

REPORT

RUSSIAN BATTLES OVER HISTORICAL NARRATIVES: THE CASE OF PRAGUE'S KONEV STATUE



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1. CONTEXT

The recent escalation in relations between the Czech Republic and Russia, relating to the removal of a Marshal Konev statue, is just another case of Russia waging a “battle” with a post-Communist country over historical narratives. This certainly won’t be the last clash over the interpretation of historical events and presentation of the Soviet Union and its leaders.

The more Russia continues to look to the past in search of its modern identity and perceived status as a global superpower, the less critical and balanced its view of 20th century history becomes. Russian leadership, which builds its own legitimacy by drawing parallels with the Soviet Union, whose crimes it attempts to hide, is becoming “a hostage” of this unilateral and uncompromised interpretation of its own history. This in turn leads to confrontations with former Soviet satellites and post-Soviet republics over differing interpretations.

The Kremlin has, for a long time, sought to (re)interpret 20th century history, in particular WWII. Russia has attempted to monopolise this history and, therefore, any challenges to the role and actions of the Soviet Union are direct challenges to Russia itself.

The removal of a Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn (in 2007) is often seen as the first of the clashes regarding historical narratives. Since then, these disputes have intensified and become more frequent. Furthermore, Russia has used more sophisticated and aggressive methods “to promote” its own historical narratives. These methods only fuel further escalation in its bilateral relations with various post-Communist countries.

Below, we not only provide some basic facts and a timeline documenting the recent escalation of the conflict around the removal of the Marshal Konev statue, but also an overview of similar historical disputes between Russian and other post-Communist countries.

We conclude with a set of recommendations that the Czech authorities should undertake. These recommendations are rather universal and, as such, could be applied by any other state that finds itself in a situation similar to that of the Czech Republic.

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2. SIMILAR WWII-RELATED DISPUTES BETWEEN RUSSIA AND POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Poland

After the European Parliament approved a [resolution](#) in September 2019 that emphasised the decisive role played by the [Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact](#) and its secret protocol in starting WWII, Russian President Putin intensified his efforts to downplay the significance of the pact and point to other events seen as instrumental in starting the war.

In December 2019, during a CIS summit, Putin [affirmed](#) that Poland were responsible for the outbreak of WWII and accused, among others, the then Polish authorities of colluding with Hitler before the partition of Czechoslovakia, driven by their appetite for expansion:

“It is noteworthy that representatives of Poland were not invited to the Munich conference, and that their interests there were in fact represented by Hitler.

It was well known to other European countries, including to both Great Britain and France, that Germany and Poland acted together.

It was them [the Polish authorities] who, while pursuing their mercenary and exorbitantly overgrown ambitions, laid their people, the Polish people, open to attack from Germany’s military machine, and, moreover, generally contributed to the beginning of the Second World War”.

This “specific” reading of history was strongly condemned by [Polish](#) and [European](#) authorities. In Russia, however, the rehabilitation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the falsification of the events around the start of WWII seem to bear fruit: according to a [poll](#) conducted by the Levada Centre among the Russian population, 53 percent of respondents believed in 2019 that “the Red Army occupied part of eastern Poland in September 1939 in order to help the local Ukrainian and Belarusian population”. Only 16 percent acknowledged that Stalin and Hitler had agreed to divide Poland between them.

For a debunking of Putin’s historical narratives on the start of World War II, see: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/21/vladimir-putin-wants-to-rewrite-the-history-of-world-war-ii/>

Baltics

Putin’s rehabilitation of Soviet-era leaders and symbols, his attempts to redeem the darker pages of Soviet history, have produced examples of historical revisionism in relation to the Baltic Republics too. Since the mid-2000s, the Kremlin has been increasingly inclined to deny Soviet occupation of the Baltics during WWII, replacing it with the version of their voluntary incorporation and “liberation” from Nazi occupation.

During a 2005 press conference, held a few days before the celebrations of May 9th, the Kremlin’s European affairs chief Sergei Yastrzhembsky [stated](#):

“There was no occupation, there were agreements at the time with the legitimately elected authorities in the Baltic countries... One cannot use the term ‘occupation’ to describe those historical events, at that time, the troop deployment took place on an agreed basis and with the clearly expressed agreement of the existing authorities in the Baltic republics”.

