

Agata Tatarenko

Removal of the Statue of Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague: a crisis in Czech-Russian relations

After several years of dispute, the authorities of Prague 6 removed the monument of Marshal Ivan Konev from the public space. The statue is to be sent to the not-yet-existent Museum of Memory of the 20th century. The conflict over the memorial related to the history of World War II indicates a deepening crisis in Czech-Russian reactions, in which Prague's local government is also involved.

The monument to Ivan Stepanovich Konev, Soviet military commander and marshal of the Soviet Union, located on Prague's International Brigade Square (náměstí Interbrigády, Prague 6, Bubeneč), was unveiled on May 9, 1980, on the 35th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia. It is located in the same district as the Embassy of the Russian Federation and not far from the Hotel International Prague, the largest Stalinist architecture building in Prague, built in 1952-1954 – and thus in a space with a large symbolic load. The date of foundation of the monument to Marshal Konev needs to be underlined. Its creation was not the result of the "spontaneous reaction of the Czechoslovak people", such as the monument to the liberation of Prague by the Red Army in Smichov – the later famous "pink tank".¹

Disputes around the monument to Marshal Konev. The first voices calling for the removal of the monument appeared already in the early 1990s on the wave of decommunization of public space in the Czech Republic. This problem was systematically resurfacing in Czech newspapers and during meetings of the Prague 6 local authorities. The statue had its supporters and opponents. In 2018, despite numerous public objections, the memorial was restored. Three tables have been added, in Czech, English and Russian. On each of them, the inscription read among others that Marshal Konev commanded the Soviet Ground Forces which suppressed the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, and that in 1968 he personally backed the intelligence surveillance preceding the invasions of the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact into Czechoslovakia. This last sentence in particular (in the original: *V roce 1968 osobně zaštil zpravodajský průzkum před vpádem vojsk Varšavské smlouvy do Československa*) caused numerous protests, mainly from Russia. The embassy of the Russian Federation in Prague, citing information from the archives of the Russian Ministry of Defence, said the record was false because Marshal Konev ended his command function in the armed forces of the Soviet Union in April 1963 due to his age (in 1968 he was 71 years old). It is worth adding that, according to some Czech historians, Konev's role in the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 could not be decisive and was rather of a secondary nature.

In 2015-2020 the monument to Marshal Konev was the subject of many discussions at local, national and international levels. It also aroused numerous social controversies. Local activists have repeatedly collected signatures on a petition to remove the monument. In response, counter-movements arose about leaving the monument on Prague Square. The monument was often covered with pink or red paint. In response to these activities, consideration was given to moving the monument to the garden at the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Prague or placing it in a museum, e.g. the Prague City Museum. Czech president Miloš Zeman spoke many times in favor of leaving this commemoration in place, particularly emphasizing this before his visit to Russia in 2017.

The dispute over the memorial intensified in the second half of 2019. Representatives of almost all political parties in the Czech Republic, including in particular the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM),

¹ See more A. Tatarenko, *Relikty komunizmu: polityka historyczna wobec materialnego dziedzictwa sowieckiego w Republice Czeskiej*, Prace IEŚ, nr 1 (1/2019), <https://ies.lublin.pl/pub/publikacje/prace/ies-prace-1-1-2019.pdf>.

were involved. In an official statement issued on August 30, 2019, the party demanded that the memorial be preserved. Despite numerous protests, including on the Russian side, on September 12, 2019, the local government of Prague 6 decided to remove the Konev's statue. At the same time, it was planned to fund another memorial related to the liberation of Prague in the same place. In turn, KSČM vice-chairman Petr Šimůnek applied to enter the Konev monument in the Czech monument register, which would allow its original location to be preserved. The Czech Ministry of Culture rejected this proposal. It was considered that the statue did not meet the requirements, namely "it is not an outstanding work of art." The decision to remove the monument was met with a sharp reaction from Russia, both from the representatives of the authorities and the Russian media.

Removal of the statue. Despite the decision of Prague authorities, the memorial remained intact for several months. It was not until the morning of April 3, 2020 that the statue of Marshal Konev was removed. In the future, the monument will become part of the collection of the Museum of Memory of the 20th Century to be built in Prague. So far, it has not been decided exactly where the institution will be based. Currently, it is active only on social media. The donation was not commented on by the official profile of the museum.

