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Silent Protesters or Acceptors? The Reaction of the Russian-speakers to the Removal of the Soviet Monuments in Latvia and Estonia after Russia's Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine*

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Abstract. For a long time the approach of the both two Baltic states to the Soviet heritage was formed by: (1) international and bilateral agreements which obliged states to protect monuments and memorial sites of the Soviet Army as well as (2) numerous Russian-speaking community for whom the Soviet statues constitute its cultural identity. The situation has significantly changed due to Russia's aggressive policy against Ukraine, when the authorities made several attempts to remove the Soviet monuments. This brought some controversies and objections among the Russian-speaking communities in Latvia and Estonia. The paper focuses on the transformation of the national historical narrative toward the Soviet monuments and the processes of the adapting of the Russian-speaking community to the official memory discourse. More specifically, the aim is to explore the ways in which the Russian-speaking residents reacted to the removal of the Soviet monuments. The concept of resistance was applied in order to explore and synthesize the outcomes of the interviews carried out among Russian-speaking communities in Latvia and Estonia. It is argued here that the reconstruction of the public space by shifting the most visual symbol of the victory of the Red Army in the WWII has not induced hot feelings among

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the Russian-speaking society, and thus, it has not motivated community to take part in the open protest against the removal. Most of the minority representatives stayed passive and silent adapting to the new reality.
Key words: resistance, national minority, Soviet monuments, Latvia, Estonia.

Tylūs protestuotojai ar rėmėjai? Rusakalbių reakcija į sovietinių paminklų pašalinimą Latvijoje ir Estijoje po Rusijos invazijos į Ukrainą

Santrauka. Ilgą laiką požiūrį į sovietinį paveldą Latvijoje ir Estijoje formavo: 1. tarptautiniai ir dvišaliai susitarimai, įpareigojantys valstybes saugoti sovietų armijos paminklus bei memorialines vietas; 2. gausios rusakalbių bendruomenės, laikančios sovietinius paminklus savo kultūrinės tapatybės dalimi. Situacijos pokytį lėmė agresyvi Rusijos politika Ukrainos atžvilgiu, paskatinusi politinius lyderius pašalinti sovietinius paminklus. Latvijos ir Estijos rusakalbių bendruomenėse tai sukėlė ginčus ir nesutarimus. Straipsnyje aptariamas nacionalinio istorinio naratyvo sovietinių paminklų atžvilgiu transformacijos procesas ir rusakalbių bendruomenės prisitaikymas prie oficialaus atminties diskurso. Kitaip tariant, siekiama išanalizuoti, kaip rusakalbiai gyventojai reagavo į sovietinių paminklų pašalinimą. Analizėje taikyta pasipriešinimo sąvoka siekta ištirti ir apibendrinti interviu su Latvijos ir Estijos rusakalbių bendruomenių atstovais rezultatus. Teigiama, kad viešųjų erdvių rekonstrukcija, pašalinant vizualiuosius Raudonosios armijos pergalės Antrajame pasauliniame kare simbolius, rusakalbių bendruomenėse nesukėlė „karštų“ emocijų, todėl nemotyvavo bendruomenių atvirai protestuoti prieš sovietinių paminklų pašalinimą. Dauguma mažumų atstovų liko pasyvūs ir tylūs bei prisitaikė prie naujos tikrovės.
Reikšminiai žodžiai: pasipriešinimas, tautinė mažuma, sovietiniai paminklai, Latvija, Estija.

Introduction

In the 1990s, the process of removing or demolishing Soviet monuments in several Central European states was initiated from the bottom up, and these activities were usually sanctioned by national authorities.[1] They were supposed to be a symbol of moral renew-

[1] See more: Ewa Ochman, "Soviet War Memorials and the Re-construction of National and Local Identities in Post-communist Poland," *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 4 (2010): 509–530; Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, "Dissonant Heritage. Soviet Monuments in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism,* eds. Agnieszka Mrozik and Stanislav Holubec (Routledge, 2018), 101–121; Alena Marková and Mariia Kuznetcova, eds., *Memory of Central and Eastern Europe Past Traumas, Present Challenges, Future Horizons*

al, negation of the totalitarian system, fight against corruption and collaboration with communist regime. The removed monuments were usually placed in the cemeteries of fallen soldiers of the Soviet Army. However, some less controversial monuments – those devoted to local communists rather than the Soviet leaders and those placed provincially – remained. Both at the local and national levels, there was no agreement as to their future, and more broadly, as to a uniform historical policy in relation to the Soviet heritage.[2] As in many post-communist countries, in Latvia and Estonia debates were represented by two narratives: completely discrediting the communist authorities and legitimizing some of the achievements of socialist ideas.[3] Conflicts over historical policy caused by the lack of social (national) cohesion were reflected in the so-called monument wars, the most known example of which is Pronkssõdur, the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn, whose relocation from a central place to a more distant cemetery led to several days of riots, resulting in the death of one person.[4] This symbolically embodies what John E. Tunbridge and

(Prague: Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2023), DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2010.48213; Caterina Preda, ""Living Statues" and Monuments as "Performative Monument Events" in Post-Socialist South-Eastern Europe," *Nationalities Papers* 51, no. 3 (2023): 544–562, DOI:10.1017/nps.2021.84; Caterina Preda, "Postsocialist Statuary Politics in Romania and Bulgaria: An Ambivalent Socialist Heritage," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 71, no. 2 (2023): 147–168, https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2022-0043.

