

Breaking the Authoritarian Past: Political Consequences of De-Sovietization in Ukraine

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How does the authoritarian past shape politics after the transition to democracy? We study this question by examining the electoral effects of the ‘de-Sovietization’ in Ukraine. During a short period of time, thousands of Soviet toponyms were replaced and most of the monuments to Lenin and other Soviet figures were removed from the public spaces across the country. Using differences-in-differences design, we find that removals of the Lenin’s monuments, on average, increased votes for the parties sympathetic to the past Soviet regime, most likely by mobilizing the supporters of those parties to turnout. Even when normatively justified, the attempts to break with the authoritarian past by reshaping the public space can carry short-term electoral costs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Transitions to democracy are often followed by sobering dilemmas of how to deal with the vestiges of authoritarian past. Should the perpetrators of repression under the previous regime be brought to justice? What should be done with the inherited bureaucratic apparatus? Should the authoritarian political elites be allowed to run for office, to work in civil service? Should the wealth accumulated by those elites be redistributed? These issues of transitional justice and institutional reforms have attracted considerable scholarly attention (Suleiman, 1999; Magalhães, Guarnieri and Kaminiis, 2006; Nalepa, 2010; Haggard and Kaufman, 2018).

In this paper, we study a far less understood phenomenon of how the symbolic public artifacts of the past authoritarian regime shape politics after the regime breaks down. Autocrats often aim to project their authority by densely populating the public space with political monuments and imagery, by naming cities, streets, and squares after authoritarian political figures. Do symbols of the authoritarian past generate political benefits or costs to the parties ideologically aligned with the earlier authoritarian regime? Does the removal of such symbols mobilize or demobilize the sympathizers and the opponents of the previous regime?

Recent developments in Ukraine present a great opportunity for a systematic empirical study of these questions. Following the unexpected annexation of Crimea in the Spring of 2014, Ukraine underwent a major restructuring of its public space. In a relatively short period of time, more than a thousand monuments to Lenin and other communist figures were removed from the public squares in cities, towns, and villages. Thousands of streets, towns, and villages named after communist leaders and idioms had been renamed. We study how one particular aspect of decommunization of the Ukrainian public sphere – the removals of Lenin’s monuments, locally known as the

Leninopad – impacted the distribution of electoral support. More precisely, we ask whether the removal of Lenin’s monuments improved or worsened the electoral performance of the ‘pro-Soviet’ parties and candidates.

We use differences-in-differences research design by comparing electoral units before and after the removal of Lenin’s monuments (relative to the units where no monuments were removed). While we find some interesting heterogeneity between the effects of the *Leninopad* across different elections, the overall conclusion is that, on average, the removal of Lenin’s statues moderately increased the electoral support of the ‘pro-Soviet’ parties and candidates. The evidence tentatively suggests that this happened because the sympathizers of the ‘pro-Soviet’ parties were mobilized to turn out in larger numbers following the removal of the Lenin’s monuments.

The core thematic premise of this paper is based on the observation in Wedeen (1999) that political science should treat the “rhetoric and symbols as central rather than epiphenomenal to politics” (p. ix). The debates about the appropriate status of public historical symbols – usually associated with past political violence, oppression, and discrimination – have been recently emerged in the US over the Confederate flag, in Spain over the symbols of Franco’s authoritarian era, and in Iraq over the symbols of the Ba’ath party regime. In light of the salience of this topic in public affairs, it is quite remarkable that we have only very limited empirical scholarship on this topic. This paper, to our knowledge, is the first systematic attempt to quantify the electoral effects of the removal of authoritarian symbols.

Scholars have long invoked “the pervasive and profound importance of symbols in politics” (Cobb and Elder, 1973). Symbols have been used to explain a variety of complicated phenomena, including mobilization and political legitimization (Merelman, 1966), group conflict and cohesion (Delamater, Katz and Kelman, 1969), identity construction (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983), elite manipulation

(Kaufman, 2006), and political communication (Gill, 2008). The previous research has also devoted considerable attention to the social history of symbolic politics and the use of political symbols in authoritarian regimes (Leese, 2013; Plamper, 2012; Falasca-Zamponi, 2000; Wedeen, 1999; Kenez, 1985) as well as democracies (Edelman, 1964). Most of this literature claims that political symbols serve the function of placating the mass public’s dissatisfaction and bringing the public opinion in line with government – so they are tools of opinion manipulation. To the extent that a presumed function of political symbols may not be equivalent to their actual impact, this literature does not say much about the effects of such symbols on political behavior, and especially about the effects of the removal of such symbols after the transition from authoritarianism to democracy; this is an important gap that our paper aims to fill.

More broadly, our paper speaks to the literature on the legacies of communism (Beissinger and Kotkin, 2014; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2017; Kitschelt et al., 1999) and the legacies of violence on democratic politics (Acharya, Blackwell and Sen, 2016; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas, Schutte and Zhukov, 2017). This literature has shown how people’s personal experiences under the authoritarian regime, institutions created by those regimes, and acts of violence perpetrated by them shape political attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. Our paper identifies an additional – rarely recognized – layer of authoritarian legacies on democratic politics.

2. THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Cobb and Elder (1973, p. 306) define political symbols as “socially significant objects of individual orientations.” Political symbols create the common attribution of meaning and value to objects, norms, and narratives. Gusfield (1965) reports that people can become emotionally attached to symbols before they are capable of interpreting or

critically evaluating them. Symbols can serve as shortcuts to explain and understand complicated ideologies, political programs, and identities. Even the basic beliefs and perceptions about the political world “are symbolically constructed” (Kertzer, 1996, p. 8).

