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An Analysis of Changes in the Perception of Historical Events in Ukraine Since 1991 through the Lens of Modern Historical Policy

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Abstract

The study analyzes changes in the perception of historical events through the lens of contemporary historical policy, enabling a comprehensive examination of the interaction among historiographical trends, public perceptions, and political decision-making. An interdisciplinary approach was employed, combining historical, political, and legal methods. The analytical framework included the concept of collective memory, approaches from memory studies, and historiographical and comparative analyses. The study identifies the role of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINP) in shaping historical policy in Ukraine. It demonstrates that Russian aggression, which began in 2014 and entered a new phase in 2022, became one of the principal factors driving substantial transformations in historical policy and increasing public interest in Ukraine's past. These developments intensified the

processes of decommunization and decolonization. The Law of Ukraine "On the Principles of State Policy of the National Memory of the Ukrainian People" is expected to play an important role in the further development of historical policy, while debates concerning centralism and pluralism in the interpretation of particular historical events are likely to continue. Contemporary historical policy in Ukraine is therefore characterized by its multidimensional nature, combining official and unofficial practices of actualizing historical memory. Although the term "historical policy" is not clearly defined within the legal framework, a well-established set of measures aimed at regulating interpretations of the past is already in place.

Keywords: historical policy, Ukraine, collective memory, public perception, decommunization, decolonization

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of perceiving historical events in Ukrainian society, and the transformation of historical knowledge under the influence of the development of historical policy, are key areas of modern humanities research [1, 2]. Given the conditions of globalization, the rapid evolution of digital communication processes, the trend toward exacerbating old "painful topics," and the unfolding of new international conflicts, history has ceased to be merely a field of academic knowledge [3, 4]. Today, this science is increasingly used as a tool for political legalisation, constructing national identity, and mobilizing social forces to overcome current challenges. Ukraine, given its complex historical "baggage," has faced new military challenges – the Russian aggression since 2014 could hardly be considered commonplace with the current societal development [5]. At the same time, such challenges are quite illustrative examples of new political processes that could spread significantly even in the near future.

For a long time during its historical development, Ukraine primarily experienced the spread of foreign historical narratives – from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, interwar Poland, and the Soviet Union – which led to the marginalization of Ukraine's own historical experience and the imposition of sometimes artificial models for interpreting the past. However, after gaining independence in 1991, an active process of revising established approaches, primarily in Soviet historiography, began [6]. Initially, these changes were controversial and heterogeneous, but the turning points were the events of the Orange Revolution in 2004, the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, and the start of the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine (since February 24, 2022). It is particularly worth emphasizing the Russian military aggression, which radically intensified the activation of historical memory and led to the formation of new strategies for historical policy.

Several key trends are characteristic of modern historical policy in Ukraine. First and foremost, researchers highlight the importance of re-evaluating the role of national liberation movements: the activities of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army [7]. For decades, this issue was either forbidden or became the subject of ideological manipulation of prorussian political parties (for example, Communist Party of Ukraine). Secondly, the emphasis on the tragic events of the 20th century – the Holodomor of 1932–1933, other genocidal practices, mass political repressions, population deportations, etc. – became important [8]. The following traumatic events of the socialist past (not all of which were carried out by the Soviet authorities, such as the Polish Operation Vistula about the resettlement of Ukrainians from Western Ukrainian lands in 1947) have become important components of collective memory in the current circumstances. Researchers also note the gradual integration of the Ukrainian historical narrative into the European context [9, 10]. Moreover, this process involves not only moving away from the Soviet legacy and overcoming the most odious stereotypes. The directions for seeking methodological convergence in conducting research were also noted, as well as the search for common ground with the histories of neighboring states. Under such circumstances, researchers highlight the importance of analyzing changes in public perception of historical events, which are influenced by modern Ukrainian historical policy [11]. Such an analysis would make it possible to identify the dynamics of collective memory formation and gain insight into the mechanisms by which the state, scientific institutions, and the media influence the interpretation of the past. The relevance of the research is also due to the need to assess the impact of recent political and military events on the reinterpretation of historical experience and the formation of national identity in Ukraine.

At the same time, there are noticeable gaps in existing research, especially considering the definition of the effect of the perception of historical events in Ukrainian society after February 2022. Specifically, in August 2025, the "Law on the Principles of State Policy on the National Memory of the Ukrainian People" was adopted, which became the first fundamental document for the formation of national memory policy in Ukraine. On the one hand, this law was a kind of reaction to the Russian invasion, and on the other hand, it was a natural stage in the development of historical science.

