September 2025; therefore, changes that may have occurred later are not covered by this study.

4. A survey of students (N = 70) at one of Kyiv's universities regarding: (1) their attitudes toward the state of Belarus and the Belarusian people, including changes in these attitudes after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022; (2) their assessment of current and future Ukrainian-Belarusian relations; (3) their attitudes toward Soviet-era Belarus-related street names in Ukraine; (4) their attitudes toward naming streets in Ukraine after Belarusian volunteers who are fighting or have fought for Ukraine; and (5) their overall assessment of the present-day policies concerning Belarus-related street names in Ukraine. The questionnaire was designed to reveal and accentuate participants' emotional evaluations. It included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, enabling quantitative assessment and qualitative analysis of respondents' opinions. The survey participants (35 females and 35 males) were aged 18–24. They came from various regions of Ukraine, although the majority (40 respondents, 57%) were residents of Kyiv. The overall response rate was 74.5%. All students provided explicit written consent to participate in the survey. All participants answered

the closed-ended questions, while the response rate for the open-ended questions ranged from 88.6% to 94.3%. The most difficult question (with the lowest response rate) concerned the emotions evoked by street names honoring Belarusian fighters for Ukraine in the ongoing Russo–Ukrainian war. University students were selected as survey participants because one of the authors works at the institution. Given the specific composition of the respondents and the small sample size, the survey is indicative in nature; moreover, this was all that could be conducted under the current warfare circumstances. Quotations from the questionnaires were translated from Ukrainian into English by the authors. Beyond the small number of participants, a key limitation of the survey data is the narrow age range of respondents, which does not allow the findings to be generalized to the entire population of Ukraine but only to younger age cohorts. At the same time, the sample included respondents originating from different regions of Ukraine, where attitudes toward 'Belarusian' street names may vary.

5 Results

5.1 Belarus-related street names: (Re)naming practices and their reflection in media

As of 1991, 162 streets with Belarus-related names had been identified. The absolute majority of these names (156, or 96.3%) referred to geographical places, namely, the Republic of Belarus itself and its largest cities (Tab. 1). With few exceptions, such names emerged during the Soviet period, and the streets bearing these names did not lead toward the cities after which they were named. Thus, the overwhelming majority of Soviet-era 'Belarusian' street names were purely commemorative: their function was to symbolically bind the Soviet space into a single whole (Gnatiuk & Melnychuk 2023). The only non-geographical denotation identified was to the Belarusian national poet and writer, Janka Kupala.

Shortly after Ukraine gained independence in 1991, as part of early decommunization efforts, the city of Lviv renamed a street in honor of Francysk Skaryna, commemorating the Belarusian pioneer printer. This toponym was the first new Belarus-related street name in independent Ukraine. Thereafter, the set of Belarus-related street names remained unchanged until the onset of mass decommunization in 2015. In 2016, Herman Titov Street in Ovruch (Zhytomyr Oblast) was renamed after Mykhailo Zhyznevskyi, a Belarusian victim of the Euromaidan, and in Zhytomyr, 1st Kirov Lane became Homel Lane (after the Belarusian city of Homieĺ). However, in 2019, Orsha (Bel. Orša) Street in Chernivtsi was renamed in honor of a Ukrainian lieutenant killed in eastern Ukraine during the hybrid war with Russia. Thus, during the era of comprehensive decommunization elevated to the level of state policy, Belarus-derived street names were seemingly not perceived by either political elites or the general public as unacceptable or hostile: they could both appear and disappear, but for the most part remained untouched.

With the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, supported by Belarus' power holders, the situation changed radically. Due to public outrage over the complicity of Belarus in Russian aggression, public demands emerged in many Ukrainian cities to change street names associated with Belarus. As in the case of the first calls for de-Russification framed as decolonization, these demands were less a carefully designed and systematic state policy than an emotional public reaction to the perceived 'betrayal' and 'treachery' of the Belarusian ruling regime, which had enabled a 'stab in the back' of Ukraine from Belarusian territory. For many Ukrainians, an additional factor deepening the sense of disappointment was the previously widespread admiration for Lukashenka and his policies. As noted by one media commentator (Boyanzhu 2025):

> "…there used to be a Belarus Street … in Odesa. It existed and then disappeared, and rightly so. If the Belarusian territory was provided for an orcish[1)] assault on Ukraine, then we clearly have many unpleasant questions for Belarus."

While placing primary responsibility on the Lukashenka regime, some commentators also expressed emotional dissatisfaction with Belarusians in general (Boyanzhu 2025):

> "Someone will traditionally say that it is not the neighboring hardworking and peace-loving people who are to blame, but the mustached cockroach[2)] who seized power

[1)] In Ukraine, during the Russo–Ukrainian war, Russians (especially Russian soldiers) came to be referred to as 'orcs'. The nickname refers to the fictional race from J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium.

[2)] 'Cockroach' is a popular nickname of Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus and other post-Soviet countries, which emerged during the Belarusian protests in 2020.

Tab. 1: Soviet-era Belarus-related street names in Ukraine in 1991 and their destinies

Subject of commemoration	Explication	Initial, N	Extant, N (%)	De-commemoration, N (%)	Re-commemoration, N (%)
Babrujsk	City (Mahilioŭ voblasć)	6	4 (66.7)	2 (33.3)	-
Baranavičy	City (Brest voblasć)	1	1 (100.0)	-	-
Belarus	Country	29	9 (31.0)	17 (58.6)	3 (10.3)
Berascejščyna	Historical region	1	1 (100.0)	-	-
Brest	City, voblasć center	15	-	12 (80.0)	3 (20.0)
Homieĺ	City, voblasć center	21	6 (28.6)	15 (71.4)	-
Hrodna	City, voblasć center	5	1 (20.0)	4 (80.0)	-
Mahiliou	City, voblasć center	6	6 (100.0)	-	-
Mazyr	City (Homieĺ oblast)	3	-	3 (100.0)	-
Minsk	City, the capital of Belarus	36	14 (38.9)	19 (52.8)	3 (8.3)
Orša	City (Viciebsk voblasć)	3	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	-
Pinsk	City (Brest voblasć)	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	-
Polack	City (Viciebsk voblasć)	3	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	-
Sluck	City (Minsk voblasć)	1	-	1 (100.0)	-
Viciebsk	City, voblasć center	13	6 (46.2)	6 (46.2)	1 (7.7)
Janka Kupala	Belarusian National poet and writer	6	2 (33.3)	4 (66.7)	-
Total		162	62 (38.3)	91 (55.8)	10 (6.1)

