

# From the Bronze Soldier to the “Bloody Marshal”:

## Monument Wars and Russia’s Aesthetic Vulnerability in Estonia and the Czech Republic

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The article analyzes historical monuments as instruments of Russia’s attempts to impose its aesthetic hegemony in the post-Communist world. Drawing on case studies from the Czech Republic and Estonia, it argues that this hegemony is precarious and vulnerable due to inability to deal with the inherent ambiguity and complexity of historical events and figures. The Russian approach regards historical truth in absolute terms and is underpinned by a zero-sum game understanding of historical narratives. It does not tolerate a multiplicity of perspectives on history and has no appreciation for postmodernist deconstruction of historical symbols. This conflicts with a more diverse, reflexive and inclusive politics of memory as an intrinsic element of cityscapes of Prague and Tallinn where some of the controversial monuments connected with the Soviet occupation have been removed. Russia’s reaction to these changes reveals an inherently vulnerable nature of its aesthetic hegemony which is deeply dependent on recognition of the absolute nature of its historical truth that the monuments are supposed to embody.

**Keywords:** *Czech Republic; Estonia; memory politics; aesthetics; historical monuments; Russian foreign policy*

### Introduction

The extant academic scholarship is replete with research on memory politics through the prism of national identities and myth making,<sup>1</sup> practices of historical reconciliation,<sup>2</sup> and the role of the media in symbolization of painful remembrances of violence and injustice. In this article, we propose a different approach to studying memory politics as an inherent element of the aesthetic organization of urban spaces where monuments to Soviet soldiers have been located, which

contributes to the emerging discussions about interconnections of memory studies, foreign policy analysis and urban studies.

The article is a comparative study of two incidents related to monuments to Soviet soldiers—the relocation of the Bronze Soldier statue from Tallinn downtown to a military cemetery in 2007, and the removal of the monument to the Soviet military commander Ivan Konev in Prague in 2020. With all the apparent similarities, the structures of the two cases are different: the removal of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn provoked a violent confrontation between the police and the activists of the Russian speaking community, and became a factor of political polarization within Estonia. The Prague controversy, apart from the Konev statue, included also the renaming of the square in front of the Russian Embassy after the murdered anti-Putin opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, as well as commemoration of the anti-Soviet Russian Liberation Army (ROA) fighters who collaborated with the Nazi Germany during WWII. However, the Estonian and Czech cases are comparable to each other as two different experiences of reorganizing urban aesthetics, followed by Russia's involvement in memory debates. The juxtaposition of the two cases is at the core of the main research questions we tackle in this article: what do aesthetic and performative components of the monuments' removals tell us about the exteriorization of Russian memory politics? And what do aesthetic and performative approaches uncover in situations of direct or indirect collisions between the Russian military aesthetics and practices of remembrance and memorialization in the Baltic states and Central Europe?

The discussion on the two cases might be extended to other events, such as the so-called *Leninopad* (“the Leninfall”), the toppling of Communist statues in Ukraine following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. These decommunization practices were in fact identity statements and expressions of Ukraine's binarized geopolitical choice, i.e. pro-Russian vs. pro-European.<sup>3</sup> In other words, through the shared Soviet legacy, the continued presence of Communist statues on Ukrainian soil could be seen as resignified to mean belonging to Russia's imperial space, its perceived “sphere of exclusive interest.” Productive comparisons are certainly possible here; however, there are also notable differences between Ukraine and our case studies. First, Ukraine as of 2013 was in a situation of a sharp geopolitical choice, and starting from 2014 in a *de facto* state of war with Russia. Neither of the two can be observed in Prague or Tallinn who had, by the respective time periods, been safely integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community (and, as far as the Czech Republic is concerned, even had some rather Kremlin-friendly leaders in power). This is one thing that clearly sets the Prague and Tallinn cases apart from Ukraine's *Leninopad* and makes them unique instances of intervention into domestic urban landscapes during times of peace.

The second (and related) important difference has to do with the ideological substance of the monuments. Though in the Ukrainian context Lenin arguably came to represent the shared Soviet past and the present geopolitical trajectory

(which easily explains Russia’s sensitivity), *per se* Lenin is not a particularly powerful symbol in Putin’s Russia. It is not the memory of the Bolshevik revolution but the Brezhnevite cult of the Great Patriotic War that was recycled in post-Soviet Russia to become one of the main ideological pillars of regime legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> Both the Tallinn and the Prague monuments bear much greater ideological significance than any hypothetical Lenin statue because they are elements of this cult—and this is also the reason why we choose to analyze them in a dyad.

Methodologically, we construct our comparative study on the premises of multimodal analysis, an approach that engages equally with both textual and visual signs, and that semiotically interprets them as means of communication and as political representations. Being inspired by research in discourses and narratives, multimodal analysis is instrumental in identifying “visual truth claims” and finding out how the urban milieu can align citizens “with some truths and distance them from others.”<sup>5</sup> This allows us to keep a balance between attention to the aesthetic components of the displaced monuments and the intense public debates around these incidents. The structure of cases reflects our overall methodological approach: each event-based section starts with a short review of the extant academic literature, and then proceeds to analysis of visualized evidences and testimonies of aesthetic practices we are investigating. Of particular interest is counter-hegemonic aesthetics of cultural products and public activities that accompanied the monuments’ removals. Apart from visuals (films, photo expositions, performers’ materials) we included in our empirical base direct narratives of participants of the two events, as well as some professional opinions concerning the impact of these events on urban cultural landscapes. Visualized objects of memory as parts of urban architecture encode important political messages and unveil relations of hegemony and power. In the next section, we develop this argument from a conceptual perspective, followed by the factually grounded theoretical analysis of the two cases and the ensuing discussion.

## **Urban Politics and Instrumentalized Memory**

We approach the field of memory politics as a battleground of different aesthetic regimes that clash with each other and produce political conflicts. Our understanding of the concept of aesthetic regime is influenced by three interconnected clusters of political theorizing. One is grounded in Jacques Rancière’s idea of the “distribution of the sensible,” which shapes “the boundaries of what is visible and invisible, thinkable and unthinkable, seemingly rational and irrational.”<sup>6</sup> By analogy with “language games,” the “distribution of the sensible” might be viewed as a realm of “image games” of marking, appropriating and signifying spaces and their material symbols, and integrating them into the hegemonic regimes of visibility.