Therefore, the proposed study aims to analyze changes in the perception of historical events thru the lens of contemporary historical politics, which would allow for a comprehensive examination of the interaction between historiographical trends, societal perceptions, and existing political decisions. The main objectives of the article are to study the peculiarities of the formation of historical policy in Ukraine and to analyze the Law of Ukraine, which became an important stage in the development of historical policy.

2. METHOD

2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The multidimensional nature of the issue necessitated the use of an interdisciplinary combination of historical, political science, and legal methods, indicating the importance of a comprehensive study [12]. Firstly, the study of changes in the perception of historical events in Ukraine is not based on a historiographical overview and analysis of public discourses, nor does it take into account the legal and regulatory factors that shape the framework of modern historical policy [13, 14]. For this purpose, the article employs a complex of methods that allow tracing the relationship between academic knowledge,

public policy, and collective memory.

2.2. SAMPLING

The proposed study uses various types of scientific publications: scientific articles, individual chapters from monographs, monographs, conference proceedings, etc., and legislative acts. The selection of the necessary material was made based on a special criteria-based sampling, which was formed according to the main criteria of content, scientific rigor, and objectivity. So, the main criteria for including scientific literature were applied (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Insertion and exclusion criteria for scientific sources*

Inclusion criteria		Exclusion criteria	
1	The article identifies the features of the formation of historical policy, memory policy, identifies the main approaches and historiographic models of the formation of such phenomena.	1	The research is not related to the topic of conducting historical policy and does not even concern cultural memory.
2	The article describes practical approaches to strategic planning of historical policy, the experience of existing cases.	2	Scientific sources that are devoted to general problems and do not concern the specifics of Ukrainian or European historical policy.
3	Geographical focus: Ukraine, EU countries	3	Works created or written about regions remote from Ukraine (rejected due to low relevance to Ukrainian realities)
4	The review includes various types of scientific articles (primarily review, theoretical and empirical)	4	Scientific research with an incomplete structure or questionable theoretical value.
5	Relevance to current events: works written in 2016–2025.	5	The research does not include sources created before 2016.

In some cases, if a scientific publication has high academic value and has left a deep mark on the interpretation of historical policy in Ukraine, criteria 3 and 5 are not applied.

2.3. TOOLS AND PROCEDURE

In the main stage of the research, various scientific sources were searched: articles, monographs, chapters from collective monographs, and conference materials. The scientific metric databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar were selected for the search. The keywords used for the search were: historical policy, Ukraine, public opinion, education, cultural memory, national memory, EU, legal mechanisms. A total of 1506 results were found. Initially, all duplicates in the titles of scientific sources were removed (-802 results). Next, grounded on the analysis of keywords, labels, and abstracts, irrelevant articles (-569) were rejected. It was found 135 scientific sources that initially met the proposed inclusion criteria.

So, the following criteria were applied: 1. Contents: The research is dedicated to the issues of the formation and development of historical policy in Europe and Ukraine, and the specifics of creating models and principles for such a system. 2. A scientific source describes practical approaches to strategic planning for historical policy and characterizes existing case studies. 3. Geographically and thematically, the studies belong to Ukraine and EU countries. 4. Research type: theoretical article, historiographical problem, survey, empirical research. 5. Relevance: Only scientific literature created between 2016 and 2025 was included. Using these criteria, the study collected and analyzed 40 scientific historiographical sources (see Figure 1).

2.4. DATA ANALYSIS

The theoretical basis for the work was the concept of collective memory, which aims to explain the stages of the emergence of shared representations of the past. Specific approaches from memory studies were also applied, which are focused on defining the interaction between official and unofficial forms of memory, and the role of media and cultural practices in their dissemination. It is also important to rely on works that address the field of historical policy and have identified the mechanisms of state influence on the interpretation of the past and its instrumentalization in public life.

The method of historiographical analysis was also used to write the study, which allowed for a comparison of Soviet, post-Soviet, and modern interpretations of key historical events. An effective addition to this was the approach of discourse analysis of official documents, political speeches, textbooks, and mass media materials, which demonstrated individual elements of historical memory construction. Comparative analysis was used to compare Ukrainian memory politics practices with the experiences of other European countries (primarily Central and Eastern European states). The use of this method indicated the possibility of identifying the specifics of the Ukrainian case.

