



## BORIS NEMTSOV SQUARE

Prague, Czech Republic

50.10366, 14.41254



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### Executive Summary

On February 27, 2016, several Czech citizens started a petition to rename Prague's Under the Chestnuts Square, the site of Russia's Embassy in the Czech Republic, in honour of the murdered Kremlin critic, Boris Nemtsov. The Prague City Council finalised the renaming on February 27, 2020. In response, the Russian Embassy changed its address to the nearby Coronation Street, which was renamed the Street of Ukrainian Heroes in 2022. The square's renaming was met with local approval and spurred protests against Putin's regime. It also inflamed tensions between the Czech Republic and Russia over the Kremlin's foreign policy and the memory of Soviet rule in Czechoslovakia, likely contributing to the attacks on the Czech Embassy in Moscow in April 2021. This case study examines how the contested legacies of Communism in East-Central Europe influence contemporary politics, mapping the diplomatic dimensions of the struggle for public space.

## Introduction

Much of the contestation surrounding Boris Nemtsov Square has more to do with the complexities of Russian-Czech and Russian-Slovak relations than with the square itself. These diplomatic relationships are inexorably entangled in complicated histories, most notably the role of the Soviet Union as a state which maintained control over the Soviet satellite state of Czechoslovakia in the latter half of the twentieth century. This case study unravels these knotted histories, attempting to draw out the implications and impact of Boris Nemtsov Square.

## Background

### *Boris Nemtsov and Putin's Russia*

The late 1980s and early 1990s brought about a breakdown of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and, shortly thereafter, the dissolution of the USSR into its constituent states. The Russian Federation emerged as the biggest of the post-Soviet successor states, with the greatest claim to carrying on the USSR's historical legacy. The turbulent ascension of Russia's first post-1989 President, Boris Yeltsin, brought about hopes of reform and rejuvenation. However, the reality of the transition from communism to capitalism and from totalitarianism to democracy, was marred by war, corruption, and high crime rates.<sup>1</sup>

Boris Nemtsov rose to prominence in the 1990s as governor of Nizhny Novgorod, one of Russia's biggest cities and a key commercial hub on the Volga River. Nemtsov's privatising initiatives earned him both domestic and international recognition and brought him the favour of Russia's President, Boris Yeltsin.<sup>2</sup> As Yeltsin's advisor and heir apparent, Nemtsov spearheaded the drive to transform Russia into a modern, Western-style state.<sup>3</sup> These reformist efforts angered Russian oligarchs, leading to a targeted defamation campaign that derailed Nemtsov's promising political career.<sup>4</sup> The Second Chechen War of 1999-2000 and the rise of Putin sealed the fate of Nemtsov's reformist vision, setting Russia onto a path towards 'managed democracy'.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2010s, Nemtsov partially recovered his reputation, positioning himself as a critic of Putin's government. In 2014, Nemtsov stood at the forefront of the protests against Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention in the Donbas.<sup>6</sup> These 'Peace Marches' served as a rallying point for

<sup>1</sup> David Remnick, *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), 122-123.

<sup>3</sup> Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 202-203.

<sup>4</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), 187.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2018), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. The People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 160.

the Russian opposition, and soon attacked not just the war in Ukraine, but Putin's rule as a whole, challenging economic mismanagement, corruption, and abuses of the rule of law.<sup>7</sup>

Nemtsov was killed on February 27, 2015 on the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge near the Kremlin.<sup>8</sup> The Russian government has denied all accusations of its involvement in Nemtsov's death, but the circumstances of the killing suggest otherwise. The men detained and tried for Nemtsov's murder were Chechens with close ties to the regime of the Putin-aligned strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov.<sup>9</sup> In 2022, a joint investigation by Bellingcat, The Insider, and the BBC uncovered information alleging that prior to his killing, Nemtsov had been followed by several members of the FSB (Russia's secret service), linked to the deaths of other prominent opposition activists.<sup>10</sup>

