

The concept of positive de-Sovietization.

# THE MEANING OF NEW MONUMENT- MAKING

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## abstract

The events in Ukraine prompted the countries of East-Central Europe to review their approach to the monuments and collective memory signs that have remained from the Soviet era. Although the region regards the dismantling of Soviet monuments in relation to de-Sovietization that started around 1990, the removal of the remaining Soviet artefacts from public spaces was also related to the international situation in 2013–2014 and 2022, almost thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the dominant research of de-Sovietization focus on the elimination of Soviet monuments, i.e. by nature, a negative aspect of de-Sovietization based on the removal and dismantling of monuments, the article presents the concept of positive de-Sovietization based on the case analysis of Lithuanian monuments. The de-Sovietization process is considered dual: the removal of Soviet monuments is accompanied by the construction of the new ones establishing a new historical narrative and state's identity. It can be defined as a positive aspect of de-Sovietization that makes its implementation complete.

**KEYWORDS:** Sovietization, de-Sovietization, monuments, ontological security, Lithuania

In recent years, disputes over monuments have acquired the name of monument wars both in Europe and the US. From the academic point of view, monuments are collective memory practices best indicating the direction of state narrative (its identity). When a regime changes, monuments usually fall first.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, recent years have marked somewhat different processes. They focus on the change of monuments and other practices of collective memory not related to major changes of the regime but linked to the identity implications of the states. In 2022, the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the East-Central European region encouraged a new debate wave concerning the Soviet heritage, particularly the remaining monuments. The discussions were often followed by the demolition of Soviet monuments. Some academics called it the third wave of de-Sovietization or the second one that began in 2014–2015<sup>2</sup> after the annexation of Crimea (continuation). The events in 2014 and especially the war in Ukraine in 2022 marked the processes related to changes in memory politics and rethinking of the Soviet heritage in the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine and other former Soviet bloc states. It has also given an impetus to the study of scientific research related to de-Sovietization after thirty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The process of de-Sovietization in Lithuania has been analyzed fragmentarily, mostly by lawyers and (cultural) historians.



The Freedom Monument  
in Plungė, Lithuania.  
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For example, the juristic regulation was examined from the legal point of view by Dovilė Sagatienė and Karolina Mickutė.<sup>3</sup> In the field of culture and literature, it was analyzed by Solveiga Daugirdaitė<sup>4</sup>, Skaidra Trilupaitytė<sup>5</sup> and Dalia Satkauskytė.<sup>6</sup> The research on monumental practices is dominated by the removal of monuments. They describe the cases of demolition,<sup>7</sup> explain how international events lead to the deconstruction of Soviet monuments<sup>8</sup> and argue that the removal of monuments marks the exit from the symbolic space of Russia.

**AT THE ACADEMIC LEVEL**, Lithuania is not an exception. The tendency to pay attention to the removal of monuments and the negative aspect of de-Sovietization are reflected in other countries of East-Central Europe as well. As the main starting point of the research, it dominates the Czech<sup>9</sup> and Polish<sup>10</sup> case studies. In Estonia, the case of The Bronze Soldier's transfer to a cemetery is often examined.<sup>11</sup> It has also received special attention in Ukraine where it has earned the name *Leninopad* (the Leninfall).<sup>12</sup>

The monuments in public spaces in Lithuania as well as other countries of the post-Soviet era prove that they always were an important part of de-Sovietization. "During and after democratic transition in Poland, the decommunization of urban toponomy became an important aspect of symbolic changes", according to Rozycki Bartłomiej.<sup>13</sup> It can be noticed in Ukraine as well that decommunization was explicitly intended to address the Soviet-era heritage of Ukraine's built environment.<sup>14</sup> In Lithuania and other states of the Baltic region monuments and statues have been at the center of the decommunization debate.<sup>15</sup>

According to James E. Young, monuments are perceived as those practices that are the dominating form of expression of memory culture best reflecting the tendencies of the state's collective memory.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that de-Sovietization is closely related to perhaps its most visible material signs in public spaces. Peter Carrier writes that the search for political legitimization via symbolic possession of urban spaces has been consistent from antiquity onwards,<sup>17</sup> and symbolic filling of public spaces is usually implemented through monuments. Physically tangible public spaces with visual expression become significant in the process of de-Sovietization as the creation and consolidation of a new type of society and state require visual signs of a new political, legal, and symbolic existence, i.e. a state's "memory landscape" must be reshaped.<sup>18</sup>

However, the process of destroying the signs of the old regime was discussed and legally regulated as it can be perceived as a negative aspect of de-Sovietization due to its nature, i.e. demolition, destruction, and removal. Although it is a process aimed at distancing from the old regime and leaving its symbolic space, still, the de-Sovietization process includes not only the removal of the remnants of the old regime but also "entails the creation of

a new set of democratic institutions".<sup>19</sup> It means that the process of demolition and destruction is always accompanied by the creation of new symbolic, legal, and political practices.

**IN TERMS OF** collective memory, this can be defined as the positive aspect: the emergence of new monumental practices that shape an identity, thereby legitimizing a new regime at the margins of the de-Sovietization debate. Even though academic research and legal regulation focus on the negative aspect (removal of monuments), the positive dimension – new monumental practices – raises various questions related to social cohesion, ontological (in)security, pluralism and the inclusion of collective memory formation, etc. The role of collective memory and monuments highlighted by the war in Ukraine today is associated with the concept of ontological (in)security<sup>20</sup>, while the lack of pluralism formation of a certain narrative about the state through various practices, especially monuments, creates new security problems related to the loss of social cohesion, decreasing trust in the state and its institutions, confrontation, and the lack of resistance to misinformation. To put it simply, breaking links with the political regime by removing its monumental signs is not all. It is important how and what ideas and meanings fill a newly emerged space.

