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# **Soviet Decolonization in Estonia from fuzzy past to fuzzy present**

October 2023

## **1. Introduction**

The territory of what we call now Estonia has been surrendered under several colonial powers: Danish, Swedish but foremost German and Russian, with Soviet Russian being the most recent as the Soviet Union, governed by Moscow, dismantled itself only 30+ years ago. Between the periods of different occupations Estonia also had a period of independence: from 1918-1940. So the Republic of Estonia was created in 1918, not in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as is the common misconception.

The colonialist past is very visible in Estonia with the landmarks from every era, with vulgar Soviet symbols as the statues of Lenin removed in 1991, but some elements like "Red stars" on prominent buildings or ideologically suggestive artworks by Soviet Estonian artists still intact, like the mural on the ceiling of The National Opera from 1947 featuring Red Army soldiers of Estonian nationality.

There is also a lot of hidden colonialism. This can be called the Soviet colonialism of the mind: stereotypes and thought patterns that are from the Soviet times and post-Soviet times that have emerged into a mentality. It is present in attitudes towards environmentalism, economic fairness, workers' rights, rights for woman and children, LGBT+, freedom of speech etc. The scholars are actually divided on the origins of the Soviet-style attitudes deeply entwined in the Estonian psyche: some say the Soviet colonialism is surely to blame, as it has shaped the minds of a great deal of Estonians, but others say that neither Putin's Russia nor the Soviet past can be considered the cause - and excuse - after three decades of independence - a great amount of time to reconsider and rethink. Considering all of the above Estonia is a complex country with players like imperialism, patriarchy and consumer capitalism all entwined into creating the mental and social climate of 2023.

Full scale Russian war in Ukraine, that was launched by Putin on Estonian Independence Day on 24.02.2022, called for the process of decolonialism that had been on hold for the most part of the last 30 years. But it was like a wake-up call, that some heard and some didn't. So it has not been without backlashes - figuratively said: as many as there are people who want the monuments and buildings with "Red stars" to be demolished, or the statues of Soviet collaborators in crimes against humanity removed, there are people, among them historians or art historians, who want to leave them intact as "for not to become as brutal as the Soviets" and to "not to demolish the past as it cannot be demolished anyway, but rather it should be studied with the help from these very monuments." Whatever the stance, it all refers to the matter that decolonialism has not only being completed in Estonia but the mental (trauma) work required to follow it through has not even fully begun yet.

Also, other aspects of colonialism/postcolonialism have emerged: as several regions in Estonia are inhabited by mostly Russian speaking minorities, the main population has in a lot of ways turned on them with the suggestion of them being Putinist or the so called fifth column of Russia. The mostly deprived regions, those that cover the need for energy resources in Estonia by producing shale oil and electricity, have been the source of many conflicts since February 2022. So the question of whether or not the people there are treated appropriately, or if Estonians (by marginalizing them) have fallen into the patterns (akin to colonialism) of power play and dominance also needs to be answered.

In this strange conundrum, several sometimes contradictory art projects have emerged, and continue to do so. We will take a look at several projects/curators/artists more closely.

As the reader can see, the quickest and most effective art projects that have emerged after the full-scale war in Ukraine tackle the matters of decolonialism in the field of visual arts, especially contemporary fine arts, be it international group exhibitions with strong curatorial approach or reinterpreting pre-existing works from previous decades. There have also been notable but few projects in the field of performing arts, mostly in one theatrical company called Vaba Lava, that is housed both in Tallinn and in Ida- Virumaa, and in Narva, the border-town between East and West.

## **2. Decolonialism in contemporary art**

### **2.2 Goodbye, East! Goodbye, Narcissus!, curator Tanel Rander**

**Svitlana Biedarieva (Ukraine/Mexico), Elo Liiv (Estonia), Holger Loodus**

**(Estonia), Kateryna Lysovenko (Ukraine/Austria), Paulina Pukytė (Lithuania/**

**UK), Aliaxey Talstou (Belorussia/Germany), Kirill Tulin (East/West)**

**The opening exhibition of the 17th season of the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM) April-June 2023**



### **Estonia (EKKM) April-June 2023**

Sign IDA ("East" in Estonian), a part of a previous art show, was taken down from the roof of the EKKM museum building as a way of saying goodbye to the New East movement in June 2023.

Photo: Marlene Lahmer/Maris Nisu/EKKM

In this international curatorial exhibition Rander considered Eastern Europe to have a collective consciousness that has been molded by the complicated relationship with Russia, the aggressor state.

