

# CHANGING IDENTITIES OF THE BALTIC STATES: THREE MEMORIES IN STONE

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents a comparative analysis of how Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania handled the process of nation-building, finding their self in their new reality which was no longer created and manipulated by the Soviets since their breakaway from the USSR. To do so, this paper suggests an ingenious method of the identity politics analysis which focuses on the importance of the so-called “lieux de mémoire” or “meaning-full places” for people. Monuments and statues are good examples of such places and play an important role in identity construction due to their ability to evoke particular kinds of feelings in people. Undertaking an in-depth analysis of monuments in Baltic States provides a valuable insight on the possibilities and challenges of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia to develop communities of shared values and to finally stop living in the shade of their “post-Sovietness”.*

**Keywords:** Monuments; national identity; Soviet Union; “Monument Wars”; Baltic States.

**JEL Classification:** F5; Y8.

## INTRODUCTION

The decision made by the authorities of the Latvian town of Bauska, in Septemeber 2012, to unveil the monument commemorating "Bauska's Defenders against the Second Soviet Occupation" was followed by utterly emotional political debates. The Bauska's defenders in question were the three battalions of the Latvian legion of Waffen SS punitive police. Contrary to the absolute absence of reaction to the event from the European Union, the reactions coming from some of the other countries were immediate and fierce. Belarusian representatives pointed to the fact that the blood of the hundreds of Belarusian partisans and civilians who were fighting against Germans was on the hands of Bauska defenders. The Belarusian government added that the fact that Bauska officials not only accepted the construction but also attended the opening ceremony was “particularly concerning” (Savinykh, 2012). The Russian government condemned Bauska officials as well as urged the European Union to respond to this event. Furthermore, Israel reacted to the event stating that the opening of this Monument is “insulting both to the victims of Nazism and to those still alive” (Suharenko, 2012). The discontent of the Jewish community in Latvia was especially sharp in the light of its failing attempts to get the approval for establishing a memorial for the Holocaust victims in Bauska; the question has been on hold for almost ten years.

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In Estonia, during the night of 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2007 the “Bronze Soldier” was moved from the Tõnismägi hill in the centre of Tallinn to the Military Cemetery. With only a few Estonians keeping themselves aloof to this even, the “small” monument removal in the “small” country immediately appeared in the newspapers all over the world raising a wave of debates and discussions on its causes and effects. First of all, dismantling the monument that glorifies the Soviet liberators of Estonia from the Fascists became yet another apple of discord in the already complicated Russo-Estonian relations: members of the Russian Federation Council unanimously signed a note addressed to Vladimir Putin suggesting to react in the fiercest way possible and, if necessary, to sever diplomatic relations with Estonia. The dispute resulted in an economic boycott starting with the refusal to sell Estonian goods in the Russian supermarkets up to the suspension of investment projects and cessation of some oil supplies to Estonia. According to some estimates, the “Bronze affair” cost Estonia around EUR 450 million which stand for around 3% of the country’s GDP (Brilliant Fixer, 2008).

Looking further backward, in April 2001, the Lithuanian Grūtas Park was welcoming its first visitors. Located only about fifty miles away from Vilnius, in the small resort of Druskininkai, this park imitates Soviet realities: the main roles here are played by the main leaders and heroes of the Soviet Union - Lenin, Stalin, Dzerzhinsky etc. Around 90 statues removed from their public sites in the beginning of the nineties were bought by one of the Lithuanian entrepreneurs, Viliumas Malinauskas, who won the government competition for the best ideas on what to do with all those reminders of the Soviet past. Notwithstanding massive criticism towards the so-called “Stalin World” bringing up unpleasant memories of the Soviet repressions in the vast number of Lithuanian population, Mr. Malinauskas claimed that remembering the past is crucial for Lithuanians to move forward. According to him, “If it [past] is brushed under the carpet, it will be unhealthy for the next generation.” (Coomarasamy, 1999) Despite being quite remote from the usual “touristic routes” in Lithuania, the park soon became one of the major touristic destinations and receives around 100,000 visitors per year (Dokodemo Door Blog, 2012).