Another source of theoretical inspiration was Ronald Bleiker’s interpretation of the “aesthetic turn” in international studies.<sup>7</sup> For him central to aesthetic regime is the

concept of representation which is always “an act of power . . . an inevitably political issue [manifesting] a gap between what is observed and how this observation is represented . . . The difference between represented and representation is the very location of politics.” In other words, there is always a space between signifieds and signifiers which functions as a major producer of political meanings and—again—often “enables a creativity that disrupts given identities and proscribed codes.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these two major clusters, we find common ground with the idea of performativity as introduced in the academic literature by Judith Butler. When it comes to historical monuments, of particular salience is the applicability of the aesthetics—performativity nexus to different forms of (re)signification of physical objects: “material structures are sedimented through ritualised repetitions of conduct by embodied agents.”<sup>9</sup> Both performativity and the aesthetic turn recognize the existence of an inevitable gap between a material object and its symbolic interpretation as an existential condition for the functioning of memory politics. What the theory of performativity adds to that is a strong emphasis on repetitions and reiterations embedded in each socially meaningful action.<sup>10</sup> In the meantime, “any refusal to repeat an act that confirms a subordinate identity, necessarily has a political effect” as well.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, “alternative ascriptions can also disrupt repetition and help question normalization, including the practices they are meant to signify,<sup>12</sup> and this is exactly how the pro-removal discourses and actions can be interpreted in the language we have chosen for this study.

In this article, we relate the concept of aesthetic regime to the urban visual culture as “a catalyst for dealing with identity, voice, trauma and political notions of self-determination and civic rights,”<sup>13</sup> which presupposes “a power to define politics”<sup>14</sup> as a semantic struggle for hegemony through exposing and hiding some elements of reality, and “giving voice to something”<sup>15</sup> that is excluded or silenced. “Visual management”<sup>16</sup> of urban spaces therefore requires certain “aesthetics as technologies of governance”<sup>17</sup> that are performatively dependent on the cultural phenomenon known as gazing which “refers to the ‘discursive determinations’ of socially constructed seeing or ‘scopic regimes.’”<sup>18</sup> Gazing “is always entangled . . . with sets of rules and expectations associated with particular contexts and particular societies about who has the right to look and who has the right to be seen.”<sup>19</sup>

The proposed approach enhances “our understanding of the range of sites, locations, and directions where aesthetics and politics converged.”<sup>20</sup> City architecture might be seen as a space where relations of power are produced and “aesthetically negotiated,”<sup>21</sup> since it always privileges “certain kinds of activities and inhibit others, supports the projects of one type of actor and deters the goals of others.”<sup>22</sup> Arguably, “the collective subject that emerged from the construct of the loss always lays claims for geo- or topographic fixation,”<sup>23</sup> even if this subject is located beyond national borders.

The combination of the above-mentioned sources of theory opens up a perspective of speaking about a “fluid condition of state ontology which is forever framed

and reframed”<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, we treat performed and aestheticized identities as lacking foundational grounds,<sup>25</sup> and appearing as results of “subversive, counter-hegemonic resignifications.”<sup>26</sup> It is within this framework that we propose the idea of aesthetic vulnerability, a category stemming from the widely discussed concepts of dislocated / decentered subjectivities that might be applicable to regimes of visibility. For example, the Estonian aesthetic regime of memory politics exposed its vulnerability in light of the debates over construction of the column commemorating the War of Independence at the Freedom Square in the center of Tallinn in 2008 (see below), as well as due to a controversial co-existence of two monuments commemorating Estonian fighters for independence and Soviet soldiers next to each other in the town of Viljandi. What makes Russia’s policies particularly vulnerable is their transgressive nature: Russia acts from a position of external power endeavoring to project its aesthetic standards over foreign urban milieus. In other words, Russian aesthetic vulnerability stems from a constitutive gap embedded in Russian memory politics that is designed and articulated as a part of the foreign policy toolkit, yet in each specific case is projected into the cultural landscapes of cityscapes with their urban sensitivities. An intervention of a foreign state into urban affairs creates an aesthetic asymmetry and multiple discrepancies between the logic of foreign policy, on the one hand, and local authorities and citizenry concerned about their urban public spaces, on the other.

This framework helps to identify cleavages between Russian mainstream aesthetic regime of memory politics, and the aesthetic regimes emerging in European countries that have been either occupied by the Soviet Union or included into its sphere of influence. When it comes to Russia, this regime is grounded in a sacral attitude to the Soviet memorials as signs representing the military glory of Stalin’s regime and serving the purpose of a symbolic reminder about the legacy of the Great Patriotic War and of its reactualization in today’s political calculus. As for countries like Estonia and Czech Republic, their aesthetic regimes include the ironic deconstruction of “one truth” narratives and the ensuing pluralization of memory debate, which is, in turn, perceived as politically offensive or inappropriate by the Russian defenders of the conservative understanding of history. In the categories of Bernhard and Kubik (2014), this cleavage corresponds to distinctions between “mnemonic warriors” and “mnemonic pluralists.”

Naturally, we do *not* imply an essentialist interpretation, according to which Russians would only be capable of sacralizing or producing Manichean representations, while Estonians and Czechs would be, by definition, “ironic deconstructivists.” There are many brilliant examples of postmodern irony in the past and present Russian art and culture, while, in both the Czech Republic and Estonia, essentialist discourses can be easily discovered. Estonia, for instance, has seen a surge of nativist politics with the rise of the right-wing EKRE party. Unless stated otherwise, by “Russian” in this article we mean the official perspective expressed by the Russian state media, the Kremlin, and its political allies. Furthermore, this

perspective has also been mainstream, and even hegemonic, as Putin's regime monopolized the country's foreign policy and political institutions. At least since the 2014, it has also been successful in mobilizing considerable popular support through its nativist politics at home and abroad. In this sense, it is impossible not to distinguish between the Czech and Estonian cases on the one hand, and the Russian case on the other. In contrast to Russia, the Czech Republic and Estonia have remained polyarchies, with decisions on memory politics sometimes belonging to local the self-government, such as in the case of Konev's statue that was removed by a Prague municipality and not the national government.

The Russian authorities, as well as much of the Russian public, on the other hand, are unwilling to appreciate the polyarchic nature of decision making in Central and Eastern European democracies, typically blaming the whole nation for these decisions as if it were a unitary political actor. Thus, on the structural level, this also becomes a clash of top-down, authoritarian, and pluralist, polyarchic approaches. These approaches are informed not by national cultures but by the nature of the existing political regimes and the state of the domestic public debate on memory politics. Hence, while we do not, in any way, suggest an essentialist reading or a "crude" binarization of the Russian and the Czech or Estonian perspectives, we certainly take into account these important political differences in our analysis.