### *The History of Czech-Russian Relations*

A communist legacy defines Czech-Russian relations. From 1948 to 1989, Czechoslovakia (the joint Czech and Slovak state, dissolved in the 1990s) was ruled by the Communist Party and belonged to the Soviet-led Cold War bloc. In 1968, Czechoslovakia was invaded by Warsaw Pact forces under Soviet leadership in an attempt to quell liberalising tendencies and consolidate Communist rule.<sup>11</sup> The memory of the invasion left a permanent mark on Czech historical memory. The Czech foreign minister, Jan Lipavský, travelled to Ukraine in 2022 after the nation had been attacked by Russia. In expressing his solidarity with Ukraine, Lipavský stated, 'We have suffered a foreign invasion in 1968. Ukraine is now living through a similar experience.'<sup>12</sup>

The memory of 1968 acts as a basis for solidarity between pro-democratic forces in Russia and the Czech Republic. After the assault on Ukraine in 2014, several protestors gathered on Manezhnaya Square in Moscow under a banner that declared 'For Your Liberty and Ours'. The same slogan was used by the seven Soviet dissidents who publicly opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.<sup>13</sup>

Official Russian accounts frame the invasion of 1968 as an instance of Warsaw Pact troops crushing fascists and reactionaries that sought to undermine the socialist project. In this respect, the memory of 1968 is linked to the USSR's liberation of Czech territories from Nazi rule at the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>8</sup> David Satter, "Who Killed Boris Nemtsov?" *Hudson Institute*, October 31, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Bellingcat, "Boris Nemtsov Tailed by FSB Squad Prior to 2015 Murder." March 28, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Oldřich Tůma, "Reforms in the Communist Party: The Prague Spring and Apprehension about a Soviet Invasion". In *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968*, ed. Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 70.

<sup>12</sup> Translation by author, Seznam Zprávy, "Ukrajina zažívá svůj rok 1968, řekl Lipavský na Donbasu." February 7, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), 424.

end of WW2. Attempts on the Czech side to problematise the history of Soviet involvement in 1945 and 1968 have exacerbated diplomatic tensions.<sup>14</sup>

From 2014 onward, Czech-Russian relations have been on a steady downturn. In 2021, information emerged implying that Russian agents were involved in the explosion of a munitions depot near the Czech village of Vrbětice. In the resulting diplomatic strife, the Czech Republic was officially condemned by the Kremlin as one of Russia's greatest international enemies.<sup>15</sup>

### *Boris Nemtsov Square and Soviet-Era Commemorative Sites on Czech Territory*

The Communist period left its mark on urban landscapes across Czechoslovakia. Post-1989, there was a nationwide push to dispense with the material legacy of totalitarianism, manifested in the dismantling of statues and the demolition of buildings associated with the past regime.<sup>16</sup> The rise in Czech-Russian tensions post-2014 reinvigorated similar impulses.

Right-wing, liberal municipal politicians, dissatisfied with the Czech government's supposed lack of forcefulness in dealing with Russia, moved to combat the memory of Soviet occupation in their areas. In 2019, Pavel Novotný, the mayor of Prague's Řeporyje district, commissioned a plaque commemorating the Russian Liberation Army, a group of Nazi collaborators who switched sides at the end of WW2 and helped liberate Prague from the Germans. Around the same time, the mayor of Prague 6, Ondřej Kolář, decreed the removal of Ivan Konev's statue on Interbrigades Square, citing the Soviet Marshal's involvement in the invasion of 1968.<sup>17</sup>

Boris Nemtsov's Square is not laden with a history of contestation. The significance of the square lies in its location — prior to the renaming, it was the official address of Russia's Embassy in the Czech Republic. The decision followed similar examples abroad. The street in front of the Russian Embassy in Washington has been renamed to Boris Nemtsov Plaza, and the Russian Embassy in Vilnius is located near Boris Nemtsov Square.<sup>18</sup> In the Czech context, the move carries particular weight, given that the local Russian Embassy, with its inexplicably large number of employees, has long been seen as a major base for the Kremlin's intelligence operations in Central Europe.<sup>19</sup>

## History of the Contestation

<sup>14</sup> David Štáhlavský and Věra Luptáková, "Odkrývání historie Rusové chápou jako útok, jako projev nevědky za osvobození, myslí si historik Mrňka." *Český Rozhlas*, April 29, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Filip Kalčák, "Rusko zveřejnilo seznam nepřátelských zemí. Mezi deseti státy je i Česká republika." *CNN Prima News*, April 27, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Milena Bartlová, "Marshall Koněv and the Immaculate Virgin: Some Art-Historical Issues in the Czech Politics of Memory," *Dějiny — teorie — kritika* 18, no. 1 (2021): 133.