2 Virginija Jureniene and Martynas Radzevicius, "The Soviet Heritage: Conceptualization of Ambiguous," *J Tourism Hospit.S2*, no. 004 (2022): 1–10; Francisco Martínez, "Memory, Don't Speak! Monumental Neglect and Memorial Sacrifice in Contemporary Estonia," *Cultural Geographies* 29, no. 1 (2022): 63–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211005517.

3 See for example: Saara Mildeberg and Vider Jaanika, "Soviet Heritage(scape) in Sillamäe: Documenting the Potential in an Emerging Tourism Destination," *Societies* 12, no. 5 (2022): 127, https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12050127; Dmitrijs Andrejevs, "Contested Monuments and Their Afterlives: The V. I. Lenin Monument in Post-Soviet Riga". PhD diss., The University of Manchester, 2022.

4 David J. Smith, ""Woe from Stones": Commemoration, Identity Politics and Estonia's "War of Monuments"," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no. 4 (2008): 419–430; Martin Ehala, "The Bronze Soldier: Identity Threat and Maintenance in Estonia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 139–158.

Gregory J. Ashworth identify as "dissonant heritage"[5] which both unites and divides, because in the process of shaping national identity it can unleash differences and social tensions.[6]

While the largest number of monuments were dismantled or demolished in the 1990s, there have been relatively few such activities in recent years. The dispute over the Soviet monuments intensified in the Baltic states as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) and finally after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022). As political changes and security threats are often reflected in the symbolic structure of the urban environment, the process of reinstallation of the monuments has begun. Moreover, so far, it has been 9 May, when thousands of people used to celebrate the victory of the Soviet Army over Nazism. It should be stressed that while for majority of the residents the Soviet monuments serve as a symbol of occupation, deportation, and loss of independence of the Baltic states,[7] for Russian-speaking population, which constitute approx. 32% and 27% of total population in Latvia and Estonia respectively, the monuments commemorate the Red Army heroes and they may be recognized as symbolic forms of Russian communities, determining the collective identity of individuals and the sense of belonging to the community.[8] One of the largest rally used to take place in the Victory (Uzvaras) Park in Riga (the original name was Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders), near the memorial complex consisting of the 79-meter stele, a symbol of the Motherland, and sculptures of three Red Army soldiers, erected in 1985. Each year the memorial gathered a few hundred thousand participants. As a result of the Russian–Ukrain-

5 John E. Tunbridge and Gregory J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester and New York: John Wiley, 1996).

6 Helaine Silverman and D. Fairchild Ruggles, "Cultural Heritage and Human Rights," in *Cultural Heritage and Human Rights*, eds. Helaine Silverman and D. Fairchild Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2007), 3–22.

7 Siobhan Kattago, "Memory, Pluralism and the Agony of Politics," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2020): 383–394.

8 Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, "Russia's Monuments Policy in the Baltic States," in *The EU and Russia: Spaces of Interaction in Times of Crises*, eds. Andrey Makarychev and Thomas Hoffmann (Routledge, 2018), 52–70.

ian war, in 2022 no official celebrations were organized in most cities of Latvia and Estonia but some residents celebrated individually and visited the monuments of Soviet soldiers in cemeteries. There were definitely fewer visitors however. While the overwhelming majority of them celebrated the day individually by laying flowers on the graves of fallen soldiers, some of them, despite the prohibition, carried Soviet and Russian flags, as well as wore clothing or insignia considered aggressive. Activists demonstrating their support for Ukraine were also present at the cemeteries.

This paper endeavors to offer a critical reflection on the political and social attitudes of the Russian-speaking residents in Latvia and Estonia towards the Soviet monument removal since the Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. It aims to explore an under-researched area of the sociality of memory practice and addresses an important topic linked to the transformation of Russian-speakers' approach towards the Soviet monuments. It is claimed here that following the Russia–Ukraine war, official memory discourses of Latvia and Estonia have included the reconstruction of the public space by shifting the most visual symbols of the victory of the Red Army in the WWII – so-called the Victory Monument in Riga and the Tank-34 in Narva. The governmental decision to shift the monuments from the public sphere has not induced hot feelings among the Russian-speaking society, and thus, it has not motivated community to take part in the protest against the removal.[9] There are at least a few arguments that explain the phenomenon of lack of protest mobilization among Russian-speaking communities. Moreover, there are still those who do not agree with the legal and political frame on how the Soviet history is remembered or how the remembrance practices are constituted. But they would rather contest the official memory discourse invisibly or vaguely.

[9] On Latvian case see: Mārtiņš Kaprāns, "Toppling Monuments: How Russia's War against Ukraine has Changed Latvia's Memory Politics," 29 November 2022. Available at: https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/latvia/toppling-monuments-how-russias-war-against-ukraine-has-changed-latvias-memory-politics#part3.

Special attention is paid to protest activities expressing anger and dissatisfaction based on the resistance concept of Jocelyn A. Hollander, and Rachel L. Einwohner.[10] Looking back to the history, social movements organized by Russian-speaking community in Latvia and Estonia are not very common. In Latvia, Russian-speaking demonstrators protested against a new education law (2002–2004 and 2017–2018**)** in defence of Russian schools.[11] Further, the demonstration over the abovementioned Bronze Solder expressed the full extent of the "protest potential" on that time. In fact, it was a part of Russia's authorities' antidiplomacy, economic sanctions and cyber-attack activities. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to describe a phenomenon of social and political mobilization of the Russian-speaking community regarding the Soviet monuments in Latvia and Estonia following Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. More specifically, the aim is to analyze political and social orientation of Russian-speakers toward dismantling the Soviet figures, as well as character and forms of mobilization and narratives connected to their relocation. My point of departure is that the reconstruction of the public space by the removal of the Soviet monuments unveiled different approaches and paths of understanding the official memory politics by Russian-speakers, thus their reactions varied in relations to their sense of attachment to the national identity and to the state.