Furthermore, the Estonian and Czech cases should be regarded not simply as two separate incidents, but as parts of a broader trend of multiple revolts against monuments that since recently became visible in countries as different as Ukraine, Poland, the United Kingdom, United States, or Finland. With all duly understood diverse contexts of monument removals or appeals to do so, we in the meantime assume that these numerous struggles with statues have a common denominator—under a close scrutiny they all challenge the very principle of immortalizing a certain "regime of truth," exposed to a public gaze in petrified embodiments of historical personalities with a high degree of symbolization. In this sense, the multiple cases of anti-monument pronouncements and actions can be approached as projections of a postmodernist logic of de(con)struction<sup>27</sup> from the ideational realm to the sphere of material culture. These gestures are often conceptualized as emancipatory and anti-colonial/anti-imperial in the plurality of concomitant interpretations, and ultimately conducive to the liberation of urban spaces from antiquated historical fixtures that are becoming less relevant and more contested with the ongoing societal transformations. This is what unites *Black Lives Matter* supporters' demands for the demolition of statues celebrating "slavery and racism" (including ones to Christopher Columbus), Finnish left activists' campaign against the monument to Mannerheim in Helsinki, or dozens of cases of dethroning Lenin from pedestals all across Ukraine.

What unites all three theoretical pillars—the "distribution of the sensible," the aesthetic turn and performativity—is their understanding of aesthetic practices as not only interpretative and creative, but also disruptive and dissensual, and thus leading to a more diverse political milieu.<sup>28</sup> The aesthetic approach allows to see prospects

for a “heterocentric mnemonical vision”<sup>29</sup> to emerge, and to avoid the binarizing “narrative structure of victims and perpetrators”<sup>30</sup>; instead we look at the opposing positions as marking a broad spectrum of various policies and attitudes toward history. Within this spectrum each agency is a complex conglomerate of different, including conflictual, articulations and perceptions, rather than a fixed position.

### **Tallinn 2007: The Bronze Soldier and Afterwards**

The removal of the monument to the Soviet soldiers from Tallinn downtown in 2007 was a major incident that triggered an outburst of anti-Estonian rhetoric in Moscow and further deteriorated relations between the Estonian and Russophone communities. What on the surface might resemble a typically modernist gesture of reclaiming the historical truth, under a closer scrutiny appears to be a set of much more complex and nuanced aesthetic interventions.

Important for our analysis is the fact that the overall frame of the conflict was marked by an ostensible bipolarity, which was aesthetically reflected in—and sustained by—a symbolic competition between monuments to soldiers who were fighting on the opposite sides in WWII. Two incidents preceding the Bronze Soldier removal are particularly worthwhile mentioning in this respect. One is related to an attempt to build a monument to an Estonian soldier in German uniform, resembling German recruitment posters, in Pärnu in 2002. Due to its political controversy and the evidently divisive effects the statue was removed before the official unveiling ceremony. Another incident was the erection of a similar monument in the town of Lihula, with the dedication “To the Estonian men who fought against Bolshevism in 1940–1945 and for the restoration of Estonian independence.” Two weeks after the unveiling the monument was demolished, which sparked an intense public debate: “why did the government remove a monument to those Estonians who fought against communism, but tolerated another monument in the heart of the capital celebrating a totalitarian regime?”<sup>31</sup> In other words, “if Nazi symbols were forbidden in the EU because they glorified a totalitarian regime, then Communist symbols should also be banned.”<sup>32</sup> Needless to say that the debate unfolded under the condition of “diametrically opposite”<sup>33</sup> opinions on that matter expressed and advocated for in the Estonian national discourse and among Estonian Russophones.

This polarizing structure of the collision sidelined all attempts to find a compromise—such as, for example, the replacement of the Soviet commemorative text on the Bronze Soldier statue (“Eternal glory for the heroes who have fallen for the liberation and sovereignty of our country”) with a more neutral one (“For the fallen in the Second World War”). Suggestions to balance the monument by a cross symbolizing Christian values and thus creating an aesthetic counterweight to the Soviet power did not lead anywhere either. Equally futile were the attempts to divest the monument of its symbolic functions through planting lime trees “to separate the site

from the neighboring street [and turn it] into a single object standing alone, without the support of a spatial context."<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the relocation of the Bronze Soldier gave a new boost to the binarization of the urban aesthetics: "Parallel with the removal of the Bronze Soldier and inspired by national sentiment, the government made preparations for erecting a new monument in Tallinn: the War of Independence Victory Column"<sup>35</sup> to commemorate the only war Estonia had won in its history. The construction of the new monument in the form of a gigantic cross spurred further debate in the Estonian society: in the opinion of an art expert, "pseudo-nationalism, briefly introduced into politics again, requires for its survival an opposing side, 'non-Estonians' as well as 'not sufficiently patriotic Estonians.'"<sup>36</sup>

The polarized approach to urban sites of memory that was dominant in Estonia since the regaining of independence resonated with equally bipolar Russian political gaze at this country where, in the Kremlin's interpretation, the nationalist majority subjugates the Russophone minority. This binary logic was repeatedly reiterated by the Russian propaganda whose message was pretty blunt: "if one does not accept the fact that the Red Army liberated Europe from fascism, then the one supports fascism, the biggest evil in the world."<sup>37</sup> What the Russian gaze—intentionally or inadvertently—failed to notice is that the binary structure of commemorative sites in Estonia has gradually started losing its "black-and-white" character and began transforming into much more diverse urban imaginaries replete with more flexible and less divisive lines of distinction.

To start with, the Bronze Soldier story in Tallinn has sparked a series of artistic deconstructions of the polarizing discourse and the concomitant binary oppositions. The interpretation of the Bronze Soldier after its relocation has changed to be less imperialistic—i.e. the commemoration side is now the most prominent, not liberation of Estonia and the World from fascism. A good example would be Kristina Kalamees' short film that desacralized the Soviet-style symbolism through a punk-style story of the platonic love of a girl for the Bronze Soldier, thus imagining the statue as an ideal man.<sup>38</sup> Another Estonian artist Kristina Norman produced a series of deconstructive imageries of the Bronze Soldier. In her short film "Monolith" the Bronze Soldier (known also as *Alyosha* among the local Russophones) was represented as a foreign object catapulted onto Estonia from Russia and ignited a deep split within the society, which ultimately led to a forceful removal of the petrified "body" of the soldier from its place in such a way that only his boots remained on the plinth. Accompanied by the ominous music, the public quarrel between Estonian nationalists and Russian activists reanimated a skeleton lying beneath the pedestal and provoked a flood that sank the whole city into the sea. However, *Alyosha* reincarnated in an image of a child who in the soldier's boots headed back to outer space.<sup>39</sup>