Additionally, emphasis is placed on an important legal analysis of certain legislative decisions that regulate the implementation of historical policy from a normative perspective. At the same time, the analysis of legal texts made it possible to reveal the extent to which legal mechanisms influence institutional memory policy and the formation of public

perceptions of the past. Furthermore, separate sociological surveys conducted by leading research centers in Ukraine have made it possible to assess changes in public opinion regarding specific historical events (for example Razumkov Center).

The use of such methods in a comprehensive manner made it possible to study the transformation of public perception of history in a multidimensional context: from the dissemination of academic texts and research to the practice of political decision-making and societal reactions in media discourse. This approach provided a holistic understanding of how contemporary historical politics shapes the framework for understanding the past and influences the construction of national identity in Ukraine.

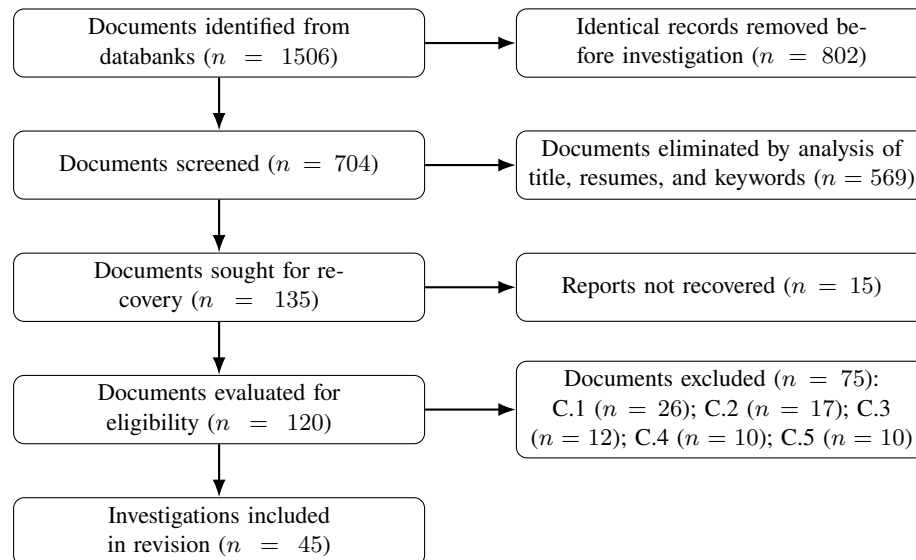


Figure 1. Data collection in accordance with PRISMA

3. RESULTS

3.1. FEATURES OF HISTORICAL POLICY IN MODERN UKRAINE

The term "historical policy" is absent from the Ukrainian legal field, but a separate set of measures carried out at a completely official level is present. An important element of this is the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, which makes a number of decisions regarding the official interpretation of events in Ukrainian history, but without any legal obligations to use these specific interpretations. This model is quite pluralistic and aligns with the decisions adopted in the European Union regarding history [15]. The results obtained demonstrated the multidimensionality of changes in the perception of historical events in Ukraine. Firstly, until 2014, this process was driven by a combination of several factors: the development of academic science, the enactment of country policy, and the evolution of public discourses [16]. The discovered material will allow us to trace how these spheres interact and how they will shape our understanding of the past in the face of new challenges. After 2014, another factor was added – Russian aggression [11], which entered a new phase in February 2022. The aggression caused a sharp increase in interest in Ukraine's past, against which the public discourse, the policy of decommunization, and the heroization of Ukrainian military figures from the past and present have become clearly more intense [9, 17]. First and foremost, it's worth noting that a significant transformation has taken place within the scientific community. There was a process of reinterpreting Soviet interpretations of history, emphasizing the distinctly Ukrainian narrative and incorporating Ukrainian history into a extensive European perspective. This approach led to the formation of new research categories (collective memory, cultural trauma, decolonization of history), which became an important scientific basis for further studies [18].

On the other hand, existing sociological data and public discourse have led to mass consciousness abandoning the role of passive reflection of official decisions. On the contrary, Ukrainian society actively responded to memory politics, transforming it thru public discussions, cultural projects, and certain aspects of media representation [19]. This demonstrated individual elements of the flexibility of collective memory, which became open to various alternative interpretations. To summarize the results, several key areas of transformation can be identified (see Table 2). They reflect a description of general trends and the specifics of the Ukrainian context.