Expectedly, given the potential impact of symbols on the perceptions of political legitimacy, attitudes, and identities, the elites may attempt to use the cognitive content of the political symbols to influence the mass public. One instance where the role of political symbols comes forcefully into the picture are regime transitions when a new regime attempts to establish its legitimacy by co-opting, contesting, or disavowing the symbols related to the previous regime. According to Gill (2008, p. 175), contestation is the most wide-spread form of symbolic struggle that usually leads to either preservation of status quo or assignment of new (predominantly negative) meaning to old symbols. Framing the symbols of the previous regime as illegitimate – as ‘authoritarian’ or ‘totalitarian’ – can help the new regime to mobilize support in the population. Precisely because public political symbols are non-rivalrous and non-excludible public goods that can be consumed by everyone, their manipulation is an important tool for the elites to shape the collective memory of the past (Forest and Johnson, 2017).

The existing literature broadly agrees that political symbols can potentially impact mass behavior and so, accordingly, the elites would have an incentive to manipulate the symbols to their advantage. However, there is no apparent consensus as to how the public would react to those attempts of symbolic manipulation. On the one hand, we can think of public political symbols as a form of the presence of authoritarian symbols that guarantees constant free political advertisement for parties, associated with the authoritarian past. They expose passers-by to specific messages promoting political ideas associated with them. Symbols’ presence can remind the electorate about the ideas of the previous regime even if it ceased to exist long time ago. Since symbols can

serve as short-cuts to complex ideologies and political platforms, they become easy-to-understand and cost free promotion materials for parties that use these authoritarian symbols in their rhetoric. Attachment to such material symbols translates into attachment to specific political ideas and parties. Therefore, removal of these symbols should lead to the decrease in support for parties who benefit from them since they lose a permanent material reminder of their agenda.

On the other hand, the removal of symbols that were present in a certain location for an extended period of time can provoke a backlash from the people who either value these symbols or do not consider such actions necessary. In regimes holding competitive elections, opposition parties can benefit from unpopular symbolic politics by increasing their vote shares through increased turn out. In addition, removal of symbols associated with a non-existing regime might be accompanied by the dissatisfaction with government's performance originating in the belief that symbolic politics are used as a substitute to actions on real issues. Since symbolic politics only change the public discourse and do not lead to radical political or economic reforms, they might be perceived as a diversionary action directed at refocusing the attention of the general public. As a result, approval of incumbent and affiliated parties/candidates is likely to decrease. Thus, an incumbent might lose votes not only among opponents of its policies, but also among the previous supporters. Thus, the removal of authoritarian symbols should increase support for the parties that are sympathetic (in relative terms) to the past authoritarian regime.

3. POLITICAL CONTEXT: DE-SOVIETIZATION IN UKRAINE

In Ukraine, the process of decommunization (breaking up with the Soviet authoritarian past) dates back to early 1990s when the first efforts were made to change Constitution,

rename toponyms, and rewrite history books (Budko and Horobets, 2015). However, the actual change of symbolic landscape implemented through Lenin's statue demolitions did not start until the Euromaidan revolution (the wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in winter 2013-2014). The first removal of Lenin's statue happened on December 8, 2013 in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. It was a spontaneous decision of protesters in line with other infrastructure destruction that took place during the Euromaidan. However, it provoked a chain reaction among the mass public trying to break up with the Soviet past: around 504 Lenin's statues were demolished during the following year, without considerable control from local or central authorities.

To prevent the further unauthorized demolitions, in January 2015 the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine started an organized removal of Soviet statues. The Cabinet of Ministers (the government of Ukraine) submitted four bills on decommunization to the parliament on March 31, 2015. All of them were passed by Verkhovna Rada (the parliament of Ukraine) on April 9¹. The government program of decommunization aims to break with the Soviet past by outlawing and renaming Soviet toponyms (for example, Lenin Street), removing Soviet symbols (such as five-pointed stars) from buildings and public spaces, and demolishing Soviet memorials and monuments. While being highly controversial, this policy is generally supported in the parliament by all political forces except for the members of the former Party of Regions which was the ruling party in Ukraine before Euromaidan and was explicitly pro-Russian. Renamed into Opposition Bloc after its leader fled to Russia on February 19, 2014, this party became the only voice of disagreement with the policy of decommunization in the parliament, calling Lenin's statue demolitions unconstitutional and denouncing it as barbarian (Nimchenko, 2017).

In contrast, new political figures who came to power right after Euromaidan, in

¹The text of the law can be accessed at the official web-page of the Ukrainian parliament: <http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/317-19>

particular the new president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko and his government supported the idea of decommunization and removal of Lenin's statues from early 2014. According to Poroshenko, decommunization was necessary "to get rid of the idols of communism" (Zanj.ua, 2018). He also linked decommunization to creation of Ukrainian identity and protection of cultural and humanitarian space (Dzerkalo Tyzhnia, 2017).

Some opinion leaders agreed with Poroshenko (Golovenko, 2015), arguing the removal of Lenin's statues helped delegitimize the Soviet regime and mass repressions associated with it. Others, however, stated that decommunization was used as an ideological tool in war with Russia and thus, did not depend on politicians (Tyzhden.ua, 2018). The most famous proponent of decommunization and Lenin's statues removal, historian Volodymyr Viatrovykh (the person who wrote and presented decommunization laws in the parliament) argued that the removal of Lenin's statues and decommunization in general should be perceived as a promise of the state not to repeat the crimes of the previous regime. He also emphasized that this way Ukraine will become "more European" (Vyatrovykh, 2015).

Despite general support of decommunization among politicians and public opinion leaders with strong pro-European views, removal of Lenin's statues remained controversial and not easy to implement. The process of change of symbols highly depended on the elites, both local and central, who were eager to use this salient issue for signaling their position. In addition, elites' attitudes towards Lenin's statue demolitions were kept strictly along party lines, with parties associated with the Party of Regions opposing the policy and those associated with the current president supporting it. As a result, oligarchs and influential local politicians had to take sides in a conflict, changing the balance between pro-Western and pro-Russian political parties (and, thus, support for them) once again.