* The transliteration of Belarusian toponyms is provided in accordance with the official *Instruction on the Transliteration of Geographic Names of the Republic of Belarus* (adopted in 2007). It was officially amended in 2023.

there. But, excuse me, this cockroach named Lukashenka … took part in the presidential elections of 1994, 2001, 2006, 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2025 and won, by hook or by crook. There are, indeed, questions for Belarusians…"

At the same time, almost in parallel, a public demand emerged to commemorate Belarusians who had taken up armed struggle on the side of Ukraine during the war (for example, as part of the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment) or the Euromaindan (Mykhailo Zhyznevskyi), or those who had fought against Russian imperialism in the past, such as Kastuś Kalinoŭski. Typically, calls to change Belarus-related toponyms were accompanied by appeals to do so specifically by memorializing these 'right' or 'true' Belarusians. This aspect revealed a clear difference from de-Russification: to the best of our knowledge, there are no known cases in which Russia-related toponyms were replaced with names honoring 'good' Russians, although fighters of the Russian Volunteer Corps could plausibly be considered as such. Therefore, if the result of de-Russification in Ukraine is limited to the removal of street names associated with Russia, in the case of 'Belarusian' street names, we observe both the disappearance of old names and the emergence of new ones – those that promote a Ukraine-centered and anti-Russian narrative.

For example, in May 2023, a petition appeared on the Kyiv City Council website calling for the renaming of Belarus Street to Zhyznevskyi Street. The author of the petition justified the proposal by the need to get rid of a name "honoring a state that cooperates with a terrorist and aggressor state," while simultaneously emphasizing the need to properly commemorate "the Belarusian, Hero of Ukraine, Mykhailo Zhyznevskyi." The petition collected the required number of signatures to be considered by the city council (Kyiv City Council 2023). The author of a less popular petition in August 2025 proposed renaming the Minska metro station to Pahonya[3]: the pro-

[3] Historical Coat of Arms chosen by the founders of the Belarusian People's Republic (1918-1923) as the state emblem.

posed name "honors the Belarusian people in their striving for freedom and the numerous Belarusian volunteers who, with weapons in their hands, defend the sovereignty of Ukraine" and "preserves the Belarusian theme in the station's design, giving it a new, positive meaning." The author also proposed synchronously renaming Minsk Square as Pahonya Regiment Square (Kyiv City Council 2025).

A deputy of the Bucha City Council, Vasyl Oleksiuk, noted: "Today, the Belarusian leadership is allowing Russia to attack Ukraine from Belarusian territory." Nevertheless, he immediately added (Tereshchuk 2023):

> "There are 'Lukashists'[4], and there are Belarusian patriots who support and defend Ukraine. The 'Lukashists' do everything under the Soviet flag, but the white-red-white flag is the flag of Belarus under which Belarusian fighters are fighting in Ukraine and reclaiming freedom and independence also for their own state."

Similarly, Vadym Pozdniakov, a representative of the civic organization Decolonization of Ukraine, while endorsing the removal of old Belarus-related names, at the same time expressed support for commemorating Belarusians who are fighting on Ukraine's side (Tereshchuk 2023):

> "…all those Minsk and Belarus streets need to be renamed. They should not be on the map of Ukraine. There is a public demand for this among Ukrainians. Unfortunately, aggression against Ukraine is being carried out from the territory occupied by the Lukashenka regime, and Ukrainians do not want to see such names in their cities … We should replace these names with neutral ones associated with Belarusians who are close to us, who supported Ukraine, and fought for Ukraine."

The Free Belarus charitable foundation also undertook active lobbying efforts to promote changes in toponymy. The foundation explained that the de-Russification of toponymy created a favorable moment to rename several streets in honor of Belarusian heroes. In particular, the head of the foundation, Aliaksei Frantskevich, justifying the replacement of Soviet-era Belarus-related names, emphasized the need to distinguish between the Belarusian political regime and Belarusians who support Ukraine (Tereshchuk 2023):

> "Belarus and Minsk Streets have been renamed, but at the same time, we are not losing the connection between the two nations. Turning Belarusians and Ukrainians against each other is a task of the Kremlin. It benefits from this. No one asked Belarusians about Russia's occupation, and no one asked Belarusians when Russia launched its offensive against Ukraine from Belarusian territory. … When Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, Belarusians came to fight for European values. And this needs to be talked about. We do not know exactly how many Belarusians have been killed and how many are fighting. Several battalions are defending Ukraine. We have contemporary heroes who are fighting against the Russian Empire, which poses a threat to the entire civilized world."

A representative of the Kyiv City Council Commission on the Renaming of Toponyms, local historian Pavlo Ostrovskyi, expressed a similar view (Panchenko 2022):

> "We must distinguish between the Belarusian people and the Belarusian occupation regime. In fact, Belarus is a territory occupied by Russian troops. The choice that Belarusians made in the elections was stolen from them. The Belarusian people do not support the war against Ukraine in the same way Russians do. Many Belarusians help Ukraine, donate to the Armed Forces, and take part in the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment … In Belarus, they took part in sabotaging railway lines to disrupt the supply of weapons to northern Ukraine, which was under occupation. We must not equate Belarusians with the Belarusian occupation regime."

Similar to the present-day Ukrainian de-Russification, the campaign against Belarus-related street names initially had a spontaneous, ad hoc, and non-systematic character. However, while de-Russification was eventually elevated to the level of mandatory state policy with the adoption of the Law "On the Condemnation and Prohibition of

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Adopted again upon the proclamation of Belarus' independence in 1991, then abolished by Lukashenka after the 'referendum' in 1995. One of the national symbols used by the Belarusian opposition.

[4] Aliaksandr Lukashenka's supporters.

Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and the Decolonization of Toponymy" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2022), the issue of Belarus-related names was never formally regulated. As a result, Ukraine's territorial communities effectively obtained freedom of action and the ability to independently decide which street names associated with Belarus would be retained and which would not. For example, in Kyiv, the relevant commission decided not to rename objects associated with Belarus and its culture, "taking into account the long-standing, strong, and significant historical and cultural ties between Ukrainians and Belarusians." Only a few of them were renamed, but "not because they were Belarusian, but because they duplicated other place names" (Panchenko 2022).

In total, between 2022 and 2025, there were 90 cases of de-commemoration of Belarus-related street names: 28 in 2022, 37 in 2023, 25 in 2024, and none in 2025. Overall, of the Soviet-era Belarus-related names, as of October 2025, 62 (38.3%) remained unchanged, 91 (55.8%) were replaced by names unrelated to Belarus (de-commemoration), and 10 (6.1%) were directly replaced by names once again related to Belarus (re-commemoration) (Tab. 1). The small number of specific names hinders a statistical comparative analysis of their persistence. However, a look at the most numerous categories (streets named after Belarus, Homieĺ, and Minsk) indicates no significant differences, and all Soviet Belarus-related names had virtually equal chances of being preserved on the maps of Ukrainian cities. Likewise, no clear regional patterns in the transformation of Belarus-related street names were identified (Fig. 3).

