

Estonia-Russia: monumental discord

Description

The profound geopolitical opposition between Estonia and Russia is primarily rooted in divergent visions of history. The war in Ukraine, a significant event that has widened the memory gap between the two countries more than ever, has added a new layer of complexity to this conflict. For almost three decades, tensions over Soviet monuments have been a focal point of the discord between the two countries.

The issue of a wanted notice by Russia on 13 February 2024 for Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas is remarkable in that it targets a European head of government—to date, the only one concerned by such a procedure—but it is nonetheless laconic. The Prime Minister is being prosecuted in a vague “criminal case” with few details.

It took comments from Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov and Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova to clarify matters. The former, commenting on the wanted notices issued against several Baltic politicians, including K. Kallas, said: *“These people are responsible for decisions that are a de facto insult to history; they are people who are carrying out hostile actions against historical memory, against our country.”* The second believes that *“these crimes against the memory of the liberators of Nazism and Fascism must be prosecuted.”*



So it is not Kaja Kallas’s very proactive stance on the war in Ukraine that the Kremlin is formally targeting, but rather Estonia’s policy of remembrance, which has been expressed particularly since the summer of 2022 by a significant effort to move and unbolt Soviet monuments on Estonian soil. Tallinn and Moscow have a monumental opposition in the primary sense of the term. It has to be said that these monuments are at the crossroads of two dynamics: the (re)construction of Baltic and Russian identities on the one hand and the reconfiguration of the geopolitical situation in Europe since 1991 on the other⁽¹⁾. These two dynamics have become deeply conflicting since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Soviet past: a cumbersome monumental legacy

Annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and again in 1944, Estonia was a Soviet Socialist Republic, an integral part of the USSR, until 1991. During this period of almost half a century, a double phenomenon took place. Estonian monuments erected during independence (1918-1940) were destroyed⁽²⁾ while others were built, thus contributing to [Estonia’s cultural and ideological Sovietisation](#).

However, with the end of the USSR in 1991, the official perception of these monuments changed radically. While they continue to be viewed by Russia and a large proportion of Estonia’s Russian-speaking population as a tribute to and recognition of the liberators and victors of the Great Patriotic War, Estonians see them as, at best, a cumbersome legacy from the past, and at worst, the stigma of occupation. This divergent assessment reflects the existence of two different, not to say antagonistic, memory narratives between Estonia and Russia. The former sees the Soviet period as a prolonged occupation that deprived the country of independence. In contrast, the latter, defending the Soviet vision, believes that the country was, on the contrary, liberated. The interpretation of the Second World War events crystallizes a large part of the disagreement in remembrance. Under these conditions, geopolitical tensions linked to Soviet monuments have arisen between Estonia and its Russian-speaking minorities and between Estonia and Russia in recent decades⁽³⁾.

After a heated European debate in 2004, the definitive installation of the “Lihula monument” on private land in the municipality of Lagedi in 2005 was pivotal. This monument, dedicated “to the Estonians who fought in 1940-1945 against Bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence,” sparked an offensive comment from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The perpetuation of the stele was, according to Moscow, evidence of [“the revival of pro-Nazi sympathies in Estonia.”](#) The tension over the monument was one of the highlights of a hectic year in 2005 in terms of remembrance between Russia and the three Baltic states⁽⁴⁾.

The return of the bronze soldier?

This Russian-Estonian confrontation culminated two years later, in 2007, in the internationally renowned episode of The Bronze Soldier. The ‘Bronze Soldier’ was a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn, Estonia, that became a focal point of the conflict. Much has been said about this significant political event in post-Soviet Estonia. Cyber-attacks and Russian interference in information and diplomacy are now well-known *modus operandi*, particularly in France in recent years. While the Russian action during the events of April 2007 was essentially an opportunistic act in the context of a domestic political debate in Estonia, it also demonstrated the critical (geo)political use made by Russia during the Second World War, particularly on 9 May, the cornerstone of Russian political discourse on remembrance. Therefore, the official unveiling of the bronze soldier in its new location on 8 May 2007 carried a strong political message: the Estonian authorities opted for a Western-style commemoration on 8 May rather than 9 May, as is the case in Russia.

Therefore, the monument’s relocation was marked by calendar symbolism and reinforced by the inauguration of the War of Independence Victory Column in 2009. The ‘War of Independence Victory Column’ is a significant monument in Estonia’s remembrance policy, located just a few hundred meters... from the former site of the bronze soldier.