Thus, the formation of a comparative analysis of existing practices in Ukraine and Central and Eastern European countries demonstrated a combination of specific factors in the Ukrainian case. First and foremost, despite the entirely European evolution of memory institutionalization models, historical politics also depends on the further development of Russian aggression. Overall, changes in the perception of historical events in Ukraine are not one-dimensional or linear

[31]. They occurred as a result of a combination of academic concepts, legal frameworks, and the transformation of societal perceptions. The formation of a new model of historical memory will be based on a balance between official and unofficial forms, national characteristics, European approaches, and individual reflective functions.

Table 2. *The main trends of the influence of modern historical politics on the interpretation of the past in the ukrainian context*

No.	Trend	Characteristics
1	Development of academic and public interpretations	Starting in 2014, the gradual departure from Soviet and post-Soviet interpretations of historical results of the Ukrainian past finally prevailed in the Ukrainian scientific and educational discourse [20]. A clear tendency to rethink them, taking into account national approaches and modern European experience, has formed. First of all, studies that indicated the relevance of the categories of “collective memory”, “traumatic experience”, etc. were important here.
2	Deepening institutionalization of historical politics	Since the activation of the full-scale war (2014), the role of state institutions in shaping the historical policy of memory has increased. The adopted regulatory and legal acts testify to the importance of unifying interpretations of the past, primarily the Soviet period, the times of World War II, the policy of the targeted Holodomor, and recent events (in particular, the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian-Ukrainian war) [21]. Legal instruments have led to active public discussion in educational institutions, media, and cultural practices.
3	Changes in public opinion	Some sociological data have indicated changes in the perception of key historical events. First of all, the role of those issues related to countering the occupation and the actualization of issues of decolonization of historical memory has increased [22]. For the mass consciousness, an idea of Ukraine as a subject of history has been formed, and not only as an object of external influences.
4	European context and comparative dimension	A comparative analysis of historical policy practices in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the Polish experience, demonstrates that the Ukrainian case is evolving toward the use of similar institutional and symbolic mechanisms of memory governance [23, 24]. However, this convergence should not be interpreted as a linear or conflict-free process. The interaction between formal (state-driven) and informal (societal, local, or familial) memory practices in Ukraine is marked by significant tensions, especially in contexts of historical revision, reinterpretation, or political reuse of the past [25]. These contradictions are intensified under conditions of war and ongoing Russian aggression, which shape Ukrainian memory policy in a predominantly defensive mode [26, 27]. While such a framework enhances societal mobilization and resilience, it also amplifies disagreements between generations, as well as between ethnic and cultural groups, regarding the interpretation of contested historical narratives [28, 29]. Consequently, cooperation between formal and informal memory does not eliminate conflict but rather reconfigures it, making memory policy a dynamic field of negotiation, adaptation, and contestation rather than a stable consensus.
5	“Collaboration” of official and unofficial memory	As a result of discourse analysis, it was found that some official political decisions are partly becoming the subject of rethinking, criticism in the media and public initiatives. Even beyond the formation of certain “canonical” interpretations, a pluralism of memory practices is preserved in society [30]. This indicates the existence of a resource and open spaces for alternative views on the past.

3.2. THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL MEMORY IN UKRAINE AT THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

An important stage in the development of historical policy was the agreeing of the Law of Ukraine “On the Principles of State Policy on the National Memory of the Ukrainian People” [32]. According to this document, the state strategy on the nationwide memory of the Ukrainian people is a directed vector of state policy that, in addition to creating legal, organizational, and economic conditions and guaranties for the restoration and protection of the national memory of the Ukrainian people, is also aimed at further research and popularization of the history of Ukraine [32]. Based on this document, the goal of historical policy can be defined as creating a shared understanding of the past thru the restoration and preservation of national memory, further support for research in Ukrainian history, and the popularization of Ukrainian science, which will lead to the strengthening of the unity of the Ukrainian people. Historical policy, which shapes national memory, is also identified as a piece of the foundations of Ukraine's national defense. Although the term “historical policy” itself is not mentioned in the Law, the document clearly defines the principles for the further development of memory strategy and the function of history.