As for the emergence of new Belarus-related names, there were 2 in 2016, 10 in 2022, 5 in 2023, 5 in 2024, and none in 2025. Of these, 9 names (almost half) represented re-commemoration – the direct replacement of an old Belarus-related name. Most of these names commemorate Belarusians who fought against Russia on Ukraine's side in 2022–2025, Kastuś Kalinoŭski as a historical figure, the eponymous Belarusian regiment within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and Mykhailo Zhyznevskyi as a hero of the Euromaidan (Tab. 2). Characteristically, streets named after specific Belarusian participants in the Russo-Ukrainian war have a close biographical connection to the individuals whose names they

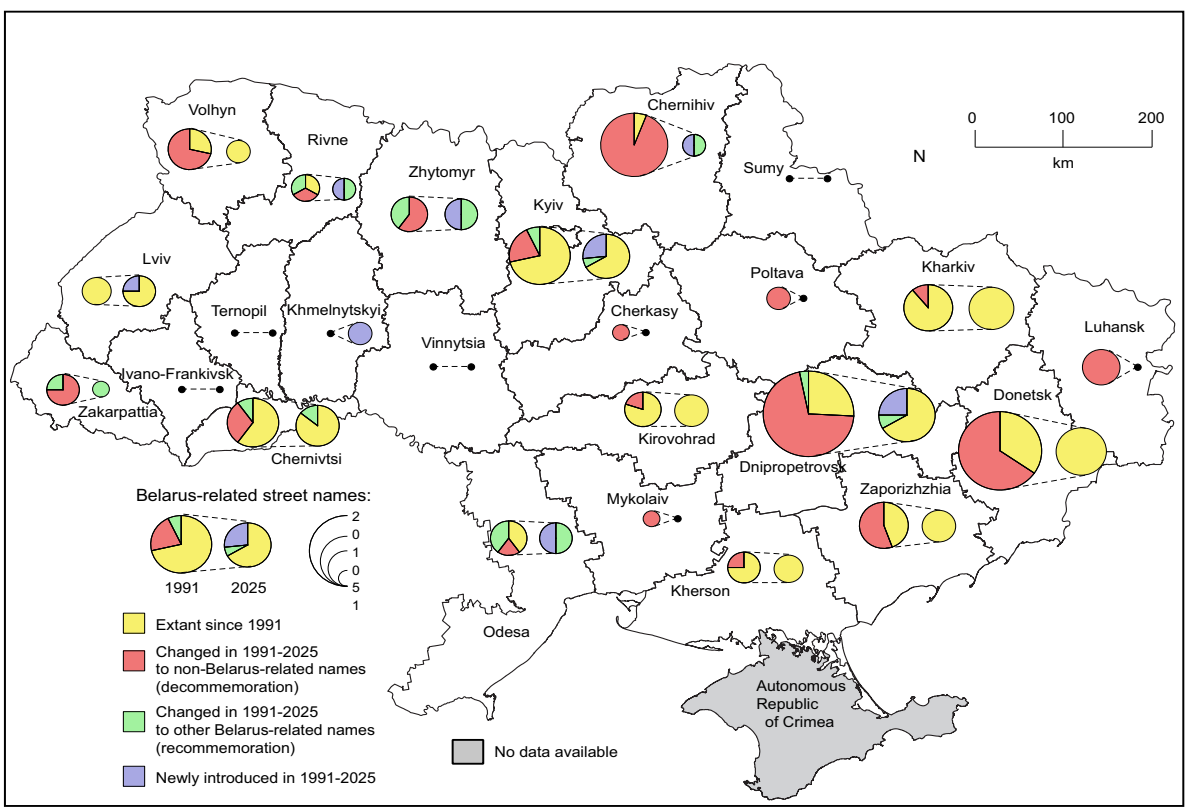

Fig. 3: Regional distribution of Belarus-related street names in Ukraine in 1991 and 2025

Tab. 2: Novel Belarus-related street names in Ukraine in 2025 and their origins

Subject of commemoration	Explication	Total, N	Commemoration, N (%)	Re-commemoration, N (%)
Kastuś Kalinoŭski (1838-1864)	A Belarusian writer, journalist, and lawyer, one of the leaders of the anti-Russian January Uprising (1863); a national hero of Belarus, Poland, and Lithuania.	10 9*	6 (60.0) 6 (66.7)*	4 (40.0) 3 (33.3)*
Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment	A group of Belarusian opposition volunteers formed during the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 to defend Ukraine against the Russian invasion; formerly known as the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Battalion until May 2022.	1	-	1 (100.0)
Aliaksiej Skoblia [bel] / Oleksii Skoblia (1990-2022)	A Belarusian soldier, a participant of the War in Donbas since 2015, and a deputy commander of the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Battalion under the Armed Forces of Ukraine (2022), who died defending Kyiv from advancing Russian troops in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and was posthumously conferred the title of Hero of Ukraine.	2	2 (100.0)	-
Berascejščyna [Bel.]/ Beresteishchyna [Ukr.]	A Belarusian and Ukrainian historical-ethnographic region, primarily located in the contemporary Brest voblasć of Belarus.	3	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)
Michail Žyznieŭskij [Bel] / Mykhailo Zhyznevskyi [Ukr] (1988-2014)	A Belarusian Euromaidan activist, who was one of the first victims of a confrontation on Hrushevsky Street in Kyiv, Ukraine, in January 2014, during the Euromaidan protests. Posthumously, he was the first foreigner to be awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine.	4	2 (50.0)	2 (50.0)
Francysk Skaryna (1470/1490-1551/1552)	A Belarusian humanist, physician, and translator, known to be one of the first book printers in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in all of Eastern Europe	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)
Illia "Licvin" Chrenaŭ [Bel] / Illia "Lytvyn" Khrenov [Ukr] (1994/1995-2022)	A Belarusian volunteer who took part in the Russo-Ukrainian War on the side of Ukraine. In 2014, he joined the newly formed Azov Battalion. After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he was the first among Belarusian volunteers to record a video calling to defend Ukraine. He was killed in the battles for Bucha, a satellite city in Kyiv's suburban area.	1	1 (100.0)	-
Total		23 22*	13 (56.5) 13 (59.1)*	10 (43.5) 9 (40.9)*

* Without accounting for the former Kastuś Kalinoŭski Street in Mukachevo, which was named in 2022 and then renamed again in 2023.

bear: they either lived there before the war (as in the case of Aliaksiej Skoblia in Khmelnytskyi) or died defending the city (as in the case of Illia 'Licvin' Chrenau in Bucha). This situation underscores the grassroots and emotional nature of the corresponding naming decisions.