<sup>17</sup> Vojtěch Berge, "Koněv, vlasovci i komunistický pohraničník. České střídání na podstavcích předbílá Východ." *Hlídací pes*, July 4, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ivana Kotassová, "Prague renames square in front of Russian embassy after slain Putin critic Boris Nemtsov." *CNN*, February 24, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Horák, "Ruští agenti v Česku vytěžují poslance, řídí putinovské trolly nebo šikanují krajany." *Aktuálně.cz*, April 22, 2021.

## *Boris Nemtsov as a Symbol of Anti-Putin Sentiments*

Nemtsov's death turned him into a martyr of the Russian opposition movement. Anti-Putin activists placed a plaque in Nemtsov's honour on the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge. The make-shift memorial has been repeatedly destroyed by the authorities, only for it to be re-established again and again.<sup>20</sup> The anniversary of Nemtsov's death is associated with annual protests. During a rally in Moscow on February 27, 2020, a woman interviewed by Radio Free Europe spoke of Nemtsov as a 'symbol of the overall social movement about how to live more justly'.<sup>21</sup>

On February 27, 2016, three Czech citizens initiated an online petition calling for Prague's Under the Chestnuts Square, the site of Russia's Embassy in the Czech Republic, to be renamed in Nemtsov's honour. The petition casts Nemtsov's death as a 'symbol of the struggle for democracy in Russia, and of the bestiality of Putin's authoritarian regime'.<sup>22</sup>

The petition also makes reference to the Czech Republic's modern tradition of 'advancing democracy and human rights across the world', begun by the nation's first post-1989 President, Václav Havel.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the push for the renaming reflects not just the history of Czech-Russian/Soviet relations, but also a broader commitment to liberal values.

## *The Russian Embassy in Prague*

A large part of society has been seeing the Russian Embassy in Prague both as an embodiment of the history of Soviet occupation and Russia's current interference in the internal affairs of former Warsaw Pact states. Prior to the wave of mass expulsions following the Vrbětice scandal in spring 2021, the number of Russian diplomatic personnel on Czech territory was close to 140. By contrast, as of 2021, Russia's diplomatic mission in the US had just around 80 employees. The Czech BIS (Security Information Service) repeatedly noted that a considerable portion of the Russian Embassy's unusually numerous employees serve as intelligence operatives.<sup>24</sup>

The Russian Embassy is a point of contention in Czech political life, reflecting broader polarisation in attitudes towards Putin's regime. In 2018, Czech Republic's President Miloš Zeman, who has strong Russian ties, disparaged BIS for its investigation of the embassy's employees.<sup>25</sup> After the expulsion of Russian diplomats in the spring of 2021, Vojtěch Filip, chairman of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, condemned the Czech counterintelligence agency for acting on

<sup>20</sup> Mary Petkova, "Keeping Boris Nemtsov's memory alive." Al Jazeera, October 18, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> RFE/RL, "Thousands Rally In Moscow, Other Russian Cities to Mark Anniversary of Nemtsov Killing." February 29, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Translation by author, Petice.com, "Přejmenujme náměstí Pod Kaštany na náměstí Borise Němcova," Petice.com, February 27, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Translation by author, Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Jan Horák, "Ruští agenti v Česku vytěžují poslance, řídí putinovské trolly nebo šikanují krajany." *Aktuálně.cz*, April 22, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Novinky.cz, "Jsou to čučkaři, řekl Zeman o BIS." December 6, 2018.