These three different cases signalize that some monuments that remained from the Soviet era became matters of concern and central to the numerous political debates within the post-Soviet Baltic area. Moreover, they were often politicized and this led to the escalation of the existing conflicts. Nevertheless, as it has been briefly identified above, the contexts of each of these three cases substantially vary. It is even more compelling as we take into account that these three countries are geographically close, have, to a great extent, common past and share a lot of social, economic and political similarities. Therefore, this article aims to investigate the question of what

monuments and stories behind them signalize about the political identities of the Baltic States. Furthermore, it aims to scrutinize the differences in the nation-building processes in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, important considerations and identification of choices with regard to the theory of national identity are presented. Secondly, the paper focuses on the specific case studies that shed light on identity formation in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, it scrutinizes how the historic development, both before and after regained independence, is reflected in the attitude towards monuments in these countries and what it says about their identity politics. Finally, conclusions with regard to the posed questions are drawn.

## 1. THE MONUMENTS' ROLE IN THE "IDENTITY POLITICS"

Elaborating the four-fold classification of the national identities' theories given by Anthony D. Smith, this paper chooses to focus on the constructivist view of the national identity identified as an "elusive socially constructed and negotiated reality, something that essentially has a different meaning for each individual" (Wan and Vanderwerf, 2013). It is also presumed that the governments and the elites play a significant role in the process of shaping (and re-shaping) national identity. By this, it is implied that each country endeavours to establish a degree of national solidarity and unity among its people – the so-called *nation-building*. According to Bloom, successful nation-building can form "a clear political solidarity in relation to the external environment" and thus cannot be underestimated (Bloom, 1990, 79-80). States do so through a variety of media: high art and literature; mass communications and kitsch; architecture and monuments; ceremonies, rituals, and myths (Osborne, 2001). There are cases when specific historical moments (e.g. wars, military defeats, coup d'états etc.) can undermine peoples' ever deeply held beliefs. These crises - to which scholars often refer as "critical junctures" - lead to rapid transformations of the political identity of the states and trigger the memory politics (Risse, 2010). Osborne notes a particular importance of specific, "meaning-full places" in this respect. According to him, some "places" are crucially important for peoples' self-identification as they reinforce collective memory and "establish spatial and temporal reference points for society". One of the first pioneers to analyse the importance of such *lieux de mémoire* (*places of memory*) was Pierre Nora who applied it on the identity formation in France (Norra, 1996). Since then, a number of historians and researchers have extended his inquiry of how monuments and memorials have a symbolic significance for nation-building. For example, Maurice Halbwachs, in his work "On Collective Memory", stresses the particular

importance of monuments and other topographical features in the formation of collective identity (Halbawachs, 1992). Anthony D. Smith underlines such practices of creation of the feeling of national unity and how, in this respect, it is important to celebrate and commemorate national heroes – people that the citizens want to identify with. According to him, there is a need to dedicate certain places to these heroes thus making the collective commemoration possible (Smith, 2003, 219-53). Collective memories then help in establishing “a transcendent national experience that bridges awkward historical chasms and lends purpose and meaning to the forward progress of the nation through time.” (Roshwald 2006, 63)

Conducting the analysis of monuments is important as the decision of their erection/dismantling in the majority of cases lies with the government or state officials and clearly shows with which heroes and events state officials want their nation to identify with. Nevertheless, such decisions sometimes lead to the strong opposition of some parts of the community. This paper relies on the premise that the decisions made by governments regarding the monuments matter as they reveal the nature of the collective identity/identities of the nation. The way in which the state leads its identity politics can either open up new horizons for the unification of the national identity or lead to conflict, which will become a serious obstacle to the formation of an integrated identity in the long-run.

When it comes to the existing studies on the monuments in the Baltic States, Estonia clearly has an upper hand. For example, Karsten Brüggemann and Andres Kasekamp investigated the challenges of Estonia’s nation-building and the importance of the Bronze Soldier’s removal in their article, *The Politics of History and the “War of Monuments” in Estonia* (Brüggemann and Kasekamp, 2008). Marko Lehti, Matti Jutila and Markku Jokisipilä added to this analysis, claiming that the events of 2007 can also signalize on the ongoing shift of the Estonian narrative towards heroism (Lehti, Jutila and Jokisipilä, 2008). Stuart Burch and David J. Smith moved Estonia’s monument wars’ analysis to its eastern border city of Narva focusing on the commemoration practices there (Burch, Smith, 2007).

