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# FREEDOM SQUARE IN KHARKIV: POLITICAL ARTICULATIONS IN 2014-2022

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**Summary:** The article is devoted to the political history of the centre square of Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, during eight years of the 21st century, at the time of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The architectural and spatial organization of Freedom Square is considered an important primary source of the political history of Ukraine. It recounts the city public space through the political practices prism. An approach is proposed that shifts the emphasis in the analysis of the square from monumental architecture to the system of civic values in the light of the existence of the nation. It is hypothesized that Freedom Square largely determines the identity of Ukrainians as a nation that is repulsing Russian ideology and war aggression.

**Keywords:** city square, public space, political culture, national identity, Ukraine

It is known that one of the most important functions of a city square is the creation of a sense of specific place. Freedom Square in Kharkiv is a physical manifestation of the idea of Ukraine's independence, and at the same time, a cultural phenomenon and a political construct [1]. Central squares can be considered as a special manifestation of the collective culture of memory, as an element of symbolic marking of the city, etc. The starting point of this study is the understanding of Freedom Square as an important Ukrainian "public arena", with which the experience of collective existence is connected. Through the description of oneself in the square, one can see what is happening on a social or national scale.

The purpose of this research is to identify the semantic features of Freedom Square through the description of the political landscape transformations in Kharkiv, taking into account the national context of Ukraine's existence in 2014-2022.

An exploratory approach to understanding the main city squares through the prism of politics and ideology has already taken shape. Many researchers represent it, in particular by P. Stachel, M. Crippen, D. Pojani [2-4]. The main squares of the city can become "witnesses" of the traumatic experience of the existence of the nation. For instance, Vienna's main square, Heldenplatz, is associated with such a traumatic event for Austrians as the Anschlusskundgebungen (on March 15, 1938). In this day, Adolf Hitler proclaimed to a jubilating mass of people on the Heldenplatz Austria's annexation by Nazi Germany. This marked the beginning of the war, as well as the ethical capitulation of a part of Austrian society to Nazism [2]. The main square is a translator of historical and political symbols into the social space of the city. The city's

main square is a traditional location for many large protests and demonstrations. Cairo's Tahrir Square was the symbolic expression of 2011 revolution values and the repeated "capture" of the square by the authorities in 2013 through the symbolic enclosure of the square [3]. Fundamental changes in the design of the main city squares, as a rule, are the result of political transformations. The design of Tirana's Skanderbeg Square is a transformation coinciding with five political periods (Ottoman Empire, Italian domination, communist regime, post-communist anarchy, and Western-style planning) [4].

The discussions around Freedom Square refer to its important symbolic character in the Ukrainian political history. It is a widely known fact that in 2014 after the victory of the Euromaidan in Kyiv, the President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich organized in Kharkiv a "congress of Deputies of the South-East of Ukraine and Crimea" for would actually declare a new state with its capital in Kharkiv. It was planned to include Kharkiv, Lugansk, Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizka, Mykolaiv, Odessa regions and the Republic of Crimea. Also at this congress, there was to be a call to Putin to send in troops in Ukraine. On February 22, 2022, at the venue of the separatist congress (Palace of Sports), both supporters of the idea of "Kharkiv is a Russian city" and those who chanted, "Kharkiv is Ukraine", gathered (the latter were ten times more). Viktor Yanukovich, who did not receive wide support from Kharkiv residents, fled Ukraine to Russia. From the point of view of the history of Ukrainian independence, these political events assessed as very important: Kharkiv pro-Ukrainian activists thwarted the split of Ukraine. The demonstration of pro-Ukrainian forces ended with a powerful procession of many thousands from the Sports Palace to the Freedom Square, the largest square in Ukraine.

Freedom Square became the political stage for a broader public, which was politicized by the Russian-Ukrainian relations. In particular, the monument to Lenin was a magnet that attracted the general attention of the demonstrators. While the pro-Ukrainian activists intended to bring it down, the pro-Russian ones defended it. The coordinators of the Kharkiv Euromaidan appealed to the local government with a demand to dismantle the monument to Lenin as a symbol of Russian totalitarianism and aggression against Ukraine. Local government officials confirmed to the activists in writing that the monument to Lenin would be dismantled by February 25, 2022. It is noteworthy that such an agreement was reached in the building of the Kharkiv Regional State Administration (KhRSA), which is also located on Freedom Square on the opposite side of the monument to Lenin. Late in the evening of the same day, February 22, 2022, pro-Russian demonstrators who are members of the "Oplot" fight club attacked pro-Ukrainian activists. After that, the pro-Ukrainian activists decided not to leave the building of the KhRSA until the appointment of a new head of the KhRGA by Kiev (after all, the current head, M. Dobkin, fled after the separatist congress at the Sports Palace). Thus, Freedom Square has become a political platform for harsh ideological statements by pro-Ukrainian activists and manifestations of the brutality of pro-Russian demonstrators [5].