In reality, Soviet troops illegally entered the Baltics in June 1940, as foreseen in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, before being driven out by Nazi forces one year later. At the end of the war, the Red Army retook the Baltics and incorporated them into the Soviet Union.

Putin himself discouraged this version of history when, in 2005, through a syllogism, he **suggested**:

"If the Baltic countries had joined the Soviet Union in 1939, then in 1945 the Soviet Union could not have occupied them, because they were already part of the Soviet Union".

This was in part a response to the refusal of the presidents of Estonia and Lithuania to participate in the Moscow celebrations of Victory Day. The presidents of the three Baltic Republics issued a joint **statement** inviting all European leaders to counter Russia's attempts to revise history.

More on the Kremlin's refusal to acknowledge the forcible annexation of the Baltic states can be read here: <https://lithuaniatribune.com/anatomy-of-russias-information-warfare-in-the-baltic-states/> and here: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/07/14/how-russia-sees-baltic-sovereignty-a48143>

Bulgaria

In late 2017, Russia's MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova's comments regarding the vandalism of a Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia caused outrage in Bulgaria. Condemning the authors of the anti-Semitic slogans on the monument, she commented:

"This is especially cynical considering that during WWII our soldiers prevented the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria and saved some 50,000 people from imminent death. What is particularly appalling here is not even the act of vandalism itself, but that those who committed it are absolutely ignorant about their own history".

Her comments were met with harsh criticism from across Bulgaria's political spectrum and society, even receiving condemnation from more pro-Russian forces in the country like the Defence Minister and the leader of the far-right Bulgarian National Movement Krasimir Karakachanov – who called Zakharova's comments a "**historical scandal**".

As **noted**, the rescue of Bulgarian Jews from Nazi camps is a point of national pride for many Bulgarians. In March 1943, Boris III, the then king of Nazi-allied Bulgaria, refused to hand over Bulgaria's Jews who were set to be deported, yielding to the pressure of Bulgarian politicians and Church. Following Zakharova's words, the Bulgarian MFA released a **statement** noting that:

"It was not the Soviet army, but the Bulgarian people who saved the Bulgarian Jews. When representatives of the Bulgarian political, economic and intellectual elite ... and senior hierarchs of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church stood with the Jews gathered for deportation, the Red Army was thousands of kilometres away from the borders of Bulgaria".

Moscow has failed to **officially denounce** Zakharova's claims.

The full story can be read here: <https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/11/05/russian-embassy-in-sofia-attempts-new-spin-in-row-on-claims-soviets-rescued-bulgarian-jews-from-holocaust/>; for the reactions to Zakharova's statement among the Jewish community outside Bulgaria, see: <https://www.ajc.org/news/ajc-ceo-david-harris-responds-to-russian-historical-revisionism-on-bulgaria>

3. TIMELINE OF THE CONFLICT AROUND THE REMOVAL OF MARSHAL KONEV'S STATUE AND RESPECTIVE RUSSIAN REACTIONS

1980

- A statue of Marshal Ivan Konev was erected in May 1980 in Czechoslovakia. It was meant to commemorate his role in liberating the city of Prague in May 1945.¹

November 2014

- The statue of Konev was vandalized for the first time. Someone sprayed the bottom half of it with pink paint. The administration of Prague 6 removed the paint.²

May 2015

- The local authorities of Prague 6 planned to remove the statue, replacing it with further explanatory information about Konev's life and role in various historical events, such as his involvement in the bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956.³

November 2017

- During an official state visit to Russia, Czech President Miloš Zeman stated that the statue "must remain in Prague".⁴
- The statue was again subject to vandalism from anonymous individuals, who spray-painted the years 1956, 1961, 1968 and 2017 on it.⁵
- It was decided by the Prague 6 Council that additional information about Konev's post-war actions would be added to the statue.⁶

January 2018

- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) sent an open letter to the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating the decision about the monument of Marshal Konev was too important to be decided by the local administration and, therefore, the statue should be left in its original state.⁷

May 2018

- The statue was once again vandalized – again with pink spray paint. The Prague 6 administration said they would remove it.⁸