The non-systematic and emotionally motivated character of work with 'Belarusian' toponyms in

Ukraine is well illustrated by the case of Belarus Street in Mukachevo. In April 2022, amid public outrage over Belarus's complicity in Russian aggression, it was renamed Kastuś Kalinoŭski Street. However, under decolonization, in November 2023, it was renamed again, this time in honor of Vasyl Harahonych, a local scholar, educator, and journalist. This decision sparked outrage among at least part of the city community due to its perceived absurdity and the city council deputies' disregard for historical facts about Kastuś Kalinoŭski and his significance for the self-identification of Belarusian combatants (Horishniak 2023, Kravchuk 2024).

5.2 Survey results: Attitudes to Belarus, Belarusians, and Belarus-related street names

The absolute majority of respondents (84.3%) draw a clear dividing line between the Belarusian people and the Belarusian political regime, acknowledging that Belarusians as a people do not bear full responsibility for the actions of the ruling state elite:

> "Belarus and the Belarusian people and their attitude toward the political situation are different things" (R47)
> "...I distinguish between the concepts of the people and the state" (R02)
> "The people also bear significant responsibility for the government in the country, however … they are trying to change something" (R12)

Such respondents mostly emphasize that ordinary Belarusians differ in their attitudes toward the Lukashenka regime, the alliance with Russia, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while the perceived proportions of 'good' and 'bad' Belarusians vary. For example:

> "Most Belarusians are conscious people who also suffer because of Putin and his henchmen" (R58)
> "In my view, Belarusian society consists of half of the normal people who oppose their government and of half of the people who nevertheless support it" (R45)
> "There is a small part of the population that supports Ukraine" (R17)

At the same time, attitudes toward Belarus as a state are uniformly and strongly negative due to its geopolitical dependence on Russia and its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Typical evaluative statements include:

> "…a dictatorship that supports the Russian dictatorship" (R39)
> "…Russian puppet state" (R16)
> "…a region of Russia … an obedient lapdog of the 'big brother'" (R54)

However, there is also a minority that does not separate the people from the state and argues its position by emphasizing the responsibility of the population for the elected government:

> "If the people do nothing about this state, it means they are satisfied with everything" (R53)
> "They do not take to the streets to protest and have supported the president for many years" (R10)
> A common analogy is drawn with attitudes toward the Russian people and the Putin regime:
> "The people are the state. Separating Putin from Russians is unacceptable. So why should we separate Lukashenka from Belarusians?" (R21)

The generally differentiated attitudes of young Ukrainians toward the Belarusian people and the Belarusian political regime, as well as the ambivalent assessment of Belarusians' political positions, are also evident in changes in these attitudes following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While one-fifth of respondents reported deterioration in their attitude toward the Belarusian people, more than one-third stated that it remained unchanged, another third was unable to give a definite answer, and for some, it even improved. At the same time, attitudes toward the Belarusian political regime deteriorated significantly, with an almost unanimous consensus among respondents on this issue (Fig. 4). Assessments of the possibility of restoring close political and cultural ties between Ukraine and a democratic Belarus in the future reveal a balance between cautious optimism ('rather high', 42.9%) and cautious skepticism ('rather low', 38.6%) regarding the normalization of relations between the Ukrainian and Belarusian states and peoples in the future.

Responses to the survey questions allow tracing a fairly broad spectrum of emotional reactions among young Ukrainians toward the Belarusian people and the Belarusian state. At one pole are anger and irritation stemming from the perception

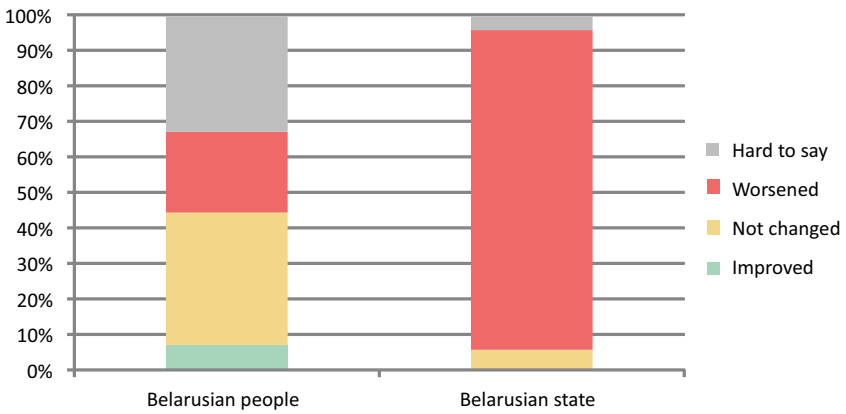

Fig. 4: Attitudes of the respondents towards the Belarusian people and the Belarusian state: Change since February 24, 2022, when the full-scale war in Ukraine began

of the Belarusian state as an enemy and an ally of Russia that is also responsible for killing Ukrainians:

> "Belarus is a country that is in fact dependent on Russia; its territory is used to shell our settlements" (R11)
>
> "A country allied with our enemy, which carries out or helps carry out strikes against Ukraine" (R30)

Much less often, they blame the Belarusian people as well:

> "The people support the war against Ukraine" (R32)
>
> "They are all for Russia!" (R09)

One of the most widespread attitudes is the perception of Belarus and the Belarusian people as victims or hostages of historical circumstances, unable or incapable of resisting a dictatorship backed by Russia. In most of the relevant comments, emotions of understanding the complexity of historical circumstances, compassion, and sympathy are evident:

> "They are in a difficult situation and cannot influence it" (R37)
>
> "Nice people who were unlucky" (R58)
>
> "I feel pity toward the people" (R69)
>
> "A totally uprooted and oppressed people with its own rich history, which lacked the strength and will to win their freedom" (R54)
>
> "[The Belarusian people] are victims of the Russian regime" (R60)
>
> "They are forced to live in Russian filth; I feel sorry for them" (R47)
>
> "They are assimilated hostages who … cannot escape Russia's sphere of influence" (R18)

There are also comments tinged with condescension, patronizing attitudes, vexation, and contempt due to what respondents perceive as Belarusians' inability to offer effective resistance to dictatorship:

> "Belarusians have, in fact, surrendered their country, and no real efforts to restore national identity … can be observed" (R03)
>
> "I consider these people to be very weak" (R61)
>
> "Intimidated victims and thugs who intimidate others" (R04)
>
> "…however sorry one may feel for them … they are spineless. This has already become their defining characteristic as a result of Russian influence, and there is no one among them to blame for it" (R60)

In some cases, this sense of contempt is accompanied by resentment toward Belarusians and explicit accusations, as Ukrainians suffer and die because of their political stance and their inability to overthrow the Lukashenka regime: "…the state is complicit in deaths in Ukraine, and the people silently support this" (R20)

At the same time, some respondents draw parallels between the historical trajectories of the Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples, acknowledging that Ukrainians have been somewhat more fortunate at the current stage of resistance to Russian colonialism:

> "Belarusians, for the most part, are just as conscious as we are. They seek change and do not want to be slaves" (R58)
>
> "…this is a people whose language, identity, and freedom have effectively been taken away – something the aggressor state is trying to do to us as well" (R01)

"I have never considered Belarusians to be bad people; to me, they are rather just as unfortunate as we are" (R58)
"I believe that Belarusians, like Ukrainians, are victims of the Soviet Union and Russia … they are also experiencing a negative scenario, but instead of war, it is almost complete absorption by Russia. The Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples both share the same pain in the form of Russia" (R60)

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum are feelings of pride, respect, and gratitude. These sentiments are expressed toward Belarusians who are conscious of their national identity, resist the Lukashenka regime, and support Ukraine in various ways in its war with Russia:

"Very cool people, especially if they speak Belarusian" (R33)
"They are trying to fight the dictatorship in their country" (R63)
"A large amount of support for Ukraine comes from the Belarusian people" (R46)
"…there are many young people (and not only young ones) who support us…" (R23)
"Positively … they support Ukraine and help in the information war" (R31)
"People who have managed to express their stance by defending another country … deserve respect" (R18)

Respondents' attitudes toward Soviet-era Belarus-related street names are more negative than positive. However, the shares of both unequivocally positive and unequivocally negative responses are low: most respondents tend toward moderate assessments (Fig. 5). This reflects both a more or less clear distinction made by some respondents between the Belarusian people and the Belarusian political regime, as well as differentiated attitudes toward various categories of street names:

"Negative attitude toward Belarus as a state, positive toward the Belarusian people" (R31)
"Belarus regime political actions have somewhat worsened my attitude. But my attitude toward the nation itself and its attributes is more positive" (R51)

Some respondents tend to justify street names commemorating prominent Belarusians while condemning names referring to the country or specific cities, given that the territory of present-day Belarus is used in the war against Ukraine and because of the Soviet practice of naming streets after cities in other Soviet republics (cf. Gnatiuk & Melnychuk 2020):

"In fact, streets named after prominent representatives of the people are not so negative. I have a very negative attitude toward names after cities, because this is inappropriate and is a Soviet legacy" (R18)
"I do not accept names after cities, but, for example, names after figures who developed a distinctive Belarusian culture or were known anti-Russian activists are acceptable" (R62)
"These are cities from which weapons are launched against the Ukrainian civilians" (R25)

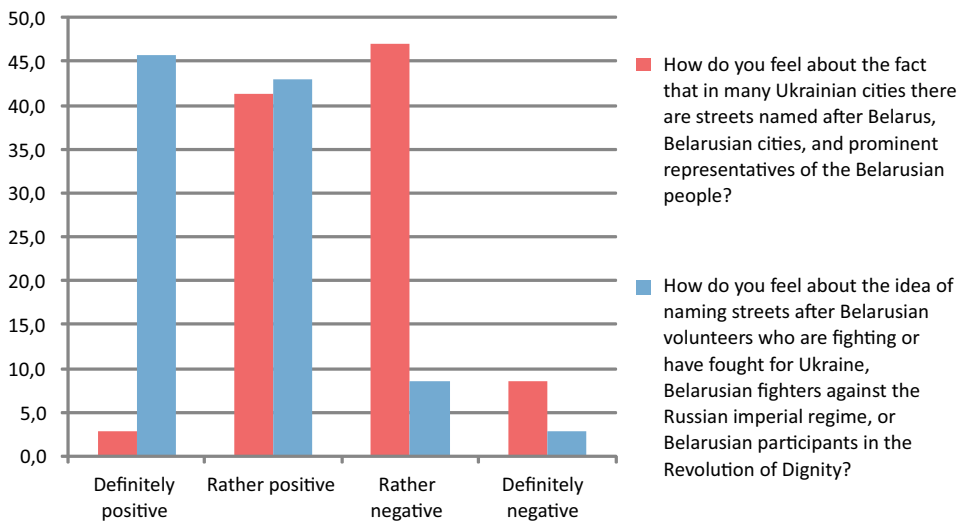

Fig. 5: Attitudes of the respondents towards the Belarus-related street names in Ukraine

"Names after Belarus are extremely negative, while those after prominent representatives are rather positive" (R08)

Others reason in the opposite way, not considering cities as geographical entities of a neighboring country to be ideological markers:

"I am absolutely neutral toward city-derived names" (R13)

"Cities have nothing to do with the actions of the authorities or the population of a particular country" (R32)

Some respondents adhere to an individualized approach to commemorating particular Belarusian figures, depending on their links to Russian or Soviet narratives and their attitudes toward the Ukrainian national idea:

"It very much depends on whom the street is named after. If it is a figure who promoted a Russian narrative, then the feelings are obviously negative, but there were also those who tried to promote ideas independent of Russia" (R12)

"If prominent representatives of the Belarusian people did not attempt to destroy the Ukrainian nation, there is no need to rename streets" (R32)

Three main reasons for respondents' negative attitudes toward 'Belarusian' street names can be identified. The most common one (27 respondents, 38.6%) is the interpretation of Belarus as an aggressor state and a satellite of Russia that assists it in waging war against Ukraine:

"Belarus is allied with Russia, and attacks on Ukraine are launched from its territory" (R30)

"Belarus cooperates with Ukraine's enemy, which means it is our enemy as well. Therefore, seeing such names … that are associated with the enemy does not bring any satisfaction" (R35)

The second most frequent reason (11 respondents, 15.7%) is the belief that priority should be given to fostering one's own (Ukrainian) identity, while street names related to other states are inappropriate in an independent Ukraine:

"I believe we should rely on our own identity" (R07)

"Why should Ukrainians live … on streets named after Belarusians? In my opinion, there are many prominent Ukrainians and places in Ukraine after whom streets should be named" (R24)

