

The “Bronze Year” of Estonia-Russia relations

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The year 2007 brought Estonia-Russia relations, which since 1991 have never been particularly good, to a new low: the siege of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, organised by pro-Kremlin Russian youth movements, risks becoming a classic example of a violation of diplomatic law that will later be found in textbooks alongside descriptions of other unlawful incidents involving embassies, including ones as serious as the Tehran hostage crisis of 1979-1981. Add to that the war of words between Tallinn and Moscow, cyber attacks, and two nights of rioting in Tallinn, and the result is the worst international crisis Estonia has been involved in since re-establishing its independence in 1991.

However, the root causes of this crisis are understood only vaguely, both in Estonia as well as outside. The prevailing perception seems to be that the Estonian government removed a controversial Soviet statue for domestic political reasons, thereby angering local Russians and picking a fight with Moscow, in which Moscow, however, lost its moral high ground by overplaying its hand, and Estonia had what could be called a lucky escape. While true in some respects, this explanation still offers a simplified and shallow interpretation of the events. The actual roots go much deeper back in time, and in order to understand those, one must look to the disputes between the two countries that started soon after Estonia's restoration of independence.

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Russia claims that Estonia is a newly independent state that came into being in 1991 with the consent of Russia and the Soviet Union. Estonia views itself as having restored its pre-war statehood, its independence as a continuation of former independence that was temporarily forcibly suspended by annexation by the Soviet Union.

This question, seemingly a legal technicality, has actually deep implications in Estonia's legislation as regards citizenship, language use, property rights, and formerly even territory. Moscow has never understood Estonia's urge to continue its interrupted statehood. Even the liberal democratic Russian politicians, who were allies of the Estonian independence movement during the perestroika years, were at a loss when independent Estonia demanded that Russia remove its occupying troops as soon as possible. Citizenship and language issues, as well as Estonia's wish to join NATO, made the list of differences even longer. Three years into their independent existences, Estonia and Russia already had a remarkably rocky relationship, in the context of which an agreement regarding the withdrawal of former Soviet troops from Estonia could be achieved only with the help of major Western mediation.

Later on, other developments complicated the relationship further. First to be mentioned is the *de facto* rehabilitation of the Soviet past and the Soviet version of history that took place in Russia during Vladimir Putin's rule. Boris Yeltsin, as one remembers, rose to power as a critic of the Soviet regime, but he failed to achieve a profound condemnation of Soviet crimes by Russian society. As time went by, he started to use some elements of Soviet glory to cement his own rule. Still, Yeltsin's attitude towards the past can be characterised as erratic and mostly disinterested.

However, Putin's regime started to consciously restore and rehabilitate the Soviet symbols and Soviet version of history. By the end of Putin's time in office, the memory of the Second World War and a close-to-Soviet interpretation of it has become a means to justify the current Kremlin's rule and policies. This self-myth is effectively becoming a substitute for ideology, at least at times.

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The Baltic states have a different truth and a different memory, and a very effective spokesperson for this has been former Latvian president Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga. Indeed, her efficiency in conveying her message to the West may be one of the reasons why many people in Moscow feel that they have to furiously oppose every manifestation of this differing truth – because if this truth becomes prevalent, the legitimacy of Moscow's current self-myth is increasingly at risk. And here lies one explanation as to why Estonia's decision to relocate a monument to Soviet soldiers was received with such an outcry in Moscow.

In Estonia, the process that led to the relocation of the statue was never just populist pre-election politics. The troublesome monument had originally been erected to honour the Soviet troops that entered Tallinn in the autumn of 1944 – as liberators according to the Soviet view, as occupiers according to the Estonian view. After Estonia became free, the statue continued to be venerated by Estonian Russians and somewhat reluctantly

tolerated by Estonians. But serious problems emerged in 2005-2006 when it started to attract small but fairly extremist groups of pro-Soviet demonstrators in addition to its regular visitors, the majority of which just wanted to honour their war dead. Pro-Soviet demonstrations were most likely inspired by the active and official nostalgia for the Soviet period in Putin's Russia, which reached the Estonian Russians via Russian TV channels. But it was profoundly unacceptable to the Estonian people and state. Given the political and societal trends in Russia, this problem was likely to deepen in the coming years, rather than go away. So, something had to be done – elections or not.

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The legal process that prepared the ground for relocation was actually very quiet and technical. No political force used it for campaign purposes. The issue became a noisy one only when Moscow made it so, which happened in January 2007. From then on, the monument was bound to get more publicity in Estonian domestic debates too, but still it would be wrong to say that it played any part in determining the outcome of the March elections. Less than 1% of voters have said that they thought of the issue of the monument when making their choice.