Another of Norman's art works, "After-War," represents her experiment with reinstalling an allegedly golden copy of the Bronze Soldier to years after its relocation. This "art research project" featured a re-installation of an even "better" *Alyosha*,



his hyperbolically over-determined comeback, which provoked some critical remarks from Estonian politicians.<sup>40</sup> In yet one more of Norman’s videos she—under a nickname—filmed herself selling small figurines of the Bronze Soldier to elderly Russian-speaking women in the military cemetery, thus checking how much they needed them—as cult objects—in their everyday lives. Since the scene took place on the 9th of May, Norman was criticized by her colleagues for interfering into the sacred sphere of the V-Day celebration.<sup>41</sup> In her own words, she wanted

to highlight the religious substance of the rituals practiced by the Russian community in Estonia. With my action I am not only targeting the Russian community who practices these rituals, but also their Other, who has, via technocratic means and methods, violently intruded into something that they don’t really have a clue about.<sup>42</sup>

Tanja Muravskaja’s art installation “Monuments” visually juxtaposed two mounds of an equal size—one of limestone (the material of which the Bronze Soldier statue was made), another of glass shards that represent the new monument to Estonia’s victory in the Independence war.<sup>43</sup> Both look symmetrical to each other, yet the high symbolism of the corresponding monuments in Russophone and Estonian national discourses is decomposed in a physical sense so that each of the symbols turns into a pile of construction materials of different nature and visually resembling each other.

These deconstructive interpretations of the Bronze Soldier saga, with a sense of sarcasm hidden in some of them, have contested the rigidity of the original “us-versus-them” binary opposition, and opened up the cultural space of Tallinn for more nuanced representations of Estonian identity. The centenary anniversary of Estonian independence in 2018 was marked by a series of cultural events meant to represent the Estonian nation through the images of ordinary people from different generations and backgrounds. Examples are two photo exhibitions: “*Estonia through 100 pairs of eyes*” by Kaire van der Toorn-Guthan, and “*The History of a Hundred*” by Kaupo Kikkas.<sup>44</sup> Both artists came up with the idea of making 100 portraits of 100 Estonians as a visualized memory of nationhood spanning the whole century.<sup>45</sup> The Estonian collective self in both cases is represented beyond divisive issues of race, ethnicity or social status (cultural and political celebrities share the space of the exposition with ordinary people). These facial visualizations made the idea of the nation an epitome of a common and inherently inclusive space for all ages, genders, professions, and social roles. The photo exhibition “Ours” (*Omad*) installed in the central park of Tallinn in 2019 had the same message—to unveil the diversity of Estonians through exposing different ethnicities and lifestyles, which ostensibly challenges the uniform and exclusionary understanding of the nation.

Another example of this trend is the rebranding of the Occupation Museum into the Museum of Occupation and Freedom in Tallinn in 2019. The change of name implied the new content moving away from a “singular and prescriptive emphasis on Estonian suffering and victimhood” toward a greater variety of personal experiences and stories

including those embracing “individual happiness under occupation or the normalization of late socialism.”<sup>46</sup> The reconceptualized exhibition “deconstructs the impression of a homogeneous ethnic community by presenting memories both of people who maintained a strong Estonian identity as well as of those who fully assimilated and lost any emotional attachment to their former homeland.”<sup>47</sup> Critics of the semiotic dissolution of the historically specific concept of occupation into a series of more general representations of freedom presumed that the new concept of the Museum would please those in the Kremlin who prefer to de-emphasize everything related to the Soviet occupation,<sup>48</sup> but—ironically—Russians failed to notice these changes in style and in form.

Therefore, in Estonia the discourse “is no longer as unvaried, monolithic and unchallenged . . . More complicated stories can thus be told about individual fortunes in wars and under occupation.”<sup>49</sup> As many authors noted, Estonia gives up on the idea of consensus in relation to the past, and instead embraces the notion of debate and competition that is at the heart of democracy.<sup>50</sup> “How to treat public space and properly commemorate the past remain highly contested issues among ethnic Estonians as well, as seen in the recent divisive debate over a monument to the War of Independence in Tallinn’s central square that takes form of a massive “freedom cross.”<sup>51</sup> When it comes to Estonian Russophones, most of them accepted the reappearance of the Swedish Lion statue in Narva that otherwise could “potentially be understood as part of a state-sponsored effort to banish the Soviet past and reconnect with a past ‘Golden Age’.”<sup>52</sup> This confirms that dyadic structures are not operational, since in between a self and an other there is space for different “figures that cannot be affirmatively characterised as either one or the other.”<sup>53</sup>

## Prague’s 2019 to 2020 Monument Wars: The “Bloody Marshal”

More than a decade later, with new tensions between Russia and the West having emerged after the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, in Prague we could observe similar tensions between binarized, Manichean views on history and polyphonic and deconstructive ones. We thus argue that one way to understand the 2019 to 2020 conflict between Russian and Czech perspectives on historical monuments in Prague is to see it as a conflict of different underlying *philosophies* of dealing with the past. The official Russian perspective has been built on the assumed possibility of interpreting historical truth as final and absolute. It implied that Marshal Konev or the ROA soldiers could be located within a Manichean demarcation of historical figures into the good and the evil. This straightforwardness naturally suggests a heroization of these figures (or their unconditional anathemization) and is thus also of an inherently moralizing nature. The belief in absolute moral truth even brings it closer to a religious cult, so this type of dealing with the past, as in the Estonian case, can be compared to worship where the historical narrative becomes a form of preaching. Notably,

the comparison of the “Great Patriotic War” cult to religious worship amounts to more than just a figure of speech. Indeed, researchers have identified the Soviet war commemorations as “a quasi-religious rite”<sup>54</sup> or the last living element of the Soviet “Party-run civil religion.”<sup>55</sup> The war became “a sacred event that could not be questioned,” while attempts to challenge the collective memory were seen as a “sacrilege.”<sup>56</sup> The celebrations of the War also visibly inherited some cultural forms from the Russian religious heritage, for instance, the parade of veteran photographs “resembles the Russian cultural tradition of carrying icons in religious processions.”<sup>57</sup> The “Immortal Regiment” movement, popularized under Putin, establishes a symbolic, sacred link between the living and the dead, and the figure of the Red Army soldier is “framed as a mythical progenitor and a shared forefather for all the peoples of post-Soviet space.”<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, as some researchers argue, the narrative about the Great Patriotic War has continued “to revolve around simplistic binaries” inhibiting “Russian historians from offering more nuanced and objective studies of the war years.”<sup>59</sup> This sacralized nature of the collective memory of the War and the assumption of the absolute nature of historical truth are also closely linked to a sense of moral superiority supported by the notion of the “great sacrifice” that the Russian (Soviet) people made during World War II, by liberating Europe, including the Czech Republic, from Nazism. Symbolic re-appropriation of this sacrifice by the present-day Russian state allows it to claim supremacy over those that were liberated. This, in turn, blends with the traditionally hierarchical attitude which Russia as a great power adopts toward the small Central and Eastern European states that used to be part of its sphere of influence and on which it continues to have a symbolic claim via its interpretations of collective memory. The monument thus becomes a form of aesthetic control over the former imperial space, a marker of domination underpinned by sacral semantics.

