

Case study of the statue of the Unknown Soldier

Discussion with the participants in the Tallinn Project

Häli Ann Reintam, Olena Romanjuk, Steven Vihalemm, Madis Mäeorg, Mari Tammesalu and Ronald Pelin. The discussion was initiated, moderated and edited by Anu Pennanen.

Case study of the statue of the Unknown Soldier, also called Aljoša and the Bronze Soldier

The following introduction has been partly written with the international audience, who might not know much about the recent events in Tallinn, in mind.

The 'Tallinn project' was an examination of how young people use public space in the changing capital of Estonia. It started with interviews and discussions with nine Estonian and Russian speaking participants. They also wrote stories which took place in public spaces in Tallinn. Based on all this, I wrote a loose manuscript which we further defined into two video improvisation workshops in 2005 and 2006. The project culminated in the half-hour film 'Sõprus – Дружба', filmed at the beginning of summer 2006. The film ends in a scene where two gangs, Estonian and Russians speaking, are united against their newly found common enemy: the Viru Keskus shopping centre. The guards of their favourite hang-out have kicked them out for quarrelling in an escalator. Armed with paint ball guns and bright-coloured bullets, they attack an antique-style statue of a voluptuous naked woman in front of the mall. For the exhibition in Kumu, it seemed worthwhile to take a look at another, more famous statue in Tallinn.



'Sõprus – Дружба' (Friendship). Film stills.

Last spring, at the end of April 2007, all the thoughts the participants had expressed in the interviews (some of which were used in the video 'You don't realize it used to be different') became very acute. Two nights of riots, 27–28.4, with up to 1000 participants, followed the government's speedy decision to move the statue of the Unknown Soldier and the 12 bodies beneath it, from its place by Tõnismägi in the very centre, to the soldier's cemetery two kilometres away. This statue seems to serve as the culminating point of the different understandings of World War II events among the Estonian- and Russian-speaking populations of Estonia.

The events last spring were an indication of the difficulties behind the undeniable success story of post-Soviet capitalist Estonia. The problems which surfaced require conscious attention, not only in Estonia, but in the EU, which reacted somewhat hesitantly to the acute crisis of its member (perhaps because Estonia is situated next to the powerful energy partner Russia, or just because it is too small a country ...) If one wants to believe that the 'friendship of nations' in the

EU has something to give small and peripheral countries, the reasons for all the reactions and non-reactions in the EU and Russia do deserve a closer examination.

It is important to acknowledge that, while there are no easy solutions, there are still reasons to look at the future with positive expectations. They are to be found at the level of 'face-to-face' rather than 'state-to-state'. The young participants in the Tallinn Project will soon be adults and start to build their own future. We met on a sunny afternoon in July to discuss the case of the Unknown Soldier Statue. The participants shared their different views on history and analysed the situation together, in English.



From left: Statue of the Unknown Soldier in Tõnismägi in May 2006 and in Tallinn soldiers cemetery in May 2007.

Discussion with the participants in the Tallinn Project. Von Krahle Theatre 18.7.2007.

Present were Häli Ann Reintam, Olena Romanjuk, Steven Vihalemm, Madis Mäeorg, Mari Tammesalu and Ronald Pelin. The discussion was initiated, moderated and edited by Anu Pennanen.

Anu: All the questions here are related to the things we talked about a year ago. Did you guess that the riots following the removal of the statue of the Unknown Soldier from Tõnismägi could happen?

Ronald: Of course the Russians were dissatisfied with the government's decision to remove this statue. Because I am Russian myself, I hear a lot of this talk in school and everywhere else.

I am neutral; I think it is not so bad. But I think the government made a mistake, because it took

the statue just like that; people didn't even know it would happen. But people are pleased with this new place, I have heard. Some of course aren't, but people think this new place is like a home for the statue.

Anu: And what do you think ...

Ronald: About all these riots? I think they were a huge mistake! The police shouldn't have let all those people stand in one place for a long time. Of course they were stressed out, and someone did something and everybody did the same. You know, breaking everything, that was a huge mistake.

