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“WAR OVER MONUMENTS” – AN ELEMENT OF RUSSIAN HISTORICAL POLICY TOWARDS LATVIA IN 21ST CENTURY

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Rosja, Łotwa, polityka historyczna, pomniki, pamięć historyczna

KEYWORDS: Russia, Latvia, historical politics, monuments, historical memory

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to present aspects of Russian historical policy considering Russian-Latvian disputes over the interpretations of the events of the Second World War, whose symbols are the monuments commemorating Soviet soldiers. The Monument of the Liberators of Riga, standing in the town centre, is the most controversial one. However, other memorials are also problematic. Some politicians and Latvian inhabitants consider them symbols of Soviet occupation, which in extreme cases leads to the desecration of cemeteries or destruction of monuments. The harsh reactions of Russia evoke attempts to commemorate "participants in the war of independence" - in fact soldiers of the Latvian SS Legion.

In April 2011 Russian Duma adopted a statement calling on the Federation authorities to take any available political and economic measures in response to the increasing discrimination of the Russian-speaking citizens in the states of the former USSR. Among other things the document includes the following:

The reason for concern is the fact that on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War and another anniversary of the Victory in some countries we can hear offensive statements directed towards the Russian people and other Russian nations. Russophobia is getting stronger, cemeteries are defiled, the monuments in honor of soldiers-liberators who died during the Great Patriotic War are taken down (Госдума 2011).

It is just one of many manifestations of the dispute over history between Russia and its neighbours which has been escalating in the recent years. It is related to the historical policy which is deliberately conducted by the Kremlin and constitutes part of soft-power (Włodkowska-Bagan 2012, 38–59).

After Vladimir Putin took power, especially since 2004, the historical policy of Russia has become more aggressive and aimed at the creation of vision of the past consistent with the state policy. It particularly referred to the World War II and occupation of the Baltic states by the USSR. Imperialistic policy of the USSR was glorified and the idea of powerful Russia was pursued. The media and press discussed historical subjects which diverted attention of the society from current problems. Disinformation was a key tool of this propaganda. Naturally, historical facts were modified and presented to the wide public (Szczygło 2009, 3 ff.; Żurawski vel Grajewski 2011, 35; Rogoża/Kaczmarski 2010, 10; Moscow 2014, 95).

Hope for change came with the beginning of the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. A new face at the helm of Russia was expected to inspire confidence among neighbours and improve the image of the state, which would facilitate political and economic relations with Europe. New features were present, indeed. In the autumn of 2009 the Stalinist terror was denounced in the press by the most important politicians of the Russian Federation. On October 30, on the occasion of the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Political Repression, the president criticized the policies of Stalin, he described the Soviet Union as a totalitarian state, and said that the policy of the Soviet authorities regarding the Katyn massacre was an example of falsification of history. He also criticized the post-war international order created at the beck and call of Stalin. However, it was not the end of creating historical policy. It was still maintained that the Soviet Union takes the credit for saving Europe from Nazism (Память 2009). In May 2009 the president approved a new "National Safety Strategy of the Russian Federation". According to it any attempts to revise Russia's role in the history pose a threat to its national security (Стратегия 2009).

After Putin again became the president, there was a return to the uncompromising rhetoric of the years 2000–2008. Symbols from the period of the Soviet Union were found useful. The changes affected education as well. The textbooks prepared at the beginning of the 1990s were withdrawn and substituted for the ones in compliance with the valid policy of the authorities (Moscow 2014, 96–102).

The purpose of this article is to present aspects of Russian historical policy based on the example of Russian-Latvian conflicts around the interpretation of the events of World War II, the symbol of which are monuments in honor of Soviet soldiers.

A huge, almost 80-meter tall, Monument to the Liberators of Riga located in the city center evokes great and extreme emotions at the same time. On the one hand, every year it is a meeting place for demonstrators who celebrate the Victory Day on 9 May, despite the fact it has been removed from the list of public holidays in Latvia. According to different sources the manifestations were participated by about 100–300 thousand people (the biggest ones took place in

2009–2011). Every time representatives of the Russian embassy took part in the event (e.g. cf. День 2008, 6; Мейден 2010, 2; Об участии 2011). For example, in 2010 ambassador Alexander Veshnyakov attended a mass for the victims of the Great Patriotic War and laid flowers at the monument. There was a party for veterans and anniversary medals were presented. The Victory Parade in Moscow was broadcast on big screens, and then there was a concert organized with the support of the embassy. There were no incidents, and the police did not intervene, despite the fact that many veterans came with orders and other symbols of the Soviet era which according to the Latvian law are prohibited. The celebration was attended by the new mayor of Riga Nils Ušakovs, a politician of Russian descent (Мейден 2010, 2; Об участии 2010). Rallies at the monument are also held on 13 October, the anniversary of the liberation of Riga from German occupation (Pie Uzvaras 2004). The Russian embassy also participates in the cost of maintenance of the monument – in 2005 they allocated 60,000 dollars and promised further support (Krievija 2005).