Rander has written that in the last decade Eastern Europe, which formerly had hidden its "eastern-ness" by all means not to seem inferior to the West, had gained a consciousness. "Alongside repressed memory, nostalgia appeared. What had previously been despicable and cause for shame, now became something exotic," Rander wrote in *Blok Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> But now, with the beginning of the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine, all the nostalgia, all the hype of babushkas and slav squats has got to go.

Rander has been researching decolonialism for a decade now, but has recently become disillusioned with the global movement and school of thought of decolonialism, because it is based on geopolitics, as Rander said in an interview for this research. "I don't even know if decolonialism is relevant [in Estonia] nowadays. That's why I made this exhibition based on a psychoanalytic vocabulary," Rander said.

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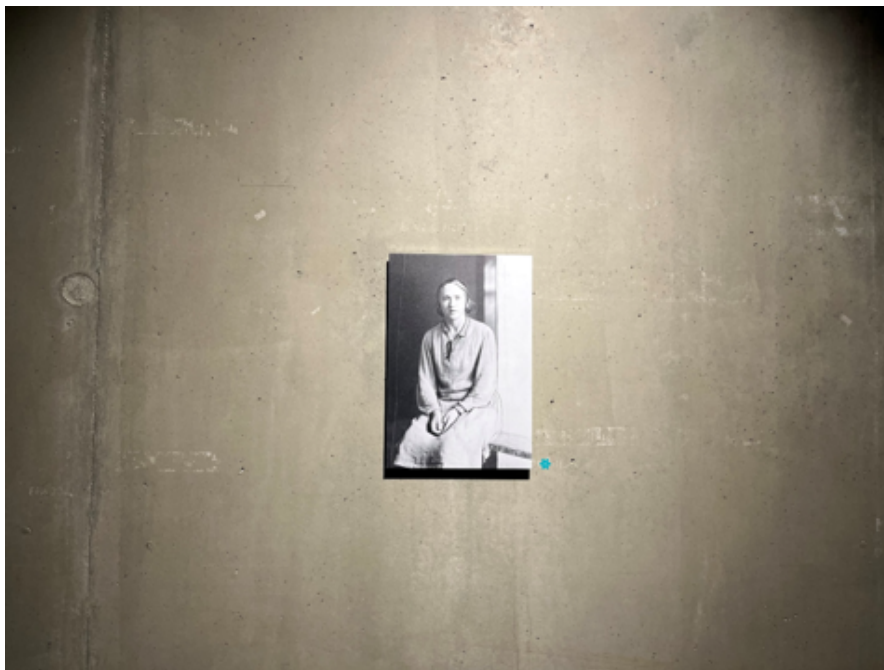
<sup>1</sup> <https://blokmagazine.com/goodbye-east-goodbye-narcissus>

Rander believes that the patriarchal ideology, still very present in Estonian society, has a lot to do with our Soviet past. "We cannot talk about Russia as a separate entity in any way; we are actually very strongly connected with Russia. Because of people -- where we come from, who our ancestors were, and what they were like -- it all has to do with the Soviet Union," said Rander. He said that Estonia lives in a narcissistic relationship, in sort of a constellation with Russia. "We have an ax hanging over our heads all the time. We have to fear all the time that we will have a war. And it changes us a lot, or has changed; it has shaped us. The point of comparison here is that it is like living in a violent family or around a violent abuser," said Rander.

The end of the war signified the end of make-believe. "The beginning of the war was very liberating for me. For the first time, I had the courage to show all my feelings. For the first time, it really became clear what was going on with Russia. And Russia is patriarchal, and perhaps the biggest problem in the whole world is that Russia is not seen as something extremely patriarchal. There are some myths that present Russia as a victim and a woman. This is a very big part of Russian ideology, that Russia is a woman, and Russia is always a victim. And the West is like a father," explained Rander.

At the finissage of the exhibition "Goodbye, East! Goodbye, Narcissus!" the guests could demolish domestic crystal objects - the symbol of USSR legacy for many in Estonia and something that symbolizes now both persistence and fragility - as part of a liberating trauma-healing session. Also, the sign IDA ("East" in Estonian), a part of a previous art show, was taken down from the roof of the EKKM museum building as a way of saying goodbye to the New East movement that had been considered cool a few years back but seems completely of bad taste and even obscene after 24.02.2022.