From a methodological point of view this is a comparative study on multiple levels. Comparative study helps to make several socio-anthropological interpretations and generalizations based on cross-national research, as well as to designate specific set of patterns of political behavior regarding the Soviet past. Moreover, this paper is based on the qualitative approach to research on protest mobilities including 30 in-depth interviews with representatives of national minorities, 15 each in Latvia and Estonia. There were 20 respondents

10 Hollander A. Jocelyn and Rachel L. Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (2004): 533–554.

11 Anders Uhlin, "The Structure and Culture of Post-Communist Civil Society in Latvia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 5 (July 2010): 829–852.

aged 20–60 and 10 over 60 years old. The interviews took place in the Latgale (Latvia) and Eastern Virumaa (Estonia) as well as in the capitals in the period of May–August 2023. I used the method of purposive sampling, where the participants were selected based on two primary criteria: Russian language as their mother tongue and membership in the Russian-speaking organizations in Latvia or Estonia. Russian ethnicity has not been necessary indicator however; the participants revealed their Belarusian, Ukrainian, or Polish origin as well. Moreover, I applied semistructured interviews asking my interlocutors core, previously planned questions and unplanned follow-up questions. The aim was to analyze social attitudes, perceptions and motivations towards the Soviet heritage after 24 February 2022.

The paper consists of the following parts. The first section concerns the academic literature being reviewed in order to synthesize the knowledge regarding protests and other forms of resistance. Secondly, the legislation framework and political practice over the Soviet monuments are explored in two Baltic states after February 2022. Next, the presented results of in-depth interviews of Russian-speaking community in relations to official memory practice shift to the discussion on inter-crossing essence of ethnic identity, memory and power. The paper concludes that the process of redefining the meaning of Soviet monuments will run in two ways: while legislative procedures and changes of public space will be introduced faster (greater social acceptance for such activities results from solidarity with Ukraine), it will be more difficult in the long run to modify collective memory of Russian-speakers and narratives contained in the symbolism of monuments.

1. Academic literature and theoretical framework

The term of *resistance* has been described and processed in a variety of ways. Academics have presented it usually as individual, collective or institutional actions, behaviors and efforts to oppose, question or object. In political science the term is mainly referred to social movements, protests or contentious politics such as marches,

picketing, the formation of organizations and other form of physical resistance.[12] Movements often use several types of action, which can include demonstrative actions, confrontational, light violence, and heavy violence. Most of them occurred due to disappointment with malfunctioning democracies, frustration with politicians, and a lack of trust in governments while fewer protests referred to a specific issue (e.g., education, climate and energy policy). Mapping of global protests Isabel Ortiz, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada and Hernán Saenz Cortés classified them into four categories: (1) protests related to the failure of political representation/political systems, focused on a lack of real democracy, corruption and other grievances; (2) against economic injustice and austerity reforms; (3) for civil rights; and (4) protests for global justice and a better international system for all, instead of the few.[13]

Mass-based social movements and revolutions being a sense of physical actions are the clearest examples of resistance, but they are used by societies with vital potential and resources. According to James Scott powerless people rarely have the resources or opportunity to resist openly against the authorities and mass protests are too costly for them.[14] Oppressed people may be conscious of oppression and may intend to resist in some fashion.[15] By so-called *everyday*

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12 See: Jenkins J. Craig and Bert Klandermans, eds., *The Politics of Social Protest: Comparative Perspectives on States and Social Movements* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Eitan Azani, "Social Protest Movements – Theoretical Framework," in *Hezbollah: The Story of the Party of God. The Middle East In Focus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230116290_1; Donatella Della Porta and Alice Mattoni, eds., *Spreading Protest: Social Movements in Times of Crisis* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2014); Eduardo G. Silva, "Social Movements, Protest, and Policy," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe* 100 (2015): 27–39; James M. Jasper, *The Emotions of Protest* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

13 Isabel Ortiz, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada and Hernán Saenz Cortés, *World Protests. A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88513-7.

14 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985).

15 Hollander and Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," 542.

acts of resistance they mask the real nature of their activities to protect themselves from repression from the authorities, thus they are unrecognized from above. Scott describes in his well-known book peasant and slave societies and their ways of responding to domination, with a focus not on observable acts of rebellion but on forms of cultural resistance and noncooperation. Among them there are less visible, everyday forms of resistance such as "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage." Scott calls them a subtle form of contesting "public transcripts" by making use of prescribed roles and language to resist the abuse of power – including things like "rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity." These forms of resistance require little coordination or planning, and are used by both individuals and groups to resist without directly confronting or challenging elite norms.[16] Thus, they are forms of objection including verbal or cognitive behavior that my remain relatively invisible to the power and may occur privately when the public resistance is too dangerous. In some cases even silence can also be a form of resistance when a person does not speak about his or her individual opinions and emotions when they are inconsistent with official narration in a country or contradictory with those of majority.