supposedly unfounded reports of the Kremlin's involvement in the Vrbětice explosion, and criticised the government for inviting Russian reprisals.<sup>26</sup>

The Vrbětice scandal spurred a swell of anti-Russian sentiments. On April 18 2021, a group of about a hundred protesters gathered in Boris Nemtsov Square. The demonstration was summoned via Twitter by Benjamin Roll, co-founder and chairman of the Million Moments for Democracy initiative. Violent clashes erupted between the demonstrators and several supporters of Putin's rule; however, these were swiftly broken up by the police.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the curtailing of Russian diplomatic presence in 2021, the embassy retained its contentious status. On March 3, 2022, the activist David Šteffel spilled a bucket of red paint on the wall of the embassy in protest against the invasion of Ukraine. Šteffel is a representative of the 'Decommunists' group, calling for the outlawing of Communism in the Czech Republic and the aggressive combating of Russian influence. After defacing the embassy wall, Šteffel declared his plan to 'bombard' all of Russia's state-owned properties across Prague with red paint, treating them as 'legitimate targets in a war that Russia has unleashed'.<sup>28</sup> Public space around the embassy continues to be defined by tensions between Putin's regime and pro-democratic, anti-communist forces in the Czech Republic.

### *The Renaming — An Exercise in Municipal Diplomacy*

The renaming of Boris Nemtsov Square was announced in front of the Russian Embassy on February 27, 2020, the fifth anniversary of the politician's death.<sup>29</sup> A sign with the new name was unveiled by Zdeněk Hřib, Prague's mayor and a member of the Czech Pirate Party, in the company of Nemtsov's daughter, Zhanna Nemtsova. Nemtsova stated: 'I thank all those who agreed with the renaming, and all those in opposition. Because that is true democracy, when all opinions are heard.' Hřib stressed the need for 'remembering those who laid down their lives in the fight for democracy' while invoking the Czech 'tradition of supporting human rights'. The ceremonial renaming attracted several dozens of peaceful demonstrators, who came to honour Nemtsov's memory.<sup>30</sup>

President Zeman's spokesman, Jiří Ovčáček, condemned the renaming as a 'puny, pathetic attempt

<sup>26</sup> Veronika Sedláčková and Michael Erhart, "Filip o Vrbětících: Důvodné podezření není důkaz. Žádný vyšetřovatel se nechá vést jednou verzí." *Český rozhlas*, April 29, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> iRozhlas, "Před ambasádou v Praze se strhl spor mezi demonstranty a příznivci Ruska. Na místě zasahovala policie." *iRozhlas*, April 18, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Translation by author, Vojtěch Gavriněv, "„Nešika“, co polil ruskou ambasádu v Praze umělou krví, inspiroval celý svět." *Seznam Zprávy*, March 23, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> iRozhlas, "Pražští radní schválili změnu názvu náměstí před ruskou ambasádou. Ponese jméno Borise Němcova." February 24, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Translation by author, iRozhlas, "Ruská ambasáda nově sídlí na náměstí Borise Němcova. Putinova kritika zavraždili před pěti lety." February 27, 2020.

to stir the pot’, illuminating the schism between national and municipal politics.<sup>31</sup> In an interview with a Czech news outlet, *Seznam Zprávy*, Hřib stressed that the City Council’s decision was not conceived as an attack on Russia, but rather as an attempt to ‘fulfil the will of the over four and a half thousand people who signed the petition’. Hřib also stressed that Putin himself condemned Nemtsov’s murder, and thus, there was no reason ‘why anyone in Russia should be concerned’ about the renaming.<sup>32</sup>

The decision was nevertheless condemned by the Kremlin. In a press conference, Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, stated that through supporting anti-Putin opposition forces, the renaming interfered with Russia’s internal affairs, and as such, bordered on a violation of international law. Zakharova denounced the decision as ‘absurd and barbaric’, and ‘disrespectful to the memory of people whose names are exploited in service of political goals’.<sup>33</sup> In March 2020, the Russian Embassy changed its address from the square to the nearby Coronation Street, declaring that ‘given that the name Coronation Street has historical significance (...) the likelihood of a renaming is lesser than in case of the suddenly invented toponym “Boris Nemtsov Square”’. The embassy did not make any explicit reference to the political motivations behind this move.<sup>34</sup>