For example, in Kharkiv, a city in Eastern Ukraine that experienced the largest

number of Lenin’s statues demolitions during Leninopad, the central government reached a number of agreements with local elites that were closely associated with the previous regime (Balash and Shapovalova, 2018). Elites whose business was ruined by war in Eastern Ukraine are eager to support Poroshenko’s policy of decommunization as long as the government guarantees foreign investment in their enterprises. The most influential oligarch in the region and the mayor of Kharkiv, Gennadiy Kernes, who persecuted and denounced those demolishing statues back in 2008-2009, is actively implementing decommunization laws by removing Lenin’s statues (Depo.ua, 2015) and renaming streets (Dzerkalo Tyzhnia, 2015). He and his colleagues also did not join the Opposition Bloc after the Party of Regions, to which they belonged, ceased to exist. As a result, in Kharkiv region, the support for Opposition Bloc decreased from 40.98% in 2012 parliamentary elections to 32.16% in 2014 parliamentary elections (however, the change was much smaller than in other regions of Ukraine) with the following drop in 2015 local elections to 13.56%. Thus, elites’ manipulation of symbols and their change had a direct impact on the electoral results of the party closely associated with the previous regime.

4. EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

4.1. Data on Lenin’s monuments

The main source of information about the monuments of Lenin is the `Leninstatues.ru`, a crowd-sourced platform that records data about Lenin’s monuments all over the world, both in post-Soviet and non-Soviet countries, 9,596 statues in total. The database aims to provide information about the location, construction and demolition of those statues. For the purposes of this paper, we collected data on the monuments located in the territory of Ukraine, excluding recently annexed Crimea, 2,410 statues

in total.

To ensure that the list of demolished statues published at the website *Leninstatues.ru* was accurate, we compared it with the list of Lenin’s statues that lost their cultural heritage status (and therefore, could be demolished) published by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine (2016). Some of these statues were removed before the cultural heritage status was taken away; the reason of including them into the official “demolition list” was to legitimize demolitions. The Ministry of Culture used similar nomenclature to describe the locations of the monuments, which allowed us to make the comparisons across the two lists. The official list of statues that lost their heritage status was much shorter than the list published at *Leninstatues.ru*: it included only 424 out of 2410 previously mentioned statues. This is because most Lenin’s statues were of low quality and no cultural or historical value, and therefore, never belonged to the list of monuments protected by the law. The data published by the Ministry of Culture provided additional evidence of demolition of only historically valuable statues (i.e., those made by famous sculptors).

The following step for checking the reliability of data was to find evidence of demolitions in mass media reports. We used search engines to find news about demolitions of Lenin’s monuments. In the media reports, we found only eight demolitions that were not mentioned on *Leninstatues.ru*, but were recorded by multiple mass media sources. We subsequently added those monuments to our database yielding the final number of 2,418 monuments. The very fact that we were able to find only eight monuments not reported in the database suggests that the coverage of our dataset is fairly complete.

The media reports also allowed us to obtain more precise dates of statue demolitions as well as their locations (we also cross-checked the locations with the list the Ministry of Culture). One issue we encountered was that multiple demolitions took place in close proximity to one another, and so were reported under the same toponyms. In those

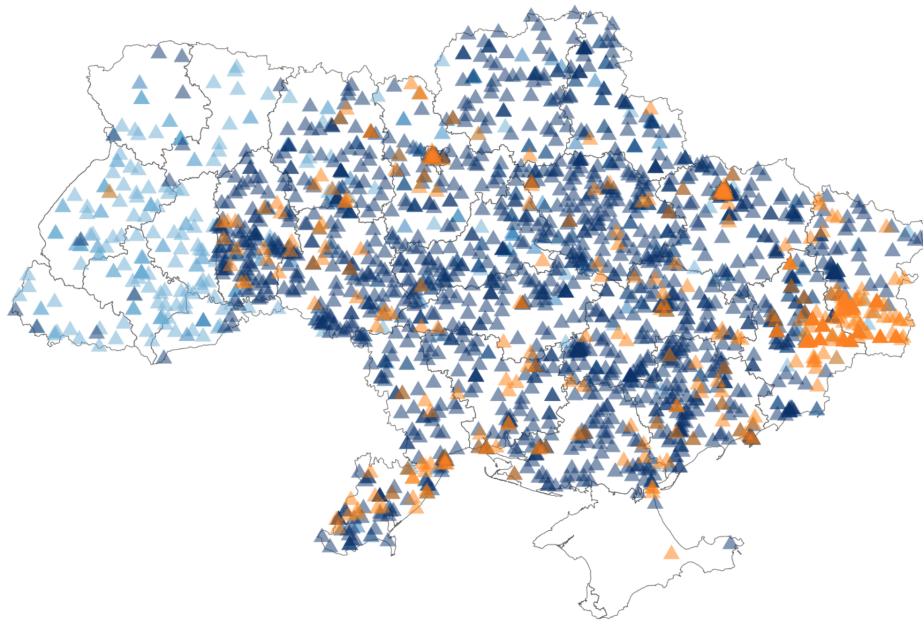
cases, we compared the images of demolitions presented in mass media to the images posted on *Leninstatues.ru*. Lenin’s monuments come in a variety of forms (seating, standing, wearing a hat, with children, etc.), so differentiating them and improving the precision of data was laborious, but straightforward.

We then geocoded the locations of Lenin’s monuments using Google Maps and Yandex Maps, a Russian competitor of Google Maps that provides more detailed and precise information in Post-Soviet region. In the cases of monuments for which we had complete addresses, we used automated geocoding. If an address was incomplete (e.g., we would know that an article reports that the monument stands in front of a village administration building or in the central square), the satellite mode of Google Maps was used to identify the precise location. In most cases, when the monuments were demolished the pedestals on which they stood remained in place. We then identified the locations of empty pedestals using the satellite view of streets. Of the 2,418 monuments we were able to geocode 2,405.