The replacement of the monuments of the old regime with

new ones that became the object of debate and disagreement or even division in the countries of East-Central Europe: "Coming to terms with the recent and more distant past has proven to be a challenging task for political elites and citizens in independent Ukraine".<sup>21</sup> Here discussions centered on the controversial Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its armed wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), and memory of their leaders.<sup>22</sup> In Poland, collective memory related to the Holocaust caused disagreements and inter-

national criticism.<sup>23</sup> Questions addressed the uncertain relation between the narrative of collective memory created at the municipal and national levels. "Fragmentation and diversification of commemorative practices at the local level that has the most potential to challenge a coherent and nationalizing version of the historical past propagated by the state".<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile in Lithuania, different collective memory practices, including monuments related to the memory of the Soviet and Nazi occupations, are subject to criticism and public debate.<sup>25</sup> These examples testify to the tensions surrounding the new memory narrative – in other words, the positive aspect of de-Sovietization that emerges from the removal of sites previously occupied by demolished Soviet monuments and other forms of collective memory.

**THIS ARTICLE AIMS** to define the positive aspect of de-Sovietization by introducing a theoretical definition of the positive de-Sovietization. The practical analysis of monuments built in Lithuania

## **"IN LITHUANIA AND OTHER STATES OF THE BALTIC REGION MONUMENTS AND STATUES HAVE BEEN AT THE CENTER OF THE DECOMMUNIZATION DEBATE."**

after 1990 reinforces the theoretical concept of positive de-Sovietization. It is based on the principles of multimodal discourse analysis following the classical understanding of multimodality in qualitative research analyses. Multimodal analysis refers to the process of interpreting and making sense of qualitative data in projects that mix verbal and non-verbal forms of information.<sup>26</sup> In this case, image and language are considered the main modalities, i.e. the way monuments appear (aesthetic/visual expression – non-verbal mode) and their descriptions (contextual/textual expression – verbal mode). The article explores how the positive aspect of de-Sovietization manifests in Lithuania, examining the principles and ideas that shape the development of the post-Soviet memory narrative through monuments, while displacing the meanings constructed during the Soviet era.

### From Sovietization to de-Sovietization in public spaces

To deconstruct the concept of de-Sovietization by emphasizing its dualistic nature, the nature and genesis of the concept is crucial. The introduction of the term de-Sovietization was influenced by the changes in East-Central Europe in the period of 1989–1991 when the region was abandoning the Soviet model.<sup>27</sup> Thus, de-Sovietization marked processes fundamentally opposing the development and consolidation of the Soviet model in the region.

**SOVIETIZATION** WAS a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing economic, socio-political, historical, and cultural elements, that manifested in the Soviet Union and its satellite states during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Semantically, the concept of Sovietization emerged in the context of the civil war in Russia and the October Revolution. It is associated with the increasing power of Joseph Stalin and the Soviet policy at that time. Tarik Cyril Amar points out that:

**By the time of the Soviet Union's participation in the Second World War, at any rate, 'sovietization' was already registered in Soviet dictionaries as a specialized neologism.**<sup>28</sup>

The practical use of the term intensified when the Soviet Union pursued an expansionist policy as Olaf Mertelsmann notes:

**Western historiography after World War I used 'Sovietization' to describe the changes in Soviet-occupied or -annexed territories in Eastern and Central Europe.**<sup>29</sup>

In general, the use of the term is not unambiguous, especially from a geographical point of view. Some authors emphasize that it is more related to the processes of the post-Stalinist period,<sup>30</sup> while others claim that the Sovietization in the Baltic States still forms a part of Stalinist politics in the USSR.<sup>31</sup> The assessment of this term is equally unequivocal:

**It was first used in the Soviet Union itself, as a term that carried very positive connotations regarding the estab-**

**lishment of a new superior system for the organizing of human affairs. However, it came to be widely used in a pejorative sense in the 1940s and 1950s by critics of Soviet rule over Eastern Europe.**<sup>32</sup>

Regardless of which assessment is followed, Sovietization refers to the processes related to the execution of the instructions on the creation of the Soviet system. They were received from the Soviet officials in Moscow and included legal, economic, institutional, political, economic, cultural, social, and other areas. A comprehensive nature is one of the distinctive signs of Sovietization found both in the Soviet Union and its areas of influence.

Sovietization in the East-Central Europe can be perceived as a multidimensional transplantation of certain institutions and state governance methods of the Soviet Union into the domestic and foreign policies of different states of the region in the period of 1939–1945. Summarizing Sovietization in Eastern Europe, Vladimir Tismaneanu also highlighted its multidirectional nature:

**For Eastern Europe was based on a unique strategy of transforming national political cultures into carbon copies of the USSR. [...] In the realm of economics, it was the transformation of the market-based, privately owned economy into a centrally planned, state-owned one.**<sup>33</sup>

He also emphasized that Sovietization in this region was targeted to the development of industry and heavy-industry, “abolishment of private ownership of land and the establishment of collective farms, [...] destruction of civil society and the regimenting of intellectual life and culture”,<sup>34</sup> whereas “the goal of the Communist Party was to annihilate any form of genuine creativity: literature, history, art, and philosophy were to be ideologically subordinated to the political sphere. The whole cultural tradition was reinterpreted in order to meet the new dogmas”.<sup>35</sup> Sovietization of East-Central Europe, including the Baltic states, implied the operation of Soviet principles and institutions, involving the states in the ideological struggle between the East and the West. According to Rudiger Ritter, the region was exceptional for the development of the Soviet collective memory structure and new Soviet identity.<sup>36</sup>

**ALTHOUGH SOVIETIZATION** is usually perceived as a practical change of state regimes involving various dimensions, there are authors who use a colonialist/imperialist perspective to explain Sovietization. As Timofei Agarin points out:

**[...] thus, in interpreting the process of Sovietization as colonial, I understand the Soviet Union not as a (socialist) imperialist country, but rather ascribe to it ambitions and structures of agency which are not much different from those of the (capitalist) imperialist powers.**<sup>37</sup>

In other words by E. A. Rees:

**Sovietization, in terms of relations between states, and between states and regions, should also be seen as part of an imperialistic conception.<sup>38</sup>**

That is why, alongside the economic, political and social fields, exceptional attention was paid to the soft attributes, such as identity, culture, literature, and especially collective memory of the Sovietized states:

**Sovietization involves a radical re-conceptualization of the past, present, and future, changing all aspects of human experience and fundamentally reconstructing social life.<sup>39</sup>**

These soft power attributes were directed at consolidating the state's model and legitimizing the regime, portraying the Soviet "project" as focused on a "bright" future and rooted in revolutionary struggle that united the fraternal nations of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the creation of a specific memory narrative through monuments and other artefacts linking the past, Soviet present, and future became a key element in the establishment and consolidation of the Soviet system.