There is a large number of studies on the conflicting views on the Soviet period in Latvia’s history (e.g. Oberländer, 2009; Dzenovska, 2005; Rožukalne, 2010). Sergei Kruk significantly contributed to the studies on the monuments in Latvia, analyzing both the production of statues of Lenin in Latvia during its Soviet period and the peculiar practices the Latvian government currently uses for political communication with its citizens (e.g. renaming of monuments, alterations of the inscriptions etc.).

As for Lithuania, it is important to mention the research of Rimantas Buivydas and Almantas Samalavičius on *Public Spaces in Lithuanian Cities: Legacy of Dependence and Recent Tendencies* (2011), in which they performed an important overview of the transformations of Lithuania's public spaces throughout its history (since Czarist Russia's colonial rule up until the restoration of Lithuania's independence). The above mentioned Grutas Park is often analysed in comparison to the Szobor Park in Hungary and its possibilities to produce the distancing effect from the Soviet past (Williams 2008). Some scholars tend to compare such practices with the ongoing commemoration of the victims of Communism in other post-Communist Eastern European countries.

It is possible to say that more and more scholars become engaged in the national identity studies by means of visual representation. This article, therefore, by taking into account the existing research on the monuments' role in identity politics in the Baltics, aims, first of all, to fill the gap of comparative analyses among the three states. The focus will be put on the existing similarities and differences in the nation-building practices in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

## **2. ON THEIR “BALTIC WAY” TO INDEPENDENCE**

The last three decades were significantly important for the three Baltic countries. Having been “Sovietized” for almost seventy years, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania fought for their independence showing tremendous strength and unity. The so-called “Baltic Way” can be noted here - when around a million people joined hands and created a human chain of 600 km long, starting from the foot of Toompea in Tallinn through Riga, up to the foot of Gediminas Tower in Vilnius, demanding independence and recognition of the secret Ribbentrop-Molotov protocol that determined the economic, political and social development of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians for years. In the end, all three countries succeeded in regaining their political independence in the course of the Singing Revolutions.

The common Soviet past predetermined specific problems the three countries had to deal with after the dissolution of the Soviet Union – liberalization of its markets, changing forms of their political systems. Above that came the identity search and the problem of the nation-building specifics. After the years of Communist propaganda, when nation-states and national identities had no importance in the supranational state of the Soviet Union, it was particularly hard for the states that experienced only brief periods of independence to launch their identity politics campaign at the

end of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, we can see the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a “critical juncture” for the three Baltic States (according to the terminology this article elaborates). The situation was even more challenging considering the vast number of Russian-speakers who remained on their territories and did not necessarily share the general negative feeling towards their Soviet past. What the countries undoubtedly shared (and had to deal with) were hundreds of monuments built according to Lenin’s “Monument Propaganda” plan and the necessity to build monuments that would play an important role in strengthening collective identity. And that is when “Monument Wars” began.

## 2.1.Latvia

Latvian feelings towards stones are particularly strong and have roots in pre-Christian times. According to these traditions, stones are “receptacles of solar powers and the forefathers’ knowledge” with their own personalities and souls (Kruk, 2009). This idea materialized in France in 2005, in a Latvian design project, “Talking Stones”, during the Latvian Cultural festival, “Surprising Latvia”. The nine stones have human faces projected on them and each stone has a unique character leading its own life: they tell stories about Latvian culture, traditions and history. Despite the general public’s reaction to the installation that was quite obscure, the Latvian government still spent around 485, 000 lats on the installation and seems eager to spend another 150, 000 to permanently place it in the centre of Riga, making it a touristic destination (Delfi, 2010). Nevertheless, as we will see below, the Latvian government’s “love” for stones is quite selective.