1 „Zpátky v čase. Koněvův pomník odhalili v roce 1980. Dnes budí kontroverze," ČT 24, 30. 9. 2019, accessed 13. 5. 2020, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/2910446-zpatky-v-case-konevuv-pomnik-odhalili-v-roce-1980-dnes-budi-kontroverze>

2 „Sochu maršála Koněva v Praze 6 někdo natřel růžovou barvou," iDnes, 20. 11. 2014, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://praha.idnes.cz/sochu-marsala-koneva-v-praze-6-nekdo-natrel-ruzovou-barvou-pne-/metro.aspx?c=A141120_105037_co-se-deje_jbs

3 „Sochu Koněva doplní cedule," Pražský deník, 23. 5. 2015, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://prazsky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/sochu-koneva-doplni-cedule-20150523.html

4 „Socha maršála Koněva v Praze musí zůstat, řekl Zeman ruské agentuře," Lidovky, 21. 11. 2017, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/zeman-dal-rozhovor-ruske-agentura-tass.A171121_112343_in_domov_rsa

5 „Vandalové poničili sochu maršála Koněva. Na podstavec nasprejovali červené letopočty," iHned, 23. 11. 2017, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://domaci.ihned.cz/c1-65966350-vandalove-ponicili-sochu-marsala-koneva-na-podstavec-nasprejovali-cervene-letopocty>

6 „ZASTUPITELSTVO PRAHY 6 PŘIJALO USNESENÍ K POMNÍKU MARŠÁLA KONĚVA," Praha6, 24. 11. 2017, accessed 14. 4. 2020, <https://www.praha6.cz/media?zprava=194>

7 „Pražskou sochu maršála Koněva řeší velvyslanci i ruské ministerstvo. Česká strana neskrývá překvapení," iRozhlas, 4. 1. 2018, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/socha-marsala-koneva-tabulky-rusko-velvyslanectvi-ministerstvo_1801041200_mos

8 „'Maršál Koněv už je zase růžovej.' K polití sochy barvou se přihlásila skupina Čeští vlastenci," iRozhlas, 8. 5. 2018, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/marsal-konev-praha-6-socha-bubenec-ruzova-druha-svetova-val-ka_1805081203_dp

- The Russian MFA issued a statement regarding the statue of Marshal Konev. In this statement, it condemned the “act of vandalism” and said it expected an immediate response from the Czech authorities, including the “preservation of the monument in its original form”.⁹

August 2018

- An explanatory plaque was added to the statue, highlighting Konev’s role in the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, in the Berlin crisis in 1961 and in the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968.¹⁰

August 2019

- The statue was vandalized once again. The unknown vandal used red paint and mentioned crucial years in Konev’s career, including 1956 and 1968. The Mayor of Prague 6, Ondřej Kolář, stated that vandalism of the statue was happening regularly, twice a year – in May and in August. Prague 6 also urged the Russian Embassy to take the statue.¹¹
- The Russian Embassy condemned the comments from Ondřej Kolář and other local officials suggesting the Embassy should take statue and stated that they were “indignant” by the claims.¹²
- The statue was covered to avoid more incidents.¹³
- The Russian Embassy in Prague stated on Facebook that the covering of the statue was a disgrace to deceased Red Army soldiers, who died fighting for Czechoslovakia’s freedom.¹⁴
- The mayor of Prague 6 was given police protection for the first time, as he had started to receive death threats following the covering of the statue.¹⁵
- Following the covering, multiple incidents have occurred with people trying to unwrap the statue.¹⁶

September 2019

- The Prague 6 city council decided that the statue of Konev should be permanently removed and replaced by a monument to heroes.¹⁷
- On September 6th, the Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky compared Kolar to a Nazi.