**IN RETROSPECT**, the process of Sovietization was not homogeneous. After Stalin's death and with the beginning of the so-called de-Stalinization process in the Soviet Union, the development of the Soviet model underwent major modifications, particularly with the abandonment of terror as a system of political control. Nevertheless, the biggest changes took place at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s when *perestroika* began, and Mikhail Gorbachev was in power. Specifically, the changes in East-Central Europe, mainly in the Baltic states, were associated with democratization processes.

In general, during this period the concept of de-Sovietization entered the political discourse. At that time de-Sovietization marked a political and historical change which can be defined as a process opposite to Sovietization. It meant a reorganization of different areas of the state, such as politics, economy, industry, culture, etc., and abandonment of Soviet mechanisms and institutions.

From a practical point of view, de-Sovietization was marked by the rejection of the policies imposed by the central authorities of the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Stanislaw Pomorski proposes that:

**It means undoing, dismantling, discarding the communist regime as political, social and economic phenomenon.<sup>40</sup>**

Primarily, systematic changes mostly affected political and legal fields when moving from the authoritarian rule to more or less democratic one and reorganizing Soviet security. The communist state security services were dissolved, and new ones were

created.<sup>41</sup> Significant changes were also made in economics, as the Baltic States and other East-Central European countries moved from the planned economy of communism to free-market economy and global capitalism.<sup>42</sup>

Still, de-Sovietization manifested itself most clearly and obviously in the context of visual ideological practices and public spaces, especially in the rejection of signs marking the Soviet regime and directly related to collective memory and historical narratives. This direction of de-Sovietization focusing on the politics of memory was not accidental.

According to E. A. Rees:

**[...] spatially, Sovietization was reflected in the renaming of towns, streets, schools, farms and factories, in the new architecture, monuments and sculptures.<sup>43</sup>**

So, the process of de-Sovietization undoubtedly involved public liquidation of soviet narrative and its replacement with a new one.

During Sovietization, the ideologically motivated historical narrative and collective memory of the states incorporated into the Soviet Union or within its zone of influence were formed through various practices such as teaching history, monuments, commemorations, etc. In the words of Agarin: "history [...] was used as a means not only to legitimate several actions, but also as a means to create a new collective memory".<sup>44</sup> When the processes of disintegration of the Soviet Union began, the practices that created and supported the old narrative and the Soviet version of memory were destroyed, and the public nature of these practices (monuments, memorials, street names, etc.) led to the fact that de-Sovietization was obvious in this area.

**ACCORDING TO** Aleida Assmann, shared practices that sustain collective memory "mark certain boundaries and define the principles of inclusion and exclusion".<sup>45</sup> Thus, as the state's framework shifts from a Soviet to a non-Soviet model, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion also change, along with the associated memory practices, including monuments.

Generally, de-Sovietization was practically implemented in Lithuania and other Baltic states up to the beginning of the 21st century. In the context of collective memory, it most clearly took place through monuments, destroying and dismantling Soviet artefacts and as Gabowitch comments:

**Following the upheaval of 1989/91, a wave of iconoclasm swept over this (Soviet – author's remark) commemorative landscape, and a second wave has been rising since 2015.<sup>46</sup>**

Along with these waves, the processes of de-Sovietization that took place after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 were exceptional as well. At that time, the countries of East-Central Europe started actively removing the remaining monuments from the Soviet era. This process is sometimes called the third wave of de-Sovietization or the continuation of the second one. It was based on decisions related to the identities of the states and reflected in the collective memory practices (e.g., monuments).

## The duality of de-Sovietization: The positive dimension

The de-Sovietization of collective memory and its practices in public spaces manifested itself in the removal of the Soviet era monuments to Soviet public figures and heroes of the Second World War. However, this did not create a vacuum in the public sphere. During the post-Soviet period, the void was filled with new symbols of memory and identity, usually having a monumental form and marking a new political state.<sup>47</sup>

This dualistic nature of de-Sovietization phenomenon stems from the fact that the removal of Soviet symbols became impossible without establishing a new narrative about the independent states. Together with the negative action of elimination, there is a positive process of creation by removing the signs of the old historical narrative and replacing them with the new ones presenting a new version of the collective memory. Here I argue that de-Sovietization is a dual process: it has both a negative dimension (the removal and dismantling of monuments) and a positive one (the erection and rebuilding of new monuments).

**IN THE SOCIAL** and humanitarian sciences, the positive and negative definition of the same phenomenon or concept can be derived from the perspectives of philosophy and psychology.

The analysis of the psychological processes revealed that the positive and negative aspects of relationship would be reciprocally related and that the same phenomenon can be a source of both positivity and negativity.<sup>48</sup> The duality of the same phenomenon, including positivity and negativity, was developed even more broadly in philosophy. For example, Isaiah Berlin in 1969 introduced a classic interpretation of two concepts of liberty, i.e. a positive and negative liberty:

**It may seem that there is no greater logical distance between these two concepts: the freedom of being one's own master and the freedom of not being prevented by other people from choosing as I want. It is nothing more than a negative and a positive way of saying the same thing. However, historically, the concepts of 'positive' and 'negative' freedom developed in different directions.<sup>49</sup>**

Berlin's main argument is that freedom as a phenomenon is not homogeneous. This dual nature of the concept of liberty was also emphasized by Joseph Raz, who was also interested in the relation between positive and negative liberty (1986). Later, the classic interpretation of two concepts of liberty was critically developed by Quentin Skinner.<sup>50</sup>