Although in the early 1990s, around 80 monuments to Soviet leaders were dismantled by the Latvian government, there are still a few that remained. There are numerous reasons for that: firstly, the demolition usually requires significant investments; secondly, it is technically complicated. Last but not least, the Latvian government always needs to take into account the public reaction to these dismantles. One of the good examples of this is the case of the removal of the monument to the Soviet soldiers-liberators in the Latvian town of Bauska. In August 2007, the monument was transferred from Korfa Park to the military cemetery. Even though local officials stated that the action had no political context, as a matter of fact, it seems that there is definitely something political to it. In fact, just like with all the others, the issue with this particular Soviet monument lies in history or - putting it more correctly - in its interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> Except for Lithuania, which had already experienced a long period of independence during the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (12<sup>th</sup> century – 1795)

For Latvia, the establishment of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1940 was an illegal occupation on the provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. By sponsoring the coup d'état and implementing Soviet leadership in a matter of only a couple of months' time, the Soviets imposed a regime of terror, arresting and deporting hundreds of people. A lot of Latvians, who managed to run away from NKVD, were hiding in the forests forming anti-Soviet resistance groups and joined the Nazis when Germany attacked the Soviet Union. To a vast number of Latvians, there was no liberation but 3 occupations in less than ten years: the 1940 Soviet annexation, the 1941 Nazi occupation and then, yet another Soviet occupation in 1944. The Russian government regards this incorporation as legitimate and stresses the significant role of the Soviet Union in the liberation of Latvia from the Nazis. This position is generally shared by the Latvian Russophone minority which stands for almost one third of the total Latvia's population. As the anti-Russian sentiment in the country is already quite strong, events such as the dismantling in Bauska only complicate the strained relationships between the two sides and undermine the possibilities to form a coherent Latvian collective identity.

Hitherto, the main Monument to the soldiers of the Soviet Army (the "Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders") was not dismantled and currently plays an important role as a gathering place for all those who revere the Great Patriotic War and its important dates. Nevertheless, the monument has not been well maintained and the inscription that used to read in Latvian and then in Russian, "For the liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga", has been removed. Moreover, in 1997, the neo-Nazi groups attempted to blow up the central column (79 meters high) which is sometimes called "Moscow's fingers" in Latvia (Hatlie, 2013). Despite all calls among the Latvian public in favour of dismantling the monument, the Latvian government appears to be quite hesitant when it comes to actual decision-making. Up until now, the Latvian government has not called to pull down the monument, stating that even though "from the moral viewpoint this monument deserves being pulled down" it can as well "cause too many dangerous consequences" (The Voice of Russia, 2012). It is important to stress that the current Latvian government acknowledges its obligation to provide for the preservation of the monument as it is subject to *Intergovernmental Agreement between Latvia and Russia on the social protection of military pensioners residing on the territory of the republic of Latvia and their family members*. This agreement has been in force since 1994 and, among other things, it provides for the "preservation and maintenance of commemorative structures and mass burial sites" (Embassy of the Republic of Latvia). Therefore, the prospect of tearing down the monument is regarded to be a violation of this agreement.



It is important to stress again that the crux of the problem in the majority of cases is not about life under the Soviet regime, but about the role of Soviets in the fight against Fascism in the Baltic States. This question still remains remaining a sensitive issue to all those for whom the Great Patriotic War can have no “additional” interpretation. Addressing this question via these post-Soviet era monuments has no potential in laying the foundations for future consensus and is, therefore, of no help in integrating the Latvian community or reshaping the national identity as “free from the past”. Recent events in Bauska such as the erection of the monument to Waffen SS legion - mentioned in the introduction of this article - show that the government should not underestimate the gravity of its possible impacts on the society; it tends to only intensify the “understanding” gap in the community.

There are some other ways in which the Latvian government conducts their memory politics. For example, the famous Monument of Red Latvian Riflemen, located in the main square of Ratslaukums in Riga, survived the numerous debates on its Communist symbolism and was not torn down. Nonetheless, it also lost its “Redness” being renamed to the “Monument to Latvian Riflemen”. Moreover, the Museum of Red Latvian Riflemen, built together with the monument in the Ratslaukums Square, started to serve as a Museum of Occupation with a declared mission to “commemorate the wrongdoings committed by the foreign occupation powers against the state and the people of Latvia from 1940 to 1991” (Mission and History, 2013). Furthermore, there are the ongoing debates of opening another monument in the same square with a non-communist meaning (Kruk, 2009).