The central Freedom Square became the main place of further protest actions by pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian activists in Kharkiv. On February 23, 2014, a pro-Russian demonstration took place and tents were set up near the monument to

Lenin. On March 1, 2014, thousands of pro-Russian rallies took place on Freedom Square against the “capture of the city by Euromaidan” and the dismantling of the monument to Lenin. Indeed, as of March 1, 2014, the head of the KhRSA had not yet been appointed, and pro-Ukrainian activists remained in the administrative building. At the same time, the demand of Euromaidan activists to dismantle the monument to Lenin was not fulfilled. Kharkiv mayor G. Kernes and the ex-head of the KhRSA M. Dobkin supported the pro-Russian demonstrators. The pro-Russian demonstrators broke into the KhRSA building, dropped the Ukrainian flag and set up the Russian flag. It is important to note that similar pro-Russian actions took place that day in many cities of the east and south of Ukraine and Crimea. On the same day, V.Putin declared that Russia has the right to invade Ukraine “to protect the Russian people”.

A political pro-Russian protest on Freedom Square in Kharkiv turned violent, with dozens injured when pro-Russian demonstrators armed with chains into the KhRSA building, brutally beating the pro-Ukrainian activists. Protesters on Freedom Square chanted “Russia!” The seriously wounded pro-Ukrainian activists were handed over to ambulance doctors (according to official information, 97 people were taken to hospitals). Thousands of Kharkiv residents watched the events, filmed on mobile phones, incited each other to lynching, finished off the wounded. The events of March 1, 2014 on Freedom Square are described a “sad page” in Kharkiv’s history. The reason for this was not only an unprecedented outburst of rampant brutality by pro-Russian forces against those who stood in makeshift armor to defend Ukrainian statehood. Freedom Square also became a place of tolerance of violence and sadistic cruelty, and moral capitulation of a part of Ukrainian society before the Russia. Although later, it became obvious that the massacre on Freedom Square in Kharkiv was one of the first operations of the Russian hybrid war, where the scenario of capturing Ukraine was covered up with slogans of protection of Lenin and the Russian language. In those days, in Kharkiv, Russian terrorists were seen in a brutal crowd with Russian flags, who a few months later became the main actors in Russian aggression in the Ukrainian Donbas. Kharkiv was to play a special role in Vladimir Putin’s plans for the scale of the so-called “Russian Spring”.

However, the pro-Russian demonstrators continued to use Freedom Square for political and violent actions. On April 6, 2014, they took over the KhRSA building a second time and immediately proclaimed the so-called “Kharkov People’s Republic”. On the morning of April 7, more than 1,000 Kharkiv citizens came to Freedom Square with a protest against the capture of the KhRSA. Participants of the pro-Russian protest, armed with bats, forced the pro-Ukrainian demonstration out of the square. However, in the evening of that day, the police liberated the KhRSA building from the pro-Russian separatists.

In April-May 2014, the ideological confrontation on Freedom Square continued. The demonstrators located on two opposite parts of the square: on the western side, near the monument to Lenin (pro-Russian), and on the eastern side, near the building of the KhRSA (pro-Ukrainian). The number of people who fill the square and temporarily “conquer” it measures the importance of political protest, in particular. According to Russian experts, the “Russian spring” did not bring a “Russian summer” in Kharkiv. One characteristic of Freedom Square in Kharkiv as political

squares is its connection to ruptures events in the modern history of Ukraine. The defeat of the separatist plan to create “KhNR” gave this square its specific national meaning as “eastern outpost of Ukraine.”