Figure 1 shows the locations of Lenin’s monuments and indicates the time periods during which they were removed (if they were removed). A vast majority of monuments located in western Ukraine were removed before or right after Ukraine became independent in 1991. Aside from this regularity, there are no visible spatial patterns in how early or late Lenin’s monuments were removed across different regions in central and eastern Ukraine. As of summer of 2018, 318 monuments remain standing², of which 171 are located in the conflict regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. Since elections did not take place in these conflict regions, we exclude Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts from our analyses.

Figure 2 shows how the number of Lenin’s monuments has changed in time across Ukraine, excluding the conflict regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. The figure shows that

²The number of remaining statues is smaller now, but we haven’t updated our dataset since summer.



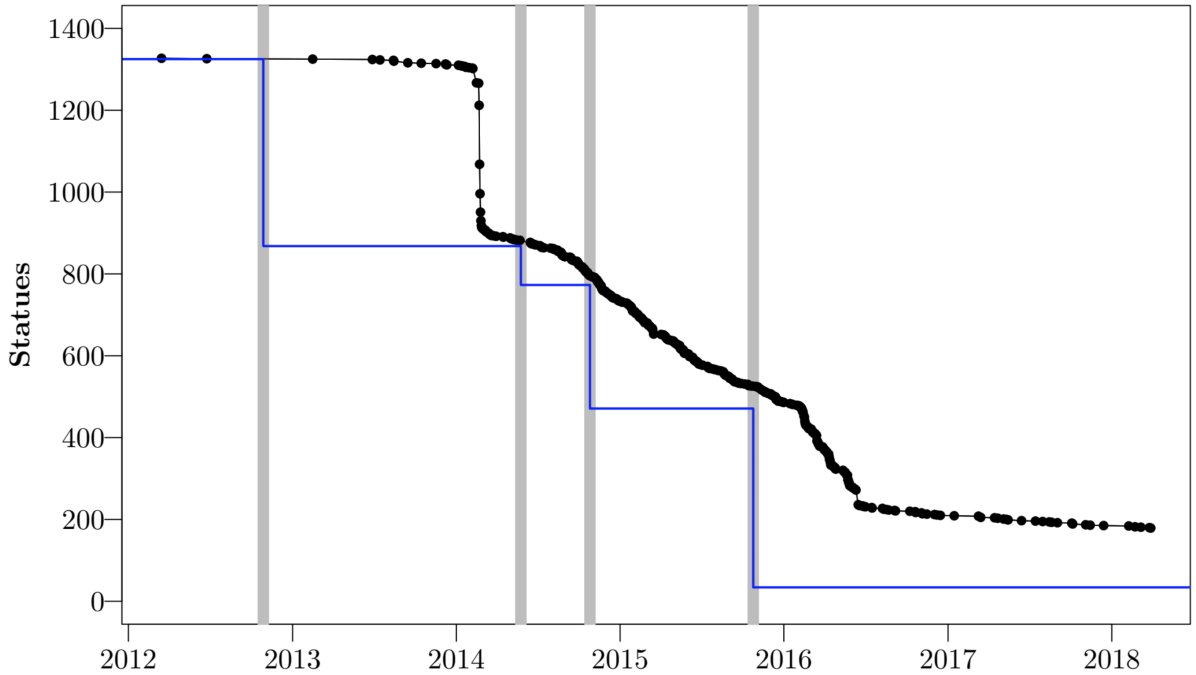
Removed ■ 1991 or earlier ■ 1992-2012 ■ 2013-2018 ■ NA

The map shows the locations of 2,405 monuments. NA's are the monuments that either have not been removed or for which the removal date is not available.

Figure 1: REMOVALS OF LENIN'S MONUMENTS IN UKRAINE

there was barely any change in the number of Lenin's monuments before the Euro-maidan protests in 2013, but the main impetus for the demolitions was the Crimean annexation at the end of February 2014. In the period of only five days from February 21 to 25, 340 monuments were demolished, and the trend continued – albeit at lower rates – afterwards.

As Figure 2 indicates, precise demolition dates could not be obtained for all monuments. However, in most cases where the precise date was unavailable, we were able to identify the inter-election period in which the monuments were removed (shown in blue solid line); in other words, we could identify whether a given monument still existed or not prior to each election. Given the type of analysis we are conducting this type



Black dot-line shows the number of monuments at a given time (only the statues for which we know the exact removal dates are included). Vertical grey bars represent elections. The solid blue lines show the number of monuments prior to each round of elections. Data exclude conflict regions of Luhansk and Donbass, as well as Crimea.

Figure 2: LENIN’S MONUMENTS IN TIME

of time-stamping is sufficient. We were not able to time-stamp in this way only 93 of the 2,418 monuments.

4.2. Election data

We analyze the electoral effects of the Leninopad on three elections: the presidential elections in May 2014, the parliamentary elections in October of 2014, and the elections to the regional (oblast) councils in October of 2015. The data on the results of these elections were obtained from the Central Election Commission of Ukraine (CECU). Since our empirical design (discussed later) also required us to consider the voting trends prior to the Leninopad, we also collected data on all national-level elections in

Ukraine going back to 2002.

The data on all but 2015 regional council elections are available at the level of electoral precinct ($N \approx 30,000$ depending on the election). The three rounds of elections that took place in 2012 and 2014 (May and October) used the same precinct structure (with a few minor deviations). We obtained the geo-coordinates of the polling stations within each precincts from the CECU. The earlier elections (2002 to 2010) used different precinct structure. We matched all precincts to a common structure as follows: First, we geocoded the addresses of the polling stations for 2002 to 2010 elections using a combination of Yandex and Google mapping services. Second, for each precinct in 2012-2014, we found a precinct with the nearest polling station in each election from 2002 to 2010, which we then treated as a match. We then selected only those precincts that could be matched to this common structure giving us an initial panel of $N =$ precincts per each of the eight election cycles. Of course, our main precinct-level analyses use only the last three cycles (2012, 2014 May, and 2014 October); the earlier elections are used only to test the parallel trends assumption.