### **2.3 Keeping Things in the Dark, curator Francisco Martínez. Curatorial group exhibition at Sillamäe Museum in Eastern-Estonia, May-June 2023 A four-artists installation by Anna Škodenko, Darja Popolitova, Viktor Gurov and Francisco Martínez**



Installation of things found in the cellars of Ida-Virumaa. Photo: Mari Peegel

To prepare the joint installation about basements as time capsules, artists Anna Škodenko, Darja Popolitova, Viktor Gurov and Francisco Martínez visited apartment buildings in Ida-Virumaa, in Eastern-Estonia. The region is mostly inhabited by Russian speaking minorities of Estonia. For example, 80 percent of the inhabitants on Narva, the most Eastern town of Estonia and also the border town of the European Union, consider themselves Russian.

"My recent three art projects have dealt with Ida-Virumaa and difficult legacies, and we can call them the colonial legacies. The art projects have dealt with intensive modernization of the landscapes, to shale oil mining, and the current one deals with the basements. I have been visiting the basements on the Estonian-Russian border and asked people to show what kind of things they keep underground. The concept of the exhibition relies on the idea that our personality has three dimensions: the public, the private and the secret. We need secret places to negotiate changes or to negotiate complex identity matters, like the ones in Eastern Estonia," Martínez, an anthropologist and a long time Estonian resident, explained.

Martínez said that the topic of decolonialism is not the main focus of this exhibition, but still an important part of it. Decolonization for him means domination. "Nowadays Estonia is an independent country, and the ones who can feel to be dominated or oppressed are the Russian speakers in Ida-Virumaa," said Martínez. "I wouldn't say that this is colonialism, because colonialism is a very specific phenomenon from 17th-19th century, but the situation in Ida-Virumaa is a form of extractivism (the removal of large quantities of raw or natural materials, particularly for export with minimal processing -M.P.), and a form of hierarchization of communities - those who are ruling and those who don't count that much and can't participate equally in public discussions. In my opinion this is the case of Russian speakers in Estonia. Many, not all of them," Martínez explained. "There is the case of extractivism of natural resources, that creates pollution and is limiting the possibilities of economic development. Crypto farming is also a problem in Ida-Virumaa that is being done by multinational companies. However, the profit does not remain in Ida-Virumaa, it goes to somewhere in the cloud. These are the forms of colonialism and extractivism that I see in Estonia," Martínez said.

He argued that while Estonians have the right to make claims of the colonization [by various foreign powers], because it has affected the development and had traumatic consequences, in the present there are forms of domination by Estonians that resemble colonization in the Eastern part of Estonia. This is a sensitive topic, he concluded. It certainly is - the problems in Ida-Virumaa are very rarely talked about from the point of view of the people who live there.

Martínez points out that there is a lack of understanding between many Estonian speakers and Russian speakers in Estonia. "And I would not say that this is a consequence of Soviet ideology. We can blame many bad things on Soviet ideology, but this is the case of Estonian speakers being oppressed by Russian speakers historically [in the region formerly], and because the two communities have different historical starting points. My question is to what extent plurality and lack of a homogenous narrative can co-exist? For me it is possible, but for many it is not." Martínez pointed out that while Estonians see Estonia being occupied by Soviet Russia in 1945, the Russian-speaking minority tends to believe Estonia was liberated from Nazi German occupation that year.

## 2.3 Artist Flo Kasearu's House Museum, Ongoing project since 2013

Flo Kasearu's House Museum's main focus is Flo herself - she, currently in her 30s, is one of the few artists in Estonia who has a museum dedicated to her/himself while living. In this house the past, and also the colonial past, represents itself as well as the contemporary and very modern art of Kasearu.

The wooden tenement in Tallinn that was built in Tsarist times by Kasearu's great-great grandparents was nationalized in the 1940s as were almost all privately-owned houses in Estonia. It was inhabited by random people and Kasearu's relatives could live there but no longer had any control over the upkeep of the house. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, previous owners of nationalized real estate or their relatives could claim restitution for nationalized property. Thus did Kasearu's great-grandmother, and as a result of a rather tedious procedure, art student Kasearu became one of the owners of the house.

The story of the house can be seen as an example of decolonization, as a Soviet construct like nationalization was put to an end, and as Kasearu said in an interview to me, the roots of the Soviet era are everywhere here. "The house was taken away, then given back - the entire history of the house reflects this," said Kasearu. She gives artist tours in the house museum where the layers of different historic periods are still intact and entwined with objects of Kasearu's art.