In August 2014, Russia carried out a direct invasion of the Ukraine in Donetsk region. In this act, many experts saw the beginning of the World War III, which Putin started. For pro-Ukrainian activists, it became extremely important to help their army, as well as refugees from the Russian-occupied Donetsk and Lugansk regions. For this purpose, they set up a large tent “Everything for Victory” on Freedom Square on September 14, 2014. It was a visual demonstration that Kharkiv is not part of the “Russian world”, and the Kremlin’s hopes for Kharkiv are in vain. Although the monument to Lenin, the “idol” of communists and pro-Russian activists, still stood on the square.

Freedom Square was filled with a new symbolic meaning. It was a kind of symbolic articulation of Russia’s military aggression in eastern Ukraine. The tent was set up by the activists until the end of the war with the victory of Ukraine, which provides for the de-occupation of all territories occupied by Russia. This tent is like a “contact space” for the transfer of national values. Its presence on Freedom Square that makes it possible to highlight the peculiarities of the political and civic activity of citizens in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war. At the same time, pro-Russian activists continued to gather near the Lenin monument. Under Lenin’s pedestal was the headquarters of the pro-Russian Anti-Maidan, where pro-Russian riots in the city and separatist attempts to separate the Kharkiv region from the territory of Ukraine were coordinated. On September 27, 2022, the communists, contrary to the court’s decision, gathered on Freedom Square for the “March of Peace”. They protested against Ukrainian war activity according to them “against the people of Donbas”. On September 28, 2022, about eight thousand people took part in the pro-Ukrainian demonstration on Freedom Square. The protesters demanded that the law enforcement agencies be more active in combating separatist manifestations. In the evening of that day, a radical part of the pro-Ukrainian demonstrators dismantled the Lenin monument. In this way, the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation of architectural and spatial symbols on Freedom Square has ended.

Therefore, Freedom Square became a place of reinterpretation of “heroes” and “anti-heroes”. Having overthrown the monument to Lenin, which played the role of the “guardian” of the Soviet identity, the square needed the next stage of national marking of the space, namely the commemoration of defenders of Ukrainian independence. At the initiative of the Euromaidan activists, a red granite memorial sign “To the Heroes who died for the Freedom and Independence of Ukraine” was placed in the western part of the Freedom Square on the alley, where the monument to Lenin had been placed earlier. The ceremonial opening of the memorial sign took place on the “Day of the Ukrainian Army” on December 7, 2014. An important place of commemoration is also becoming a banner with a photo of the heroes who died in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. It placed on Freedom Square by pro-Ukrainian activists.

In addition to the spatial articulation of the function of commemorating Heroes, national and cultural actions also took place on Freedom Square. In particular, such actions took place near the “Everything for Victory” tent during the

national holiday “Day of Defenders of Ukraine” (October 14), as well as the unofficial (people’s) Day of Heroes (May 23). Heroes’ Day is a day of remembrance of all Ukrainians of different historical eras who dedicated their lives to the struggle for the freedom and independence of Ukraine. These national holidays are part of a Ukrainian political culture, which consolidated of people and make a viable state.

Various events dedicated to the important events of the Kharkiv Euromaidan took place around the tent “Everything for Victory”. In particular, on April 7, 2017, an artistic action “checkpoint” took place, timed to coincide with the liberation of the KhRSA building from pro-Russian demonstrators on April 7, 2014. Young artists took part in it to create their patriotic works on foam blocks. A kind of checkpoint was formed from these blocks. The well-known Ukrainian writer Y. Andrukhovych also took part in this artistic action.

Before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the front line was 40 km from Kharkiv. The “Everything for Victory” tent located on Freedom Square was a volunteer hub for helping Ukrainian military personnel, as well as people who remained in the combat zone. However, outreach activities remained the main task of the volunteer tent. Activists used it as a symbolic campaign stand informing about Russia military aggression in eastern Ukraine. There were information boards near the tent, as well as a part of a Russian missile that exploded in eastern Ukraine. The information leaflet was attached to part of the Russian military bomb: “The shame of fascist Russia”. The following comment was also given: “Greetings from the “fraternal Russian people”. On February 10, 2015, during the negotiations in Minsk, the peaceful city of Kramatorsk, which was then 50 km from the front line, was fired upon by Russian “Smerch” missiles...” Near the fragment of a Russian missile, there was a banner: “Kharkiv is next? ... And what did you do to prevent Kharkiv from becoming the next one?” Thus, a tent was an articulation of the national-ethical dimension of communications in the public space of Freedom Square. A “landscape of citizenship” was created on the square, which can be characterized in terms of the “meeting place of Ukrainians” and the reproduction of a sense of national unity and civic solidarity.