The third reason (4 respondents, 5.7%) is the argument that such names are a Soviet legacy that should be abandoned:

"…because we should move away from Soviet society" (R40)

"…this is inappropriate and is a Soviet legacy" (R18)

The reasons for respondents' positive attitudes toward Belarusian-related street names are more diverse. The most widespread one (14 respondents, 20.0%) is the idea of close cultural and historical ties between the Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples, a shared past, and similar historical destinies:

"…these names remind us of the historical and cultural ties between our peoples" (R59)

"…Ukrainian history is closely connected with Belarus…" (R31)

"…many shared historical events and hardships that unite us…" (R02)

The second most common argument (6 respondents, 8.6%) is that the Belarusian people should not be equated with the Belarusian state, and that many Belarusians continue to support Ukraine:

"Despite the fact that the Belarusian 'authorities,' which are not legitimate, have sided with the aggressor, many Belarusians continue to support Ukraine" (R31)

"Belarus, although under full Russian control, cannot be fully considered an enemy, because the will of the people is known (the 2020 protests), and historically Belarusians were allies of Ukraine" (R52)

"As a state, Belarus is our enemy, but I love Belarusians as a people, and they are similar to us because their language was also destroyed" (R33)

Almost equally common (5 respondents each, 7.1%) are the arguments that cities or individual figures have nothing to do with Russia or with Belarus's support for the Russian regime, as well as the view that Belarus-related street names have become habitual, serve a purely utilitarian function, and are not perceived as instruments of ideological influence:

"If prominent representatives of the Belarusian people did not attempt to destroy the Ukrainian nation, there is no need to rename streets" (R32)

"Belarusian artists were usually not

Russophiles" (R51)
"We have already gotten used to the old names, and they are not associated with anything bad" (R47)
"I am used to these names, and they do not bother me" (R28)

This group is followed (4 respondents, 5.7%) by the argument that preserving Belarus-related street names is an appropriate way to demonstrate solidarity with Belarusians in the struggle against a common enemy, as well as by the idea that there is little sense in replacing such toponyms now, given the prospect of Belarus's future democratization. Besides, this corresponds to the widespread motivation of the Belarusian fighters to "liberate Belarus by liberating Ukraine" (Josticova & Aliyev 2024, Lozka & Marples 2025: 54):

"…by supporting Belarusian figures, we as a nation demonstrate solidarity in the struggle against a common enemy" (R49)
"…such names, for example, those honoring prominent Belarusians, are appropriate, because the current authorities show contempt for Belarusian culture, and therefore Ukraine can create an environment for the development of Belarusian identity and movement" (R52)
"In the future, Belarus will free itself from the occupying authorities and become free, so I see no point in renaming streets now" (R31)

For three respondents (4.3%), such street names are a normal practice for commemorating not only the history of one's own country but also that of neighboring countries and their prominent figures. Finally, two respondents (2.9%) reported their own Belarusian ethnic background, highlighting the influence of respondents' personal biographies on perceptions of toponymic changes and memory policies.

An absolute majority of respondents (88.7%) support the idea of naming streets after Belarusian volunteers who are fighting or have fought for Ukraine; in particular, almost half of the respondents (45.7%) express an unequivocally positive attitude (Fig. 5). Respondents also expressed maximum agreement and minimal disagreement with the statement that "Replacing the Soviet street names associated with Belarus with names that reflect the joint struggle of Ukrainians and Belarusians against Russian imperial policies is appropriate" (Fig. 5). The main reason for approving such names (57 respondents, 81.4%) is the perceived need to commemorate people, regardless of nationality or citizenship, who had the courage to fight on Ukraine's side and to give their lives for another country:

"These are people of another nationality who had the courage to fight against common enemies and to support my country in a difficult time" (R02)
"These are great friends of Ukraine who died for us and saved the lives of other Ukrainians" (R31)

At the same time, different respondents place different emphasis. Some highlight the bravery of such Belarusians in opposing their own political regime in defense of their ideals; thus, their belonging to the Belarusian people becomes an additional reason for commemoration:

"Such names are justified because they show that we notice and positively value warriors who went against the authorities and propaganda and have a clear mind about the situation" (R36)
"People who went against the system … were not afraid and believed in truth and light" (R34)
"…not everyone in that state [Belarus] is brainwashed" (R28)
"People effectively renounced their homeland for the sake of justice" (R26)

Another group emphasizes that these individuals fought for Ukraine and are therefore the same defenders of Ukraine as other soldiers of the Ukrainian army, while their nationality is secondary:

"A person who defended our country deserves honor and remembrance regardless of origin" (R52)
"We must honor everyone who fights for Ukraine, and some of them are foreigners, which also becomes part of our history" (R12)
"…they are our Cossacks" (R09)

A less common reason (9 respondents, 12.9%) is the declared support for nationally conscious Belarusians, the opportunity to preserve an authentic Belarusian identity, and to set an example for other Belarusians of what should be done in their own country:

"This will improve attitudes toward Belarusians as a nation" (R51)
"This is support and a friendly attitude toward those Belarusians who are nationally conscious" (R49)

> "Through these [names], we can show Belarusians what should be done in their own state" (R21)

The key argument (7 respondents, 10%) voiced by the minority who opposed commemorating Belarusian fighters or expressed certain reservations about it was the belief that streets in Ukraine should be named specifically after Ukrainians rather than representatives of other nations:

> "Are there really no Ukrainians left to name streets after? In general, it's OK, but priority should be given to Ukrainians" (R24)
> "…as an exception, it is possible to name a street after them. But at the same time, I believe that we should first commemorate Ukrainians" (R66)

Here we again observe manifestations of a rather assertive nationalism among a segment of young Ukrainians, for whom Belarus – despite historical and cultural closeness – has become simply a foreign, albeit neighboring, state. This nationalism, which contrasts with Soviet internationalism, acknowledges Belarusians' right to fight on Ukraine's side but denies the necessity of honoring them on an equal footing with Ukrainians. However, despite their presence, such views clearly did not become prevalent. Other arguments *contra* included the potentially controversial nature of such names, the risk of intensifying political polarization in society and creating interstate tensions (2 respondents), as well as everyday inconveniences for residents and additional costs associated with renaming (1 respondent).

It is also instructive to compare attitudes toward the emergence of street names honoring Belarusian defenders of Ukraine in general and, more specifically, within the respondent's own locality. In the latter case, the level of support is significantly lower: 11 respondents (15.7%) expressed unequivocal opposition, while 16 respondents (22.9%) voiced reservations, stating that they would support such a practice only if the fallen Belarusian had a biographical connection to the respective locality:

> "It is ambiguous if there is no direct connection to my city" (R08)
> "Only if he had a personal connection to the area where the street is located" (R62)

Some respondents immediately agreed with such commemoration: "Belarusian volunteers are involved in the defense of my city" (R63)

Thus, we once again observe a recurring demand among Ukrainians for geographically contextualized toponyms that have a direct connection to the locality (Gnatiuk 2022, Gnatiuk & Homanyuk 2023: 250-251).