Exploring and reviewing Scott's concept, Jocelyn A. Hollander, and Rachel L. Einwohner mentioned eight types of resistance taking into account intention of the actors and recognition of the target or observers.[17] While there is not enough place to analyze them all in details I would like to pay attention to a few of them. Firstly, *overt resistance* such as revolutions and mass protests is visible and readily recognized by the audience, in contrast to *covert resistance* which is intentionally unnoticed by others. Then, the authors indicate *unwitting resistance* which is not intended as resistance by the actor yet recognized as a threat by

[16] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992): 137.

[17] Hollander and Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," 544.

the targeting group or observers. For example, the authorities may feel threatened by some activities of national minority representatives contradicting to official politics of a country, although members of national minority do not intend to provoke such reaction. Finally, there is *attempted resistance* expressed in an intentional act unnoticed by the target group or observers. It may occur privately, hidden by the others.

Furthermore, Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen[18] paid attention to spatialization and temporalization of *everyday resistance* meaning that the space and time illustrate how the resistance practices and activities are organized and constructed socially and culturally. Moreover the authors underlined that the local and time dimensions of resistance are controlled by certain social groups (politicians, officials, elites) and they are fundamental for exercising of power.

Everyday resistance or *covert resistance* does not necessarily have a visual effect; it is a pattern of acts undertaken by individuals or collectives in a subordinated position.[19] They include a struggle of marginalized and weak people, usually without formal organizations and leaders, coordination and planning.[20] Thus this approach may be also exploited by national minorities when open political mobilization and public articulation are not possible because of criminal repercussion or lack of social resources. Majority of their activity focus on a desired policy change, rather than on change in an overall governing system, thus they attempt to preserve their national culture against assimilation to host culture rather than encounter hegemonic structure in a country. They prefer hidden or vague forms of resistance. In Latvian and Esto-

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18 Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen, "Dimensions of Everyday Resistance: An Analytical Framework," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 3 (2016): 417–435, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514524604.

19 Marta Iñiguez de Heredia, "Patterns and Practices of Everyday Resistance: A View from Below," in *Everyday Resistance, Peacebuilding and State-Making: Insights from "Africa's World War,"* (Manchester University Press, 2017): 50–74, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1wn0rvj.9.

20 Richard Ballard, "Everyday Resistance: Theorising How the 'Weak' change the World," in *The Routledge Handbook of Social Change*, eds. Richard Ballard and Clive Barnett (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023): 303–314, DOI:10.4324/9781351261562-29.

nian cases, the Russian-speaking minorities might have also used such types of resistance after the removal of the Soviet monuments. While the Baltic states should not be seen as discriminatory and national minorities as being oppressed, Russian-speaking minority representatives in both countries may feel disappointment of the official memory politics and share the perceptions of discrimination.[21] Particularly, some Russian-speakers might feel irritation by the political decisions regarding the limitation of commemoration of the Soviet monuments and especially regarding their removal, as those objects have aided the consolidation of the Russian-speaking identity. By ignoring the official decisions, evading them or breaking the law, they do their daily activities with an intention to negotiate power relations from below.[22] In that sense their resistance to the state politics is not only a political and social action but also an identity-based approach directed at maintaining and strengthening their own culture.

2. Official memory discourse in Latvia and Estonia

Since the 1990s, a new national identity has been adopted in Latvia and Estonia. They have been concentrating their own memory policies around the occupation and the glorification of the fight for independence while the Soviet period is associated with deportation and occupation. This approach meaning the Soviet period as a category of "hot memories,"[23] according to which the memory of the Soviet Union expresses a lively, active relationship with the past, as opposed to the passive, closed "cold memories" regarding the period of German occupation, has been a part of the national rhetoric building national identity based on experiences of the trauma of the Soviet Union.

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21 Ammon Cheskin, „Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States," *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 1 (2014).

22 Uday Chandra, "Rethinking Subaltern Resistance," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45, no. 4 (2015): 563–573, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2015.1048415.

23 Hedvig Turai, "Past Unmastered: Hot and Cold Memory in Hungary," *Third Text*, 23, no. 1 (2009): 97–106.

This can be illustrated particularly by an example of memorial museums in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn, whose aims are to rehabilitate and commemorate the victims of Communists.[24] Although, the sense of patriotism and attachment to Latvia and Estonia are formed under the influence of internal (the presence of Russian-speaking minorities) and external (Russia's historical policy) factors. For Russian-speaking minorities, the Soviet past is one of key elements of the Soviet/Russian cultural identity and a sense of belonging to Russia,[25] and the Soviet monuments play a significant role in this regard. Both in Latvia and Estonia thousands of residents annually used to celebrate the Victory Day on 9 May, and thousands of them used to take part in the extremely sentimental procession of the "Immortal Regiment" to honour the fallen of the Great Patriotic War, carrying photographs of their ancestors. The march symbolized tradition, collective memory, and the national and ethnic identity of individuals.[26] In turn, Russia's historical policy may symbolically refer to Russia's geopolitical rivalry with the West. This type of narrative serves Russia to build a myth about the imperium – superpower – and justifies its role in the world order. In this sense, Russia's historical policy is a reaction to the Baltic states' independence, their identity building process in

24 Kuczyńska-Zonik, "Russia's monuments," 52–70.

25 Eva-Clarita Onken, "Memory and Democratic Pluralism in the Baltic States: Rethinking the Relationship," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2010): 277–294, doi:10.1080/01629778.2010.498186; Maria Mälksoo, "Criminalizing Communism: Transnational Mnemopolitics in Europe," *International Political Sociology* 8 (2014): 82–99, doi:10.1111/ips.12041; Mārtiņš Kaprāns, "Remembering Communism in Latvia: A Nationalizing State and the MultiDirectionality of the Past," in *The New Heroes, the Old Victims: Politics of Memory in Russia and the Baltics*, eds. Igors Gubenko, Deniss Hanovs, Vladislavs Malahovskis (Riga: Zinātne, 2016): 74–107; Toomas Hiio, "On the Historical Identity of the Estonians and the Politics of Memory in Estonia," *Institute of National Remembrance Review* 1 (2019): 66–115.