For 2015 elections, the data are available at the level of regional electoral district ($N = 1,700$). Since a sizable portion of Lenin's monument's were removed between October 2014 parliamentary elections and the 2015 regional elections, including the regional elections is a valuable addition to our analysis even if the election data are far less granular. For that purpose, we created a common district-level structure for each round of elections from 2012 to 2015 by aggregating the data from 2012-2014 precincts to the level of 2015 districts. The resulting district-level data are less granular geographically, but they have a longer timespan as they include one additional election.

For each unit of analysis (precinct or district) we calculate the percentage of votes for 'pro-Soviet' parties and candidates – the main outcome of our analysis. We define parties as 'pro-Soviet' if their agenda has been sympathetic, in relative terms, to

Ukraine’s Soviet past. In particular, we coded parties as ‘pro-Soviet’ if their leaders were linked to the Party of Regions or the Communist Party of Ukraine (mostly former members) and have similar political agenda; we coded presidential candidates as ‘pro-Soviet’ if they were members of the ‘pro-Soviet’ parties.

4.3. Matching Monuments and Election Units

We match monument locations to election precincts based on their proximity. In our baseline analyses, we calculate the number of monuments in precinct at a given election by counting all the existing monuments located within 1,000 meters of the precinct’s polling station. If we choose a cut-off much smaller than 1,000 meters, then very few precincts end up coded as exposed to Lenin’s monuments. A much larger cut-off leads to most precincts being exposed to monuments. Our results are qualitatively similar for a range of cut-offs from 200 meters to 3,000 meters.

For district-level analyses, we could calculate the number of statues that fall within a district, but unfortunately, we could not obtain data on the boundaries of regional election districts. Instead, when we aggregate our data for district-level analysis, we sum the number of monuments for each precinct located within a given district. The added value of this approach of measuring exposure to monuments is that a monument located near a boundary of two districts is not counted as potentially affecting only that district, which seems reasonable.

4.4. Research Design

We employ the differences-in-difference (DID) approach to estimate the electoral effect of statue removals. For each *pair* of election cycles, we estimate the following two-way

fixed effects regression model:

$$(1) \quad y_{it} = \eta_i + \gamma_t + \beta X_{it} + u_{it},$$

where i denotes precinct $t \in \{1, 2\}$ denotes a period, y_{it} is the percentage of ‘pro-Soviet’ votes, η_i is the precinct-level fixed effects, γ_t stands for election fixed effect. X_{it} is a binary treatment variable indicating whether statues were removed from the precinct. Since the effects of statue removals might not be homogeneous across different time periods, we estimate the above equation for each pair of election cycles. In particular, we estimate two regressions using precinct-level data: cycle 1 (2012) vs cycle 2 (2014 May), and cycle 2 vs cycle 3 (2014 October). When we use district level data, we estimate three regressions : cycle 1 vs 2, cycle 2 vs 3, and cycle 3 vs 4 (2015). A pooled estimate that includes data from all election cycles would represent a weighted average of the individual two-period models.

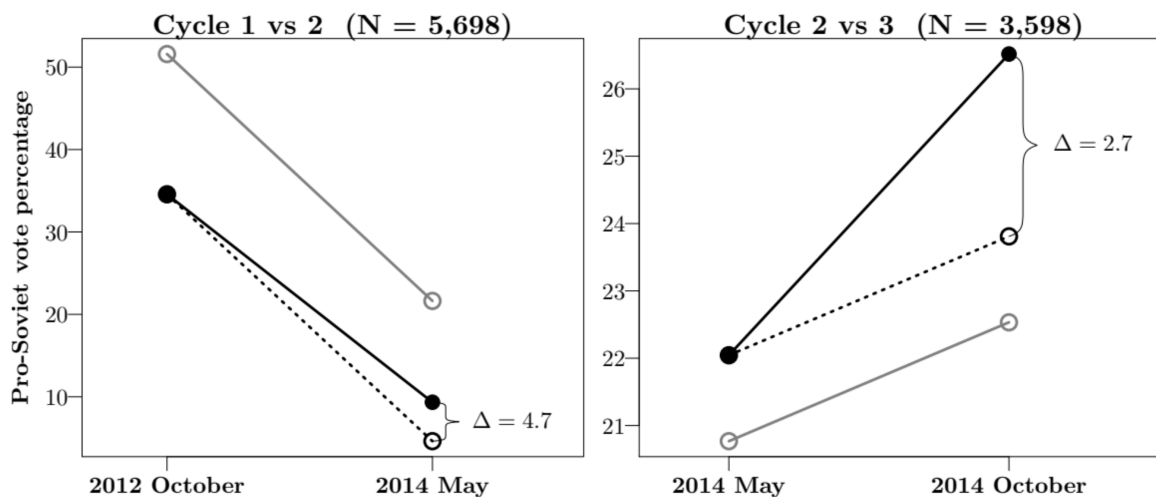
To approximate the assumptions behind the DID design, we need the units to be similar (ideally, identical) in their ‘treatment status’ at the starting point of each pair of elections. This means that we cannot include electoral units that did not have monuments at the start of the each pair of elections, because they either could not be treated (because they never had monuments) or they were treated earlier. This also means that our usable sample must shrink with each successive pair of elections because the number of treatable units declines deterministically in time – after all statues in the unit are demolished, it cannot be used in later analyses. Ideally, we would want each unit to have exactly the same number of statues in the pre-treatment period, but that means that we would need to run separate regressions for units with one statue, two statues, and so on. To avoid this problem, we select unit i into the sample if it has any statues at time $t = 1$. Since most precincts that have any statues have only one

statue, in practical terms, the sample in each analysis mostly contains precincts with exactly one statue at the starting point.