Nevertheless, an invisible border divided the country in two before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It was not the line of the Russian-Ukrainian front border, but ideological. Only one part of the society (smaller) was actively involved in voluntary assistance to the defenders of Ukraine, making its contribution to the victory. However, instead of winning the war, the rhetoric of peace and the need to “find a middle ground” spread in society. In 2019, Kharkiv mayor G.Kernes tried to demolish a volunteer tent from the central square and move it to another city square. In an interview with “Babel” on June 11, 2019, he noted that he had always opposed this tent: “What is the point of this tent if it stands and reminds people of some kind of war that we do not hear and live under a peaceful sky? ... and there are some pieces of shells ... for what?” [6].

The pro-Ukrainian activists defended their tent. According to the Ukrainians, the “Everything for Victory” tent has become a “sacred” place for Ukraine. They organized round-the-clock security of the tent, and on May 12, 2019, they initiated a people’s meeting. The meeting was held under the slogan “Stop Kernes!”. By their action, the participants also reminded that the Russian-Ukrainian war has not ended,

as well as the anti-Ukrainian actions of G. Kernes. On May 20, 2019, unknown people set the “Everything for Victory” tent on Freedom Square on fire. At the time of the fire, three defenders were in the tent. Pro-Ukrainian activists noted the symbolism of the date of the arson, which coincided with the inauguration of V. Zelenskyy as the President of Ukraine, who cultivated the rhetoric of “peace instead of war”.

The volunteers restored the tent, which continued to function as a permanent picket and outpost of Freedom in Kharkiv. They emphasized that Ukraine based on freedom. Therefore, it is not the tent itself that is important, but the fact that it symbolizes this value. The systemic changes in the social communications of Kharkiv’s main square become obvious, when a well-integrated community is created through the consensus of the value of Freedom.

Freedom Square performed an important political function of protecting Ukraine through the “Everything for Victory” volunteer tent. Numerous public meetings were held here against the signing of a peace treaty with Russia based on the “Stan Mayer formula”. Their slogans were “No capitulation”, “Peace is not needed at any cost!” It should be noted that the official authorities often prohibited such actions. Nevertheless, despite the ban, pro-Ukrainian meetings were held and were many thousands. In particular, such actions took place in February 2022, the purpose of which was to demonstrate Kharkiv’s readiness to resist a possible Russian invasion. They were against the “pacification” of the people and called for preparations for a full-scale of Russian invasion. The demonstrators noted that only those who still think that there is no war in Ukraine can talk about Russia’s non-aggression on Ukraine. On February 11, 2022, participants of a pro-Ukrainian picket on Freedom Square met the President of Ukraine V. Zelenskyy with the following slogans: “Kharkiv is Ukraine!” They demanded an apology from the President of Ukraine for his statement about the possible occupation of Kharkiv by Russia. Although he constantly assured the public that, there would be no war with Russia. Thus, the “Everything for Victory” tent was a decisive factor in the cultural and political “reconquest” of the public space of Freedom Square from pro-Russian narratives and the establishment of Kharkiv’s main square as the Ukrainian-centric.

With the beginning of the full-scale stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the architectural and spatial organization of Freedom Square in Kharkiv was seriously affected. Russian missiles hit Freedom Square Russian on March 1, 2022. The KhRSA building was destroyed, the tent “All for Victory” survived, although it experienced serious damage. It is important to note that as of June 2022 this tent has been restored and continues to perform its important ideological function as a permanent “assembly place” for the defense of Ukraine.

**Conclusions.** Svoboda Square an important primary source of the political history of Kharkiv. It also retains significance as a place of local collective memory. The largest square in Ukraine with the tent “Everything for Victory” largely determines the identity of Ukrainians as a nation that is repulsing Russian ideology and war aggression. The architectural and spatial transformations of Freedom Square was a part an articulation of socially important meanings of the newest Ukraine. An approach is proposed that shifts the emphasis in the analysis of the square from monumental architecture to the system of civic values in the light of the existence of the nation. It became a place of worldview transformations of the citizens, as well as

their formation of their civil and national positions.

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