The renaming, along with the removal of Marshal Konev’s statue in Prague 6 and the construction of a memorial to the Russian Liberation Army in Prague-Řeporyje, led to an attack on the Czech Republic’s Embassy in Moscow. On April 5 2020, several members of Other Russia, a successor of the National Bolshevik Party, threw smoke bombs onto the embassy’s grounds and placed a banner on the fence around the embassy, stating ‘Stop Fascism’. Other Russia cited the removal of Konev’s statue as its primary motivation, but the move followed a broader trend of diplomatic escalation between Czech municipal officials and Russia. The Czech Foreign Ministry issued a note to the Kremlin, declaring its hopes that ‘Russian authorities will take measures to prevent such incidents from reoccurring’.<sup>35</sup>

In spring 2020, the three mayors implicated in diplomatic tensions with Russia — Novotný, Kolář, and Hřib — were placed under police protection following the news of a poisoning plot orchestrated by Russian secret services. *Respekt*, a Czech investigative weekly, published a story based on the testimony of an unmanned source in BIS, claiming that a Russian agent came into Prague carrying ricin, a deadly poison previously used to eliminate other rivals of Putin’s regime in

<sup>31</sup> Translation by author, *Ibid*.

<sup>32</sup> Translation by author, Martina Spěváčková, “Hřib: Náměstí B. Němcova Rusové uvítají, Putinovi to nandat nechceme.” *Seznam Zprávy*, February 26, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Translation by author, Aktuálně.cz, “Nonsense, větší absurdita se ani nedala čekat, komentuje náměstí Borise Němcova Moskva.” March 3, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Translation by author, iRozhlas, “Ulice Korunovačnická je historická a spíš ji nepřejmují, zdůvodňuje změnu adresy ruská ambasáda.”, April 19, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> RFE/RL, “Czech Embassy in Moscow Attacked After Prague Removes Soviet Commander’s Statue.” April 6, 2020.



foreign countries.<sup>36</sup>

In May, Czech Republic's Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš, ultimately declared that the 'entire case came to being as a result of international feuding among workers at the embassy', one of whom 'sent false information about a planned attack against Czech politicians to our counter-intelligence service.' The Russian Embassy labelled the whole affair a 'fabricated provocation'.<sup>37</sup> The resulting diplomatic row saw a tit-for-tat expulsion of two diplomats on both the Czech and Russian sides.<sup>38</sup>

Disputes regarding the space around the Russian Embassy were reignited twice, first in 2021 by the aforementioned Vrbětice scandal and then in 2022 by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of that year. In spring 2022, Jan Čížinský, the mayor of Prague 7 and a member of the Prague City Council, called for a reclamation of the part of Stromovka granted to the Russian — then Soviet — Embassy in the aftermath of 1968. Čížinský denounced the embassy's ownership of the section of the park as an 'occupation', invoking the memory of the Soviet invasion.<sup>39</sup>

On April 5, 2022, the part of Coronation Street where the Russian Embassy moved its address after the renaming of Boris Nemtsov Square was renamed to the Street of Ukraine Heroes on the initiative of the Prague 6 Council.<sup>40</sup> The new street sign was unveiled on April 22 by Hříb, Kolář, and Yevhen Perebyinis, the Ukrainian ambassador in the Czech Republic. Hříb declared that the purpose of the renaming was to 'honour the immense bravery of Ukrainian fighters, defending not just Ukraine, but the whole of Europe against unprecedented Russian aggression'. The Ukrainian ambassador spoke of the significance of the new name in reminding 'the Czech youth what is good and what is evil, and who are the heroes fighting in Ukraine, both soldiers and civilians and the fact that they are fighting against Nazi Russia, which perpetrates severe war crimes'.<sup>41</sup> The unveiling ceremony was attended by representatives of the Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Slovak, and Polish Embassies and signalled a new, more explicitly anti-Russian direction of the toponymic initiatives of Prague representatives.<sup>42</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