It is proposed to actively use the strategy of state memory as a key tool to counter Russian imperialism. This part is an element of state policy that is a component of national security, strengthening the unity of the Ukrainian people, and

repelling external aggression. Alongside this, a condemnation of Russian imperialism has been proposed. Accordingly, the basis of Ukrainian national memory plan will be the recognition of the criminality of Russian imperial policy, including, obviously, the Soviet period. Modern "Rashism" is interpreted as a distinct type of totalitarian ideology, based on Russian chauvinism and imperialism, and incorporating certain practices from the Leninist and national socialist (Nazi) past of dictatorial administrations [32]. Specifically, the armed hostility against Ukraine, which began in February 2014 and escalated into the Russo-Ukrainian War, is considered a direct consequence of the implementation of Russian colonial strategy. In this vein, the events of the Russian-Ukrainian War will be interpreted in the future, which will have a direct impact on the formation of historical policy in Ukraine [33].

One of the central tasks of the Law is to counter historical anti-Ukrainian propaganda and overcome its consequences. Such propaganda was defined as the propagation of wrong information about the history of Ukraine with the aim of glorifying or justifying imperialism and totalitarianism, denying crimes against the Ukrainian people, and conducting actions aimed at undermining Ukraine's sovereignty. The central executive authority in the field of media and information will take measures to prevent the import and distribution of anti-Ukrainian foreign publishing, digital, and cinematographic products, etc.

The law also summarizes previous experiences with the rehabilitation of the Ukrainian insurgent movement. State authorities ensure the preservation of the memory of the centuries-old past of Ukrainian statehood and the phases of the work for the renovation of statehood. Throughout its history, the Ukrainian people resisted foreign rule and fought for independence, which led to the restoration of Ukrainian statehood on August 24, 1991 [32]. The role of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance is emphasized, which has been granted functions for collecting, summarizing, publishing, and disseminating information about the past of Ukrainian lands, the development of the fight for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Special attention is given to events following the Russian invasion in 2014. The law also regulates the policy of respecting the memory of victims and combatants for Ukrainian independent status. It is proposed to perpetuate memory thru the creation of special places of remembrance (reserves, memorials, memorial plaques, etc.), name lists of the deceased and databases, naming geographical and topographical features after prominent figures, and holding commemorative events.

Among the provisions of the law that have an impact on historical policy is also the continuation of decommunization and decolonization. The special measures include the dismantling of Soviet monuments and memorial plaques, and an active policy of renaming geographical features and toponymic objects that are associated in the mass consciousness with the Russian imperial and communist regimes. The UINP will provide binding conclusions and recommendations for regulating such processes.

The law will also regulate the intensification of scientific activity, educational processes, and international cooperation. Ukrainian state authorities will support scientific research and the popularization of Ukrainian history, and will promote its deeper study in educational institutions at all levels. Archival information on issues of Ukrainian history, state-building, and crimes against the Ukrainian people (primarily from previously closed funds) will be made publicly accessible [32]. Ukraine will also develop international cooperation to raise awareness of its history abroad, organize scientific, cultural, and informational events that promote mutual understanding and cultural exchange.

At the same time, the law also has its vulnerabilities. A shared understanding of the past, strengthening the unity of Ukrainians, can lead to the formation of monolithic historical narratives. In times of war, such a practice is entirely positive, but a policy of creating single mandatory interpretations can harm free academic discussion and the pluralism of opinions. Identifying individuals whose memory is associated with a significant contribution to the development of Ukraine can be quite subjective. This is especially relevant during times of complex historical events and for characterizing controversial figures. It's also worth noting the rather broad powers of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. Centralization aimed at efficiency can create the risk of excessive unification of historical approaches.

4. DISCUSSION

The study of contemporary historical politics in Ukraine is relevant given the development of scientific discourse, the evolution of relevant institutions, the departure from Soviet postulates in interpreting the past, Russian aggression and its significance for the evolution of public life. The purpose of the proposed paper is to analyze changes in the perception of historical events thru the prism of modern historical policy, which would allow for a comprehensive examination of the interaction between historiographical trends, public perceptions, and existing political decisions. The main objectives of the proposed paper were to investigate the peculiarities of the creation of historical strategy in Ukraine and to analyze the Law of Ukraine "On the Principles of State Policy of National Memory of the Ukrainian People," which became an important stage in the development of historical policy.

The proposed results confirm the thesis about the multidimensionality of historical policy in Ukraine, which had its influence on the perception of Ukraine's past in society. These remarks generally align with the previous conclusions of researchers who pointed out the complex interplay between the existence of academic interpretations, the application of

state policy, and the development of public perceptions [34, 35]. Ukraine faces the institutional challenge of protecting physical memory, as the UINP faces a logistical challenge to protect archives and historical monuments from Russian destruction, while at the same time documenting current crimes (such as war crimes). In contrast, countries such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have implemented their historic policies in a peaceful and stable environment, and after joining NATO and the European Union, proving that Ukraine's situation is exceptional and faces double challenges.