I think the policemen should have spread the people out, somehow smoked them out, but they were standing in a one place for lots of hours; it was so wrong I think, and then ...

Häli: It was a big surprise for them, they didn't know what to do, and they just couldn't go and hit people without orders. It can't happen so fast!

Ronald: But they were hitting people later; you saw it on TV.

Mari: I, for example, don't have anything against ... I like you, Ronald, for example. I like you because you speak Estonian and you want to live here, and you don't hate this place. I really like those people who are Russian and they say that yes, I am Russian, but I live in Estonia and I work here; its OK to live here. I think fighting in the street was really wrong and that just showed that those people are really stupid.

Häli: They showed they were all stupid. They didn't want the statue back, they just wanted to smash things up ...

Ronald: It was actually planned. There was a group of people which made the whole crowd go nuts and do this all. They even gave out baseball bats and heavy things to people from a car. It was all planned. Because, when a crowd is, you know ...

Häli: ... manipulated ...

Ronald: Yes, it was manipulated. In one second, people were given these heavy things. Of course what could they do? They were very unpleasant and they smashed everything they saw. When this whole thing started to happen, I was near Toompea, and I heard this ... the people started screaming, something like: 'Russia!' I was thinking: 'Is it a football match?' It was not understandable to me. People are living in Estonia; why the hell are they screaming 'Russia!'?

Mari: I feel sorry for those Russians who are living here and didn't do anything, but some Estonians now think all Russians are stupid ...

Häli: Auh ...

Ronald: It's worse for me too. The relationship between Russians and Estonians was not so perfect before, and after this it was total crap, if I can put it that way, and now it will not be better for years ...

Häli: I have seen in the city lately ... One day I was sitting and waiting for my bus. Some Estonian guys came to talk to me -they were a bit drunk- and then a Russian boy came up and they were like: 'Oh you're Russian, we will beat you up! Get lost, go to Russia!'

Ronald: It's so stupid. I was chatting with people in one (Internet) game, in Russian, and they asked me: Oh, you are Russian and living in Estonia. I answered 'Yes there are 40 percent Russians living in Estonia'. And they always ask: 'why the hell are they living in Estonia - they speak Russian!' I answer: 'Maybe they like it. I think it is true that if people didn't like living here, they could move to Russia, and live in some village a long way from the centre. I think the Russians who live here are pretty satisfied with living here.

Anu: Who do you think was behind these events, giving out the baseball bats and so on?

Mari: Teachers ...

Häli: No, some of the teachers were ...

Olena: Probably someone who wanted to provoke the crowd. To provoke the crowd is quite easy; you just have make one man hit someone and the crowd goes wild, it's like ...

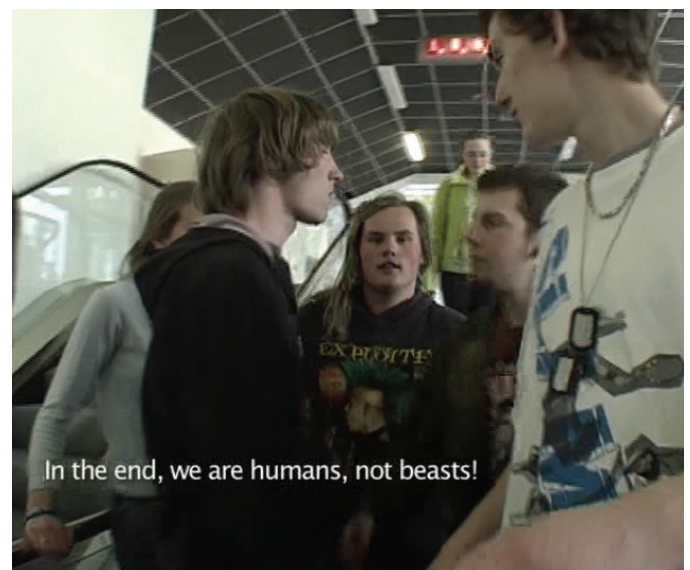
Ronald: ... a chain...

Olena: ...reaction, everyone starts to hit; it's a simple basic rule: everyone runs, I run. This was a whole crowd reaction.