Besides the house museum other Kasearu's art projects have dealt with problems that she draws back to Soviet times, and that are being resolved. "My exhibition on domestic violence "Cut out of life" in Kunstihoone in 2021 was also very much related to the fact that during the Soviet era, everything that happened in private life was private and not talked about. As a result, we now have high statistics of violent incidents. People dare to talk about what is happening in their families and seek help," Kasearu explained. "I have said on my website that I was born in the Soviet Union, but I live in Estonia. However, history is simply inevitably present in my various works," Kasearu resumed.

In the yard on her house museum Kasearu exhibits a work from 2015, "The Uprising," that is influenced by the fact that Estonia is geographically located next to Russia, and also the growing tensions in the region after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. "Relations between Estonia and Russia throughout the history give this work a greater context. "Uprising" (an exhibition at the Temnikova & Kasela gallery in 2015) was inspired by the fact that Russian war planes entered the Estonian airspace in 2015. Was it an inadvertent mistake? Was it manipulation? Was this some kind of prank by the pilot or was it part of some bigger plan? It was in the media a lot at the time, and I was also inspired. Both large and small metal airplanes in the style of paper airplanes were made from the old roof," explained Kasearu. But, she also states that she doesn't consciously seek out or link her works to historical events. "I work more with gut feeling," she said.



## 2.4 Ann-Mirjam Vaikla. Chasing the Devil to the Moon: Art Under Lunar Occupation Today, international group exhibition curated by Corina L. Apostol. Tallinn Art Hall, June-August 2023



Ann-Mirjam Vaikla's installation in Tallinn Art Hall. Photo: Paul Kuimet/Tallinn Art Hall

The international group exhibition that "explores the profound implications and complex questions arising from the concept of lunar colonization" also hosts an installation by Estonian artist, curator and scenographer Ann-Mirjam Vaikla.

At the heart of Vaikla's work is the full moon-shaped wall ornament of a Stalinist-style building, the cinema house Sõprus ("Friendship" in Estonian) built during the Soviet era (1955) in Tallinn's Old Town. The artist has brought a copy of the ornament into the gallery, in front of which she has placed a burning kerosene lamp for the lamp soot to paint over the white ornament as a continuous performance. According to the curator, it is like repainting the moon in the context of Eastern European decolonization that invites the viewer to reflect on how power structures have shaped our vision of the world.

In her art and artist research Vaikla deals with the meaning of Russian imperialism and colonization and the associated decolonization practices. "Russian colonialism in Estonia - including in the surrounding regions in the Baltics, and Eastern Europe in general - has manifested itself in different ways in different historical periods (Russian Empire, Soviet Union). Based on what is happening in Ukraine now, where Russia pursues its imperialist and colonialist goals at the expense of human lives and at the expense of the environment, Russian colonialism has become an unavoidable topic," Vaikla said.

She is interested in the interweaving of colonial politics and history, including the practices of decolonization, with the environment and the environmental crisis. As she started

researching the influence and traces of Russian colonialism in Paldiski (a port town near Tallinn), she soon realized that the exceptionally deep Paldiski Bay had been the trigger that led to a hub for constructing warships and later a military submarine base to be established. "Deep water gave impetus for the emergence of colonialist imaginations, accompanied by establishing large-scale infrastructures. But what happens when we humans begin to attribute certain things to "deep water" agency? To see the so-called 'body of water' which consists of an ecology that is non- vs. more-than-human (bacteria, plants, fish, birds, etc.) as a collective organism?" the artist asks.

Vaikla considers art to be a good tool for dealing with the topic of decolonization because art allows an open discussion. "In my works and artist practice, I am interested in communicating with different generations, because it seems to me that the Soviet era has left a very different mark on every generation that has experienced it. This has had an influence on the forming of the identity of different generations on an individual as well as on a collective level," Vaikla said.

### **3.1 Memory work. Queering the permanent exhibition Museum of Estonian Freedom VABAMU, curator Rebeka Põldsam**

Starting in June, which is pride month, a new audio journey accompanies Vabamu's permanent exhibition, titled "From "such people" to LGBT activism. Stories from sexual and gender minorities in 20th century Estonia." With that addition the permanent exhibition of Vabamu gained four new objects and the audio guide eight new stories.

Queering museums is not as common a practice in Estonia as it has been in other Western countries, so Vabamu, a museum that depicts the two recent occupations of Estonia by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, can certainly be called a pioneer in this field in Estonia. However, queering of the past is also not totally uncommon in the visual arts in Estonia, as it is one of the topics of the art of visual artist Jaanus Samma.