When the duality of freedom is applied to the context of de-

Sovietization, negative freedom – or freedom from constraint, in Berlin's sense – helps to elucidate the negative aspect of de-Sovietization. It is the process of breaking free from the old ideological constraints, demolishing the monuments of the old regime and removing the restrictions to create new state's identity values. Meanwhile, following Berlin, positive liberty as freedom to follow a certain form of life may be illustrated as a positive aspect of de-Sovietization: a process creating a new narrative about the state's identity through newly built or restored monuments reflecting a new political regime. What is more, according to critical literature, the classic distinction between the positive and negative liberty introduced by Berlin acts as "both a historical and analytical claim".<sup>51</sup> In this way, it brings the duality closer to the concept of de-Sovietization and its practical expression in the field of collective memory. Historically, the beginning of the

1990s marked the change of the old regime and its practices by replacing them with the new ones. From the analytical point of view, the change can be analyzed to identify how and to what extent it was untied from previous political situation, what and to what extent new practices were used, while their analysis allows defining the direction of state's identity and policymaking.

**FROM THE ANALYTICAL** point of view, the duality of freedom proves that freedom as a social phenomenon can

not be fully analyzed without rejecting its duality. Saulius Arlauskas and Daiva Petrėnaitė, writes on The Principle of Liberty in the Law of a Democratic State:

**Positive freedom is the prerequisite of negative freedom.<sup>52</sup> [...] Negative freedom [...] must still be based on the doctrine of positive freedom.<sup>53</sup>**

In the absence of manifestations of a new political regime, i.e. the positive aspect of de-Sovietization, there are no prerequisites to remove the signs of the old regime – there are no prerequisites for negative de-Sovietization and vice versa.

This approach is supported by representatives of psychology and social psychology, who argue that it is not necessary to define certain phenomena as exclusively positive or negative:

**Positive and negative affect are not necessarily bipolar and are therefore inconsistent with the circumplex.<sup>54</sup>**

Such an interpretation applied to emotions and attitudes in psychology illustrates that phenomena with a dominant negative or positive aspect in their interpretation do not eliminate the opposing aspect. "When one affect is strong, the inhibitory effect of the opposite affect is not sufficient to eliminate the opposite affect".<sup>55</sup> In other words, even if the dominant interpretation of

**"DURING THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD, THE VOID WAS FILLED WITH NEW SYMBOLS OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY, USUALLY HAVING A MONUMENTAL FORM AND MARKING A NEW POLITICAL STATE."**

de-Sovietization and academic research in collective memory are related to the negative aspect, it does not eliminate the positive aspect.

The beginning of the distinction between the negative and positive aspects can also be felt in the early interpretation of de-Sovietization. The duality of the concept in the legal field is introduced by Pomorski:

**Taken literally, it means undoing, dismantling, discarding the communist regime as a political, social and economic phenomenon. So negatively interpreted, substantial advancement of the process of decommunization in Central and Eastern Europe has occurred. [...] Nonetheless, this positive aspect of decommunization, that is to say replacing communist structures, processes and ideas that have already been or en route to being dismantled with the new ones, is also gaining ground rather rapidly, if unevenly.<sup>56</sup>**

De-Sovietization is not complete without new signs as coming to terms with the past means not only disconnecting from certain past periods, events and personalities but also the corresponding interpretation of the collective memory compatible with the system of political values of the restored independent state. As Alexander Etkind, following Pierre Nora, emphasized, the selectivity of memory – manifested through monuments dedicated to specific events, individuals, or epochs – shapes the representation of national identity.

**Such monuments demonstrate the continuity of the political tradition of a nation-state from its great founding fathers.<sup>57</sup>**

Thus, as the state's identity changes, its representation through monuments is also transformed, with new ones replacing the old.

This can be illustrated through monuments in the context of the Soviet regime change. For example, the period of 1988–1991 in Lithuania or Estonia when Soviet monuments were actively demolished, and independence monuments commemorating the independent states in the interwar period were rebuilt. When de-Sovietization began, the negative and positive aspects went hand in hand. The construction of new monuments shows that what one identifies with when separating from the old political regime ultimately reveals the relationship with the previous regime as the mere demolition of the old monuments does not prove it.

## The case analysis of Lithuania

It would be misguided to regard the new narrative, which highlights the positive aspects of de-Sovietization, as coherent and self-explanatory. New monuments and other expressions of collective memory are the new unregulated practices that have re-

cently caused disagreements in Lithuania and other countries in the region, hence the memory laws in Poland and Ukraine. Disagreements and debates prove that the new historical narrative is not homogeneous.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, unlike during Sovietization, the process of erecting monuments is no longer top-down, it is horizontal and different groups of society participate in it, possibly developing different memories of the past. It is unclear how the relationship with the challenging Soviet past is shaped. In the former Soviet republics, Soviet monuments face different fates: in Belarus, they are integrated into the current narrative,<sup>59</sup> while in Kyrgyzstan, they are woven into the present-day discourse, although this is balanced by the growing influence of China in the region.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia,<sup>61</sup> there is an effort to dissociate from the Soviet era by removing Soviet

monuments from public spaces. From a broader perspective, European memory remains divided between the Holocaust and the Gulag.<sup>62</sup>

To identify the positive aspect of de-Sovietization in contrast to its negative counterpart, the analysis focuses on the monuments erected in Lithuania after the restoration of independence in 1990. Here the concept of “monumentscape” is employed, which enables an understanding of monuments not as isolated

objects but as integral elements of a broader memory landscape. This implies that the analysis focuses not on individual monuments but on their entirety, as this can shed at least as much light on important changes as can a focus on a few select sites.<sup>63</sup> It specifically examines monuments having a monumental and long-lasting expression (made of bronze, stone, etc.) in public spaces. It is considered that, regardless of the sources of financing and initiation, monuments cannot appear in public spaces without the approval of state institutions (usually municipalities). Therefore, they reflect the direction of the state's identity compatible with and supported by the political elite and can reveal the principles and meanings of the state narrative.