26 Ieva Birka, "Expressed Attachment to Russia and Social Integration: The Case of Young Russian Speakers in Latvia, 2004–2010," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47, no. 2 (2016): 219–238, DOI: 10.1080/ 01629778.2015.1094743; Ammon Cheskin and Angela Kachuyevski, „The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics and Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 1 (2019): 1–23, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2018.1529467.

opposition to Russia, and the loss of former privileges by the Russian-speaking inhabitants of the region.[27]

The Russian invasion of Ukraine updated priorities and dynamized activities in the field of historical policy in both Latvia and Estonia. The official discourses included what should be commemorated (and what should not) and how. Special focus was devoted to the Soviet monuments and the 9 May. In order to limit the provocations associated with Victory Day, celebrated by many members of the Russian-speaking minority, in 2022 the governments of Latvia and Estonia decided to ban the use of war symbols and limit the organization of mass events at the monuments of the Soviet Army. The Latvian parliament adopted a law prohibiting the organization of events within 200 meters of monuments commemorating the Soviet Army. Moreover, the Riga authorities decided to fence the area around the Victory Park complex due to the "poor condition of the monument." There was also a photo exhibition entitled "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!". The number of police patrols for security on this day was also increased. The security services in Latvia were on high alert to prevent provocations and various propaganda-related activities. A few persons were detained for laying flowers at the fenced off area where the Soviet Victory Monument once stood decorated with a symbol of military aggression. Similarly, the Estonian Riigikogu decided to ban on April 26 – May 10 public gatherings that could incite hatred and use of a symbolism war because possible gatherings might take place, both on the anniversary of the so-called Bronze Night and with the approaching May 9 anniversary. While commemorating those killed in the war was not forbidden, the organization of the

[27] Marlene Laruelle, "Russia as a "Divided Nation," From Compatriots to Crimea: A Contribution to the Discussion on Nationalism and Foreign Policy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 2 (2015); Kjetil Duvold, "Beyond Borders: The Return of Kin-State Politics in Europe," *Baltic Worlds*, 1–2 (2015); Valentina Feklyunina, "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the "Russian World(s)"," *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2015); Angela Kachuyevski, "The "Russian World" and the Securitization of Identity Boundaries in Latvia," in *Suturing the Ruptures: Seams and Stitches in the Baltic Sea Region*, eds. Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk (London: Palgrave, 2017): 227–247.

so-called Immortal Regimen march was forbidden. Every year about a thousand people attend the march in Tallinn. Participation in any march was considered immoral however and was treated as an expression of support for Russia's aggressive actions. Despite this, hundreds of people arrived at the Defence Forces Cemetery in Tallin on that day to pay their respects to the Red Army soldiers buried there.

The crimes committed by the Russians in Ukraine mobilized the Baltic authorities to remove the Soviet monuments from public places and to make further legislative changes in this regard. They made an attempt to change the meaning of dates and places previously identified with the Soviet Army as well. For example, the Latvian Saeima has established 9 May as a day of remembrance for the victims of the war in Ukraine. Then, the discussion on the Victory Monument in Riga brought public attention. So far, attempts have been made to remove the Victory Monument from public space, but the bilateral agreement between Russia and Latvia did not allow for the demolition of the statue.[28] According to this Agreement a removal of any Soviet statue needs Russia's consent, and only the Parliament might change the rules. Surprisingly, on 14 July, 2022, Latvian Saeima approved the removal of 69 monuments, memorials, and other objects glorifying Soviet and Nazi regimes selected by the Heritage Administration, the Latvian Artists Union and Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. What is also interesting, the annotation of the law stated that the goal of the law is to prevent the denouncement and threat to the values of Latvia as a democratic and national state, to express a condemnatory stance against the illegal occupation powers of the USSR and Nazi Germany, as well as to prevent false, inaccurate and biased reflection of historical events. Most of those objects were memorial plaques or stones which made them simple to remove. There were also larger objects and sculptures most of which were located in Riga. Among them was abovementioned Victory Monument in Riga, which was eventually demolished in August 2022. In Estonia approx-

[28] The Latvian-Russian Agreement on Preservation and Maintenance of Memorials and Burial Sites of 1994.

imately 200 to 400 Soviet-era memorials or monuments were reported to be still standing across Estonia. The move was not without its controversy however. In August 2022 the removal of the T-34 tank monument outside the city of Narva near the border with Russia was met with some opposition from the local population, 90% of whom are Russia-speakers. According to Estonian media there were several people gathering in this place, lighting candles and bringing flowers each day for a few months following the monument removal.[29] But the Estonian Prime Minister Kallas stressed that it was not the "right place" for commemorating the dead: "A tank was a murder weapon, it was not a memorial, and these same tanks are killing people on the streets of Ukraine right now."