Although Moscow tries to characterise its actions and reactions as inspired by honest moral outrage, several facts betray that for Moscow the monument-saga was actually a conflict of choice. Take, for example, the obvious double standards: in many countries and most notably in Russia itself, similar monuments have been removed and the related human remains reburied without any noise from Moscow and sometimes with its official co-operation. It is not widely known that Estonia also invited Moscow to get involved, to participate in the reburial that could have been conducted prominently, with highest honours to the war dead. That proposal was supported by several people in Moscow's political establishment, the chairman of the State Duma Foreign Affairs Committee Konstantin Kossachev expressed his support even publicly, but at the eleventh hour Moscow still said no. It is hard to say why.

People familiar with the corridors of power in Moscow tend to point to personalities, saying that Estonia has some ill-wishers in certain key positions there.

But it is also possible to point out another more general shift of attitude that Russia has gone through recently that may have affected Russia's readiness to co-operate in resolving the Bronze Soldier issue. Up until 2004, Moscow felt that its policy *vis-à-vis* the Baltic states, based on disputing the legal nature of their statehood and the rights stemming from that, was actually not working and that something better was needed. Therefore every now and again they would set up working groups that were supposed to come up with more workable approaches – something that, however, never happened. But around 2004, Moscow suddenly realised that it did not need a workable policy towards the Baltic states at all. Quite the opposite: it decided that it was beneficial to keep the Baltic states as a problem that could be raised on the international level at a convenient time to fend off criticism of Russia. “If you do not raise the question of Chechnya, we will not mention the Baltic states,” Moscow would imply, and the Europeans, who are polite people and whose agenda *vis-à-vis* Russia is overburdened anyway, succumb to the tradeoff.

There is a more complex background that makes this new approach by Moscow possible: high oil prices, America's less than successful war in Iraq, the marginalisation of the domestic opposition, rapidly growing anti-Westernism and xenophobia in contemporary Russia, all play a role. But for the Baltic states, this means that if earlier we had an erratic partner with whom we could at least sometimes come to terms, from 2004 onwards our Eastern neighbour was not playing in good faith.



The head of the delegation of the State Duma of Russia, Nikolai Kovalyov, places a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at its new location. Tallinn, 1 May 2007

Quite apart from all that lies the question of the Russian population in Estonia that played a part in the "Bronze night" and whose positions have to be explained. Having arrived in Estonia for the most part as simple labourers during the Soviet era, then having found themselves living in an independent Estonia and having chosen to stay, they are still torn between the two countries and now increasingly between the two versions of history. They are both here and there. Many of them feel an affinity with the great Russian culture, but they feel bad when they actually visit Russia: too many rude habits, a tiresome tempo, different business cultures... By now, the Russians in Estonia have become very much like Estonians, both for good and bad: they are slow, introverted, law-abiding, somewhat depressed ... and their command of the Estonian language is getting better and better. But they have learned history from Soviet books and they watch official Russian TV channels, understanding at the same time that much of what they are being told is untrue, but not having an alternative truth to put forward themselves.

For the majority of these people, the relocated statue was a place to honour and remember their relatives who died in the World War. Many of them did not approve of the pro-Soviet nostalgia, and many of them understood why the Estonians found the statue problematic. But what they firmly condemn is the manner in which the statue was relocated: the process by which it was done remained unclear to them, and it was not accompanied by any serious and coherent explanations by the authorities. And this is the most serious shortcoming of the Estonian government: the whole process of relocation was treated as a technical and bureaucratic one; care was taken that everything was legally correct, but no attempt was made to reach the hearts and minds of the people most affected.

And here lies the most important lesson, as well as a future plan: we need to talk with our Russian fellow citizens. During the past 15 years it has been assumed in Estonia that if the local Russians learn the Estonian language, they will automatically come to understand Estonian history, Estonia's worries about Russia, etc. This has not proven to be the case. At the same time, the local Russians are not blind and uncritical consumers of the current official Kremlin propaganda either. They are confused people, and more effort should be made to explain to them the Republic of Estonia, and its actions and relationship with its huge neighbour to the East.

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As regards the neighbour itself, however, one tends to be less optimistic. At the time of this writing, everything is calm and cool in the relations between Estonia and Russia. The "enemy of the month" in Moscow is the UK. Next month it could be some other country. Estonia feels relieved to have escaped the limelight. But real improvement in

Estonia's relations with Russia, as well as the whole West's relations with Russia, will arrive only once Russia abandons its current semi-authoritarian political arrangement in favor of a proper democracy with everything the latter normally entails: political competition, rule of law, free media, and an interpretation of history that is based on facts and scholarship rather than political expediency or nostalgia for the past.