When in October 2006 unknown perpetrators painted swastikas and offensive slogans on the monument, the embassy sent a note of protest to the Latvian Foreign Ministry, calling to identify the perpetrators and to ensure the future protection of monuments and places of burial of Soviet soldiers, according to the agreement of 30 April 1994 (В Латвии 2006).

On the other hand, the Monument to the Liberators of Riga is a symbol of enslavement to many Latvian activists. The response of society to the celebration of Victory Day is also extremely negative, e.g. in May 2008 there was an Internet campaign “Go home” organized by the “Defenders of Latvia and language”. Another example is a website with registration numbers of cars (and information about their owners) decorated with “Saint George ribbons” or Russian flags, or a website where “disloyal” citizens of Latvia were called to leave the country (Радионов 2010а; Радионов 2010б).

The Monument to the Liberators of Riga became known in 2012. From February at www.peticijas.com one could express support for the initiative of destroying it (a month later, an option to sign a petition to keep the monument became available). In August, in an interview for “the Independent Morning Newspaper” Latvian minister of defense Artis Pabriks opted for the disassembly of the monument, whilst he stressed it could result in “too many dangerous consequences”. The media associated his statement with local elections next year and attempt to obtain anti-Russian voters. Politicians representing the Russian-speaking population made harsh comments on such an attitude (Pabriks 2012). When the media uproar over the Pabriks’s words broke out, the minister explained that he did not call for the destruction of the monument, but from a moral point of view, it is merely a political symbol (it does not commemorate any specific fallen soldiers) that can be used to fight against the Latvian state

(Радионов 2012). The reaction of the Russian side was unequivocal – the deputy head of the Duma Committee in charge of issues related to CIS and relations with compatriots Dmitry Sablin described the statement as blasphemy (В ГД сочли 2012).

Another manifestation of the conflict can be a discussion on the future of the monument which started at the beginning of May 2013. Architect Aleksandrs Kiršteins (a member of a ruling National Union “Everything for Latvia” – “To Homeland and Freedom/Latvian National Independent Movement”) regretted that the monument had not been removed in 1991. He was supported by Einīrs Cilinskis (Environment and Regional Development Minister since early 2014). Until the disassembly it was suggested that the monument could be covered (by a amusement park) or fitted with information boards as “liberation” commemo-rates (NA: Uzvaras 2013). The celebration of 9 May was attended by fewer people than in the previous years but still there were about 100 thousand participants – there were ambassador Veshnyakov and mayor Ušakovs who started his speech in Russian (Ušakovs 2013).

In October 2013 ten thousand signatures were collected under an Internet survey. Then, a possibility that the removal of the Monument to the Liberators of Riga would be discussed by the parliament became real. However, a representative of Latvian Foreign Ministry Kārlis Eihenbaums, while presenting the position of the department on 21 October stressed that the disassembly would be against the agreement of 1994. Further, prime minister Valdis Dombrovskis was also very cautious and he indicated both international agreements and deeper division of the Latvian society (Kincis 2013). The atmosphere was heated up with a statement by Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns (who also acted as Minister of Culture at that time) who opted for the demolition of the monument. This time a reaction of Russian Foreign Ministry was unavoidable. Spokesman Aleksandr Lukashevich expressed his indignation and warned that such behavior would be harmful to the development of dialogue with Russia (Комментарий 2013). The minister was criticized by president Andris Bērziņš who accused him of using his position to run electoral campaign (Politiku 2013). In mid-November, ambassador Veshnyakov assessing relations between Russia and Latvia pes-simistically stated that the initiative to remove the monument may make them worse (Посол 2013).

