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How the War in Ukraine Strengthened Latvia's European Credentials and International Standing

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KARL STUKLIS, MAR 18 2025

25 August 2022—a warm summer day in Riga, Latvia. Throngs of tourists and locals mingle in the city's Old Town, taking in the medieval architecture and enjoying the ambience outside numerous bars and pubs. The languid, convivial mood of the Baltic summer, however, is punctured by both excitement and tension. LTV, the public broadcaster, has set up a livestream. The camera is unmovingly focussed on the 79-metre-tall concrete obelisk of the Soviet war memorial, located across the river from Old Town in a sprawling park. Nothing happens for hours. Then, abruptly, bulldozers manoeuvre into place. They push the giant obelisk over, and it falls with a thunderous splash into the pond behind. Those watching the livestream cheer and raise drinks to the demolition of the *okupeklis*, or “occupation monument”. For ethnic Latvians, the monument was an eyesore that represented the shameful legacy of their nation's occupation by the Soviet Union for almost half a century. Most wished it had been demolished decades ago. An ultranationalist group had even tried to blow it up in 1997.

Despite the celebrations of many, later that evening, the area around the destroyed monument becomes the scene of angry protest and heavy police presence. For many Russian speakers in Latvia, who comprise 37.7% of the population as of 2022 (CSP 2022), the monument was their national epicentre of remembrance. Their relatives had served in the Red Army, defeated Hitler, and liberated Europe from fascism. Every year on 9 May, Russian Victory Day, the monument was the site of celebration and display of Russian identity. However, in 2022, these celebrations had been prohibited and flowers laid by the monument were bulldozed away the following day. The demolition of this sacred monument was felt as a betrayal and blasphemy to many Russian speakers in Latvia, which was mirrored by official outrage in the neighbouring Russian Federation.

The prohibition on Victory Day celebrations and the demolition of the Soviet Victory Monument in Riga were part of the Latvian government's response to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This views all Soviet monuments and associated remembrance as elements of a propaganda campaign by the Russian Federation, which instrumentalises the Soviet “liberation from fascism” narrative of WWII to justify its invasion of Ukraine and undermine Latvian independence (Saeima 2022; Kaprāns 2022). After the Latvian parliament passed a law in the summer of 2022, over a hundred Soviet war memorials were removed across the country, despite protests from some locals who remember Latvia's Soviet past more fondly.

On a physical level, the removal of monuments represents a decisive step in Latvia's journey to rid itself of its Soviet legacy and rejoin Europe since regaining independence. However, this process also contradicts the conventional Western European narrative of World War II. Soviet war memorials remain protected in Germany and Austria, and national memorials in France and the Netherlands commemorate the same Allied victory over the Nazis as those which are being demolished in Latvia.

The paradox of the Latvian, and wider Eastern European, memory of World War II is a telling example of how postcommunist states have interacted with the EU and broader West since 1991. On one hand, they have striven for acceptance and recognition from the old EU member states. In terms of official memory, this has been done by institutionalising remembrance of the Holocaust. On the other hand, they have sought to redefine European identity. This has been done through a push for the institutionalisation of an anti-communist, anti-Soviet narrative.

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Postcommunist states like Latvia have campaigned for European institutions to recognise “the memory of Western betrayal of Eastern Europe in the Second World War” (Mälksoo 2013, 6) and the crimes of communist regimes as equal to that of Nazi Germany (Mälksoo 2009, 655; 2013, 84-85). This anti-Soviet perspective conflicts with the Western European narrative of a joint US, UK, and Soviet effort to liberate Europe from fascism. It has also been met with accusations of historical obfuscation of local involvement in the Holocaust and Holocaust trivialisation (Subotić 2019).