The curator of the Vabamu's new audio guide, Rebeka Põldsam, argues that in the newly founded republic of Estonia, in 1920-1930s, LGBT+ people were discussed publicly in media, literature and film, but the Soviet occupation that followed, erased queers completely from that sphere and thus also from the Estonian public memory. It was to the point that people have no instant recollection of gay people from Soviet times, and even say that there were no "such people" during Soviet times. Some are even implicating that the times were better in that sense, and seem to be having a certain nostalgia for the seemingly queer-free times "when everybody was 'normal.'"

There were reasons why LGBT+ people were not out and seen during the Soviet times. Homosexuality became a crime in the criminal code (it had not been that during the last years of the Estonian Republic from 1935-1940) and by wearing the clothing of the other gender you could be stopped and taken away by the police as an offender of the public order. So pointing out the stories of the then criminalized and harassed gay people and making them visible and relatable, the audio guide is an act of decolonization of the past and of the mind without using the notion specifically.

"During the Soviet era, everyone's freedoms were oppressed, and the way sexual and gender minorities' right to privacy and free choice to create intimate relationships and to be themselves was limited, reveals the control mechanism that all residents of the Soviet Union had



to take into account," Põldsam wrote in a commentary for the public broadcasting web portal.<sup>2</sup>

One of the aspects of Vabamu's new audio guide is marriage, as sham marriages to the opposite sex helped queers to function in a society where one's real nature and desires had to be disguised. The topic of marriage is also of importance as Estonia legalized gender-neutral marriage this June, and also this change in legislation can be seen as an act of decolonialism as it is a giant step away from the criminalized homosexuality of the Soviet past.

#### **4.1. Performing arts. Theatre Vaba Lava, in Narva and Tallinn, various productions and The Freedom Festival. Creative director Julia Aug, CEO Märt Meos**

Vaba Lava/Free Stage is one of the very few, not to say the only, Estonian theatrical company that has reacted on the new reality that came with the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine. Being a small project theatre, it has had the ability and also the willingness to react quickly to the situation with the means of visual arts. Vaba Lava benefits largely from the work of Julia Aug, a very famous Russian actress and director, but also a Russian emigre of Estonian and Jewish decent, who lives now in Estonia.

Julia Aug has directed and written two plays for Vaba Lava: "Narva - The City We Lost" and "Fuck War. Letters from the Front."

"Narva - The City We Lost" is based on written and oral history and legends of the city of Narva. The play wants to give the city that was bombed to the ground during the II World War back its memory so the people of Narva, many of who came to live in Narva after WWII from other parts of the Soviet Union, get the sense that the city existed also before the Soviet time and has thus a much broader history. By liberating Narva from the "only Soviet" narrative, a new future is given to the third largest city of Estonia, the authors of the play believe.

The other play by Aug, "Fuck War. Letters from the Front," was staged only two months after the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine broke. "Fuck War" draws on the correspondence of Aug with her friends - actors/actresses, theatre directors - in Ukrainian bomb shelters during the first weeks of war.

The project was not only a performance, but also a chronicle of what was happening in the early days of the full-scale war. The days that have grown into a year and a half. "The play has a definite beginning, but no end. There is no end to the Russian war in Ukraine," the synopsis of the play read.

As the people of Narva are mostly conservative and some of them are also influenced by the Putinist propaganda they receive via Kremlin TV channels, the play "Fuck War" was not well

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.err.ee/1609009631/rebeka-poldsam-mida-raagivad-vahemuste-lood-enamuse-muuseumis>

received by locals. "The people who live here are not native Estonians, and they are also influenced by the information from beyond the [Russian] border. Art here is provincial, conservatism is prevalent. They think that Vaba Lava is not for them, that it is propaganda and someone else's opinion that is being imposed on them. But our theatre fights against conservative attitudes and expands the boundaries," said the marketing director of Vaba Lava, Rene Abramson in an interview for Goethe-Institut Tallinn's web magazine Samovar.<sup>3</sup>

"It is difficult to find suitable labor for the theater in Narva, and the attitudes there are also different. We also have to explain a lot to our employees why we do one thing or another. But we have made the people of Narva more open with our community projects," said the CEO of the theatre Märt Meos in a conversation to me. "We also know them a lot better now," Meos adds. "We created our theatre for Narva to have access to culture in Estonian language. Unfortunately, it has not gone as well as we hoped, because other Estonian theatres do not particularly want to come to Narva to give performances," said Meos.