A comparative analysis with the experience of EU countries has allowed us to establish that Ukraine generally follows the same direction of development of pan-European practices, including decommunization and decolonization. Historical science in the countries of the former "socialist camp" has also followed a similar path, as researchers rightly note [36]. The only exceptions are modern Russia and Belarus [37, 38]. However, significant changes occurred under the influence of Russian aggression, which became a tangible catalyst for societal and scientific changes – a phenomenon that was not observed in other scientific communities. A certain combination of the European development vector and the peculiarities of military exceptionalism has formed a rather unique case that may still become the subject of further research.

A debatable issue is maintaining a balance between official and unofficial forms of memory [39, 40]. While state institutions aim to create a shared understanding of the past, this perspective will inevitably meet resistance at the level of local initiatives. The resistance of local initiatives reflects the structural tension between centralized memory policies and decentralized lived memories, particularly when official narratives simplify or politicize complex historical experiences. This confirms the thesis of researchers who note the preservation of significant space for alternative interpretations within civil society [10]. Such a system aligns with views on the importance of flexibility in memory culture. However, the downside of this possibility is the risk of polarizing public opinions, even regarding the Soviet past or certain controversial historical figures. The proposed results also indicate that the transformations in Ukrainian historical policy have become significantly more relevant since 2014, and especially after 2022. This aligns with the findings of other scholars [17], who, however, consider this process to still be ongoing. In such a case, individual potential trajectories of historical policy development may be at risk of monopolization of interpretations, leading to further public disputes. This also justifies the growing role of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, which could be transformed into a state organization for the extension of "managed historical memory." A possible way to overcome such a potential negative situation is to refer to the conclusions of other contemporary "memory studies" researchers, who highlight the polyphony of collective memory [41, 42].

In the proposed results, special attention is drawn to the acceptance of the Law of Ukraine "On the Principles of State Policy on the National Memory of the Ukrainian People." It was noted that he solidified the strategic vector of unifying interpretations of the past, countering imperial and totalitarian narratives, primarily from Russia. However, the law carries the risk of excessive centralization and restriction of academic pluralism. As other scholars note, the Ukrainian case may be approaching the models of Poland or Hungary – in these countries, historical policy and memory politics can often be a supplement to state policy or ideology [43, 44]. Adapting such experience can have a positive effect during Russian military aggression, but it is impossible to determine whether such an approach is justified in potentially peaceful times under current conditions.

The proposed results note that the law could lead to the formation of monolithic historical narratives. This approach to creating single mandatory interpretations could potentially harm free academic discussion. It was also noted that the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance has quite broad powers – there are serious questions about how effective such centralization is. However, the Polish experience has shown that the work of this institute is essential for national unification [44, 45].

The methodology used in the study has certain limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. First and foremost, it should be noted that the study focuses on the use of scientific papers written in English, while it is possible that the opinions of scholars who wrote their works in other languages were excluded from the review. This aspect will require special attention, as it could develop into a separate scientific problem within the study of historiography.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, contemporary historical politics in Ukraine is formed as an interaction of official and unofficial memory practices, combining institutional regulation with local and public initiatives. At the same time, this interaction is accompanied by internal contradictions, especially in the context of political rethinking and actualization of the past. Discrepancies between state narratives and the experienced historical memory of individual communities can cause intergenerational and cultural tensions, which emphasizes the conflictual, rather than consensual, nature of the formation of national memory. In this context, Russian aggression acted as a catalyst for the intensification of decommunization and decolonization processes, while at the same time actualizing the risks of politicization of history.

The Law of Ukraine "On the Principles of State Policy of the National Memory of the Ukrainian People" played a role in the development of historical policy. He established the opinions of state strategy on national memory and approved separate institutional frameworks. However, there will be a discussion in the future regarding the opposition between

centralism and pluralism in the interpretation of individual episodes from the historical past. Under such circumstances, Ukrainian historical policy will be at a crossroads between state initiative, academic movement, and public discussions. Combined with military challenges, this could create a rather unique model for the formation of national memory.

Future research should focus on finding a balance between institutional unification and societal pluralism in historical politics. Another promising direction is defining the characteristics of the Ukrainian historical plan model in comparison to the experiences of other Central and Eastern European countries.

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