**THE ANALYSIS OF** monuments is based on the principles of multimodal discourse analysis considering image and language as the main modalities, i.e. how the monuments appear (aesthetic/visual expression – non-verbal mode) and their descriptions (conceptual/textual expression – verbal mode). The aesthetics of monuments consists of their appearance: shape, symbols, place, inscriptions, i.e. what is visible when looking at a monument. Publicly circulating descriptions of monuments and other related texts are used as well because, as Bellentani states monuments cannot be analyzed separately from cultural context,<sup>64</sup> that is shown by the linguistic and significant discourse surrounding them, as the dominant discourse revolves around these monuments.

The analysis of image (non-verbal mode) and language (verbal mode) follows the analytical strategy of visual objects by Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. It indicates that the analyses of

## “FROM A BROADER PERSPECTIVE, EUROPEAN MEMORY REMAINS DIVIDED BETWEEN THE HOLOCAUST AND THE GULAG.”

visual practices should focus not only on single images but also on *syntax*, i.e. what is said about them as well as what historical, cultural and political contexts surround them and contribute to forming a statement that reveals a certain meaning.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the analysis is based both on the monuments, their visual expression and epitaphs as well as their public descriptions and presentations allowing to extrapolate how specific meanings defining the identity of the post-Soviet state are formed in the monuments through an appropriate combinations of image and language.

**IN THE ANALYSIS**, the monuments of the post-Soviet era (53 monuments built in the years of 1988 and 1989, and 412 monuments built in the period of 1990–2019) are primarily categorized according to the groups of monuments responding to dominant historical narratives. These are the historical narratives that have been determined in previous research in Lithuania,<sup>66</sup> and the assignment of monuments to a certain narrative is determined by the monuments themselves. The meanings they create are revealed through the analysis of their visual expression and descriptions. The actual possibility of assigning monuments according to an event, period, personality or a group they commemorate was checked based on historiographical materials.

The categorization of monuments was based on the following analytical sequence: 1) compiled list of analyzed monuments; 2) a preliminary analysis was carried out allowing to divide the monuments into groups according to the dominant historical narratives; 3) identified meanings of monuments and their repetition; examination of the principles and ideas of a new historical narrative created through monuments that establish a new political regime after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through multimodal discourse analysis, a critical relationship between the positive aspect of de-Sovietization and the previous Soviet narrative is revealed: it shows how old meanings are eliminated by negating them through the state's newly constructed identity narrative.

### The negative aspect of de-Sovietization and the transitional period

Carried out through the dismantling and removal of Soviet monuments from public spaces in Lithuania, de-Sovietization began with the restoration of Lithuanian sovereignty. The Reform Movement (Sąjūdis) in Lithuania encouraged the devaluation of Soviet cultural heritage and a campaign that removed the identity symbols of the occupation regime.<sup>67</sup> Although there is no accurate data, according to written documents, about 42 Soviet monuments were removed from public spaces as soon as Lithuania's independence was restored as well as during the whole restoration of independence from 1989 to 1994. It was a symbolic gesture of separation from the Soviet space and system or an active expression of the negative aspect of de-Sovietization.

The negative aspect of de-Sovietization occurred later as well. The so-called Maidan Revolution and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 became a stimulus for the second wave of de-Sovietization not only in Ukraine but also in the entire Central-Eastern European region. Its echo in Lithuania was the removal

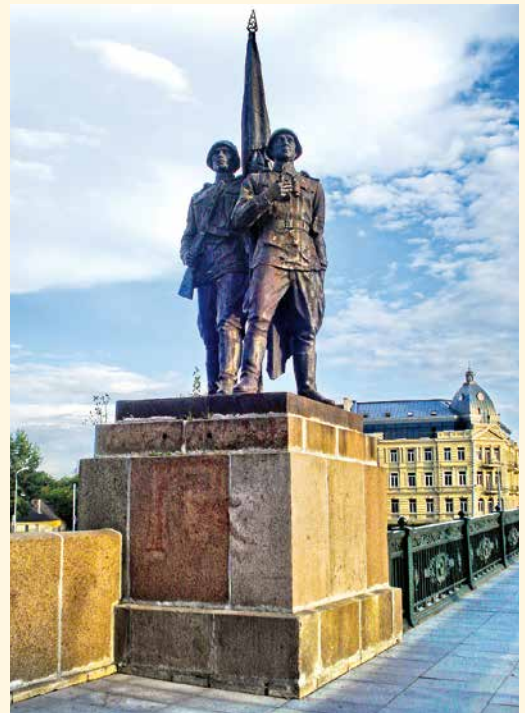


PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

One of the four sets of statues symbolizing archetypal Soviet society groups. They were installed on the Green bridge in Vilnius in 1952, and removed in 2015.



PHOTO: AUTHOR

Freedom Monument in Švėkšna.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Detail of the Monument of Independence in Nepriklausomybes square of Rokiskis.

Antakalnis Military Cemetery, Mausoleum of the Red Army soldiers, Vilnius, Lithuania. The monuments were dismantled in 2024.

of the Soviet sculptures from the Green Bridge (*Žalioji tiltas*), Vilnius in 2015. In 2017, an initiative for a law on the demolition of the remaining Soviet monuments in Lithuania appeared in the Lithuanian Parliament followed by a list of Soviet-era relics to be demolished made by the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrat Political Group. And in 2021, after long discussions and disagreements, the monument to the Soviet writer Petras Cvirka in Vilnius was finally removed.