The dispute over the Monument to the Liberators of Riga is the most clear but not the only manifestation of the “war over monuments”. In the territory of present-day Latvia there are hundreds of collective and individual graves of Russian/Soviet soldiers and many monuments commemorating “heroic” deeds of the Red Army. The Russian embassy was actively joining in operations organized by Latvian archaeological groups which searched for remains of soldiers (e.g. “Legenda” Tālisa Ešmitsa). Every year, at an anniversary of the end of the

war the ashes of the found soldiers were solemnly buried – in 2008 ashes of 99 soldiers and officers were buried. During a ceremony at the cemetery in Ropaži (financed by the embassy) there was Metropolitan of Riga and all Latvia Aleksandrs as well as representatives of diplomatic missions from Uzbekistan, Belarus and Ukraine. Russian charges d'affaires Valentin Ovsyannikov stressed that a duty to “those who died in defense of their homeland and who are the pride of real patriots of Russia and Latvia” has been fulfilled (О церемонии 2008). Russia participated in the costs of the renovation of World War II graves and cemeteries from 2003 spending funds from the federal budget – for example in the jubilee year 2005 the works were carried out in more than 100 locations. Further, in later years, the embassy was involved in the care of cemeteries and monuments reminding of a “liberating” role of the Red Army, for example in 2009 a monument in Dubrovin Park in Daugavpils, where several Heroes of the Soviet Union are buried, was renovated. A year later, maintenance works on a monument at the cemetery in Vaiņode were performed as well. In 2013 Moscow allocated over 700 thousand dollars for this purpose (Комментарий 2006; Вешняков 2009; Об участии 2010; Харланова 2013).

However, after regaining independence, some politicians and residents of Latvia said openly that many of these monuments are symbols of Soviet occupation, which in extreme cases lead to the desecration of cemeteries and destruction of monuments, each time causing a sharp reaction from Moscow.

For example, on the night of 4/5 July 2004 in Ate the graves of Soviet soldiers killed in World War II were desecrated – marble tombstones were overturned and most of them were broken. It was the third act of this kind in Ate, however, the local authorities stated it had been done by vandals and it had not been a political action. Naturally, Russians saw it in a different way – the embassy sent a note of protest to the Foreign Ministry (Alūksnes 2004). The Duma also reacted and in a statement of 7 July they expressed their indignation due to more and more frequent actions in the Baltic states in favor of “rehabilitation and heroization” of Nazism, giving an example of the cemetery in Ate. Moreover, the statement called parliaments in the Baltic states and international organizations to condemn incidents of this kind (Заявление 2004).

In 2005 there was a clash between the Russian embassy and the Ministry of Culture of Latvia and the State Inspectorate for Heritage Protection. The Russian side offered to cover part of the costs associated with the restoration of a complex built on the site of Salaspils concentration camp. Latvians treated it as an accusation, and interference in the internal affairs of the state. On 12 April Minister of Culture Helēna Demakova informed that the monument is in a good condition and “the actions by the Russian embassy intensify the problem”. Therefore, the embassy, on 13 April, expressed an “apology”, at the same time informing that the funds for the renovation would come back to the federal

budget (О финансовом 2005). The subject was back in December, when the leaders of the Center of Concord (Jānis Urbanovičs i Ušakovs) appealed to Minister Demakova to take interest in the situation in Salaspils as the technical condition of the complex of monuments is very poor there. The politicians asked why the Ministry had rejected the Russian offer (Opozīcija 2005).

The Latvian authorities sought to emphasize that the memory of the dead Soviet soldiers is held respect and no one has the intention to move their ashes. It was also mentioned in February 2007 by Latvian ambassador in Moscow Andris Teikmanis (Посол 2007) in the context of a resolution of the parliament of Estonia which allowed for a repeated burial of ashes of soldiers located in “inappropriate places”. Whereas, prime ministers Aigars Kalvītis and Mikhail Fradkov at the same time talked about a new agreement on the status of burials of Soviet soldiers. It was fairly easy to find a common ground, especially as Latvians were critical of Estonian actions aimed at the transfer of the monument of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn (Россия 2007).

In spite of conciliatory gestures, in August 2007 there was a scandal related to the transfer of a monument raised in the 1950s in honor of Soviet soldiers who “liberated” a town of Bauska. The monument was moved to a military cemetery, which was justified with an earlier urban planning scheme. The Russian embassy (and Latvian Anti-Nazi Committee which publicized the whole issue) did not like the form of the transfer (at night), time (13 August, and not 1 September according to the City Council resolution) and explanations that before the embassy had not been against it, and the monument is not present in the Russian register of monuments. As ambassador Victor Kaluzny stated on 15 August, the embassy had not been contacted and Latvian Regional and Self-Government Development Foreign Minister was not familiar with the undertaking. The situation could be considered a breach of the agreement on protection of objects of this kind (Kaļužnijs 2007). There were opinions that Latvia might take the “Estonian way”, but first they would move monuments in the province and then in the capital city. However, the lack of reaction of Russian Foreign Ministry indicates that the policy to improve relations with Latvia was still in force and no one wanted to publicize the scandal.