The initial impulse for the renaming of Boris Nemtsov Square was bottom-up, with a petition

<sup>36</sup> Rob Cameron, "Mystery 'poison plot' sends Czech mayors into hiding." *BBC*, May 3, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Shaun Walker, "Czechs expel two Russian diplomats over fake poisoning plot." *Guardian*, June 5, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Deník.cz, "Odplata. Rusko vyhostilo dva české diplomaty, ČR má problém za vyřešení." June 15, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Translation by author, Michael Bereň, "Díky „čučkařům". Putin je vrah! Konec okupace pozemku, zní z Prahy kvůli Rusku." *Deník.cz*, April 19, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Karolína Němcová, "Ruská ambasáda změnila svou adresu. Část Korunovačnické ulice nově nese název Ukrajinských hrdinů." *Forum 24*, April 22, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Translation by author, Anna Dohnalová and Radek Bartoníček, "Ukrajinských hrdinů. Praha přejmenovala část ulice Korunovačnické u ruské ambasády." *Aktuálně.cz*, April 22, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Seznam Zprávy, "V pořádku i zbytečnost, neshodnou se lidé o přejmenování ulice u ruské ambasády." April 22, 2022.



posted online on the Petice.com website by Petr Kutílek, František Nejedlý, and Petr Marčík. Between 2016 and 2020, the petition garnered a total of 4596 signatures, not just from Prague, but from other cities across the Czech Republic. Several signatories also resided abroad.<sup>43</sup> The initiative thus carried a broader dimension, stretching beyond municipal boundaries.

Prague's municipal toponymic commission initially rejected the renaming on the grounds of potential administrative issues. However, in a session convened on February 5, 2020, the commission agreed that the renaming was an 'expression of political opinion within the jurisdiction of the City Council of the Capital City of Prague'. Furthermore, it was announced that the renaming would not force any of Prague's citizens to 'change their permanent residence address'. Despite the renaming, the 'historical name Under the Chestnuts would be preserved through the nearby Under the Chestnuts Street'.<sup>44</sup>

The new name of Boris Nemtsov Square was agreed upon in a session of the Prague City Council on February 24, 2020. In the same decision, the Prague City Council also decreed for a promenade near the Russian Embassy to be named in honour of the murdered Russian writer, journalist, and activist Anna Politkovska.<sup>45</sup> *Ruling no. 331 on the Naming of Streets, a Promenade, and the Renaming of a Square on the Lands of the Capital City of Prague* was proposed by Hřib, sponsored by Jiří Pospíšil, chairman of the United Forces for Prague coalition, and passed by a majority of nine votes to zero, with two members of the council recorded as absent.<sup>46 47</sup>

Hřib noted that the renaming was not a product of the council's top-down push, but an effort to act on the will of the signatories of the petition. Hřib also cited similar renamings in Kyiv, Washington, or Vilnius, stressing Prague's participation in this 'international initiative'. Hřib distanced himself from Kolář's decision to remove the Konev statue, claiming that the statue was property of Prague 6, and thus outside the jurisdiction of the City Council.<sup>48</sup> Through these statements, Hřib rejected notions of a united front of anti-Russian municipal politicians, exercising diplomatic initiative independently of the national government.

In 2021, Čížinský's calls for Prague to reclaim parts of the Russian Embassy's grounds were shot down by the Czech Republic's Foreign Ministry, which declared that Czechoslovakia's government ceded the land on an indefinite lease, meaning that any prospective changes to the contract are conditioned by Russia's willingness to negotiate. Čížinský, Hřib, Kolář, Jan Chabr (another member

<sup>43</sup> Petice.com, "Přejmenujme náměstí Pod Kaštany na náměstí Borise Němcova," Petice.com, February 27, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Translation by author, Jaroslav Peterka, *Record from the Session of the Toponymic Commission of the Council of the Capital City of Prague, held on February 5, 2020*. Prague City Council (Prague, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Rozhlas, "Pražští radní schválili změnu názvu náměstí před ruskou ambasádou. Ponese jméno Borise Němcova." February 24, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Ruling of the Prague City Council, no. 331, from February 24, 2020