3. Contesting the remembrance practices

The qualitative interviews with the representatives of Russian-speaking minorities and leaders of Russian-speaking voluntary organizations revealed that the Soviet past is involved in the process of strengthening or constructing the collective identity of Russian-speaking minorities. The specific questions asked included: the importance of the Soviet monuments for individual and collective identity, the way of commemoration of the Red Army heroes as well as the respondents' reactions for the monuments dismantling. The interviews confirmed the Soviet past is related to commemorations of historical events and people, and monuments of historical personalities or heroes are important for the Russian-speaking ethnic groups. However, the complex identity of the Russian national minorities overlaps with elements related to origin, upbringing and ethnicity (Russianness, Russian-speaking) and the environment in which they live (the nationality of the Baltic states, Western European ideas and culture). The research unveils that Russian-speaking minorities are

[29] Jüri Nikolajev, "Narvas käiakse endiselt tank-monumenti meenutamas." 16 November 2022. Available at: https://www.err.ee/1608790807/narvas-kaiakse-endiselt-tank-monumenti-meenutamas.

heterogeneous, diverse and does not constitute a cohesive group in terms of their attitude towards the Soviet monuments and official memory politics in Latvia and Estonia.

I started my research from the issue of the contemporary role of the Soviet symbols in the public sphere in both countries. For several years the Soviet monuments have been called a gathering point of the Russian community and a key factor of their cultural identity. Each year thousands of people participated in the celebration on 9 May not only to commemorate the Red Army, but also to express their attachment to the Russia-speaking community. Thus, it seemed that political decisions regarding the relocation of the most recognizing and respectful Soviet statues determined by Russia's military aggression against Ukraine would bring social anger, frustration and resistance among Russian-speaking community representatives. In contrast, both the Victory Monument in Riga and the T-34 in Narva were demolished or transferred without much objection. This provokes my next research question: why the governmental decision to shift the monuments from the public sphere did not mobilize them to any mass protest, demonstration or other form of visual physical resistance? I have found several answers and synthesized them into six categories.

1. *Lack of protest culture.* Majority of respondents underlined that Latvia and Estonia have not a culture of mass protests and strikes like in Germany or France.

> Speaker LV6: "В целом население спокойное" [In general, the population is calm]
>
> Speaker EE4: "Народ неактивный, спокойный. Это менталитет, характер такой" [People are inactive, calm. It's a mentality, a character]

This phenomenon was analyzed since the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Baltic citizens were gathering and singing in nonviolent protest. This revolutionary fervor known as "Singing Revolution" is an example of peaceful social movement against oppressive Soviet regime. Following the re-establishment of the Baltic states'

independency, the countries have experienced the a demobilization of social movement. While new social movements emerged, often as a result of foreign funding, the number of people engaged in such activities decreased.[30]

2. *Marginalization and luck of trust.* It was stated that there is no civic courage to express the opinion among national minorities. A few respondents unveiled that they do not believe they may change anything.

> Speaker LV1: "Люди оценивают ситуацию и понимают что нет смысла, не будет результатов… Они считают что пережили уже многое, и сейчас переживут" [People evaluate the situation and understand that there is no point, there will be no results <...> they think that they have experienced a lot and now they will survive either]

It was particularly visual among respondents in Latvia where since the mass demonstration opposing to educational reform and particularly the language referendum, there was a continuous decrease of trust among the Russian-speaking people toward the democratic structures in Latvia.[31]

3. *Law and criminalization.* Some of interlocutors mentioned that they afraid of repercussions which might appear if they participate in the events commemorating the Soviet past or opposing to the Soviet monuments removal.

> Speaker LV1: "Русскоязычные это законопослушные люди" [Russian-speakers are law-abiding people]
>
> Speaker LV11: "Люди поняли что будет большая неприятельность за то" [People understood that there would be in great trouble for that]

As it was indicated earlier, before the Victory Day, both Latvian and Estonian authorities decided to introduce some restrictions on public gathering. In fact, on 9 ad 10 May, 2022, despite the calls of

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30 Anders Uhlin, "The Structure and Culture," 829–852.

31 Juris Rozenvalds, "Integration in the Shadow of Cultural Trauma: The Case of Latvia," *Roczniki Socjologii Morskiej. Annuals of Marine Sociology* 21 (2012): 55–68.

the State Police not to come (and interpretation that the arrival is a symbol of support for Russia) and restrictions on transport, several hundreds of people came to the Victory monument in Riga both in order to commemorate the Red Army heroes and to express their objection to official historical narrative.

4. *Fragmentation and lack of organization.* It was also argued that the Russian-speaking community is very fragmented, and the differentiation is increasing over the years.

> Speaker LV11: "Общественные организации и партии не чувствуют за собой реальной силы, они только будут покрикивать с парламентской трибуны" [Public organizations and the parties do not feel real power behind them, they will only shout from the parliamentary rostrum"

Fragmentation explains why even when everyone is against something, the community is difficult to mobilize. The most radical social relations and manifestations of Russian-speaking can be observed in Latvian Latgale and Estonian Ida-Virumaa, where not only the ethnic factor plays a role, but also the socio-economic problems of the regions. But even in such regions the national communities do not constitute consistent group. They are rather weakened and unmotivated and there is no mutual coordination between them. Moreover, studies of the role of civic mobilization of ethnic minorities in the Baltic states have revealed that their activities are not frequent. For example, Natalija Kasatkina and Tadas Leončikas explore the role of ethnic organizations as an important indicator of social adaptation and integration.[32] Further, Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė analyzes Russian-speaking NGOs as a determinant of the consolidation of the Russian-speaking community in Lithuania.[33] Finally,

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32 Natalija Kasatkina and Tadas Leončikas, *Lietuvos etninių grupių adaptacija: kontekstas ir eiga* (Vilnius: Socialinių tyrimų institutas, Eugrimas, 2003).