This year, Vaba Lava has not qualified for additional state subsidies. "It seems to me that the Estonian state is not particularly interested in Narva. That they are ready to let the town go. Vaba Lava's support is 400,000 euros this year, but for this money we have to give performances in two cities and rent a theatre venue in Tallinn," Meos explained. He said that moneywise it is not going great.

This August, Vaba Lava organized The Freedom Festival in Narva, where Central Asian contemporary theatre troupes and a theatre from Ukraine will perform as guests. "The Freedom Festival will focus on Ukraine, that is fighting for the freedom of previous and current areas with the Russian Empire and Central Asian countries that need to find new ways, roles and balance in the forming geopolitical situation," the blurb on the festival booklet says. "These are strong productions, they are worth showing, and the makers of these theatres are literally risking their lives making art like this because censorship severely represses artists and there are problems with the free speech," explained Meos. Vaba Lava believes that Narva is the perfect place for The Freedom Festival: the city where the free world begins and with which - over the border - the free world ends.

## 5. Conclusions

**As said in the introduction of this paper, decolonialism is still not a word publicly used in discussions in Estonia in 2023. If at all, it is used in international academic discussions, as in the panels of the Tallinn University "Disentangling Eurasia" Summer School in July and August or the panel discussion "Decoloniality and Art Historical Alliances in Eastern Europe" in the Kumu Art Museum in September, to mention some of the few. Among wider public, as in mass media, or in private circles it is rarely discussed as a phenomenon characteristic to all former Soviet Republics or the countries of the Soviet Bloc, but is rather discussed about as isolated cases. For example, the discussions about removing and demolishing Soviet War Memorials and burial grounds, are mostly of the practical nature: how many skeletons, in what condition,**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.goethe.de/prj/sam/et/kun/wtk.html>

and what would be the costs of the removal works for the local government. Decolonialist practices on state level are mostly motivated by political profit and not directed towards memory work or filling the gaps in collective memory in a pluralist way.

So, it is fair to say that Estonian society greatly dismisses the opportunity to do the long due memory work about the Soviet past and the involvement of Estonians in Socialist repressive policies and practices. As all trauma and memory work is painful and could shift the known and convenient structures of Estonian society, politics and culture, this is avoided by all means.

That said, there are art projects on the topic of decolonialism, but they are mostly small scale and independent, i.e. there are no larger state-funded institutions involved. Most of the art projects that deal with decolonialism in Estonia or in Eastern-Europe in general stem from the interests of certain curators or artists who were interested in decolonial issues even before the full-scale Russian war started in Ukraine.

Larger cultural institutions have not picked up the theme and the majority of Estonian artists tend to pick themes that are not political or social but rather introspective. One can argue that the lack of political activism in Estonian art and culture is also a Soviet legacy as during Soviet times art was considered to be a tool for the state propaganda and political themes were favored and often commissioned by the politburo, with some topics being totally no-no at the same time. With demolishing of the Soviet order, the artist was free to choose and refuse, and by tendency they began to look for themes outside of the once forced upon political sphere.

By being independent, the art projects on decolonialism so far have received little public funding. The Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia, EKKM, that opened the season of 2023 with the exhibition "Goodbye, Narcissus" is chronically underfunded by the state and operates in a venue that is temporary. The museum has no heating so it can be operated only during warmer seasons, and the museum's requests for extra funding from the Ministry of Culture have remained unfulfilled. The same can be said about the theatre company Vaba Lava that has had to go to court on several occasions to claim appropriate state subsidizing.

The organizers of the projects and art performances sometimes face dismissal from the public, since there is no coherent public opinion towards Soviet past and the need to decolonialize Estonia from Soviet ideologies and thought patterns. A case worth mentioning is the proposed removal of a bronze figure of Soviet writer who - as the documents uncovered in 2023 proofed - took part in crimes against the humanity as a member of one of the brigades that deported people to Siberia. The sculpture, a bas-relief, is placed on the House for Writers, in Tallinn Old Town. The dispute whether to take the bas-relief down ended in a vote where the majority of Estonian writers were against removing of the statue, and the writers and activists who demanded the removal were - and still are - considered troublemakers who want to cancel 'a writer much more talented as they are'. The approach towards the writers is not unlike how dissidents were treated by many during the Soviet times.

And so, the fuzzy past that has turned into a fuzzy present carries on. So one can only hope that the ideas from the Estonian art and academic community will soon be adopted by

**the wider public, and no greater cataclysm will force Estonia to deal with the Soviet past at full speed.**

**(Dis)Solutions.  
Mapping of decolonial discourses in Kazakhstan.  
A project by Goethe-Institut.**