**ANOTHER EXTREMELY** prominent manifestation of de-Sovietization as a separation from the symbolic Soviet Union and current Russian space directly related to it was the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The new Memory Law of the Republic of Lithuania addressing de-Sovietization in public spaces was adopted in December 2022. The law<sup>68</sup> bans the promotion of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes and their ideologies and provides for removing public objects depicting the symbols of such regimes. Two other resolutions of the *Seimas* of the Republic of Lithuania, adopted on June 1, 2023, regulate this Memory Law. According to these resolutions, the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania (GRRCL) was tasked with forming an inter-institutional commission to decide whether public objects violate the Memory Law and to organize its work. The commission submitted cases of potential violations to the GRRCL, and its head made the final decision. Depending on the object, the responsible state or municipal institution was required to implement the decision to remove it, with the right to appeal. This legislation provided the framework for the implementation of negative de-Sovietization; however, it is crucial to note that the dismantling of Soviet monuments post-2022 was not particularly vigorous, as most

of such monuments had already been removed. The process of monument removal primarily targeted cemetery complexes of Soviet soldiers, with the symbolic monuments at these sites being dismantled. Notable examples include the *Antakalnis* Cemetery in Vilnius, the *Aukštieji Šančiai* Cemetery in Kaunas, Soviet military burial sites in Seredžius and Viešvilė (Jurbarkas district), and the sculptural group at the Soldiers' Cemetery in Klaipėda, among others.

In the context of collective memory and, specifically, the monumental practices that establish it in public spaces, these actions marked the negative aspect of de-Sovietization that occurred during more than 30 years of restored independence of Lithuania. The removal of symbols of the old regime began not only in the early years of independence but also during the transitional period, when the shift from one regime to another occurred. This process was characterized by the transformation of monuments. During the transition period (1988–1989), when Lithuania moved from the Soviet regime to independence, the demolition of Soviet monuments was accompanied by the active restoration of monuments built in the interwar period and demolished during the Soviet era. These monuments were dedicated to modern Lithuania established in 1918 and various anniversaries of this occasion, v.i.e. the 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, etc. as well as the interwar struggles for independence from 1918 to 1920.

**THE ACTIVE RESTORATION** of monuments reflecting pre-Soviet times began as early as 1988, a few years before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990. This process was particularly intense in 1989, when more than 50 monuments were rebuilt in various Lithu-

anian cities and towns. This period can be seen as a transition from the Soviet era to the new political state. During that time (1988–1989) and in the early years of restored independence, the monuments that were actively demolished, vandalized, hidden or buried during the Soviet era, especially during the first decade of Sovietization, were restored. The most destroyed were the monuments marking the anniversaries of Lithuania's independence, the freedom fighters, grand dukes of Lithuania (most notably Vytautas the Great), state, public and cultural figures, and those that at least slightly reminded of Lithuania's statehood.<sup>69</sup>

In the public presentations surrounding the reconstructed monuments, this process is frequently framed as a return to "normality", emphasizing that the status of an independent Lithuania represents the inherent and normative condition of a sovereign state. Consequently, these monuments serve as instruments for constructing a distinct discourse that positions the Soviet era as an aberration from the established norm of statehood. It proves once again that the process of de-Sovietization, along with the liquidation of the old regime, also includes the development of representations of the new political state.

**TO MOVE AWAY** and get rid of the Soviet narrative, de-Sovietization was aimed at creating a new narrative about Lithuania and its collective memory related to the establishment of modern and independent Lithuania in 1918 and its origins. This image was constructed in the collective memory through the reconstruction of monuments that commemorate the period of the First Republic of Lithuania, spanning from 1918 to 1940. Among the historical monuments erected during the Soviet era, this period was also commemorated: over 20% of Soviet monuments in Lithuania were dedicated to the years 1918–1940.<sup>70</sup> However, according to Vaitkuvienė:

[...] the history of this period was reflected in a way that immortalized only those events and individuals deemed beneficial for legitimizing the Soviet regime.<sup>71</sup>

In both Soviet and post-Soviet narratives, monuments commemorate the same period, yet the forms of commemoration are oppositional. Monuments that memorialized the Soviet system and legitimized its ideology, which replaced the demolished monuments of the First Lithuanian Republic (1918–1940), are being dismantled. In contrast, those monuments that highlight Lithuania's statehood, as linked to the First Lithuanian Republic, are being restored. This statehood was interrupted when the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, and the monuments were extensively demolished and vandalized as they did not align with the Soviet ideological narrative. Therefore, the restoration of the interwar monuments represents a return to "normality": the idea of an

independent and free Lithuania was restored after its interruption by the Soviet occupation.

This argument becomes apparent through an analysis of the public descriptions and inscriptions on monuments that feature the terms "freedom" and "independence". For instance, the Freedom Monuments in Žiežmariai, Akmenė, Sutkai, Siesikai, Šešuoliai, and Švėkšna, as well as the Obelisk of Freedom in Kalvarija, emphasize that this definition of the state's identity is framed as "normal". The engraved dates of construction, demolition, and reconstruction highlight that the removal of monuments commemorating the Lithuanian state, established in 1918, during the Soviet era signifies a rupture in the continuity of the state's identity as an independent entity.

**THE ESCALATION** of the meaning of a free and independent state during the transitional period is particularly evident through the recurrence of the Angel of Freedom, which is reflected in the visual expression of the reconstructed monuments. The Angel of Freedom (as a general recurring symbol, an archetype created by various sculptors) can be considered a standard example of the sacralization of the idea of freedom and the personification of abstraction. Grunskis argues that:

**"IN BOTH SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET NARRATIVES, MONUMENTS COMMEMORATE THE SAME PERIOD, YET THE FORMS OF COMMEMORATION ARE OPPOSITIONAL."**

[...]the purpose of these monuments is to perpetuate, emphasize (sanctify) an abstract idea (symbolizing an event) as an object led to selecting a representative of the extraterrestrial world whose abstract, primary symbolism was clear to everyone and communicated a simple message that our freedom is a sacred thing and the most important value.<sup>72</sup>

It can be found in Rozalimas (Monument of Independence, also called the Angel), Plungė (Monument to the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence with a sculpture of the Angel of Freedom), Kuliai (Monument to the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence, also called Freedom Monument), Meškuičiai (Angel of Freedom) and Alytus (Angel of Freedom). They create the identity of a free state by destroying Soviet monuments and erasing the meaning of belonging to the Soviet Union which is replaced by the meaning of free Lithuania.