In 2022, the degradation of the statue of the soldier on the night of 12 April raised fears of a new political outburst, all the more so on the fifteenth anniversary of the events of 2007 and especially two months after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. But there was more fear than harm. Better still, on 27 April, fifteen years after the monument was moved, Kaja Kallas was keen to stress that Estonia had become a [“heavyweight in cyber security.”](#) In a similar vein of apprehension, but with the same result, the celebrations on 9 May passed off calmly, without any significant incidents. In Narva and Kohtla-Järve, the monuments dedicated to the Soviet victory were decorated with flowers, a reminder that these are also popular places.

Narva: the T-34 retreat

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine exacerbated the memory gap between Estonia and Russia. In the summer of 2022, K. Kallas announced his government’s intention to remove Soviet monuments from public spaces⁽⁵⁾. Among the sites targeted is the T-34 – the legendary Soviet tank of the Second World War – which has stood in Narva since 9 May 1970. The Prime Minister’s visit to the Russian-speaking town on 8 August 2022 to meet the municipal authorities was a balancing act between firmness and dialogue. The municipality of Narva finally agreed to remove the armored vehicle, which, on 16 August 2022, moved to the Estonian Military Museum in Viimsi. Unsurprisingly, the Estonian decision aroused the ire of the Russian authorities. In a gesture that was half revenge, half provocation, a T-34 was installed in Ivangorod, the Russian town next to Narva, in September 2022. This is an openly assumed response to the Estonian action. In November 2022, the Russian Federation’s Investigative Committee issued a second response, a judicial one. It announced that it was opening an investigation into “the circumstances of the demolition of more than 240 Soviet monuments in Estonia.” The wanted notice issued in February 2024 for Kaja Kallas is the obvious consequence of this investigation.

Que retenir finalement de cet affrontement monumental entre l’Estonie et la Russie ? While the dispute is not new and has lasted for at least 20 years, the war in Ukraine has undeniably widened the memorial gap between the two countries. In Estonia, Soviet monuments are places of expression and geopolitical tension with the Russian neighbor. But who wins such a monumental duel? Ultimately, it is a non-zero-sum game. Any gain for one side is good for the other. With the war in Ukraine, Estonia has found in this significant geopolitical explosion an excellent opportunity to break with a Soviet past deemed cumbersome and as rejectable as Nazism, the ultimate avatar of evil in both the Western and

Russian imaginations. Russia, for its part, sees this as confirmation that its memory is being attacked by Estonia, whose supposed ingratitude necessarily conceals a latent or even open fascism or Nazism, just like Ukraine. Now, with a “special military operation” designed precisely as a “denazification” and where, in return, Russia is itself accused of fascism⁽⁶⁾, we can see the extent to which Soviet monuments in Estonia are genuine ideological and geopolitical seismographs of a Europe that is returning to martial fury, and that has not finished with the ghosts of the past.

Notes :

(1) Eiki Berg & Piret Ehin (éd.), *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009.

(2) Argo Kuusik, “The Destruction of Monuments from the Period of Independence in the Estonian SSR” in *Propaganda, Immigration, and Monuments. Perspectives on Methods Used to Entrench Soviet Power in Estonia in the 1950's-1980's*, Meelis Saueauk et Meelis Maripuu (éd.), Tartu, University of Tartu Press (Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, 3), 2021, pp. 139-179.

(3) Jörg Hackmann & Marko Lehti (ed.), *Contested and Shared Places of Memory. History and Politics in North Eastern Europe*, London, Routledge, 2010.

(4) En particulier au moment des célébrations du 9 mai à Moscou. Sur le sujet, voir : Eva-Clarita Onken, « The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration. Analyzing Memory Politics in Europe », *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 59, n° 1, 2007, pp. 23-46.

(5) To mark the occasion, the Estonian government launched [a major political communication campaign \(a question-and-answer session\)](#) to make its intentions known.

(6) On this mutual use of fascism to (dis)qualify the other, see the clarifications in Marlène Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2021, especially chapters 3 and 4.

Thumbnail: The Soviet T-34 tank was installed in Narva just before it was moved (copyright: [Ülo Veldre/Wikimedia](#), 13 August 2022).

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