9 “Comment by the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department on the act of vandalism committed in Prague on the monument to Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev”, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 8. 5. 2018, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/main_en/-/asset_publisher/G51ijnfMMNKX/content/id/3211994

10 „U sochy maršála Koněva odhalili vysvětlující desky. Přepisujete historii, protestovali komunisté,” Aktuálně, 21. 8. 2018, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/u-sochy-marsala-koneva-odhalili-vysvetlujici-desky-prepisuje/r~6408ca48a55011e8b634ac1f6b220ee8/>

11 „Někdo znovu polil barvou sochu maršála Koněva. „Zůstane pomalovaná,” oznámila Praha 6,” iRozhlas, 22. 8. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dejvice-socha-konec-vandalismus-ivan-marsal-praha-6-trestny-cin-pachatel-sprej_1908221524_mpr

12 Посольство России в Чехии, „Komentář velvyslanectví Ruské federace v České republice v souvislosti s aktem vandalismu vůči pomníku maršála Sovětského svazu I.S.Koněva,” Facebook, 22. 8. 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/AmbRusCz/posts/2240843419469692>

13 „Starosta Prahy 6 Kolář má policejní ochranu. Vyhrožují mu kvůli Koněvovi,” iDnes, 30. 8. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/pomnik-marsala-koneva-v-praze-6-zakryla-plachta-ruska-ambasada.A190830_103310_praha-zpravy_rsr

14 Посольство России в Чехии, „Komentář velvyslanectví Ruské federace v České republice v souvislosti s vývojem situace kolem pomníku maršála Sovětského svazu I.S.Koněva,” Facebook, 30. 8. 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/AmbRusCz/posts/2246045038949530>

15 „Starosta Prahy 6 Kolář má policejní ochranu. Vyhrožují mu kvůli Koněvovi,” iDnes, 30. 8. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/pomnik-marsala-koneva-v-praze-6-zakryla-plachta-ruska-ambasada.A190830_103310_praha-zpravy_rsr

16 „Třetí incident od zakrytí památníku Koněva. Muž přeřezal pásy u plachty,” iDnes, 31. 8. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/socha-marsala-koneva-mestska-police-zakryti.A190831_085737_praha-zpravy_brzy

17 „Praha 6 schválila odstranění Koněva, nahradí ho památník hrdinů,” iDnes, 12. 9. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/socha-koneva-v-zastupitelstvo-prahy-6-premiseni-pomniku.A190910_085328_praha-zpravy_rsr

The Russian MFA also warned that the act may have consequences.¹⁸

- In response to Medinsky's comment, the Czech MFA Tomáš Petříček said an apology was necessary.¹⁹
- The Russian MFA argued they couldn't move the statue to Russia because its location was significant, they claimed removing it from Prague would be a violation of the 1993 Treaty on Friendly Relations and Cooperation between Russia and the Czech Republic.²⁰
- The Russian MFA accused the Czech Republic of starting a "war" on symbols due to the removal of Konev's statue.²¹
- The Czech MFA told the Russian Ambassador Alexander Zmeyerovsky that Russia should not interfere in Czech internal affairs and that he should protest the offensive language used by some Russian Government officials.²²

December 2019

- The Russian MFA stated they were thankful for the proposal from the former Slovak Prime Minister Ján Čarnogurský, who had offered to move the statue to Slovakia, however they wanted the monument to remain in Prague.²³

April 2020

- The statue of Marshal Konev was removed on April 3rd. According to the mayor of Prague 6 Ondřej Kolář, the removal was agreed upon some time ago and the state of emergency was used to simplify the removal. The statue is set to be placed in the planned Museum of the 20th century.²⁴
- The Czech Embassy in Moscow was attacked on the 5th of April by a group of extremists (Other Russia claimed responsibility) as a reaction to the removal of Konev's statue. They used smoke bombs and vandalised the property.²⁵
- The Czech MFA Tomas Petricek sent a diplomatic note to Russia condemning the attack on the Embassy. He stated that such attacks should not happen again, and that Russia must protect the

18 "Prague To Remove Statue Of WWII Soviet Marshal, Sparking Moscow's Ire," Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, 13. 9. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/prague-to-remove-statue-of-wwii-soviet-marshal-sparking-moscow-s-ire/30161806.html>

19 „Pomohla by omluva, reaguje Petříček na slova ruského ministra o nacistech," iDnes, 6. 9. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/petricek-ministr-zahranici-rusko-kultury-medinskij-vyrok-kolar-starosta-praha-6-nacista-konev-pomnik.A190906_190128_domaci_pmk

20 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the idea of moving the monument to Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 11. 9. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/3782388

21 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the idea of moving the monument to Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 11. 9. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/3782388