A monument that is forsooth playing a special symbolic role for Latvians is the Freedom Monument. Standing in the very heart of Riga, the monument is a column on which a Latvian woman stands, lifting three stars skyward. The monument was unveiled to honour soldiers killed during the Latvian War of Independence in 1935 in the short period when Latvia was free of foreign rule (1920-1940). Miraculously having survived the years of Soviet rule, the monument became particularly important for Latvia’s political identity since it links the modern period of Latvian independence with its independence in the interwar period. The current common view of the monument as a symbol of independence from the Soviet regime is a successful example of identity politics when the government can invoke the national spirit in people by linking to a time period which is not related to the Soviet regime.



## 2.2. Estonia

The problem of interpretation of the Soviet period history refers as much to Estonia as to Latvia. The Estonian government continuously demands recognition of the illegal incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union after its short period of independence (1918 -1940). Furthermore, it condemns any positive representation of the Soviet rule and puts it together with Nazism as being one of the biggest evils in the Estonian history. In fact, the evils of Communism are seen by some groups to be greater than those of Nazism. In 2004, in the western town of Lihula, approximately 2,000 people attended the unveiling ceremony of the monument to those who fought together with the Nazis against Bolshevism (BBC, 2011). The opening ceremony immediately elicited strong international criticism, notably, by Russia, the European Union and Jewish communities. The reaction of the Estonian society was controversial itself. The negative reaction of the Russian minority in Estonia (about 25% of the total population) was backed by the Estonian Government that, possibly under the pressure of the EU, called the unveiling a ‘provocation’ and decided to remove the monument. The removal, however, caused massive protests in Lihula and the monument was successfully removed only with the help of the police and use of teargas (Lauri, 2002).

The consequences of the infamous monument affair mentioned in the introduction of this paper - the removal of the Bronze Soldier from Tõnismägi in central Tallinn – were even fiercer, going as far as imposing economic sanctions on Estonia. These events also raised concern about the possible revival of neo-Nazi groups in Estonia and its consequences on the Russophone minority.

One might find it also interesting to look at the legal perspective of the removal. Initially under the jurisdiction of the Tallinn City Council, which showed no serious intentions to relocate the statue, the Bronze Soldier removal was possible mainly due to the activities of the Reform Party Prime Minister Andrus Ansip. In the beginning of 2014, he succeeded in pushing two major bills in the Estonian Parliament - War Graves Protection Act (signed on January 10, 2007) and Law on Forbidden Structures (approved on February 15, 2007). The former bills gave the right to the Parliament to overrule local governments in the decisions concerning monuments if such measures were to “ensure the honouring and dignified handling of the remains of the persons killed in the military action on the Estonian territory” (Riigikogu Press Service, 2007). The latter aimed at prohibiting the public display of monuments that would glorify the years of Soviet rule in Estonia. Although President Toomas Hendrik Ilves vetoed the Law on Forbidden Structures as anti-Constitutional, the War Graves Protection Act was still enough to dismantle the monument and have it moved to the Defence Forces cemetery. The case of the Bronze Soldier is significant, clearly

showing that Estonia went yet another step forward from Latvia and it was the state's decision to relocate the monument which is symbolic for a vast number of the country's population who commemorates the Great Patriotic War.

Another example of identity politics is the case of the restoration of the "Swedish Lion" monument in the eastern border city of Narva. The monument filled the place where once Lenin's monument stood but was then dismantled. Received as a present from Sweden, it commemorates the Battle of Narva and Sweden's victory over Russia. Stuart Burch and David J. Smith, in their article *Empty Spaces and the Value of Symbols: Estonia's 'War of Monuments' from Another Angle* (2007), argue that despite the common fears that such gesture would trigger a furious reaction in such a city as Narva, where the absolute majority (82%) of the population are Russian by ethnicity, the result was quite opposite. It showed that Estonia's Russians, despite "looking to the heritage of the Tsarist Russian rule" also see the Swedish Lion as a legitimate symbol of their city (Burch, Smith, 2007). The idea of the importance of their town in the course of the Great Northern War - keeping in mind that Sweden was, in the end, defeated - is appealing to the Narvians. As for the government of Estonia, the connection to the Swedish past - the "Golden Age" of Estonian history - is momentous in the light of the growing engagement of Sweden in Estonia. Therefore, despite the fact that "Russian" and "Estonian" perspectives on the Great Northern War are different, it can still be seen as a successful "discussion of the past" (Burch, Smith, 2007). There are, of course, limits to this success. The followed proposals of Narvians to erect a statue of Peter the Great in the city stumbled across the rejection of the Estonian government. Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip expressed his strong disapproval of the idea, arguing that this erection would be as a "spit in the face" of Estonia's inter-war leaders who spent a lot of effort to remove other Peter the Great monuments. Hence, the Estonian self-identification is strongly linked to that short period of Estonian self-rule and such a controversial act of going against the leaders of that period simply cannot be negotiated.

