

# THE MOSCOW TIMES

## Impossible Symmetry

By Konstantin Sonin

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When it comes to relatives who live far away, there is a tendency to remember them only on certain occasions, such as birthdays, weddings or funerals. These are the times when you feel ashamed of the fact that, for example, you haven't visited them for over 10 years, even though you keep promising to do so. But sometimes just hearing about other relatives is enough to get us thinking about our own.

The recent events concerning the monument to Soviet soldiers in Estonia are just this kind of situation. The Estonian government clearly did not show its best side in deciding to move the monument: It doesn't take a great deal of political courage to behave in strict accordance with the majority opinion. True political leadership also involves taking into consideration the minority view. The journalists who wrote of the "Russian monster" in an editorial published in one of Estonia's most popular newspapers crossed all conceivable limits of journalistic etiquette and political correctness. It is not surprising that Russian politicians and intellectuals began contemplating an appropriate response.

But what type of response? It looks like they decided to turn to the tried, if not particularly true, approach of imposing economic blockades, sanctions and other measures forcing Russians to foot the bill for bringing economic pressure to bear on producers in another country. Essentially, Russia is once again looking at an asymmetrical response. Perhaps this time it would make sense to explore the option of a symmetrical response instead. If the Estonian government takes actions that offend Russian historical sensibilities, the Russian government shouldn't have to show much concern for the historical sensibilities of the Estonians.

Maybe, for example, it would make sense to limit temporarily access to the memorial to the victims of the violent resettlement of the Baltic peoples. Russia could also reduce the funding for taking care of certain halls within the Museum of Political Repression. As a long-term measure, there could be the threat to exclude mention of these events from the list of crimes which Russian laws make it a crime to deny. These laws, after all, were based on similar laws in a number of European countries forbidding the denial of the Holocaust and requiring countries to list all peoples that suffered repression on the basis of ethnicity or faith.

These methods are universal geopolitical weapons. If, for instance, relations with Ukraine were to deteriorate any further, whoever Russia's president might be at the time could skip the annual rite of laying flowers at the memorial to the victims of the Holodomor, the Ukrainian famine of 1932 and 1933. Even though this was a tragedy shared by Russians, the majority of those who died of hunger as a result of the collectivization and policies of the Communist leadership were Ukrainians, and so the memory of those events holds special meaning for them. Even the slightest lack of sensitivity toward that memorial would have a greater effect than an attempt to manipulate the flow of gas to Ukraine.

I wouldn't favor any of these measures, so I suppose it's a good thing that none of them could be implemented in Russia today. This is because we don't actually have a memorial to the deportation of the Baltic peoples. Nor is there a fitting memorial to the famine victims of 1932 and 1933, although the famine was one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes of the 20th century. No Russian president, therefore, has ever laid a wreath at such a memorial. Russian history textbooks do not mention that the collectivization campaign was a form of civil war --one of the deadliest, in fact -- nor does the country have a Museum of Political Repression or laws forbidding the denial that this repression ever took place.

It is simply not possible to strike back at countries offending the historical sensibilities of Russians by going after monuments to the suffering of their peoples. Russia doesn't have any.

*Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR.*