33 Моника Фреюте-Ракаускене, [Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė], "Неправительственные организации русских Литвы: основные социальные характеристики" [Main Social Characteristics of Non-governmental Organisations of Lithuania's Russians], *Etniškumo studijos* [Ethnic Studies] Special issue: Русские в Балтийском регионе: меньшинство и государство [Russians in the Baltic region: the minority and the state], 2 (2007): 93–115.

Sigita Struberga discusses the role of the Russian-speaking sector in developing social exclusion phenomena in Latvia.[34] General view is that civil organizations of Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states have influenced the consolidation of this community only to a small extent. NGOs do not serve as an indicator of civil action, as the most of them are local and a very small number of individuals take part in them. Additionally, to some extent, Russian-speaking NGOs have been identified as a soft power tool for Russia's influence in the Baltic states.[35]

5. *The Soviet mentality.* This argument was quoted to explain that it is better to stay at home and keep quiet rather than participate in collective actions as many people used to do during the Soviet times. On that time several public activities were forbidden. Till now a group of Russian-speaking minority, particularly the older generation, claims that anti-governmental activity may cause unpredictable consequences.

> Speaker EE3: „То что мы граждане наших стран не выходим на улицы это проблема всех постсоветских стран. До сих пор живут поколения которые думают что говорить можно только на кухне, шутить тоже можно только на кухне. И это нормально" [It is that we, citizens of our country, do not go out into the streets, this is a problem for all post-Soviet countries. Until now, there live generations who think that they can only speak in the kitchen, joking is also possible only in the kitchen. And that's ok]
>
> Speaker EE4: "Они привыкли жить на своих хуторах, в своём маленьком мире. Они порычает на кухне и все" [They are used to living on their farms, in their own little world. They growl in the kitchen and that's it]

[34] Sigita Struberga, „Non-governmental Organisations: Source for Inclusion or Exclusion?," in *Societal Security. Inclusion – Exclusion Dilemma. A portrait of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia,* ed. Žaneta Ozoliņa (Zinātne, 2016): 95–123.

[35] Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, "Russian-speaker NGOs in the Baltic States," *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe, Special Issue: Minorities, Diasporas, Refugees in Contemporary Europe* 15, no. 3 (2017): 165–183.

Speaker EE6: "Это из-за советского происхождения, люди не выходят на улицу, потому что до сих пор помнят, что выражать свой голос было запрещено" [It is because of the Soviet background, since people have not go out because they still remember that it was not allowed to express their voices]

6. *Transformation of identity.* The respondents expressed different opinion regarding that issue. Some of the interlocutors argued that the Soviet heritage is still very important as a part of their cultural identity (for some of them even as significant as the Russian language). However, the Russia–Ukraine war reduced their readiness for social mobilization to raise their objection against the monuments removal. Others claimed that following the war the Soviet statues and the Victory Day of 9 May have not constituted the value for the Russian-speaking groups yet, and they have not consolidated the community either.

Speaker LV7: "В общественном мнении советские памятники были символом идентичности. Война в Украине повлияла на умы и больших протестов не было" [In the mass consciousness, the Soviet monuments were a symbol of their identity. The war in Ukraine affected their minds and there were no big protests]

Speaker LV9: "Война в Украине конечно очень сильно вызволила расколы внутри общества, вызвала фрустрацию <…> Они не знали что делать и потеряли координаты" [The war in Ukraine, of course, greatly unveiled the splits within society, caused frustration <…> They did not understand how to react and lost their coordinates]

Speaker LV11: "Война в Украине кому-то открыла глаза" [The war in Ukraine opened someone's eyes]

Generally, the need to change the way of commemorating the fallen during World War II is gradually being noticed by representatives of the Russian-speaking minorities. Some of them dissociate themselves from the pro-Kremlin war narrative and increasingly accept the symbols, values and national ideas of the Baltic states, which serves social integration in the Baltic states.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Soviet monuments have always played a significant role in the process of building of the Russian-speaking identity, both for bottom-up community perspective and for Russia's ideological purposes. For a number of people, the monuments have represented a sense of imagined community[36] where a nostalgia for the past is one of the characteristic features.[37] This specific self-identification have developed due to the fact that the culture and language are different from those of the titular group. But the Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significantly reframed this phenomenon as this act has affected Russians-speakers' feelings of respect towards the past and commemorative practices regarding the WWII. Decisions of the Baltic states' authorities to remove the monuments have not provoked any aggressive actions of Russian-speaking community however. No demonstrations and mass protests regarding the monument transfer took place in Latvia and Estonia in contrast to the previous expectations and fears made by the state institutions.