<sup>47</sup> Translation by author, Daniela Krausová, *Record from the 8th Session of the Prague City Council, held on February 24, 2020*. Prague City Council (Prague, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Translation by author, Martina Spěváčková, "Hřib: Náměstí B. Němcova Rusové uvítají, Putinovi to nandat nechceme." *Seznam Zprávy*, February 26, 2020.

of the Prague City Council), and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jakub Kulháněk, established a joint commission to further look into the issue. However, the hands of Czech politicians are mostly tied by international law.<sup>49</sup>

The renaming of Coronation Street to the Street of Ukrainian Heroes was proposed by Libor Bezděk, municipal representative for Prague 6 and member of the STAN (Mayors and Independents) party. It was agreed upon by a total of thirty-eight votes to zero, with one absence, in a session of the Prague 6 Council on February 28, 2022. In the same ruling, a nearby railway bridge was renamed to the Bridge of Vitaly Skakun, in honour of a Ukrainian soldier who died on February 24, 2022, sacrificing himself by blowing up a bridge to stall the advance of invading Russian forces.<sup>50</sup>

The renaming was supported by the Prague 6 toponymic commission and the Prague City Council, and was finalised on April 5. Bezděk remarked on the remarkable swiftness of the procedure, stating that it was worthy of a ‘Guinness record’. The ease of the procedure was largely owed to the fact that the Russian Embassy is the only entity with a permanent address in the newly renamed section of the street. Matyáš Vitík, spokesman of the Czech Post Office, announced that after an undefined period of adjustment, the Russian Embassy will be obliged to use the new address to continue receiving mail.<sup>51</sup> The only potential alternative address available is on Boris Nemtsov Square. The renaming of the Street of Ukrainian Heroes thus sealed the symbolic encirclement of the Russian Embassy.

## Summary and Conclusions

The renaming of Boris Nemtsov Square exacerbated diplomatic conflict between the Czech Republic and the Kremlin and exposed deep-seated internal fissures in attitudes to Russia’s present policies and historical legacy. The renaming was tightly linked to a broader battle for public space around the Russian Embassy and to a push by Czech municipal politicians to purge marks of the Communist era from their localities.

There is a tension between efforts to uplift liberal democratic values and to preserve the memory of totalitarian rule as a warning to future generations. The public space is thus not a site of active conversation, but of a zero-sum battle for representation, animated more by contemporary diplomatic tensions rather than by a push for a more faithful and balanced retelling of the past.

In implementing the renaming, Prague’s municipal authorities showed a remarkable

<sup>49</sup> iRozhlas, “Praha nemůže dostat od Rusů zpět část Stromovky. Moskva ji v roce 1972 dostala k trvalému užívání.” June 29, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Jana Kabelová and Jaroslav Holý, *Record from the 24th Session of the Council of the Prague 6 District, held on February 28, 2022*. Prague 6 Council (Prague, 2022).

<sup>51</sup> Translation by author, Anna Dohnalová and Radek Bartoníček, “Ukrajinských hrdinů. Praha přejmenovala část ulice Korunovační u ruské ambasády.” *Aktuálně.cz*, April 22, 2022.

responsiveness to bottom-up pressures. However, this swiftness is largely owed to an — only half-acknowledged — convergence between the citizens' initiative and the political leanings of their local representatives. The renaming, with its polarising impact and transnational dimension, raises questions with regard to the limits of municipal authority.

Russia's forceful reaction illuminates the interconnected nature of public spaces in the former Soviet Bloc, which transcends state boundaries. The case of Boris Nemtsov Square provides insight into the enduring legacy of Russian and Soviet cultural imperialism in East-Central Europe and the long way that is still ahead of countries in the region in their efforts to decolonise their historical memory.

Research contributed by Matyas Knol

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

## Contact information

Paula O' Donohoe  
Program Director

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu  
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio - European Association of  
History Educators  
Bankaplein 2, 2585 EV  
The Hague, The Netherlands  
+31 70 3817836

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