22 „Prohlášení MZV k předvolání velvyslance Ruské federace," Velvyslanectví České republiky v Moskvě, 13. 9. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mzv.cz/moscow/cz/aktuality/prohlaseni_mzv_k_predvolani_velvyslance.html

23 "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 26, 2019," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26. 12. 2019, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3984138#12

24 „Praha 6 odstranila sochu Koněva. Využili jsme nouzového stavu, připustil starosta," Novinky.cz, 3. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/praha-6-odstranila-sochu-marsala-koneva-40319208?seq_no=7&source=h-p&dop_ab_variant=327501&dop_source_zone_name=novinky.szhnp.box

25 "Czech Embassy In Moscow Attacked After Prague Removes Soviet Commander's Statue," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 6. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-embassy-in-moscow-attacked-after-prague-removes-soviet-commander-s-statue/30535440.html>

Embassy.²⁶

- Russia's Investigative Committee were said to have opened a criminal case against Prague authorities involved in the removal of the Konev statue.²⁷
- The criminal case was opened on Sergei Shoigu's (Minister of Defence, RF) recommendation. According to Russian authorities, the removal of the statue was a violation of a Russian law on war memorials abroad.²⁸
- The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement condemning Russian interference in Czech internal affairs. It also stated that the relocation of the statue to a different place was not a violation of the 1993 Treaty and that if Russia continued to make similar statements, it will be a sign that it has lost interest "in the development of mutually beneficial relationships".²⁹
- The Czech MFA also claimed that the Czech Republic takes good care of war graves, unlike the Russian Federation, based on a 1999 Treaty.³⁰
- Russia wrote to the Czech Minister of Defence, saying that it wanted the statue of Konev. A spokesperson explained that the Ministry could not give it to Russia because it is property of Prague 6.³¹
- The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov said the removal of the statue was cynical, a violation of the 1993 Treaty and warned against aggravating the situation.³²
- The Social Council in Moscow suggested that the underground station named after Prague should be renamed Marshal Konev, as a reaction to the removal of the statue.³³
- The Czech consulate in St. Petersburg was attacked by Other Russia.³⁴
- The Russian MFA addressed the removal of the statue in a briefing by spokesperson Maria Zakharova, saying it was cynical and again stating that it was in violation of the 1993 Treaty on Friendly Relations and Cooperation and that Russia could take actions against the Czech

26 „Musíte naši ambasádu chránit, obrací se Petříček na Rusko po útoku extremistů“, Novinky.cz, 6. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/musite-nasi-ambasadu-chranit-obraci-se-petricek-na-rusko-po-utoku-extremistu-40319558>

27 "Russia opens criminal case after Czech officials remove Soviet statue," The Guardian, 10. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/russia-opens-criminal-case-after-czech-officials-remove-soviet-statue>

28 „Rusko chce po obraně odstraněnou sochu maršála Koněva. ‚Není naše,‘ brání se ministerstvo“, iRozhlas, 10. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/socha-konev-praha-rusko-lubomir-metnar-ministerstvo-obrany-praha-6_2004100958_kro

29 „Prohlášení MZV k vyjádření Ruské federace“, Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky, 10. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/prohlaseni_a_stanoviska/x2020_04_10_prohlase-ni_mzv_k_vyjadrenim_ruske.html

30 „Prohlášení MZV k vyjádření Ruské federace“, Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky, 10. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/prohlaseni_a_stanoviska/x2020_04_10_prohlase-ni_mzv_k_vyjadrenim_ruske.html

31 „Rusko chce po obraně odstraněnou sochu maršála Koněva. ‚Není naše,‘ brání se ministerstvo“, iRozhlas, 10. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/socha-konev-praha-rusko-lubomir-metnar-ministerstvo-obrany-praha-6_2004100958_kro

32 "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Russian and foreign media via video-conference on urgent international issues, Moscow, April 14, 2020," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 14. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/4099053

33 „Maršála Koněva místo Pražské. Moskevská společenská rada chce přejmenovat stanici metra“, ČT24, 16. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/svet/3077597-marsala-koneva-misto-prazske-moskevaska-spolecenska-rada-chce-prejmenovat-stanici-metra>