The conclusions drawn from the analysis of respondents' opinions are consistent with their own assessment of current developments in Ukraine regarding Belarus-related street names. The respondents, on average, expressed a moderate level of agreement (with low consistency in responses) with the statement that present-day changes to street names related to Belarus are part of a systematic and coherent state policy to decolonize and de-Sovietize the country's symbolic space. At the same time, they demonstrated a high level of agreement (with high consistency of responses) with the statement that such changes represent an emotional reaction of Ukrainian society to the Lukashenka regime's support for Russia's war against Ukraine and to the participation of Belarusian volunteers fighting on Ukraine's side (Fig. 6).

6 Discussion

Practices of dealing with Belarus-related street names in Ukraine, their official justifications, and media coverage of these practices, as well as indicative surveys, indicate that these practices are a deeply emotionally-driven and emotionally-constructed phenomenon (Anderson & Smith 2001), where both positive and negative emotions are felt, played out, and deployed (Pain 2009).

Decisions to change Soviet-era Belarus-related street names were made to publicly express attitudes (including anger, disillusionment, retaliation, and disrespect) toward the Belarusian state's complicity in Russia's war against Ukraine, which was perceived as a betrayal, treachery, and a crime against Ukraine. They signal a distancing from the Belarusian state, embodied in the specific regime of Lukashenka, and manifest feelings of protest, outrage, and anger, as well as the desire to remove the symbolic presence and the ever-present reminder of the aggressor's ally from local communities, completing in this way the 'emotional divorce' (Moïsi 2025). The absence of coordinated state policy and systemic criteria, along with the fragmented, bottom-up nature of renaming, further confirms that this is more a reputational-symbolic action than a structured policy of memory.

The saga of Belarus-related street names also contains an element of systemic state policy. As

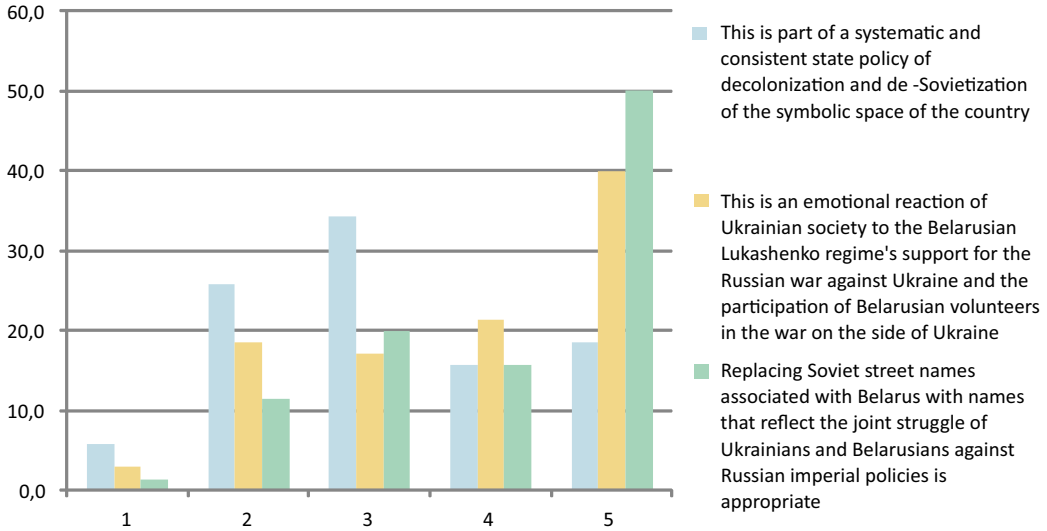

Fig. 6: Respondents' agreement with statements about the present-day (2022-2025) change to Belarus-related street names in Ukraine (1 = minimal agreement, 5 = maximal agreement)

shown above, they were less a reflection of geographical proximity and cultural affinity between Ukrainians and Belarusians than a product of Soviet policies aimed at stitching together the Soviet republics into a single ideological and cultural space (Wojnowski 2015; Gnatiuk & Melnychuk 2020). Some decisions to change Belarus-related street names are formally justified in local government resolutions as part of decolonization, and some survey respondents similarly emphasized the need for de-Sovietization. However, decolonization here serves more as a pretext and legal rationale than as the true, underlying reason for the renaming. After all, the street names of other former Soviet republics (except Russia) introduced during the Soviet era mostly persist on the maps of Ukrainian settlements. The meaningful difference is only one: unlike Belarus, the governments of these other named countries have clearly not supported or publicly justified military aggression against Ukraine, so the corresponding toponyms do not provoke emotional rejection or disapproval. Thus, the renaming of streets with Belarus-related names can and should be considered primarily as an expression of *emotional geopolitics* rather than a systemic, rational policy of memory.

At the same time, commemorating Belarusians who fought on the side of Ukraine, as well as historical figures of the Belarusian anti-imperial movement such as Kastuś Kalinoŭski, serves as a way to express gratitude and solidarity toward those people (and, through them, toward all the 'right', 'good' 'true' Belarusians) who had the courage not to submit to the will of their own government and to give their lives for a foreign country. As the survey showed, Ukrainians' attitudes toward both old and new 'Belarusian' street names are shaped by their attitudes toward Belarus as a state and the Belarusian people; these attitudes, again, are mostly not a systematic, academic, dispassionate analysis, but rather an emotional, impulsive, often exaggerated, and usually deeply personal reaction to the contemporary and historical context of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations. These reactions range from respect, admiration, and hope for a better shared future to sympathy and sorrow for the current state of the Belarusian people and even to anger, outrage, and contempt; various combinations of these emotional responses and assessments are also possible.

Although sentiments of internationalist fraternity toward neighboring nations, cultivated by the Soviet authorities, appear to have largely faded from the minds of young Ukrainians, a significant portion still feels a special attitude toward Belarusians, distinguishing them from other peoples – both due to an understanding of the deep cultural affinity between Belarusians and Ukrainians and because of awareness of the similarity or at least the close connection of the historical fates of the two nations in the past, present, and possibly the future. Similar to the renaming of old Belarus-related streets, streets named after Belarusian soldiers were designated ad hoc, with a close biographical link to the local context, without a formal program or systematic commemoration plan, which makes these actions frag-

mentary. Thus, the introduction of such street names also functions as an emotional, symbolic, and place-embedded geopolitical signal reflecting society's moral judgments rather than a systematic, consistent governmental policy of memory.