In our baseline specifications, we say that a unit is treated ($x_{it} = 1$) if at least one monument was removed between $t = 1$ and $t = 2$. We also consider an alternative definition of treatment under which the unit is treated if all statues have been removed between the two election periods. One could use a specification with an ordinal treatment variable measuring the number of monuments that have been removed, but this is somewhat problematic because the number of monuments that have been removed is bounded above by the number of monuments that exist, and so the treatment values are not easily comparable across the units. Again, in reality, it makes little difference which definition of treatment we use because most precincts that do have monuments have only one.

5. RESULTS

Figure 3 shows two DiD plots that utilize precinct level election results. The first plot compares pro-Soviet votes between the first and the second election cycles and between the precincts that had *any* statues of Lenin before the first cycle and had *any* statues removed prior to the second cycle versus precincts that had *any* statues of Lenin and *none* of them were removed. We see that the electoral support for pro-Soviet parties had massively plummeted between two elections in all precincts. However, the downward trend was less steep in precincts that saw statues of Lenin removed between 2012 parliamentary elections and 2014 presidential elections. Whereas in precincts where no statues were removed the pro-Soviet votes dropped by 30 percentage points, in precincts where some statues were removed the respective drop was around 25.3 percentage points, leading to the differences-in-differences effect of 4.7 percentage points.



The solid black line shows the average trend in pro-Soviet voting in precincts where Lenin’s statues existed and at least some were removed (treatment group). The grey solid lines show the trends in precincts where Lenin’s statues existed but none were removed (control group). The dotted line represents the counter-factual trend in districts treated by statue removals had they not been treated.

Figure 3: PRECINCT LEVEL EFFECTS OF STATUES REMOVALS

The second plot makes an identical comparison for the second and third election cycles (2014 presidential versus 2014 parliamentary). As before, we only include precincts that had *some* statues of Lenin by May 2014 (most of the time it means a single statue). For this reason, the set of precincts across the two plots is not the same: if a precinct had any statues when 2012 elections took place, but those statues were removed by May of 2014, then precinct cannot be used in the comparison of election cycles 2 and 3.

The plot indicates that there was a moderate increase in the support for pro-Soviet parties across all precincts that had any statues of Lenin at the start of the comparison. However, the increase in the support was larger in precincts where some statues were removed between two rounds of elections. In the control group (where no statues were removed), the increase of pro-Soviet votes was about 1.8 percentage points, but in the treatment group (where some statues were removed), the increase was about 4.5

	Baseline		Oblast-election FE	
	(1 vs 2)	(2 vs 3)	(1 vs 2)	(2 vs 3)
<i>Model 1: Removal = 1 if at least one statue removed</i>				
Removal	4.73*** (0.37)	2.71*** (0.40)	3.79*** (0.38)	1.52*** (0.36)
<i>Model 2: Removal = 1 if all statues removed</i>				
Removal	4.54*** (0.38)	2.29*** (0.46)	3.18*** (0.39)	1.24*** (0.39)
District FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election FE	✓	✓		
Oblast-election FE			✓	✓
Observations	5,694	3,598	5,694	3,598

Dependent variable is the percentage of votes for pro-Soviet parties in the precinct. Standard errors clustered by precinct and election. Significance levels: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1: PRECINCT LEVEL REGRESSIONS

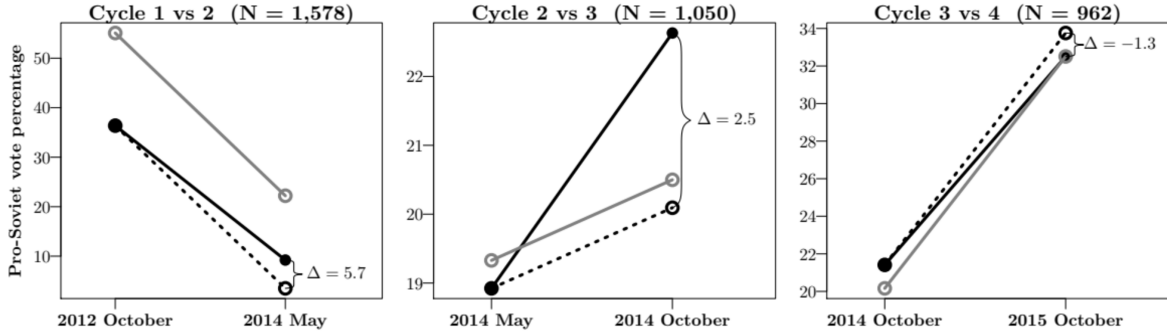
percentage points; this means that the removal of monuments increased the support for pro-Soviet parties by $4.5 - 1.8 = 2.7$ percentage points.

In Table 1 we probe the patterns in Figure 3 using various regression specifications. We start with the first two columns of the table, which show the results in the “Baseline” specifications that adjust for precinct and election fixed effects. In Panel 1, the treatment variable *Removal* is defined in the same way as in Figure 3 – it is equal to one if at least one monument was removed between the two election periods, and is zero otherwise. The estimated coefficients, which reproduce the results of the figure, are significant at 99 percent confidence level. Panel 2 shows results of identical specification but with the treatment taking a value of one if all statues were removed around the precinct between two election cycles. The results are very similar: precincts that had all statues removed increased pro-Soviet votes by about 4.5 percent in the 2014 presidential election (cycle 2) and by about 2.3 percent in the 2014 parliamentary election (cycle 3).

The above DID regressions identify the causal effect of statue removals under the parallel trends assumption (Angrist and Pischke, 2008). In our context, this assumption requires that the pro-Soviet votes trended identically in precincts where the monuments were removed and in the precincts where the monuments were not removed. It is possible that more monuments were removed in places where pro-Soviet votes were expected to go up, which would then produce a positive DID coefficient. However, we do not think that such strategic removals could have been targeted on precinct-by-precinct basis. It is more plausible that, if at all, politicians and activists behind monument removals were targeting regions (oblasts) where they expected pro-Soviet votes to go up.