As compared to the official Russian gaze, the Czech perspectives, on the other hand, should be seen in the plural. This reflects both the much more decentralized nature of political power in a democratic state as opposed to authoritarian rule, and the complexity and inherent ambiguity of historical issues and figures that need to be addressed. To begin with, some actors in the Czech Republic were rather sympathetic with the official Russian interpretations. Thus, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia lambasted the decision of the Dejvice municipality to move the Konev statue to a museum as part of an “anti-Communist and anti-Russian campaign.”<sup>60</sup> Criticism also came from President Miloš Zeman, whose official spokesperson Jiří Ověčáček even attended previous protests held against the decision to veil the statue that was adopted by the municipality following the vandalization of the monument with red paint.<sup>61</sup> As Czech analysts argued, the presence of these actors in the Czech political space allowed the Russian media to create a “picture of division and polarization of the Czech society.”<sup>62</sup>

However, there are two other approaches that should be singled out as standing in contrast to the position of moral superiority and the belief in absolute historical truth.

The first approach is built on the understanding of history and its figures as often being ambiguous and internally contradictory. Therefore, rather than requiring heroization, they are in need of being understood and interpreted in their inherent complexity and from multiple perspectives, as didactic or reflexive: history is a lesson and food for thought rather than a ready-made truth. The second and related approach is built on postmodern irony which helps to deal with the tragic contradictions of the past. Irony can also be a powerful tool for countering the narratives of absolute truth. The two case studies from Prague we examine below illustrate this point.

In November 2019 Russia's Channel One released a news story claiming that the Dejvice municipality in Prague was planning to replace the monument to Marshal Konev with a monument to the ROA soldiers. As reported by the Russian Channel One, the idea of switching monuments was presented by the municipality head at an annual conference dedicated to ROA, funded and attended by representatives of the US State Department.<sup>63</sup> As it turned out, Channel One had effectively conflated two different stories. In 2019, the Prague municipality of Dejvice, presided by Ondřej Kolář, had in fact been discussing the possibilities of moving the Konev statue to a museum and replacing it with another monument which paid tribute to the liberation of Prague. In Řeporyje, a different municipality located in another corner of Prague, the head of its self-government Pavel Novotný was pushing for commemorating the participation of ROA in the 1945 liberation of Prague, not with a large monument, however, but with a plaque and a small sign.

Apart from indifference to fact checking on the part of Russian outlets that reproduced the same story,<sup>64</sup> this conflation is indicative of several important things. Firstly, this coverage signals a total lack of interest in the local context on the part of the Russian state media narrative. The hierarchical approach toward the former "informal empire"<sup>65</sup> does not in fact require any such understanding, as it superimposes the imperial vision without due sensitivity for the local nuances, whether factual or interpretational. Much more importantly, however, the Russian media narrative on the Prague monuments was that proverbial drop of water which reflected the ocean, in other words, the overarching Russian notions of memory politics as a zero-sum game between competing and clashing narratives, "our Truth" vs. "theirs." Within that cognitive frame, for the sake of imperial consistency, the removal of the Konev statue could not have been anything but a hostile act, and the statue simply *had* to be replaced with its symbolic antipode, an analogous monument to ROA. This frame of perception rests both on a Manichean view on historical characters as divided unambiguously into the "good" and the "evil" as well as on a "*securitized*"<sup>66</sup> approach to memory, which implies that every "unorthodox" interpretation endangers the absolute moral truth embedded in the imperial narrative, and is therefore essentially a camouflaged act of war.

The contemporary Russian strategy of using World War II to securitize political opponents has been well documented.<sup>67</sup> In accordance with it, Russia's minister of culture Medinsky branded Dejvice mayor Ondřej Kolář "a Gauleiter" (a Nazi Party

regional leader), and Russian media suggested that those who wanted to move monuments were “Nazi collaborators.”<sup>68</sup> These projections of WWII images onto the present illustrate the Manichean and securitized perspective which leaves no room for local nuances, ambiguities and contextual re-significations of monuments. What’s more, this insensitivity reveals the persistence of a hierarchical approach toward Central and Eastern Europe which the Russian discourse symbolically re-appropriates through what it sees as “its” monuments. In 2020, Russian officials requested that the Konev statue be turned over to Russia,<sup>69</sup> despite the fact that the Prague monument was originally created and installed by Czechoslovak authorities and could thus be property of none other than Czechoslovakia’s successor states. While this request could still be interpreted as a gesture of good will, i.e. offering symbolic “asylum” to a “persecuted” monument, foreign minister Lavrov’s subsequent statements that the Konev statue “*must be re-installed*” sounded much more imperative.<sup>70</sup> The opening by the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation of a criminal case to investigate a case of defiling monuments of Russian military glory (article 354 of the Russia’s Penal Code)<sup>71</sup> was *de facto* a criminal procedure against democratically elected self-government bodies of another sovereign country, as the official response from the Czech Foreign Ministry pointed out.<sup>72</sup> In a yet more sinister follow up, the mayor of Prague Zdeněk Hřib, and the mayors of the Dejvice and Řeporyje municipalities, were given police protection in April 2020, as a reputable Czech magazine *Respekt* published leaked information about the arrival to the Czech Republic of Russian secret agents, who posed a security threat to the three Prague politicians.<sup>73</sup> Following the statue removal, the Czech embassy in Moscow was also attacked by groups of radicals.

