

Minsk Toponymics: Communist Street Names in a Medieval City

In today's Minsk most of street names refer to the Communist period. The streets named after Lenin, Komsomol, Marx, Communism dominate the historical centre of the city founded in 1067.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union Minsk cultural landscape was one of the most "Sovietized" in the USSR. Unlike in Warsaw, Vilnius, Kiev and even Moscow where city officials in 1990s supported communist toponymics elimination Minsk toponymics changes were limited.

Moreover, in 2000s the main capital avenues were renamed once again and now refer to the victory in Great Patriotic War – Soviet historical myth which became the main nation building myth in Lukashenka Belarus. For this reason the issue of Minsk naming often becomes a hotly debated political subject.

A city without a past?

Today's Minsk is a city which was designed and built after the World War II. Despite the fact that Minsk has a long, nine-century history, most historical monuments did not survive. The majority of buildings in the historic parts of the Upper City and Lower City were destroyed during and after World War II by Soviet authorities. In particular, the Soviet authorities destroyed the Lower City in 1960s and replaced them with blocks of flats.

Minsk is different from Central European cities because of the absence of an old town and architecture from periods before social realism. At first glance, it seems that the city has no

past and was built fifty years ago.

The story of the name of the city is illustrative. The original name of the city was Mensk. First, it was changed to Minsk by Polish authorities in the sixteenth century, and that name was used by Russian authorities in modern times.

In the 1920s, the city returned to its original name, and again Mensk was renamed Minsk by communist authorities in 1939. After the USSR collapsed in 1991, the Minsk Council of Deputies addressed the Supreme Council of Belarus to return to Minsk its origin name, but the Supreme Council refused to accept the idea.

As a result, Minsk has neither its origin architecture, nor its origin name.

Limited decommunization of Minsk street names

In the beginning of 1990s when in capitals of ex-Soviet countries took place the process of street names decommunisation and lot of sculptures which glorified communist leaders were removed, in Minsk the process of city landscape decommunisation was very limited.

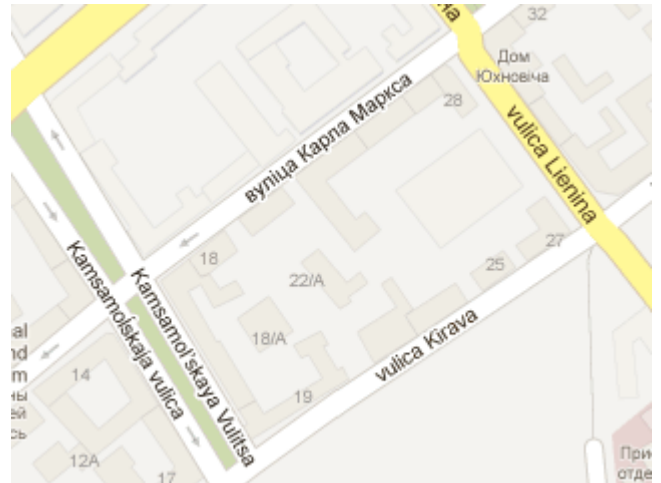
Only fourteen streets and one square were renamed and none of communist sculptures were removed. These developments took place only during a short period between 1990 and 1993.

Why has the renaming been so limited? The initiative "Return Minsk Historical Street Names" from beginning of 1990s included renaming around thirty street names. Most of them were to receive their pre-1917 names. Former representatives of the Soviet nomenclature who became Minsk officials at the beginning of the 1990s opposed the initiative.

The limited changes in Minsk toponymics have been made possible only after pressure by City Council deputies from the Belarusian Peoples Front – the main opposition nationalist

party in 1990s.

Back to the Soviet past



In 1993 this process stopped. After Alexander Lukashenka won the elections in 1994 the political climate in the country changed, the new president called the collapse of the USSR a geopolitical catastrophe and promised to restore the Soviet Union.

That is why the continuation of streets names decommunisation was not possible.

In 2005, at the year of 60th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War to perpetuate the heroism of Belarusians, high state authorities initiated the renaming of two central Minsk streets.

Francysk Skaryna Avenue was renamed Independence Avenue (Praspekt Nezalezhnasci) and Masherov Avenue was renamed Victors Avenue (Praspekt Peramozhcau). The old street names were transferred to less significant streets.

This renaming was done to increase in the city landscape the memory of the Great Patriotic War, which had become the main historical myth in Belarus.

Nevertheless plenty of Minsk inhabitants are not satisfied with communist naming in the city. The a case of Lenin Square metro station renaming is very telling.

The Lenin Square saga

In 1992, when Lenin Square was renamed Independence Square, the metro station Lenin Square which was located near the square also got the name Independence Square. But the renaming was not a reason to change the decoration of the station. The monument of Lenin and the Lenin Square signs on the track walls still retain their original form.

In 2003 city authorities returned the Nezalezhnasci Square station its old communist name Lenin Square. A large number of passengers and opposition activists did not like the decision which resulted in the permanent practice of deleting Lenin Square stickers from metro line maps in train cars.

Several detentions and penalties imposed upon “metro activists” followed as well as petitions and rallies to return the station name Independence Square. In 2010 the commission for street renaming in the city Executive Committee decided to rename the metro station Independence Square, again.

However, at the beginning of 2011 it cancelled the decision, explaining it by a large number of protests by city residents against renaming.

Minsk toponymics as a political issue

The issue of toponymics also used in political campaigns. Illustrative example is the campaign to rename Ulyanauskaja street (Ulyanov is the real surname of Lenin) to Bykau street (Bykau is a Belarusian writer and dissident).

The campaign began just before the 2010 presidential election and its main aim was to promote the opposition candidate Uladzimer Niakliayeu’s movement “Havary praudu”. During the campaign, approximately one hundred thousand signatures in favour of the name change were collected.

Many Minsk inhabitants are unhappy about Soviet names of Minsk

streets. (See the map of Minsk city centre on [google maps](#).) This topic is regularly discussed in independent mass-media and many Minsk intellectuals have already expressed their opinion to reform Minsk toponymics.

Clearly, the issue of Minsk toponymics will continue to be used as an instrument of political struggle. The Belarusian authorities clearly want to preserve myths and references to the Soviet past.