### **Positive de-Sovietization: Identity narrative through monuments**

The analysis of the positive aspect of de-Sovietization reveals the principles and ideas that fill the gap of the removed Soviet historical narrative. During the transition period, it was based on the idea of returning to "normality". The aim was to establish a clear identity of a free and independent state. This aim was subsequently realized through the erection of new monuments dedicated to historical events and figures, often aligning domi-

nant meanings with an oppositional stance toward the Soviet Union and its predecessor, the Russian Empire.

Based on visual expression and public descriptions, the monuments erected after 1990, which align with the dominant historical narratives defined in historiography, can be categorized into the following five prominent groups: 1) occupation narrative (mostly dating from 1940 to the Soviet (several to Nazi) occupation and resistance to it (partisan movement, exiles, memory of the concentration camps); 2) statehood narrative (based on interwar Lithuania, including important occasions, e.g. the Millennium of the First Mention of Lithuania or the Centennial of the Restored State of Lithuania); 3) the 12<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania narrative (monuments to the only King Mindaugas, Lithuanian grand dukes, noble families and medieval battles); 4) national revival narrative (monuments commemorating national revival, Lithuanian book smugglers and the 1863 uprising); 5) Jewish narrative (mostly Holocaust and, with some exceptions, the history of Lithuanian Jews/Jews in Lithuania).

**FROM A GENERAL** perspective, the dominant historical narratives promote the idea of a free and independent Lithuanian identity and the meanings of the continuity of the state, the struggle for Lithuania, and its Western direction. These are the main principles of the historical narrative presenting Lithuania's identity found in all groups of monuments, thus defining the principles of positive de-Sovietization.

In retrospect, the meaning of a certain independent political entity, i.e. the medieval state, emerges in the group of monuments of old (12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century) Lithuania. Monumental practices to Lithuanian rulers, noble families and battles reveal the development of the political structure of that time, i.e. cities, how the state sought its place in the world and defended medieval Lithuania from possible enemies.

The idea of an independent state is also expressed through monumental practices classified to the group of national revival. The monuments commemorating the 1863–1864 uprising, Lithuanian book smugglers or leaders of national revival depict the meaning of the Lithuanian language and culture as links connecting a certain national community based on which the idea of an independent state gradually crystallizes. An explicitly defined articulation of a free and independent state emerges in the group of monuments addressing statehood, presenting the development of the modern state in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and perpetuating the anniversaries of 1918, interwar independence struggles and creators of modern political institutions. Later, this meaning in the statehood narrative represented by monumental objects is repeated through monuments dedicated to the development of the modern state at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and through monumental practices for the genesis of the statehood, e.g. monuments commemorating the centenary of the state

and the monument to the accession to the European Union in Girija, Vilnius region. The concept of Lithuania as a free and independent state is clearly articulated in the group of monuments commemorating resistance to occupation, particularly those honoring the memory of exile and the partisan movement. This group represents the largest category in terms of the number of monuments erected between 1990 and 2019.

In constructing the state's identity through monuments, the dating of the narrative to the medieval era emphasizes the significance of continuity in statehood. This legitimizes the existence of an independent state from ancient times, thereby negating the Soviet occupation as a disruption in the narrative of statehood.

## **“THE IDEA OF AN INDEPENDENT STATE IS ALSO EXPRESSED THROUGH MONUMENTAL PRACTICES CLASSIFIED TO THE GROUP OF NATIONAL REVIVAL.”**

**FROM A THEMATIC** perspective, according to the Law on the Protection and Use of Historical and Cultural Monuments of the Lithuanian SSR,<sup>73</sup> monuments erected during the Soviet era commemorated the Great October Socialist Revolution, the socialist revolution in Lithuania, the events of the Civil and Great Patriotic Wars, as well as the labor achievements of the working class, collective farmers, and intellectuals. These monuments also celebrated the fraternal solidar-

ity of the peoples of the Soviet Union and the heroic struggle of the Soviet people for the establishment of socialism and communism. However, following the dismantling of Soviet monuments as part of the process of negative de-Sovietization, these themes are excluded from the framework of positive de-Sovietization, effectively eliminated through the construction of new monuments.

Instead, the concept of continuity in statehood (that was interrupted during the Soviet era) is consistently reflected across nearly all groups of newly erected or restored monuments, particularly through the widespread use of visual symbols. Notably, the active use of the Pillars of Gediminas and the Double Cross of the Jagiellonian Dynasty is dominant. Banned during the Soviet times, the Pillars of Gediminaičiai and the Cross of Vytis (Double Cross of the Jagiellonian Dynasty), symbols of the Lithuanian state since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, imply the long-standing origins of the state in monumental expression. It is expressed by conveying a clear meaning that the independent state has its origins in the Middle Ages.

What is more, the expression of state's identity in monuments is inseparable from the meaning of the struggle for Lithuania in different groups of new monuments. It covers two directions. In the group of monuments of old (12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century) Lithuania, the battles of King Mindaugas and the Lithuanian grand dukes are presented as their fights for statehood, i.e. the existence and development of medieval Lithuania, including the expansion of its borders and spheres of influence and defense against historical enemies. The struggle for statehood can also be associated with the monuments to the 1863–1864 uprising in the group of monu-

ments dedicated to national revival. The meaning of the struggle for freedom appears in the monuments to the leaders of the late stage of the Reform Movement, a period when Lithuanians voiced their desire for a free and independent Lithuania.

Here it is important to note that Soviet-era monuments also commemorated the 1863–1864 uprising. Among the monuments dedicated to the period of the Russian Empire, the 1863 uprising was the most frequently represented event, accounting for 45% of all monuments from the Russian Empire era<sup>74</sup>. However, the commemoration of this event during the Soviet period differed significantly from its post-independence interpretation: in the Soviet era, these monuments did not represent a struggle for Lithuanian statehood or social and economic well-being; instead, they depicted the uprising as a social class struggle, where the uprising was directed not against Russian rule, but against the nobility and the Tsarist regime.<sup>75</sup>

The most prominent meaning of the struggle for freedom and independence is found in the monuments commemorating the interwar struggles for independence. The significance of this struggle is even more pronounced in monuments commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup>-century occupations (primarily Soviet), particularly the Second World War and the post-war period, as well as the resistance to these occupations. This meaning is also highlighted by the monuments depicting the restoration of the modern state in 1990, symbolizing the struggle for liberation from the Soviet Union.