In the third and the fourth column, we report results from a more flexible regression specification, which controls for oblast-election fixed effects thereby allowing each oblast to have its own (possibly non-linear) temporal trend. Such specification should alleviate the concern that there were time varying oblast level factors that simultaneously drove the increase in pro-Soviet votes and removals of statues. The estimated coefficients are smaller in the more flexible specification (this could indicate that, indeed, we have omitted time-varying factors, but it could also be a result of over-adjustment), but the qualitative conclusions we would draw are quite similar – the removals of monuments increased the support of the pro-Soviet parties at the ballot box.

We now conduct the same type of analyses at the level of regional electoral district. The district level data include four rounds of elections, which allows us to estimate three DID regressions. First, consider the DID plots in Figure 4. The first two panels are making the same type of comparisons as Figure 3 only at a more aggregate level. Reassuringly, the results are very similar in direction and even in magnitude: monument removals between the first and the second cycle reduced the rate at which pro-Soviet votes were plummeting between the two elections by about 5.7 percentage



The solid black line shows the average trend in pro-Soviet voting in districts where Lenin’s monuments existed and at least some were removed (treatment group). The grey solid lines show the trends in districts where Lenin’s monuments existed but none were removed (control group). The dotted line represents the counter-factual trend in districts treated by monument removals had they not been treated.

Figure 4: DISTRICT LEVEL EFFECTS OF STATUE REMOVALS

points and the removals between the second and the third cycle increased the pro-Soviet support by about 2.5 percentage points.

The third graph in Figure 4 shows the effects of monument removals between cycle 3 (parliamentary elections in October of 2014) and cycle 4 (regional legislative elections in October of 2015). The support for pro-Soviet parties has increased quite dramatically in districts that had Lenin’s monuments standing in the fall of 2014 (the sample used in this graph). However, the rate at which this support increased was lower by about 1.3 percentage points in districts that saw Lenin’s monuments removed between the fall of 2014 and the fall of 2015. The removals of Lenin’s monuments that occurred between these two elections *reduced* the electoral support for pro-Soviet parties in the 2015 local elections.

We do not have a fully fleshed out explanation for why the coefficients change sign in 2015 elections, but we see several possibilities. First, the difference in the coefficients could be reflective of the difference between the national elections (for which the coefficient is positive) and the local elections (for which the coefficient is

	Baseline			Oblast-election FE		
	(1 vs 2)	(2 vs 3)	(3 vs 4)	(1 vs 2)	(2 vs 3)	(3 vs 4)
<i>Panel 1: Removal = 1 if at least one statue removed</i>						
Removal effect	5.72*** (0.61)	2.54*** (0.59)	-1.25 (1.07)	3.68*** (0.61)	1.07** (0.44)	-1.92* (1.04)
<i>Panel 2: Removal = 1 if all statues removed</i>						
Removal	6.02*** (0.67)	2.83*** (0.92)	-2.23** (1.07)	3.77*** (0.62)	1.18* (0.63)	-3.02*** (1.03)
District FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election FE	✓	✓	✓			
Oblast-election FE				✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,576	1,050	962	1,576	1,050	962

The dependent variable is the percentage of pro-Soviet votes in regional legislative district. Standard errors clustered by district and election. Significance levels: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2: DISTRICT LEVEL REGRESSIONS

negative). Even though national leaders could face antagonism created by messing with symbolic politics, these antagonisms would not necessarily trickle down to local level politics. Second, it is also possible that the monument removals would result in a backlash at an early stage, but the backlash could not be sustained in the long run; eventually, after the backlash loses its momentum, the removal of monuments would be akin to the removal of advertisement for the pro-Soviet parties. We will be able to adjudicate between these explanations better after we extend our analysis to the presidential election in March 2019.

6. MECHANISMS

One potential explanation for the backlash effect of the *Leninopad* in the two 2014 elections is that it mobilized sympathizers of the pro-Soviet parties. A competing explanation could be that monument removals demobilized the opponents of the pro-Soviet parties. The latter mechanism would be akin to the agenda-setting model of

	Precinct level		District level	
	(1 vs 2)	(2 vs 3)	(1 vs 2)	(2 vs 3)
<i>Panel 1: Removal = 1 if at least one statue removed</i>				
Removal	2.41*** (0.22)	0.46 (0.33)	2.39*** (0.28)	-0.05 (0.35)
<i>Panel 2: Removal = 1 if all statues removed</i>				
Removal	1.98*** (0.22)	-0.26 (0.36)	2.31*** (0.27)	-0.45 (0.49)
District FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Oblast-election FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	5,698	3,598	1,578	1,050

The dependent variable is turnout (in percentages). Significance levels: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3: MONUMENT REMOVALS AND TURNOUT

electoral competition where a party that resolves a mobilizing issue loses the ownership of that issue and the electoral advantage (Glazer and Lohmann, 2004). In this case, if the presence of Lenin’s statues had mobilized the nationalist and pro-Western Ukrainians, the removals of those statues would then demobilize them.

The two competing mechanisms have distinct empirical implications. If the first mechanism is at work, then we should observe a positive effect of the *Leninopad* on turnout, but if the second mechanism is at work, then the relationship should be negative. We now test these predictions using the data from the first three rounds of elections. We do so by replicating the DID regressions with oblast-election fixed effects using turnout as the dependent variable. Unfortunately, we do not have data on turnout from 2015 regional elections to conduct similar analysis.

The results shown in Table 3 indicate that the first mechanisms has more empirical merit: the precincts that saw any monuments removed prior to 2014 May elections had 2.4 percent higher turnout than the precincts where no monuments were removed; the respective effect of all monuments having been removed is about 2 percentage points.