Despite this controversy, Eastern European countries have been quite successful in modifying official European memory. In 2005, Latvian members of the European Parliament helped pass a resolution that acknowledged the “renewed tyranny inflicted by the Stalinist Soviet Union” after the end of World War II and condemned “all totalitarian rule of whatever ideological persuasion” (Mälksoo 2013, 94; European Parliament 2005). They also supported EU recognition of the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes, which falls on the anniversary of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Mälksoo 2014, 95). Political scientist Maria Mälksoo argues that by seeking recognition for the historical injustices inflicted by communist regimes, Latvia and other Eastern European states seek to incorporate their national narratives into the European value system of universal human rights, thus promoting their recognition as European (2014, 85, 96).

Because of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Eastern European historical narrative has gained further international recognition. The Baltic states, who were for so long dismissed by the old EU members as irrationally Russophobic (Kuus 2011, 279), felt vindicated. Even Germany, which for so long had attempted to maintain relations with Russia and bring it into the Western fold, was forced to completely break with Russia and accept elements of the anti-Russian Eastern European narrative. Mälksoo (2023, 472) describes this as a “decolonizing moment” for Eastern European states, which has led to their perspective of Russia as a neoimperial power bent on denying the sovereignty of its former subjugates to become accepted within the EU.

Latvia and the Baltic States have been among the world’s most vociferous supporters of Ukraine, calling for a NATO no-fly zone over Ukraine and harsher sanctions on Russia; sending substantial aid and donations relative to their small GDPs; hosting tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, and cutting economic links with Russia. They have also continued to advocate for Ukrainian membership of the EU and NATO (Budrytė 2023, 88). This has increased the self-esteem and international status of Latvia and the other Baltic states as influential EU members. The EU leadership has listened to them and taken their suggestions, even pushing more hesitant states like Germany to send arms to Ukraine (Budrytė 2023, 89). Therefore, Latvia’s strong identification with and support for Ukraine in its war with Russia has enabled it to go from a liminal European state to a “moral and practical” leader within the EU with increased agency.

The war has also had political advantages for the Latvian government, which is composed of parties deriving support from the ethnic Latvian majority. In March 2022, Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš declared to parliament that, though divided by language and politics for so long, Latvians “have now come together and agreed to condemn Putin, to support Ukraine...I am convinced that this crisis will bring us together, that we will emerge from this crisis wiser, stronger and more united” (2022). In a way, he is correct: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has firmly discredited the Russian historical narrative, which threatens Latvia’s national unity.

Yet demolishing monuments and bulldozing flowers does not evoke voluntary national unity. Therefore, Kariņš’ “coming together” should better be described as a more forceful imposition of ethnic Latvian historical memory over the country’s Russian-speaking minority. The formerly unthinkable act of removing Soviet monuments, lest the ire of the Russian Federation, has now become acceptable and relatively painless, as Russia did not launch any meaningful response. This contrasts markedly with the 2007 Bronze Soldier crisis in neighbouring Estonia. Back then, Russian speakers rioted on the streets of Tallinn, the Estonian embassy in Moscow was besieged, and the country suffered a major cyber-attack in response to the mere *relocation* of a Soviet war memorial.

With US President Donald Trump’s attempts to force through a peace deal between Ukraine and Russia, there is much uncertainty about how the war in Ukraine will end. If a deal is reached, will European countries eventually resume diplomatic and economic relations with Russia? Or is that relationship forever broken by its criminal invasion

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of Ukraine? We will not know the answers to these questions for some time, but what is certain is that the war has been advantageous, in some ways, for Eastern European countries like Latvia. They now have a freer hand to rid themselves of the mnemonic baggage of Soviet occupation and crack down on the remembrance practices of Russian speakers. Their anti-Soviet, anti-Russian view of history has become more mainstream in the broader West, and their status has been elevated to that of foreign policy leaders in the face of Russian aggression.

The heightened threat posed by Russia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the mnemonic integration of Europe, helping to popularise a more generally anti-totalitarian historical narrative that better represents the experiences of both old and new EU members. Meanwhile, the mnemonic hegemony of the Holocaust in the EU continues to be challenged, and much controversy lies ahead as Western and Eastern European historical narratives interact and compete for dominance.

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