

## An Identity Crisis in Europe's Russian Frontier

By  
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A cultural feud over the legacy of the American Civil War has raged in the United States for over 150 years, pitting sympathizers of the Lost Cause against their opponents over historical monuments and symbols. A similar but lesser-known war over a different chapter in history has been raging in the city of Narva, in the tiny Baltic nation of Estonia. Like the controversy over Confederate monuments in Richmond, Virginia, Estonia has been grappling with its Russian minority over how to handle monuments installed under the grip of the Iron Curtain.

The Narva River separates Narva from the Russian city of Ivangorod, where a historic Swedish castle faces a Russian fortress built by Ivan III in 1492. Walking through the streets of Narva, one might easily believe they were in Russia, were it not for the Estonian street signs breaking the facade. Here, many Russian residents from the Soviet era, known as “grey passport” holders, still live [without](#) Estonian citizenship. Efforts to remove Soviet monuments have fueled anger amongst the local population in what remains an overwhelmingly Russian-speaking area.

Many in the Riigikogu (Estonia’s parliamentary body) view efforts to remove monuments across the country as a way of moving on from painful symbols of oppression. Tens of thousands of Estonians were imprisoned or [deported](#) to Siberia during the Soviet occupation, many of whom died in captivity. Many community members of Russian descent consider this to be an unnecessary cleansing of history, especially concerning monuments dedicated to Soviet soldiers killed in the “Great Patriotic War” of WWII.

A Soviet T-34 tank that stood in honor of fallen Soviet casualties was controversially removed in August of 2022. The monument, which stood against the banks of the Narva River, was left covered in flowers by residents and eventually [relocated](#) to the Estonian War Museum. I was in Narva during the months leading up to the removal of the tank and heard the Russian perspective firsthand from the people I lived with. This, however, was not the first-time parts of Estonia had struggled with identity issues.

Riots swept through the capital city of Tallinn in 2007 over the relocation of a Soviet monument known as the Bronze Soldier. Now known as [Bronze Night](#), the unrest led to over 100 injuries and the deadly stabbing of an ethnic Russian, as well as Russian [cyberattacks](#) that brought Estonian government, banking, and news sites offline.

Events like these placed Estonia directly in the Kremlin's sights, where it has remained ever since. While I was living in Narva in the summer of 2022, Putin [remarked](#) that Narva, Estonia’s third-largest city, was historically Russian and “would need to be ‘taken back’.” These comments drew immediate ire from many politicians, but more importantly, they preceded a series of provocations by the Kremlin against Estonian sovereignty that intensified through 2025.

On an early morning in May 2024, nearly half of Russia’s buoys marking the border in the Narva River [disappeared](#) after their unexpected removal by Russian border guards. Estonian officials and media interpreted this as a threat against their statehood. This incident led to an increase in

[accidental border crossings](#) by fishermen in the Narva River, particularly in sections where buoys had been removed. Later, on December 17th, 2025, Russian border guards themselves [crossed](#) the border near Narva, perhaps accidentally. Moreover, Russian aircraft breached Estonian airspace for 12 minutes in September 2025, prompting NATO to quickly [scramble aircraft](#) in response. This was consistent with the common Russian tactic of testing NATO's response times and military capabilities while also making a strong statement toward their adversaries. Earlier in the same month, Estonia's Baltic neighbor, Latvia, reported that a Russian military drone had [crash-landed](#) in Latvian territory.

If a pattern of recurrent airspace violations is not enough, Russia has adopted a new tactic of unorthodox warfare by using shipping vessels to cut internet cables in the Baltic Sea. These incidents [made headlines](#) around the world and have continued to plague EU and NATO officials to this day. As recently as December 31st, 2025, a vessel was [seized](#) by the Finnish Border Guard after dragging its anchor across the Baltic seafloor, cutting a cable between Helsinki and Tallinn.

It is unsurprising that Putin has held a special grudge against Estonia, considering the nation's unwavering support for Ukraine after Russia's 2022 invasion. Adjusted for GDP, Estonia has been among the most dedicated providers of [military aid](#) to Ukraine. The country has also handled many refugees, some of whom, by my own experience, include military-aged males fleeing the war. These refugees have been somewhat successfully encouraged to [assimilate](#) into host communities and learn the Estonian language.

After multiple tumultuous years in a row, Narva highlights the contrast in opinion between ethnic Estonians and many of their fellow ethnic Russian citizens. On the banks of the Narva River, the celebrations of Victory Day on May 9th set the stage for one of the more bizarre scenes of 2025. A Russian holiday celebrating the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 [drew crowds](#) on both sides of the river for the third straight year.

Supportive cheers erupted from many in Narva's crowd during the celebrations in Ivangorod across the river, despite a massive banner protesting Putin hanging in the background on the walls of Narva Castle. Estonia may not support Putin, but feelings of identity in this Russian-speaking city are undeniably complicated. Just months after Narva residents gathered on the riverbank to celebrate with their neighbors across the border, Estonia began work on concrete [defensive bunkers](#) near the Russian border in December 2025, as part of the planned Baltic Defense Line to prepare for armed conflict.

Given Estonia's cultural divide, which benefits Kremlin propaganda, it is vital the EU and Tallinn prevent Russian claims of marginalization from gaining credibility. Policies phasing out Russian-language schools have strained relations in Narva, but Estonia's efforts to protect its heritage are legitimate. To enhance social cohesion and ensure security and human rights, Estonia should invest in inclusive initiatives that value Russian communities, recognizing that descendants of Soviet-era immigrants are not responsible for Estonia's colonization.

After the American Civil War, Ulysses S. Grant took steps to address past wrongs but recognized that former Confederate states must rejoin American democracy for lasting peace. Estonia has made significant efforts to redress past injustices by gaining independence. The new generation of Russians must assimilate, but more initiatives are needed. The Kremlin has used the situation to foster a narrative of marginalization, resonating with frustrated Russian Estonians. The government must reconcile with young Russian speakers to ensure peace, sovereignty, and stability for Estonia.

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