Steven: I don't think there was a huge conspiracy behind it, spies and things like that, Antifa making everybody go crazy...it was just...people are people.



'You don't realize it used to be different'. Video stills.



Anu: Do you think something good could come out of this?

Olena: I don't think anything good will come out of it. The relationship between Estonians and Russians in most places is well, a bit spiky. In some places it's OK: you're Russian, I am Estonian, we like each other and we live in peace. But in some places its hatred and war. It all depends on how the child was raised, what the parents, and the grandparents told them about Russians from their perspectives, how they see Russians. Some say Russians are good, they brought some good things to Estonia, like the factories, and they provided work and homes for some. Yes, there was the part where everyone told you how to think, how to wear clothes, how to walk, and everything. Most people remember the bad parts of that life; they tell everyone that Russians are bad because they invaded Estonia, they took our lands, and they took everything from us and something like that. Over the years it grows into a legend, a myth. Some people say things that never happened, exaggerate a bit, more than what happened.

Mari: I think we should learn more history. In our school, we learn history about...Estonia mainly. We know about Russia and the USA, and what happened, but the problem is in the schools. Some Russian schools, I don't know ...

Ronald: We speak a lot; we learn a lot ...We had two books all about Estonia in the 10th grade. Some paragraphs in those books were so exaggerated - they say that Estonia fought back; they took a lot of Russian lives. We know that this was not true. Estonia is a small country, and Russia is soooo huge, of course it could like ... phuh, in one second take Estonia. I think that the behaviour of people is like ... when in World War II there was ... Nazism, and, what's the word, socialism, no communism ... Some people had more luck with the communists, some with the Nazis, so they were divided into two different groups. Some people were for the communist rule in their country, some people wanted to be not for the Nazis, but to be liberated, free, self-...

Häli: Most people wanted to be free, I guess, not some. I think very few people wanted to be part of the (Soviet) Union; most people wanted to be free, because we are Estonians. Every nation wants to be ...

Olena: Most people wanted to be free. Yes, well some and some and some ...

Steven: I think most Estonians didn't see Nazism or communism as their way; they wanted to be free, without Germans or Russians. That's it.

Ronald: Of course every country wants to be free, but in those times it was World War II..

Steven: They didn't support either side, communists or Nazis.

Ronald: Of course, but you understand it was a war. There were two groups: communists and Nazis. They wanted more people in their armies, and more supporters. So they began to invade all other countries, and occupy them, and show their opponent that they had more supporters. It was a question of who gets more countries, who can kick some ass with all these machines and ... It was a war! Of course it would happen! Do you think that Estonians could just think: 'Oh, we are free, we don't care about war'? Of course someone would come here and smash everything down.

Olena: That's what happened in February. When the Nazis began to invade west into Europe,

moving into the Baltic region, the Russians knew they couldn't hold Estonia, so they returned to their territory back in Russia. At this point, when the Russians were gone from Estonia, but the Nazis still weren't in it, but close, Estonia declared itself a free country. It was neutral to both Russians and Germans. But when the Germans finally came, they said no such thing had happened, and they took over Estonia again. That's why we celebrate the 24th of February as the 'one day of freedom' actually.

Ronald: And why Estonia? Because Estonia is a very good strategic point. Its at the centre of the Baltic Sea, it's very convenient, (jokingly) you know, we are living in a good place ...

Olena: It's an open port to the sea ...

Anu: Olena, do you follow the Russian news and TV programs?

Olena: I like to keep my own opinion. Yes, I read them sometimes, but I mostly find them boring. Mostly they are wrong and made up. I try to find out how things happened, who did what, who is to blame. Not my problem, it's their problem.

Anu: How would you change things if you had all the power? Would you do something concretely? Did Ansip and his government do the right thing?

Madis: Maybe Ansip chose the wrong time to take away the statue. It would have been better a bit later, or a bit earlier ...

Steven: Just a few weeks later.

Olena: After the 9th of May, when all of Russia was celebrating Victory Day.

Steven: That was pure provocation.