The results are very similar when conducted using district level data. These estimates are consistent with the prediction that monument demolitions had a mobilizing effect, most likely on those who already sympathized with the pro-Soviet parties.³

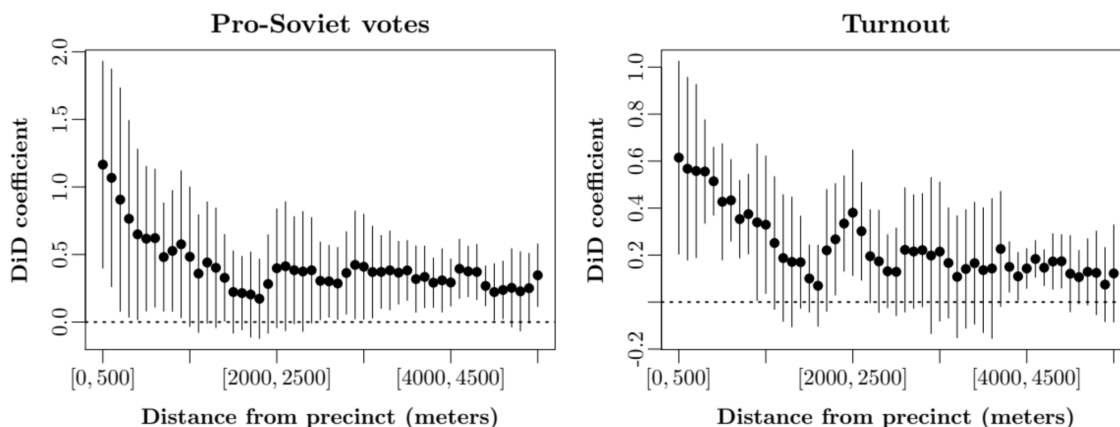
Another testable implication of the mobilizational mechanism is that the removals of monuments should have greater effect at shorter distances from the site of the monument. The idea here is that citizens living closer to the locations of monuments are more likely to learn that the monuments have been removed. Accordingly, if the removals had a mobilizing backlash effect then this effect should be larger the closer we get to the location of the monuments.

We test this empirical prediction by calculating the number of statues at variable distances from each precinct and then running the DID regressions using them. In particular, start by measuring the number of demolished statues within 500 meters of each polling station, and then estimate the DID effects (using oblast-election fixed effects) on pro-Soviet votes and turnout. We then move the window by 100 meters, and estimate the same effects of removals that took place in the interval of 100 to 600 meters. Each successive window measures the effect of monument removals further and further away from the precinct.

As before, to make sure that we are comparing units that are similar in their treatment status in the beginning, for each new spatial window, we only select precincts that have any monuments (so that they can be treated by monument removal) at the starting point. For simplicity, we pool data across the three rounds of elections, which means that we are estimating the average effect of removals on pro-Soviet votes and turnout in 2014 May and October elections.

The results of these analyses are shown in Figure 5. The patterns are quite similar

³After we adjust for precinct and oblast-election fixed effects, there is only moderate partial correlation of 0.26 points between the pro-Soviet votes and turnout. This rules out the possibility that the positive coefficient of demolitions on pro-Soviet support and turnout is due to those variables being highly correlated.



The points are scaled coefficients for removal of any statues within the distance interval shown on the x -axis (each successive window is moved by 100 meters). Vertical bars are for 95% confidence intervals adjusted for clustering by precinct and oblast-elections. Specifications include precincts and oblast-election fixed effects, and they use data pooled from all three cycles.

Figure 5: EFFECTS OF MONUMENT REMOVALS AT DIFFERENT DISTANCES

to the results we saw for pro-Soviet votes and turnout: the effects of statue removals are more pronounced when they happen in a close vicinity to the precinct, and the effect attenuates as we move away from the location of removal. Note that we continue to observe meaningful effects even for removals 5,000 meters away from the precinct. This is not surprising because living in a close proximity to the site of statue removal is not necessary to learn about it. In other words, people can learn about the statue removals from the media or through their peers. However, it appears that living closer to the side of the removal – and presumably learning about it more intimately – has a far more pronounced effect than learning about it indirectly.

7. DISCUSSION

We have analyzed the electoral effects of Lenin’s statues demolitions to understand how the symbolic public artifacts of the past authoritarian regime shape politics after

the regime ceases to exist. The results show that the removal of the most important Soviet symbols, Lenin's monuments, is associated with an increase in support of the pro-Soviet parties at the ballot box, both at the district and precinct level up until the fall of 2014. In the last electoral cycle examined in this study (between the fall of 2014 and the fall of 2015), removals of Lenin's monuments reduced the electoral support for pro-Soviet parties. An explanation for the observed backlash effect of the Leninopad in two 2014 elections which has most empirical merit is that statue removals mobilized sympathizers of the pro-Soviet parties. The mobilizing backlash effect of the removals is more pronounced when they happen in a close proximity to the precinct, suggesting that the personal exposure to a monument demolition has larger effect on the voting behavior than learning about it indirectly.

While the previous research has stated that symbols play an important role in different aspects of political life, our goal was to provide the first systematic quantification of the electoral effects of the removal of authoritarian symbols. The implication of this study is that the aggregate effect of change of symbols is a product of the distribution of political priors in the population who is mobilized by the symbolic change. We argue that change of symbols has a potential of pulling the mass public preferences in the opposite direction from government's intentions. In the case of Ukraine, where voters were polarized by a variety of internal and external factors, exposure to Lenin's statues demolition benefited pro-Soviet parties by mobilizing incumbent's opponents. Thus, change of symbols aggravated differences in political attitudes and voting.

Additional research is needed to establish how exactly change of symbols affect electoral outcomes in the long term. The further research should also concentrate on the study of swing vote migration from parties opposing and supporting the connections with the previous authoritarian regime, in particular in highly polarized political environments. Outside of the Ukrainian case, it might be useful to analyze the electoral

effects of change of symbols and their impact on electoral performance of incumbent and opposition parties in recently democratized states.

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