34 „Ruská policie nás o útoku na náš konzulát vůbec neinformovala, diví se český velvyslanec“, iRozhlas, 17. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/ruska-policie-nas-o-dalsim-utoku-na-nasi-ambasadu-vubec-neinformovala-divi-se_2004171307_mim

Republic.³⁵

- Weekly newsmagazine Respekt reported a Russian man coming to the Czech Republic under diplomatic protection. He was allegedly carrying with him ricin (a deadly poison) and was targeting the mayor of Prague Zdeněk Hřib and the mayor of Prague 6 Ondřej Kolář.³⁶
- The Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Tomáš Petříček met with the Russian Ambassador Alexander Zmeyerovsky and warned him about the possible consequences if any Czech politicians were hurt or killed.³⁷
- The Russian Embassy, on Facebook, condemned the information published in the Respekt article and sent a note to the Czech MFA asking it to stop such reporting.³⁸
- The Mayor of Prague 6 Ondřej Kolář was given police protection for a second time - his whereabouts is still unknown. According to Kolář "[The police protection] was given to me based on some facts, and the facts are, that there is a Russian man, whose job is to destroy me. Not only me but also Mr Hřib and Mr Novotný".³⁹
- The Russian MFA discussed the Czech Republic in a briefing. Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed the information reported in Respekt was fake news and said that such reporting could lead to "very serious consequences".⁴⁰
- The head of Security Information Service (BIS) Koudelka confirmed to Czech MPs in the Committee on Security that the Russian man was still in the Czech Republic and may be a threat to the three politicians under police protection.⁴¹
- One MP noted that it was possible the man was carrying a form of poison, however it was not clear whether this was ricin.⁴²
- According to DeníkN, the man was working for Russian intelligence and is currently under diplomatic protection in the Russian Embassy. The Czech Republic is not planning to expel him yet.⁴³

35 "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 23, 2020," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 23. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/posledniye_dobavleniye/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/4105092#16

36 „MUŽ S RICINEM," Respekt, 26. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2020/18/muz-s-ricinem>

37 „O vaší akci víme. Hřibovi, Novotnému a Kolářovi se nesmí nic stát, varovala česká vláda Rusko," DeníkN, 27. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://denikn.cz/348931/o-vasi-akci-vime-hribovi-novotnemu-a-kolarovi-se-nesmi-nic-stat-varovala-ceska-vlada-rusko/?ref=in>

38 Посольство России в Чехии, „Komentář Velvyslanectví Ruské federace v České republice," Facebook, 27. 4. 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/AmbRusCz/photos/a.1385358595018183/2445964102290955/?type=3&theater>

39 „Je tu Rus, který má za úkol mě a Hřiba zlikvidovat, řekl starosta Kolář," Novinky.cz, 28. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/je-tu-rus-ktery-ma-za-ukol-me-a-hriba-zlikvidovat-rekl-starosta-kolar-4032226>

40 "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, April 29, 2020," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 28. 4. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4108704#11

41 „Rus, který může představovat nebezpečí pro Hřiba a spol., je stále v Praze. Česko se ho vyhostit nechystá," DeníkN, 6. 5. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://denikn.cz/355197/rus-ktery-muze-predstavovat-nebezpeci-pro-hriba-a-spol-je-stale-v-praze-cesko-se-ho-vyhostit-nechysta/?ref=tit1>

42 „Rus, který může představovat nebezpečí pro Hřiba a spol., je stále v Praze. Česko se ho vyhostit nechystá," DeníkN, 6. 5. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://denikn.cz/355197/rus-ktery-muze-predstavovat-nebezpeci-pro-hriba-a-spol-je-stale-v-praze-cesko-se-ho-vyhostit-nechysta/?ref=tit1>

43 „Rus, který může představovat nebezpečí pro Hřiba a spol., je stále v Praze. Česko se ho vyhostit nechystá," DeníkN, 6. 5. 2020, accessed 14. 5. 2020, <https://denikn.cz/355197/rus-ktery-muze-predstavovat-nebezpeci-pro-hriba-a-spol-je-stale-v-praze-cesko-se-ho-vyhostit-nechysta/?ref=tit1>

4. SUGGESTED REACTIONS TO SIMILAR CASES

In general, any meaningful reaction to the Russian behaviour related to historical issues should address and counter, first of all, objectives of Russia. These are:

- a) Telling the domestic Russian audience that Russian authorities would not tolerate such „hostile“ acts abroad and that they would fiercely defend their national interests with all possible means. This objective is especially necessary when Russia is facing internal problems, such as the coronavirus pandemic;
- b) Channeling and redirecting public attention (and anger) in Russia away from domestic problems to alternative issues abroad;

With regard to the targeted country:

- c) Testing the red lines and limits of that country's response to such provocative and hostile acts by further escalating pressure on national authorities and democratically elected politicians of the country concerned;
- d) Polarising domestic political debates and further deepening political cleavages in the given country and thus weakening democratic political institutions and public trust in them;
- e) Creating a hostile and hateful atmosphere in the society of the targeted country, mainly through local proxies (pro-Russian activists including radical Left- and Right-wing extremists), who launch verbal attacks and threats to politicians and other individuals;
- f) „Neutralising“ politicians and other individuals who challenge (or may in the future challenge) Russian historical narratives by both a) criminalising their decisions and activities (according to Russian law), possibly issuing international arrest warrants, thus causing them anxiety when traveling abroad and b) creating an uncertainty with regard to their personal security (through, for example, threats to their life);
- g) Setting a precedent for the actions they will take towards other countries who take a similar path, for example also seeking to remove Soviet monuments.

While little can be done by the authorities of the targeted country with regard to Russian objectives a) and b), they should be able to work to tackle and respond to the other objectives.

Here is a set of measures and reactions that we deem necessary:

- Strong and resolute political reaction to Russian threats and interference into internal affairs. Countries should immediately state that it is unacceptable for Russian authorities to launch „criminal prosecutions“ of democratically elected politicians based on Russian domestic law, which is unprecedented in the domain of international relations.

Preferably, this formal statement should come from the highest possible political positions (prime minister, government, parliament);

- Ideally, such a resolute statement should be supported by all mainstream democratic political parties in order to demonstrate national unity and consensus on such historical issues, thus preventing Russia from further exploiting domestic political cleavages and disputes;
- Following the release of the statement, the national authorities should consult their Moscow Ambassador and consider the expulsion of Russian diplomats;
- Key political actors representing both the government and the national parliament should attempt to seek international support on the issue and should try to build an international coalition of like-

minded countries, especially those who have been, or might be, facing similar Russian pressure and behaviour;

- International bodies and structures, such as the various EU institutions (European Parliament, EU Council) and/or the parliamentary assemblies of the Council of Europe, OSCE or NATO should be approached in order to get formal resolutions of support adopted.
- Further international projects aimed at studying and analysing historical events, which Russia is exploiting and monopolising by imposing their own narrative on them, should be continued or re-launched in order to provide a strong objective intellectual reply to such misuse of historical topics for the purpose of Russian (domestic) propaganda.

Regarding the recent Czech case specifically, we would argue that following steps should have been considered:

- 1) Immediately after official Russian statements about the launch of a criminal prosecution of Czech politicians, the Czech authorities should have recalled their Ambassador in Moscow for consultations and expelled a certain number of Russian diplomats in Prague, aiming at those who work under the diplomatic cover for Russian intelligence agencies.
- 2) Preferably, these steps should be coordinated with other partner countries, which had either been targeted with similar Russian assaults or could potentially be the subject to such attacks in the future. These partner countries, as a sign of solidarity and support, could join the Czech Republic in expelling Russian diplomats, similar to the coordinated response following the Skripal poisoning.

There could be two major arguments why such a response should be avoided:

- 1) Russia will reciprocally expel Czech (other countries') diplomats from Russia. Given the asymmetrical numbers of Czech and Russian diplomats deployed in each other's countries, this could lead to significantly reduced capabilities of the Czech diplomatic mission in Moscow;
- 2) This might harm Czech economic interests and interests of individual Czech companies present in or exporting their production to Russia.

With regards to the first point, we believe that, in the long-term, it is better to start building Czech diplomatic presence in Russia from scratch, with an equal number of diplomats in each country.

The latter economic argument can be tackled by the fact that the Czech exports to Russia amount to only 2 % of total Czech exports. This means that Russia is not among the key export destinations of the Czech Republic.