The Russian official approach built around notions of absolute moral truth and used to discipline and to symbolically appropriate the post-imperial space can be compared with the Czech approaches. In order to properly understand the differences, one needs to appreciate the broader historical context, identities, and the political meanings that are collectively attached to particular historical monuments. Thus, the Konev statue was installed by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1980 in the midst of the so-called *normalization* era, a period that followed the 1968 crushing of the Prague spring by the Warsaw Pact members led by Moscow. Normalization was characterized by broad political repression and censorship, meant to eradicate the very possibility of dissident, unorthodox, that is, non-Soviet-authorized political developments in Czechoslovakia. Moscow adopted an approach, subsequently dubbed the “Brezhnev doctrine,” recognizing the sovereignty of its satellites only to the extent that they did not breach its ideological orthodoxy. In the opposite case, it reserved the right to intervene to save the “people’s democracy” from “revisionism.”

Unsurprisingly, the Konev monument could easily be associated with the events of 1968 more than with those of 1945—which it was officially said to commemorate. Konev was also tied to the broader context of the Cold War through his leading role

in the crushing of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, a Soviet intervention into another member of the Warsaw Pact. The Prague statue was vandalized with red paint and graffiti “No to the bloody marshal.”<sup>74</sup> Others pointed out to Konev’s participation in the Berlin crisis which eventually led to the building of the Berlin Wall and even to his (disputed) participation in the planning of the 1968 to Czechoslovakia as a consultant. To some, this context made “the Dejvice Marshal” a “medium of the great power politics of the Soviet Union who had bloody connotations.”<sup>75</sup>

Despite this, the original decision, adopted by the Dejvice municipal self-government in 2015, in response to petitions for removing the statue, was not built on an either/or logic. Following consultations with professional historians, the monument was supplied with a new plaque which emphasized the controversial role Konev played in history, listing both his participation in the 1945 liberation of Czechoslovakia from Nazism, and his negative role in Berlin (1961), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Explaining the decision of the self-government, Dejvice mayor Ondřej Kolář said that “it would be a shame not to use the statue, since it is already here, and could be used as an *educational tool* showing what our society went through in the 20th century.”<sup>76</sup>

This attempt to turn the Konev statue from a sacral symbol into an educational monument marks an approach to history as being inherently complex and ambiguous. The role of memory politics is not to heroize or preach but to stimulate reflection on these inherent dislocations and the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts that can be tied to historical figures. This approach can be seen as desecralizing and *demonumentalizing*, but also as depoliticizing as the statue could no longer be identified as an aesthetic pillar of one political narrative, but only as a meeting point of different perspectives on history. The approach was nevertheless immediately securitized. The Communist Party of Czech Republic accused the municipality of “rewriting history,” while the Russian Embassy claimed that altering the monument was a dangerous precedent, threatening the memory of “the common heroic struggle of our nations against Nazism.”<sup>77</sup>

The post-political, educational approach could not be sustained in the end, as vandalizations of the statue continued, and the Dejvice authorities decided to veil it first and then to move it to a museum, planning to replace it with a politically more neutral monument to the 1945 liberators of Prague. The Russian reaction to the original desecralization of the monument, however, illustrates well that multiplicity of perspectives is not something that Moscow is prepared to accept. Its zero-sum game approach to historical memory demands unconditional heroization as well as claims an exclusive right to interpreting the meaning of monuments in the post-imperial space.

The second case study reveals a similar clash of perspectives albeit with an added element of irony as a form of both dealing with the contradictory past and desecralizing collective memories. In 2019-2020, in parallel to the debate on the Konev monument, another controversy developed in the district of Řeporyje on the north-western

outskirts of the capital. Its mayor Pavel Novotný decided to install a plaque and a counter-commemorative<sup>78</sup> sign to honor the participation of the ROA in the 1945 liberation of Prague.<sup>79</sup> The plaque text was not dissimilar to the original approach of Dejvice to Konev. It emphasized the decisive role of ROA soldiers in the 1945 Prague uprising against the German forces, and in liberating Prague. By the same token, it also mentioned the “multiple controversies” associated with the “anti-Stalinist” ROA. The text ended with a bilingual quote from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*: “But who knows whether all of them [i.e. all of the Czechs—authors] remembered later *which* Russians had saved their city?”<sup>80</sup> The Solzhenitsyn quote can be understood as a reference to both the dramatic character of the 20th-century Russian and European history and its ambiguous nature which allows for “anti-Stalinist” allies of Nazi Germany to be seen as saviors of Prague in some contexts.

The text is complemented by a small sized pillar with a tiny sculpture on top, featuring a Soviet tank capped by a German helmet. This exercise in sad irony is, apparently, meant to represent the inherently contradictory nature of ROA fighters whose hatred for the Stalinist Soviet Union pushed them toward a pact with the devil. The author of the plaque (and also the suspected author of the mini sculpture) is the renowned Czech sculptor David Černý who is known for his postmodernist, “hooligan” inversions of culturally significant symbols and images. For instance, he authored the famous statue of King Wenceslas on an upside-down dead horse, a parody of the revered patron saint of the Czech lands, whose statue towers over the nearby Wenceslas square (Václavské náměstí). Černý’s visual “rhetoric of parody and provocation”<sup>81</sup> fits well with the sophisticated Czech taste for the ironic (pungent self-irony included) and the *absurd* which has haunted the Bohemian intellectual landscape since the times of Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek’s Good Soldier Švejk. This spirit of irony has made its way into the ROA commemorating sign and, in this context it can also be seen as one way of dealing with the absurd and internally contradictory nature of historical figures and events which sometimes present us with seemingly irreconcilable facts—such as ROA’s alliance with Nazi Germany and its participation in the anti-German uprising that relieved Prague.

Irony, in this case, functions as an additional depoliticizing instrument. It commemorates without straightforward solemn heroization, and it also serves as an antidote to militarization which has been traditional function of humor and satire.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, in that capacity, it works to undermine the Russian securitization of collective memory, stigmatizing projections of WWII images onto the present, and the new imilitarism embedded in the Great Patriotic War cult. Needless to say, the official Russian reaction to the Řeporyje initiative was hostile. The Russian embassy in Prague issued a statement to the effect that it was all part of a revision of the WWII results and contradicted “basic” (but unspecified) international norms.<sup>83</sup>

Previously, Řeporyje district mayor Pavel Novotný also appeared via the internet in a propagandistic “talk show” on the state-owned Russia-1 channel, where he clashed with pro-Kremlin commentators. His deliberately informal behavior

included laughing, constantly making faces, lighting a cigarette, and above all, calling the Russians commentators “drunk,” “stoned,” incompetent and liars.<sup>84</sup> In Czech politics, Novotný is a well-known *trickster*, with a political style marked by use of transgressive, provocative remarks and actions. In his interaction with the Russian state TV his deliberately unserious approach contrasted sharply with the solemn indignation and, indeed, verbal aggression displayed by the Moscow commentators who accused him of trying to redeem a war criminal condemned by the Nuremberg trials.

