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Renaming urban toponymy as a mean of redefining local identity: the case of street decommunization in Poland

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During and after democratic transition in Poland, the decommunization of urban toponymy became an important aspect of symbolic changes. Although the general course of street renaming was similar in the whole country, the pace of these changes as well as scope of tolerance towards the symbols of the past varied. In this article, the cases of three major Polish cities are analyzed. In Kraków, its long and rich history constituted a background of local identity and certain level of autonomy in defining the symbolic landscape. Warsaw on the other hand was a city whose extraordinary experiences related to the World War II resulted in commemoration of a whole new set of myths and figures through the street names. What is more, its status of the country's capital caused its identity to influence the canon of Polish history as a whole. This affected the third analyzed case, Wrocław, whose long history of links with German culture resulted in very little symbolic capital which would be compatible with this new patriotic canon. As a result, Wrocław accepted in its urban toponymy a vast number of symbols unrelated to its own memory, in the same time suppressing symbols linked to its local identity. Accepting external heritage turned out to be a strategy of avoiding conflict with the dominant narrative.

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