Removal of the sculpture was met with a positive response from a significant part of Czech society. There were also some humorous references to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Ondřej Kolář (TOP 09), Mayor of Prague 6, commented on his social media profile that the statue of Konev was removed because "it did not have a mask, and the rules apply to everyone the same" (in the Czech Republic, the obligation to wear masks or other covering the mouth was introduced for all persons moving in public space).

The actions of local authorities were criticized by the President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman, who described them as unjustified, especially in quarantine conditions. Václav Klaus also expressed a similar opinion. The removal of the statue was also critically assessed by representatives of KSČM. It was pointed out that the monument was destroyed in circumstances that prevented any form of protest. The Prague 6 administration replied to these allegations that the dismantling of the monument was planned long before the SARS-Cov-2 virus pandemic.

Reaction from Russia. The removal of the monument was strongly criticized by Russia. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the actions of the Czech authorities "fighting the symbols of victory over Nazism", while Vladimir Medinsky, the former minister of Russian culture referred to them as "sacrilege". In an official comment posted on the website of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Prague, the whole action was unequivocally condemned and described as "an act of vandalism". It was considered that this step constituted a direct violation of the 1993 agreement on friendly relations and cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Czech Republic (*Smlouva o přátelství a spolupráci s Ruskem*²), under which the Czech and Russian authorities were to cooperate in the field of protection of cultural and artistic heritage of their countries and provide care, maintenance and access to military graves and monuments in the territory of each party (Articles 18 and 21). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, the dismantling of the monument to Marshal Konev does not violate the provisions of said contract.

Two days after the removal of the monument, on April 5, 2020, a group of masked people threw smoke bombs at the Czech Embassy in Moscow. In addition, an inscription in Russian was placed on the embassy fence: "Stop fascism". On April 6, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic announced in an official note that Russia, as a country receiving Czech representation in its territory, is obliged to protect such representation. The Czech authorities also hoped that similar incidents would not occur in the future. The letter was left without an official response from Russia. The non-registered political party "Other Russia" (*Другая Россия*) responded to the letter on its website. The removal of the monument was described there as "part of the overall strategy of

² *Smlouva o přátelství a spolupráci s Ruskem. Sdělení č. 99/1996 Sb.*, https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1996-99?fbclid=IwAR08chS0vIkuEb84fQqEOMkiBvOBWeeG0WT_PmtP71WFVRDyPjEkW2ySR3A [09-04-2020].

European countries to revise the result of World War II” and as “a denial of the merits of the Soviet people in the fight against Nazism, whereby the Czech authorities themselves are entering the path to justify Nazism”.³

On April 10, 2020, on the website of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation (*Следственный комитет Российской Федерации*), information appeared that a criminal case was initiated in the Main Investigation Department of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation due to a crime under Part 3 of Art. 354.1 of the Penal Code (profanation of symbols of the military glory of Russia, committed in public). The case concerns the dismantling of the Konev monument in Prague.⁴

Conclusions. The lack of official response from the Russian authorities regarding the attack on the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Prague indicates a deepening crisis in Czech-Russian relations in which Prague’s local government is involved. It is worth recalling that, according to the decision of the local authorities, on February 27, 2020 the ceremony of naming the city square after Boris Nemtsov took place near the Embassy of the Russian Federation, located in the Bubeneč district of Prague. The removal of the monument to Marshal Konev shows the continuation of the critical policy towards Russia implemented by the Czech opposition parties, such as the Czech Pirate Party or TOP 9. Andrej Babiš has yet to refer to the dismantling of the Konev monument, indicating his desire to maintain distance in Czech-Russian relations. The Czech prime minister is guided by moderate criticism in relations with Russia, which results not only from his views on foreign policy, but also from some kind of power alliance with President Zeman, known for his pro-Russian sympathies. Paradoxically, the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic favors the political juggling characteristic of Babiš. It can therefore be assumed that the joint history of the Czech Republic and Russia is a cause of a greater conflict, including on the internal political scene on the Vltava River.

³ Нацболы атаковали посольство Чехии в Москве, <https://drugoros.ru/novosti/azwkgm7m> [09-04-2020].

⁴ Возбуждено уголовное дело о сносе памятника Маршалу Коневу в Праге, <https://sledcom.ru/news/item/1454798/> [10-04-2020].