The contrast between the Russian solemn seriousness, and Novotný’s comical, jesting approach, corresponds to the traditional function of comedy as “liberating and subverting domination” and “opening the possibility of communication across divides.”<sup>85</sup> In contemporary cultural studies the “trickster” is discussed as a transgressive comedian, and a challenger to the monologue of hegemonic discourses with a “license to disrupt and redefine.”<sup>86</sup> Consequently, Czech irony, epitomized by Novotný’s encounters with the Russian TV, also functions as a disrupting tool that subverts the discourse of moral superiority and, through humoristic performances, works to *desecuritize* collective memory. Irony can thus be seen as an important component of the pluralistic and depoliticized approaches to history as opposed to presumption of the zero-sum game logic of memory wars.

### Russia as a “Mnemonic Warrior”

The case studies juxtaposed in this article exposed the characteristic of the Kremlin as a “mnemonic warrior,” a concept introduced by Kubik and Bernhard. In their interpretation, “mnemonic warriors tend to draw a sharp line between themselves (as proprietors of the ‘true’ vision of the past) and other actors who cultivate ‘wrong’ or ‘false’ versions of history. They usually believe that the historical truth is attainable and that once it is attained it needs to become the foundation of social and political life.”<sup>87</sup>

Russia’s mnemonic warriorship includes a projection of the Soviet aesthetics into the new and qualitatively transformed reality of the former socialist and Soviet countries. In a documentary “The Bronze Cleavage” dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the Bronze Night in Tallinn, a Russophone resident of Tallinn articulates this projection quite lucidly: “In the Soviet times we were proud of this memorial; that is why it is so important to us nowadays.”<sup>88</sup> This retrospection is accompanied by what might be dubbed a necropolitical reappropriation of the fallen soldiers who in contemporary Russian discourse are referred to as “our heroes.” This appropriation merges individual bodies into a collective imperial body characterized by a trans-ethnic nationalist nostalgia—in the sense that it is articulated on behalf of the Russophone community yet reaches far beyond ethnic lines. For example, the Russian discourse makers are fully aware that the Bronze Soldier was created by



an ethnically Estonian sculptor and modeled after an Estonian prototype, yet they still sacralize—and identify themselves with—the monument. In the case of the Konev statue the appropriation was expressed by the references to “our monument” that needs to be “returned,” despite the fact that it was created in Czechoslovakia and belongs to the municipal self-governance. This testifies to Russia’s moral right to interfere in controversial issues related to reshuffling and reconfiguring the places of memory, thus ex-territorially interiorizing the material remnants of the Soviet era and re-signifying them as allegedly belonging to the Russia-protected historical pedigree.

Russia’s high sensitivity to all critical discussions concerning the role of the Soviet Army during and after WWII is connected to the nostalgic and retrospective memory politics promoted by the Kremlin.<sup>89</sup> “While Russia bears full responsibility for initiating the memory wars with its neighboring states, the Russian Federation sought to accuse the Central-East European countries of unleashing them by blaming the Eastern Europeans for not paying due respect to the memory of the fallen Soviet soldiers.”<sup>90</sup> On numerous occasions the Russian government leveled “strongest criticism against Russians and foreigners who perceive the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 not as a heroic crusade against the evils of Nazism but as a death-struggle between two totalitarian systems which brought vast human loss and enabled the Soviet victor to strengthen repression at home and in newly communized lands.”<sup>91</sup> This attitude is correlative to domestically nurtured feelings of nostalgia, complemented by a creeping re-Stalinization, both within Russia and in Russian de-facto protectorates, anecdotal examples of which were the renaming of Donetsk into Stalino, Luhansk into Voroshilovgrad and Tskhinvali into Stalinir for a period from May 9 (Victory Day) to June 22 (the beginning of the Great Patriotic War), 2020.

Russia’s instrumentalization of memory narratives allows Moscow to exert its symbolic power through interfering in the discussions on WWII and even giving legal qualifications to them. In the formerly Soviet/socialist countries this policy has to face practices of “commemorating the victims of the communist era. Eastern Europe thus appears as an area of disasters, suffering, and trauma. Moreover, the desire to recognize the suffering of unrecognized victims sometimes causes “‘martyrological competition’ in which focusing on one kind of suffering obscures the suffering of other groups.”<sup>92</sup> It is in this symbolic universe of ideational and material signs, performances and representations that Russia interferes, accusing its opponents of “rewriting history” and demanding respect from them.

From a practical perspective, from 2007 to 2020, the instruments of Russian memory politics became more diverse. Thus, after the removal of the Konev monument the Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in a letter to his Czech colleague demanded the transportation of the statue to Russia, for which the Russian government offered financial compensation. However, the Czech government declined the proposal, referring to the fact that the statue belongs to the local municipal authorities. Obviously, the rejection sparked a storm of indignation in

the pro-Kremlin media. In the meantime, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has mentioned a possible “American trace” in the removal operation, referring to a US-based consulting company that worked with the municipal authorities in Prague. This version was amplified to the level of conspiracy theories by the Kremlin-loyal journalists. In the media multiple pro-Kremlin mouthpieces called for “acting as robustly as Americans” and forcefully bringing foreign officials to Russian court for trials. In the same vein, many Russian public voices (including, for example, the head of the foreign department of the Russian Orthodox Church the metropolitan Illarion) called for “symmetric responses,” ranging from a proposal to rename the Prazhskaya (Prague) metro station in Moscow to discontinuing all measures related to preserving the graves of Czech nationals buried in Russia. By the same token, the Russian Historical Museum opened a virtual exposition dedicated to Ivan Konev, which might be categorized as a cultural response to the Prague incident.

However, Russia’s externally projected imperial memory politics proves to be very precarious. On a general note, the “aesthetic turn revealed a kind of vulnerability of states (and—Authors) brought to light states’ concern with their own representation and self-representation”<sup>93</sup> This “aesthetic vulnerability” has only strengthened Russia’s dependence on the sphere of symbolic politics, and put Russia in a defensive position—such as, for example, when the Russian Embassy in the Czech Republic has officially refused to use for diplomatic correspondence the new address with Boris Nemtsov’s name in it.