**THE MEMORY OF** the Second World War occupies opposing positions in the Soviet and post-Soviet narratives. In the memorialization of the Second World War, or as it was known in Soviet vocabulary, the Great Patriotic War, the theme of Lithuania's liberation from Nazi forces played a significant role during the Soviet era, supported by visual representations of local heroes in collective memory. Monuments were erected to Soviet partisans, and the heroization of Soviet partisan Marytė Melnikaitė was promoted. Numerous monuments to the Red Army depicted it as a “brotherly” and “liberatory” force<sup>76</sup>, with soldiers portrayed as “simple men who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of the nations of Central-Eastern Europe”.<sup>77</sup>

Following the dismantling of these monuments after the restoration of independence, they were replaced with symbols that conveyed entirely opposing meanings. The Red Army, once depicted as a liberator from Nazi occupation, was reimagined as an occupying force. Likewise, monuments to Soviet partisans were replaced by those honoring the *Forest Brothers* (partisans), who fought against Soviet authority in defense of Lithuania's independence. In this process, the meanings embedded in the Soviet narrative were effectively negated.

Disassociation from the Soviet period and the negation of its integration into the narrative of the Lithuanian state are actively cultivated by silencing the relationship with the Soviet Union and implying a Western-oriented state trajectory, one that has been developed since ancient times. Commemorating the genesis of Lithuania's statehood, memorial practices for joining the European Union and monuments for the Millennium of the Name of Lithuania – that immortalize the existing links with the West-

ern world since 1009 – reinforce the recurring significance of the Western orientation.

**AT THE CONTENT LEVEL**, these principles and ideas of positive de-Sovietization shape Lithuania's identity by challenging and refuting the narrative constructed during the Soviet era. The themes that formed the foundation of monumental propaganda during the Soviet era – such as the Great Patriotic War, Soviet partisans, the establishment of the Soviet system, and revolution – are erased. Any connection to the Soviet period is systematically eliminated, with monuments offering opposing alternative narratives that counter key elements of the Soviet narrative, instead aligning with the idea of restored Lithuanian independence and the new statehood. This forms the basis for the positive aspect of de-Sovietization in the case of Lithuanian monuments.

## Conclusions

The process of de-Sovietization is dual, including a negative and a positive aspect. Although the dismantling, demolition and removal of Soviet monuments from public spaces is usually analyzed in the context of de-Sovietization, this action is invariably accompanied by incentives for positive action after a change in the political regime.

The process of destroying the symbols of the Soviet regime can be perceived as the negative aspect of de-Sovietization. However, de-Sovietization is incomplete without the creation of new symbols (the positive aspect), as coming to terms with the past means not only disconnecting from certain past periods, events and personalities, but also offering a corresponding interpretation of collective memory that aligns with the political values of the restored independent state system. Thus, the positive dimension of de-Sovietization includes newly erected or restored monuments, created during or after the change of regime, that form a narrative about the new post-Soviet identity of the state.

**THE INTRODUCTION** of the concept of positive de-Sovietization and the analysis of this practical category offer a comprehensive view of the field of collective memory in the post-Soviet space. The demolition of Soviet monuments goes hand in hand with the erection of new ones. Understanding the monuments that underpin the state's narrative and how they interact with the Soviet narrative is essential for planning memory policy more effectively and inclusively, while also strengthening social cohesion. The duality of de-Sovietization builds upon current research and offers a comprehensive understanding of collective memory in states that underwent Soviet transformation and its subsequent alterations.

The analysis of Lithuanian monuments revealed that the positive aspect of de-Sovietization was aimed at opposing the dominant meanings of the Soviet narrative. What had been established as the foundation of Soviet collective memory is negated through the new or restored monuments erected after 1990. Thus, the positive aspect of de-Sovietization not only defines new meanings of state identity but also the relationship between the new state narrative and the Soviet past.

Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence in 1990 when Lithuania started demolishing Soviet monuments, active restoration of monuments built in the interwar period and the removed ones during the Soviet era began. From 1988 to 1989 and during the first years of the restored independence, Lithuania rebuilt the monuments commemorating the development of modern Lithuania in 1918. The restoration of these monuments was a return to “normality”: the idea of an independent and free Lithuania created in the interwar period, interrupted by the Soviet occupation and continued during the restoration of independence from the Soviet Union was restored. In this way, the state’s identity is represented by replacing the Soviet narrative about the state.

LATER, THE NARRATIVE presenting the identity of the state and consolidating the meanings separating Lithuania from the symbolic space of the Soviet Union was expanded by including the collective memory of various historical figures, periods and events. Thus, through the monuments built between 1990 and 2019, the identity of a free and independent Lithuania and the meanings that support it were developed, breaking away from the dominant Soviet narrative, including revolutionary struggle, the Great Patriotic War, and the Soviet nomenclature.

A clear understanding of how the relationship with the Soviet past fits into the new state narrative in the post-Soviet space is particularly important in the context of conflicts and post-conflict societies. Russia’s war against Ukraine has intensified memory wars, particularly regarding monuments dedicated to Soviet symbols and figures. This highlights that these monuments are not merely historical objects but are instrumental in shaping contemporary identity and geopolitical struggles. By examining the meanings of monuments, we can better understand how nations negotiate their pasts and navigate their futures in the face of both external and internal pressures.

While monuments from the Soviet era remain a significant axis of Russia’s information warfare, it is crucial to understand how national narratives are consolidated – through specific events, figures, periods, and the meanings they convey – with the goal of strengthening democratization and constructing a memory policy that unites rather than divides. ❌

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