

Russia Targeting the Czech Republic over Statue Calls for International Reaction

Adéla Klečková

The decision to remove an old statue from a square in Prague has led to a chain of very unlikely international incidents, culminating in the direct intimidation of political representatives of a member of the EU and NATO. This is only the latest example of the way Russia treats its former satellite states, and it threatens the freedoms of citizens of any country it sees as too critical. The international community should learn from the recent past about how to react to this kind of Russian intimidation in Central and Eastern Europe.

The statue in Prague of Marshall Ivan Koněv has been the subject of political conflict and acts of vandalism for decades. The Soviet commander played an instrumental role in 1945 when the city was liberated from Nazi Germany and again in 1968 when it was re-enslaved by the Soviet Union. This memorial to a figure who played a crucial role in one of the most regrettable eras of Czech history had been a subject of ideological conflicts and acts of vandalism for over a decade. So, when the local government of the municipal district of Prague 6 decided last summer to remove the statue from its prominent public space, most Praguers felt relieved.

The new Russian law brings any citizen of any state throughout the world under unprecedented extraterritorial jurisdiction.

However, as the statue was about to be removed last month, this simple act by a local authority triggered a strong response in Russia. In quick succession, the Czech Republic's embassy in Moscow and consulate in St. Petersburg were attacked by extremists calling Czechs whores and threatening Prague with the return of Russian tanks. The Kremlin not only did not denounce such acts, but it immediately pushed a law through parliament to punish the destruction or damage to Russian military graves and other war memorials located in the country or abroad with a considerable fine or three years of forced labor. As soon as it was passed, Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu called for the criminal persecution of the mayor of Prague 6.

Then, earlier this week, it was reported that an agent from Russia's FSB counter-intelligence agency had recently traveled to Prague on a diplomatic passport, carrying the poisonous substance Ricin. As a precautionary measure, the mayor of Prague, the Mayor of Prague 6, and another mayor were immediately given police protection.

Unprecedented Extraterritoriality

The new Russian law brings any citizen of any state throughout the world under unprecedented extraterritorial jurisdiction. People acting in good faith and in line with the jurisdiction of their own country could still be punished in Russia under it. Given that Russian memorials can be found all over Europe, and in the former Soviet republics especially, this legislation should become a subject of interest to the international community as traveling to Russia or a Russia-friendly country might become risky to any person who might be accused of interfering with a Russian memorial.

This new law is also inappropriate in light of the way Russia treats the war memorials and graves of other countries on its own territory. Despite the 1999 agreement between the Czech Republic and Russia on mutual maintenance of war graves, those of Czech legionnaires who died in Russia during the First World War are neglected and in the highest state of deterioration. There have been cases when financial aid sent by the Czech Ministry of Defense for their reparations was embezzled by the Russian authorities.

Once a Russian Satellite, Always a Russian Satellite?

This still developing story is yet another proof that today's Russia is a direct successor of the Soviet Union when it comes to not respecting the sovereignty of other countries and still perceives many of them as its satellites. Russia as a fallen power is also hypersensitive about any actions connected with commemorations of its former glory.

This leads to illegitimate claims on the obedience of countries around it and a constant urge to meddle with their domestic affairs. Russia never has and probably never will perceive them as equal partners but always as former colonies to be controlled or reconquered. Its attempt to punish and bring to heel the city of Prague fits in this pattern.

For now at least, Russia's actions against the Czech Republic are less severe than those it took against Estonia in 2007. Then, the Kremlin mobilized the country's ethnic-Russian minority, which makes up approximately one-third population, against the decision to remove of the statue of a Red Army soldier symbolizing the liberation of Estonia from the Nazis in 1944. This led to three days of the biggest riots and protests since the country's independence from the Soviet Union. At the same, cyberattacks of a sophistication not yet seen before targeted Estonia, attributed with the highest probability to Russia.

Lessons to Learn

The cyberattacks on Estonia were studied intensively by diverse military planners, and NATO subsequently established the Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence in Tallinn. The latter developed the Tallinn Manual on the application of international law to cyber warfare. When the former Russian secret agent and U.K. citizen Sergei Skripal was poisoned in 2018, the whole of Europe joined to condemn Russia and expelled 146 Russian diplomats.

Today, the Czech Republic—an EU and NATO member—has seen its embassy in Russia attacked, it is being targeted by Russian extraterritorial jurisdiction, and its democratically elected officials are being threatened. Another joint response from the international community should follow. This could take a form of another round of coordinated expulsion of Russian diplomats. The Foreign Affairs Council within the Council of the EU should issue a joint public statement strongly denouncing Russia's act of aggression.

Regarding the Russian war memorials legislation, given its unprecedented extraterritoriality, the EU should consider issuing a universal warning to all of its citizens who could somehow become a subject of criminal prosecution under this law against traveling to Russia or countries with Russian-friendly regimes.

Finally, the Czech experience is a strong argument for strengthening the legal mechanisms the EU has to protect itself. The need for the adoption and prompt implementation of a Magnitsky Law is now stronger than ever. This would enable the EU to impose targeted sanctions and travel bans on Russian officials in charge of any criminal prosecution of the three Prague mayors or any state officials responsible for individuals traveling around Europe assassinating or attempting to assassinate citizens of other countries, as was the case in Bulgaria, Germany, Montenegro and the United Kingdom.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC

www.gmfus.org