As a result, Russian memory politics exposed an intricate and paradoxical interlacing of hegemony and subalternity. In the extant literature one may find a distinction between “*visibility-as-control*” produced by power holders versus “*visibility-as-recognition*” that “refers to the claiming and appropriation of space by subaltern groups.”<sup>94</sup> In this regard, Russia’s claims for *aesthetic hegemony* in the post-Soviet / post-socialist space ended up with playing the role of a *subaltern* who desperately needs visibility and appreciation and struggles for recognition and acceptance. Arguably, Kremlin’s memory politics pushed Russia to the margins of the mainstream memory discourse in countries that have been either occupied or colonized by the Soviet Union.

The projection of aesthetic hegemony into the post-imperial space is built on a zero-sum game logic. In principle, as the authors of the soft power concept argue for instance, culture can be a source of a non-zero-sum-game power of attraction which does not necessarily involve clashes or struggles. Different narratives and symbols can coexist peacefully. In our case, however, the vulnerability of the *subaltern hegemon*, who operates in a permanent recognition seeking mode, makes it securitize historical memory. Hence, the sensitive reactions to any perceived competition from alternative interpretations. These reactions are easily triggered even by smaller alterations of aesthetic objects (such as the replacement of the plaque on the Konev statue in Prague), and as a result these alterations are framed as hostile attempts to rewrite

history. Thus, in comparison to standard cultural soft power, we are talking about *securitized* aesthetic hegemony attempts.

Russia’s over-inflation of—and over-investments into—the sphere of political symbolism beyond national borders affects the broader spectrum of relations with the EU where two different approaches toward Moscow compete with each other. One of them encourages Brussels’ dialogic relations with the Kremlin and refrains from treating Russia as Europe’s existential Other, while another is oriented toward countering and opposing Russia’s views on international politics.<sup>95</sup> Obviously, the extrapolation of Russia’s memory politics from domestic contexts to foreign policy realm only strengthens the second position within the EU, and therefore complicates any possible rapprochement between Russia and the EU.

Apart from specific cases of monuments’ removals, the findings of this study might be useful for a broader discussion on Russian subjectivity. On the one hand, it is true that Russia has, in recent years, been described as a “postmodernist dictatorship”<sup>96</sup> or “transideological” actor,<sup>97</sup> which corresponds to the logic of a decentered subject.<sup>98</sup> Moscow has been seen as spoiler power that opportunistically plugs into different narratives and ideologies.<sup>99</sup> However, as far as the regime discourse is concerned, this postmodern approach does not seem to extend to some of the most important pillars of the regime such as Putin’s image as a powerful leader, or sacrosanct values such as the legacy of the Great Patriotic War or the so-called traditional values. In fact, the existing analyses of the regimes’ practices as “post-modernist” notwithstanding—over years, the Russian regime seems to have evolved from being “post-ideological”<sup>100</sup> into developing a strong nationalistic ideology which has left very little room for postmodern self-irony. The 2014 war in Ukraine served as a powerful catalyst, however, even prior to that a “traditionalist” turn in Russian politics could be observed, which was well illustrated by the harsh reaction to the 2012 postmodernist Pussy Riot performance, or by other attacks on postmodern activism in Russia. In sum, while we do not dispute the conceptual validity of existing depictions of some of the practices of Russian domestic and foreign policy as “postmodernist,” this particular approach to memory politics is not informed by them. When it comes to securitized memory objects, Russia is both unable or unwilling to embrace the complexity of postmodernist deconstruction—arguably because its memory politics is strongly securitized and refer to the ideological pillars of its present political regime.

Yet, having waged memory wars with former Soviet / socialist countries, Russia still attempts to position itself within a broadly understood European political milieu. This might be seen in the frequent references to vaguely defined “European norms” (“in no normal European country something like this might have happened”), as well as in discursive distinction between “good Europeans” (such as Germans or French) who honor the Soviet war legacy, and “bad Europeans” (Poland and the Baltic states, as well as Ukraine) who “rewrite” and “falsify” history on political grounds.

## Conclusion

In this comparative study we tried to bring together and find a synergy between memory, foreign policy and urban cultural landscapes. In each of these spheres we have seen its own dynamics, and all three elements of this triangle are closely connected to each other. Memory politics in the two countries we have analyzed are becoming more diverse and less uniform, which creates a gap with the continuously uniform, rigid, and top-down historical and commemorative narratives promoted by the Russian government and part of the nationalistically minded public. Changes in memory politics in Estonia and Czech Republic, exemplified by the removal of the Soviet-era military monuments, were not only aimed at symbolically detaching these countries from the Russian vision of history, but also directly affected urban milieus in Tallinn and Prague, bringing more plurality of expressions and new cultural forms into city architectonics. This growing diversity replenished urban spaces in both Tallinn and Prague with visual messages, images, and symbols calling for mourning the victims, rather than for celebrating the war victory, which reflects the continuing process of historical, cultural, and aesthetic decolonization.

Though located in the same broader region of the post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, the two countries naturally demonstrate important differences in terms of their history, culture as well as their historical patterns of relations with the neighboring imperial powers and their colonial projects. However, one key similarity, which became the common denominator for our analysis, is the necessity to deal with a colonial legacy that is tightly intertwined with historical traumas and collective memory dilemmas, which are not always easily solved. Consequently, one important conclusion here is that the plurality of possible interpretations of symbols and monuments in the Czech Republic and Estonia cannot be reduced to the influence of external actors, and to the clash between the “foreign” and the “domestic” approaches. On the contrary, memory dilemmas in CEE stem from the complexity and inherent ambiguity of historical issues, whose significance can often be multifaceted. This is evident, for instance, from the ambiguous role played in Prague by the ROA fighters, but also from other questionable aspects of the Soviet monuments in Estonia, which, depending on the context, could be interpreted as symbols of foreign domination and part of the shared European legacy of the anti-Nazi struggle.

Furthermore, when it comes to memory politics, the plurality of perspectives and the postmodernization of interpretations correspond to the polyarchic nature of democracies, which allows for autonomy and a role for local self-government in decision making. It is in this sense that the two cases in question can be juxtaposed to the authoritarian top-down decision making in Russia’s present political system, and to the strategic use of consolidated, Manichean narratives in the Kremlin’s foreign policy. From its part, the Kremlin’s instrumentalized memory politics as a part of geopolitical toolkit is meant to symbolically reconnect the two countries with their Soviet-dominated past. As we have shown, Russian reactions to incidents

related to relocations of WWII monuments included diplomatic, discursive and performative incursions into the sphere of urban aesthetics. By doing so, the Russian state claimed its ambition to have its say on what can / should be seen, how and in what contexts the material signs have to be verbalized, and—concomitantly—what has to remain silent or hidden.

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