Belarus-related street names in Ukraine may be one of the most vivid illustrative examples of the mutual interplay between emotions and geopolitics, given the specific context: the background of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations was largely devoid of the legacy of colonialism or ideological, cultural, or military expansion in the past. However, a closer look reveals that other large-scale toponymic changes in Ukraine have likewise not been free from the influence of emotional factors. Mass de-Russification also began in 2022 as a spontaneous, grassroots movement, driven at its core by public outrage over Russia's launching of a war against Ukraine. Prominent Russians commemorated in the street names of Ukrainian cities were designated as 'culprits' for the actions of the contemporary Russian army, and the renaming of such streets was perceived by society as the removal of irritating symbols of the aggressor state and nation and as an act of restoring justice (Gnatiuk & Melnychuk 2023). Only later was the eradication of Russian toponyms officially framed and legitimized as decolonization. In the case of the mass, mandatory decommunization in Ukraine after 2015, the emotional component is less immediately apparent.

Yet, upon closer examination, this spontaneous, enthusiastic, and massive toponymic cleansing (Kuczabski & Boychuk 2020: 12) appears not so much as a sudden awakening of Ukrainian society or its new political elites to the crimes of the Soviet communist regime, but rather as an *emotional* reaction and moral condemnation of Russia's actions (as the ideological successor to the communist Soviet Union) in the annexation of Crimea and the launch of a hybrid war in Donbas behind the backs of pro-Russian separatists. "A great number of studies on renaming in Ukraine that appeared right after the start of the decommunization, tended to give a rather emotional, sometimes even biased, appreciation of events" (Kudriavtseva & Homanyuk 2020: 4) – this acknowledgment by the editors of a special issue of an academic journal devoted to Ukrainian decommunization also serves as evidence of the deeply emotional nature of decommunization itself that is difficult to resist even for a 'neutral' and 'detached' scholar. Indeed, the Revolution of Dignity itself, in December 2013, began precisely as an emotional response to the beating of student participants of the Euromaidan by internal security forces – as a demand for justice and for accountability of those responsible. Turning back to the Belarusian fighters, many of them decided to fight on the side of Ukraine after experiencing emotional distress caused by the Lukashenka regime or by the oppression of Euromaidan participants in Kyiv (Josticova & Aliyev 2024: 217–218, Lozka & Marples 2025: 55).

Up to this point, we have discussed emotional motivations primarily as grassroots ones arising from segments of the Ukrainian public. If we consider state policies and intentions, however, the Ukrainian state has not directly attempted to cultivate a distinct emotional attitude specifically toward streets bearing 'Belarusian' names. Nevertheless, the emotional perception of such toponyms may have been indirectly reinforced by broader state policies concerning the symbolic space. Following the adoption of the decommunization laws in 2015, the state began systematically removing Soviet symbols from the public space. This policy effectively brought renewed attention to the origins of place names and their symbolic meanings. As a result, toponyms associated with the Soviet or imperial geographical space (including the names of cities in other Soviet republics) increasingly came to be perceived as elements of Soviet symbolic geography. In its recommendations on renaming, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory emphasized the need to reconsider Soviet toponymy and suggested replacing names associated with imperial or Soviet narratives (Ukrainian Institute of National Memory 2023). Although these recommendations were not directed specifically at Belarusian toponyms, they contributed to the formation of a normative discourse in which place names referring to the Soviet geographical space could be critically reassessed.

Finally, as emotional impacts and costs do not feature in the decision-making calculation (Pain 2009), emotionally driven decisions may instead rationalize the occasion and the reasons for certain deeds and actions. However, as Belarus-related street names in Ukraine witness, neglecting emotions means excluding a key set of relations through which lives are lived, and societies are made (Anderson & Smith 2001: 7). Emotions are shaped by geopolitics and, in turn, produce geopolitically burdened place names that influence geopolitics (cf. Pain 2009: 478), thereby initiating and sustaining this spillover.

The author of a publication about the renaming of Belaruska Street to Kastuś Kalinoŭski Street in Odesa concludes by inviting readers to dream about the future: "In closing, let us dream of the time (and

it will come!) when nothing will remain of the tyrant Lukashenka in Belarus, when not only 'Zhyvie Belarus!'[5] but also 'Khai zhyve vilna Ukraina!'[6] will resound loudly in the streets of this neighboring country, and when in Odesa, somewhere in an expanding district of new residential developments, Belarus Street will once again appear" (Boyanzhu 2025). This toponymic example of everyday geopolitics of *hope* (Pain et. al. 2010) strikingly coincides with the recent official commentary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine: "We believe that in the future, democratic Belarus will go through the path of cleansing itself from the crimes of Lukashenka's dictatorship, restore its independence and sovereignty after years of Russian domination, and return to the family of European nations to which it belongs historically, politically, and culturally " (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2025). These thoughts also reflect the Belarusians' "painful soul-searching" (Kazharski & Lozka 2026: 71) regarding the dilemma of the regime's responsibility and the collective responsibility of the nation for the long period of mass political indifference, which caused the traumas of the crushed revolution in 2020 and the Russian invasion in 2022, which will be crucial for the reconstruction of the relationships between the neighbors.

Ultimately, feelings are "a vehicle of geopolitics" (Hur 2025: 4), and geopolitically driven toponymic (de)commemoration of Belarus-related street names reflects both resentment and hope. Our work demonstrates that the naming policies may be regulated by the state, but this does not deny the emotional basis underlying them, which is an important theme for future discussion in critical toponymy.

In this way, the study advances the intersection of emotional geopolitics and critical toponymy by demonstrating how place naming functions as a medium through which geopolitical emotions are produced, expressed, and spatially embedded in everyday urban landscapes. By analyzing Belarus-related street names in Ukraine, the research highlights how emotions of both sides of the spectrum shape symbolic landscapes and contribute to the formation of geopolitically meaningful place names. The findings suggest that policymakers and local authorities should consider the emotional and societal dimensions of place naming when implementing toponymic reforms, particularly in contexts of geopolitical tensions. Recognizing the emotional motivations behind renaming practices can help develop more transparent, context-sensitive, and socially accepted approaches to urban symbolic policy. The study indicates that commemorative naming can serve as a tool for expressing solidarity with allies and reinforcing shared political values.

[5] Long live Belarus! – a Belarusian patriotic motto widely used by the members of the Belarusian opposition.

[6] Long live free Ukraine!

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