On 18 December 2007 during the first historic working visit of the Foreign Minister of Russia in Latvia an agreement on soldier burials was signed (announced during a visit of prime minister Kalvītisa to Moscow) (Стенограмма 2007). The Russian Duma ratified the agreement on 2 July 2008. Earlier, Leonid Slutsky, the deputy chairman of the International Relations Committee, stated that if exhumation and transfer of ashes of soldiers can be performed by mutual agreement, there would be no such acts as the disassembly of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn (Госдума 2008). Two weeks later the Latvian parliament ratified the agreement. According to the agreement the costs of maintaining the graves are to

be covered by the state where they are located, however each side, after receiving the consent of the other side, is allowed to perform activities at their own expense.

There were also negative opinions on the Russian side. As presented in “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” Latvians may request care over the graves of their people who served in the infantry of Waffen-SS or died as a result of “reprisal” (even for collaboration with the Nazis) (Демурин 2008, 3).

At the beginning of August 2012 graves of Soviet soldiers were again defiled. This time it took place near Spirkus. The perpetrators left words “Occupiers” on the tombstones painted with red paint. The information was spread by the Russian Association of Latvia which issued a letter to the local authorities, police and Russian embassy (Tukuma 2012).

Despite the incidents, the ambassador of Russia in Latvia during his journeys around the country often thanked municipal authorities for taking care of the Soviet soldiers who died in World War II. It was the same in April 2005 in Daugavpils and Valga (О визите 2005).

Russian-Latvian “war over monuments” has also its another side – every now and again, in Latvia there are projects in honor of “heroes of fight for independence” who are de facto soldiers of a Latvian SS legion, which bring about strong reactions from the Russian side.

For example, in July 2008 at the cemetery in Lestene near Riga, where many former legionaries are buried, a plaque saying “about eternal memory” was unveiled. The ceremony was attended by the speaker of the sejm Gundars Daudze. His words that the cemetery should be not only a place of memory, but also a message for future generations which tells about the complex history of the state (Спикер 2008) could not be assessed favorably by the Russian side, especially in the context of a burial agreement – permanent OSCE representative of Russia Anwar Azimov, criticizing Latvia in February 2009 reported events in Lestene as an example of “rehabilitation of Nazism” (Выступление 2009).

At the end of 2012 in Bauska there were again events which led to a higher tension between Latvia and Russia. On 14 September a monument dedicated to the soldiers of three police battalions (23, 319, 322) being part of the Latvian SS legion was unveiled. The inscription was: “To the defenders of Bauska against the second Soviet occupation” and “Latvia should be a Latvian state”. The monument was funded from the district budget and the unveiling was attended by Latvian Members of Parliament and Town Council. The initiator explained that the monument is not a glorification of Nazism, and it only commemorates Latvians, including many citizens of Bauska, who fought against the Soviet occupation. However, the Latvian anti-Nazi Committee requested the monument to be disassembled and the deputy chairman of the sejm Klementjevs claimed that people responsible for raising it should be judged. The reaction from the Russian

side could not be avoided. Press attache of the embassy in Latvia Vadim Ponomarev condemned raising the monument. The representatives of the Duma talked about distorting history, revising results of World War II, justifying Nazism etc. (Auzāns 2012; В Госдуме 2012).

Russia uses this type of events to deprecate Latvia at an international forum, e.g. leading to the adoption of a resolution condemning heroization of Nazism by the UN General Assembly every year.

Russians find removing monuments calumny and evidence of ingratitude for liberation from Nazism. As Edward Lucas wrote: "Stalinist version of World War II is the most important myth supported by contemporary Russia [...], and improving the Soviet history is one of the pillars of the new ideology of the Kremlin" (Lucas 2008, 171, 177). Although these words were uttered in 2008 they did not lose their relevance, which is confirmed with a statement by President Putin in October 2014. He talked about the contribution of the Red Army in the victory over Nazism, the criminal ideology of which threatened the existence of civilization. Therefore, it is necessary to fight against any signs of the revival and glorification of Nazism, pointing towards Latvia.

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