

Post-Soviet Monument Wars Now Spreading Far Beyond the Former Soviet Bloc

Culture

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Fighting over monuments to the past has become a regular feature inside the countries of the former Soviet bloc and among them as well, with decisions to erect or dismantle this or that statue sparking controversies in many places. But now, such disputes are spreading far beyond the borders of what was that bloc.

By Paul Goble for "Window on Eurasia": Nov 18 – Fighting over monuments to the past has become a regular feature inside the countries of the former Soviet bloc and among them as well, with decisions to erect or dismantle this or that statue sparking controversies in many places. But now, such disputes are spreading far beyond the borders of what was that bloc. Often these disputes intersect with conflicts within the countries where the monuments were erected or involve differences of opinion about the foreign relations of those countries. One such conflict, which is likely to attract far more attention in the future than it has so far concerns an Abkhaz monument in the Scottish city of Kilmarnock. More than 20 years ago, the city authorities there agreed to the erection of a memorial plaque in honor of those Abkhaz who died in the 1992-1993 fighting between the Abkhaz and the Georgian authorities. Scotland, which has its own interests in a separate future, was apparently quite happy to have this plaque erected. Then on November 8, the Georgian ambassador in London called for the statue to be removed because it contained language and symbols at odds with British policy toward Georgia and the breakaway republic of Abkhazia. Abkhazians and their supporters in the UK and in Abkhazia protested Kilmarnock's agreement to take the monument down. Then Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister David Dondua said in Tbilisi that "no one had planned to remove or take down the monument as the Abkhazia claims but only to modify it to bring it into correspondence with British policy and then put it back in place in the Scottish city (ekhokavkaza.com/a/28860255.html). That wasn't sufficient for the Abkhazians and their defenders, and officials in Sukhumi and Abkhazian residents organized a protest, even adopting an appeal to the international community to intervene on their behalf in this latest battle of the monument wars (ekhokavkaza.com/a/28860162.html). Levan Geradze, a Georgian conflict specialist, says that it isn't surprising that this has happened. When the two sides can't agree on fundamental questions, they often get more exercised than one might expect on secondary ones like monuments – and these disputes spread through the diplomatic world and on social networks. Giya Khukhashvili, another Georgian political scientist, adds that "polemics of this kind reflect the political impotence of both sides," adding that in his opinion the current conflict is being spurred on by third parties interested in keeping tensions high and avoiding any serious negotiations. But participants at a protest in the Abkhaz city of Gali are clearly furious and say they will be watching closely to see what happens to their monument in Scotland. If it is not restored exactly as it was, they say, they will erect "an exact copy in Sukhumi on Scotland Street" to make their point. In any case, observers say, it is already clear that the controversy around the monument in Kilmarnock is nowhere close to resolution and likely will spark more diplomatic and non-diplomatic exchanges in the future.

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