The urge to incorporate Estonian "Scandinavian-ness" can also be seen in the analysis of the War of Independence Victory Column. In 2005, Riigikogu launched a design competition of a monument that would commemorate thousands of people who died during Estonia's War of Independence, 1918-1920. The glass monument incorporates the Cross of Liberty - an Estonian special award established in 1919. The style of the award itself has been inspired by Finland's Order of the Cross of Liberty. The use of a cross is also important in terms of the ongoing debates on whether the Estonian flag should be changed from tricolour to the Scandinavian-cross design. The idea was proposed in 2001 by an Estonian politician, Kaarel Tarand, and generally shows the

importance of the country's connections to the Nordic countries and its self-portraying rather as "Nordic" than "Baltic".

### 2.3. Lithuania

While in Estonia and Latvia we see irrefutable attempts to get rid of everything in the public spaces that could bring up unpleasant Soviet memories, the case of Lithuania is somehow different. On the one hand, here, as in the rest of post-Soviet countries, a lot of monuments to Lenin and other Soviet figures were demolished right after the dissolution (with the majority of the monuments to Stalin torn off during the Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinization). On the other hand, the country - making up to 50 years of political dependence – started reconstructing monuments that the Soviets tried to get rid of. One of the first was the Three Crosses Monument that was built in 1916 but blown up under the order of Kremlin in 1950. The story of the Crosses goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and until 1869 similar wooden crosses stood on the same place (Hill of Three Crosses in the Kalnų Park).

The rich history of Lithuania goes back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, one of the largest countries in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The Grand Duchy covered the territories of the present day Belarus, some parts of Ukraine, Russia and Poland and formally existed until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Lithuania also formed a voluntary two-state union with Poland – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – that was established in 1569 and existed until the Third Partition of Poland in 1795. Therefore, Lithuania had a far richer independent history than her Baltic neighbours and did not have to reassert her identity by only linking it to the interwar period of independence. History also explains the strong ties with Poland, which are extremely important to Lithuanians until today. After the re-establishment of its independence, Lithuania erected a number of monuments to commemorate its history. The monument to the Grand Duke Gediminas, who ruled from 1316 to 1341, was erected in 1996. Gediminas is known to be one of the most significant figures in Lithuanian history and is also called "the founder", as it was under his rule that Lithuania tremendously expanded its territory. Lithuanians similarly erected monuments to Mindaugas (the first King of Lithuania) and Barbora Radvilaitė (the Queen of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth).

Another significant difference between Lithuania and its Baltic neighbours resides in its success in preserving its language and successfully resisting Russification by both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet occupation periods. The Russians who resided in Lithuania after the World War II

are said to be successfully integrated into Lithuania; the Russian minority here is not as numerous as in Latvia and Estonia and counts for less than 6%.

Lithuania's extensive history of freedom and independence, its language and culture - corroborated to its strong affiliation to Poland - all contribute to the representation of Lithuania as a Central European country with its role as a bridge between East and West. The country's aspirations were proven in 1989 by the estimations made by National France Geography institute according to which the unassailable geographic centre of Europe is located in the Lithuanian village of Purnuškiai, just 26 kilometres north from Vilnius. In 2004, symbolically, the year of its EU accession, Lithuania erected a monument with the white granite pillar with a crown of stars on the top. Hereby, the country's European-ness obtained a monumental representation.

The Lithuanian support for the opening of an outdoor museum of Grūtas Park shows a unique manner in which the country decided to deal with its controversial Communist past. Some Lithuanians criticize Grūtas Park saying that it is an imitation of the Soviet gulag, with an extensive collection of Soviet monuments and other attributes bringing up painful memories of the times of occupation. Nevertheless, the proponents of the park agree with the project founder, Viliūmas Malinauskas, when stating that the park's role is crucial as it ridicules the Soviet Union and helps to "understand what dictatorships are capable of and what tools they use to brainwash people" (Harrison, 2000). Rather than destroying or locking the monuments up in some warehouses, Lithuanians have chosen to rather acknowledge their past, to put it behind them, and move forward.