A few explanations are given here revealing why the reconstruction the public space and limitations on the commemorative practices have not induced hot emotions and radical actions among the Russian-speaking community. According to the interlocutors the passiveness or lack of readiness for mass mobilization may be perceived through the perspective of: (1) national character; (2) disinterest and powerlessness; (3) fragmentarization of Russian-speaking communities; (4) fear of the consequences; (5) the Soviet mentality as well as

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36 Triin Vihalemm and Veronika Kalmus, "Cultural Differentiation of the Russian Minority," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 95–119, DOI: 10.1080/01629770902722278.

37 Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde, "Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 21 (2005): 354–374, 10.1080/13523270500183512; Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe, "Introduction: The Many Practices of Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Affect, Appropriation, Contestation," in *Routledge Studies in Cultural History*, eds. Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe (New York/London: Routledge 2019): 1–17.

(6) transformation of identity and adaptation. Some of the phenomena have been already noted by research devoted to the social activity and civicness such as the Voices of Central and Eastern Europe report,[38] according to which Latvia belongs to the group of more dissatisfied countries in the Satisfaction with the System of Governance Index. Decreasing voter turnout reflects the strong perception among the public that the needs of the people are not taken into consideration by the political system. Similarly, a few social surveys[39] regarding the attitude toward the Soviet monuments carried out in Latvia and Estonia confirm the thesis of fragmentarization of the national minority communities and transformation of their identity. Moreover the data unveil that the Russian-speaking residents' attitudes toward the Soviet past have been changing and the Russia–Ukraine war has influenced this process significantly.

The results of the interviews do not indicate however that the Russian-speaking community has resigned from demonstrating their opinion openly or has not got any capacity to act or to influence over the social and political environment. The fact that despite several limitations made by the Baltic authorities, many people came to the square and gathered near the statues, though in smaller numbers than before, in my opinion confirms that Russian-speaking residents are still in the game.

On the other hand, the process of dismantling of the figures to some extent could be perceived as a symbolic personal attack on the national minority cultural identity, thus Russian-speaking residents may become more radicalized. According to this hypothesis, al-

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38 Dominika Hajdu and Katarína Klingová, *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of Democracy & Governance in 10 EU Countries* (Globsec: Bratislava, 2020), https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/voices-central-and-eastern-europe-perceptions-democracy-governance-10-eu.

39 Eng.LSM.lv, "Survey: 27% of Latvian Russians support Ukraine," 13 July 2023. Available at: https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/13.07.2023-survey-27-of-latvian-russians-support-ukraine.a516349/; ERR, "Poll: Third of Russian-speakers in Estonia back relocating Soviet Monuments," 18 August 2022. Available at: https://news.err.ee/1608688741/poll-third-of-russian-speakers-in-estonia-back-relocating-soviet-monuments.

though there are fewer voices in the public space accepting the Soviet past, the discussions that were previously in public space has shifted to closed forums on social media. It seems to be what Jocelyn A. Hollander, and Rachel L. Einwohner define as *covert resistance* when actors use different ways of objection masked by the others. Another clear example of this type of resistance was observed when the flowers brought to the Soviet Victory Monument in Riga on 9 May were promptly removed the next morning. This caused an outrage among many Russian-speaking Latvian residents and many returned to the monument again on the 10th of May, bringing more flowers. Similarly, in Narva several people were gathering in the place where the T-34 tank used to be located, bringing flowers and candles. They were singing the Soviet patriotic songs as an expression of their collective identity. They were particularly old generations of Russian-speaking who did not agree with the Soviet monuments removal and did not accept the official memory discourse. This invisible form of resistance was also marked by the respondents:

> Speaker LV5: "Люди из протеста принесли цветы снова. Это была спонтанная, неконтролируемая акция спровоцированная глупостью местных властей, которые не рассчитали, что у населения будет такая ответная реакция" [People for the protest brought flowers again. This was an uncontrolled spontaneous action provoked by the stupidity of our local authorities, who did not calculate that the population would have such a response]
>
> Speaker LV6: "Люди стояли, они ничего не делали, это не запрещено было" [People stood, they did nothing, it was not forbidden]
>
> Speaker EE6: "Там было много людей, никакой агрессии не было. Люди несли цветы и свечи, как это делалось 9 мая" [There was a lot of people there, there was no aggression. People were bringing flowers and candles as they used to do it on 9 May]

Finally, there is also a question of the dynamics of the changes regarding memory practices among Russian-speakers. While the purification of the public sphere from the symbolism of the WWII resulting from appropriate regulations may take place relatively quick-

ly, it will be more difficult to change social awareness and memory contained in the symbolism of monuments and ceremonies. Without any doubts the tradition of celebrating 9 May in certain groups of Latvian and Estonian societies will not disappear so quickly, and the Soviet monuments being relocated / dismantled might be perceived as a physical form symbolizing community relations and communication with the state. As there are the state authorities who exercise the power sanctioning and institutionalizing particular memories, there is a risk that a commemorative practice that is not the same as those of majority will become an issue that cannot been debated. If state institutions are the only one who decides what to remember and how to remember, national minorities may be excluded from the process of how the official memory discourses are constructed and understood. This, in fact, may induce resistance as a form of rejection of values that sustain existing power relations. To prevent from possible confrontation, Maria Mälksoo proposes that agonistic remembrance of the past should be speakable, discussable and debatable. She also suggests that reconceptualizing relationship between the authorities and Russian-speaking population should be based on common ideological sphere for arguing over diverging interpretations of the past.[40] Nevertheless, resistance still remains a powerful means for people to restructure social and political environment.

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[40] Maria Mälksoo, "'Memory must be defended': Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015): 233, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614552549.

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