Lithuania was also the only Baltic country that created a monument commemorating the solidarity of the Baltic countries during the restoration of their independence in 1989. "The Road of Freedom" is a monument glorifying the live chain of people that joined their hands in a "Baltic Way", therefore demanding the acknowledgment of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the end of occupation. The sculpture is a collective creation – people could contribute to the Project and get a brick with his/her name stamped on it. Lithuania, hence, became the first country which monumentalized the recent past of its people and their non-violent resistance towards the Soviets.

## CONCLUSIONS

Breaking away from the Soviet Union together with the longed-for independence imposed a number of significant challenges on the former Soviet Baltic Republics. Being multiethnic, all the countries needed to undergo the nation-building process and, therefore, shape their identity politics. This paper builds on the concept that visual representations play an important role in the process of

a person's identification with particular "lieux de mémoire". Monuments can evoke specific feelings in people and therefore reveal a lot about the collective identity of some groups of people. The governments that face a problem in introducing a successful identity policy often use the tool of destruction/erection of monuments in order to shape the self-image and, more importantly, to deal with its past. In doing so, governments can face specific problems when these acts clash with some fundamental beliefs, some postulates of the collective identities of specific groups. The creation of a coherent identity is often doomed as it might only deepen the gap of misunderstanding between the groups.

The analysis of the development of Baltic States shows that, despite some features that these countries share (geographic position, history of several occupations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, re-establishment of the independence followed by introduction of pro-Western foreign policies), their similarity in terms of their political identities is more complicated. Similarity can be found between Estonia and Latvia, where the "Monument Wars" have constantly revealed the high degree of misunderstanding and incoherence between the various collective identities. A reason for that lies in the interpretation of history, more specifically, in the question of the role of the Soviets in the Great Patriotic War and the incorporation of states into the Union. The ongoing "memory wars" result in the attempts of the governments to cross out everything connecting them to the Soviet years from the public sites. These acts evoke indignation and strong condemnation among those who share a special feeling of attachment to these sites; thus, the countries lack in the ability to put the past behind and move into the modern period of their policies. Although none of the monuments that were described in the present article was subject of the UNESCO heritage protection programs, the case of the Bronze Soldier showed how the Government was keen to even change national laws in order to proceed with the removal. In Latvia, the removal of the Victory Memorial would require the same actions and this leaves Latvian government hesitating under the pressures of both – the part of the nation that equates the Soviet period of its history with occupation and those Russophone groups who still revere the Great Patriotic War.

When it comes to Lithuania, on the other hand, the "monument war" never broke out and even though the opening of the Grūtas Park left a lot of people in Lithuania discontent, its placement (far from the city centre, in the village) together with an argument that the main idea is too ridicule not to glorify the Soviet Union, promises no further conflicts around the park. Moreover, the Park symbolizes that a lot of Lithuanians are eager to acknowledge their controversial past and move on to the phase of reconciliation.

There are also some specific remarks that can be derived from the monument analysis in the Baltic States. Examples of the Swedish Lion monument in Narva and the cross-shaped War of Independence Victory Column in Tallinn reveal the attempts to promote and strengthen the country's Nordic identity. At the same time, Lithuania accentuates its Central European-ness and puts a special stress on her relations with Poland, opening monuments that could remind its citizens of their country's rich cultural heritage and diverse history that goes back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

It is necessary to acknowledge and point out one limitation of the present research, namely, the number of the cases that have been investigated in this paper. Though carefully selecting and focusing on the most representative examples of the torn down/erected monuments, this analysis would benefit from an expansion of the number of cases. However, it is important to stress that the main aim of the article is to contribute to the existing studies suggesting an ingenious method of identity politics analysis. Through the comparison of the attitude towards the post-Soviet monuments in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania and the study of the monuments built in the new period of their independence, this paper showed and proved that even "stone" can bring us closer to understanding some aspects of the complexity of identity transformation. The analysis of the ways in which these seemingly stationary items are treated in each country should carry on as it can only enrich the existing research of the past and current issues of the Baltic States development.

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