Olena: All of Europe was celebrating, well Europe celebrated on the 8th of May, because from their point of view the victory was achieved at midnight, and in Russia it was an hour later, so it was actually the 9th of May.

Anu: See, this makes a big change in world history again.

Olena: Well it doesn't matter which day. We can say that in those two days the victory was achieved.

Anu: Olena, do you think the same way (as Madis) about Ansip's decision to move the statue?

Olena: No, I believe he shouldn't have taken it away at all. I know it was in the centre of town; it was a graveyard right in the centre of town. It is not really pleasant if you think about it that way. But don't look at it that way, dead people beneath your feet ... look at it just as a symbol of tolerance. The Russians came and they helped to save Estonians from the Nazis. Yes, there were some problems with the Russians, but if the Nazis had won the war what would the world be now?

Anu: What about the Estonians' arguments about this? They say they were occupied.

Olena: They say Russians occupied them. Well, technically, Estonia was always occupied. First by Germans, when no such thing as Estonia existed ...

Steven: Does that excuse occupying us again?

Olena: No I am not saying that it was a good thing. I am just saying that Estonia was a piece of cake that everybody wanted to grab, and it has always gone from hand to hand. Not just Russians and Germans, but Sweden also took it, and Denmark, part of it.

Anu: What do you think of the current situation?

Olena: As long as we are not fighting and there is no blood spilling, I think it is all right.

Anu: Do you think living in a small, independent country is the ideal situation?

Olena: To be free is good. The political situation is a bit wrong I think, but nobody is perfect; there are always some problems, everywhere.



'You don't realize it used to be different'. Video stills.



Anu: What would you change in this political situation?

Olena: I think before doing something, you must think that Estonia is actually an Estonian and a Russian country; it is both. It doesn't matter that Russians came to Estonia; the second generation were born in Estonia, so they are practically Estonians, and the only thing that makes them different is that they speak Russian. Before taking down this monument you have to think what would happen, that Russians would come in groups and rise against that action.

Mari: I heard there was some Estonian monument in Russia, and they took it away, and nobody,

no Estonian, said anything. I think that the statue of the Unknown Soldier was really important for some people, but this is Estonia ... I don't think it should have stayed there. I'm not saying anything about the statue, but I think the location was wrong, and now it's better. It's a really nice place where it is now. It was a little bit the wrong time, but it was the right thing to do.

Ronald: It happened very unexpectedly. It was too fast; I think everybody will agree with me on that. Everybody knows that Russian people are very emotional, very passionate. I think that when this thing started developing, Russians started talking about it. They were so anxious about it, because like ... oooh it's our, it is the memory of victory from Nazism. I still don't understand the reason why this memorial was removed? They just want to forget about all the occupation, so they moved the statue further away.

Häli: No, we will never forget it.

Ronald: Of course you will never forget it. C'mon I told you it was a war. It was a huge war and everything was a huge pile of crap, everywhere there was violence, do you understand me?

Häli: Yes I do but ... it doesn't excuse it, to occupy us ...

Ronald: The Germans came.

Häli. Yes they both did, and occupied us.

Mari: I think we don't blame Russians, just some of them. I think that we can't do anything about it and so many years have passed. I really do like Russian people. It's just some Russians who bug me because they are violent ...

Ronald: Of course, I don't like every Russian. There is no true Russian any more; there is no true nationality. There are so many nationalities, from Uzbekistan, Ukraine, from everywhere, its like mixed, like juice, a cocktail ...

Mari: I think some Estonians should treat Russian people better.

Ronald: I don't think you should judge someone because of their nationality; you should treat individuals by their behaviour.

Häli: The Russians' attitude towards us is wrong ... we can't be happy together if they still have this attitude towards us. If they don't change their attitude we won't change ours. When one side is not cooperating ...

Ronald: I am absolutely, absolutely on your side. Those people who are so nationalistic about Russia, why the hell are they here? Go to Russia, get the hell out of here ...

Häli and Mari: Yes.

Olena: Maybe they would but they don't have any place to go ...

Mari: I think we are all living together; we should get along with each other.

Olena. We are going to be living together, working together and dying together.
(Laughs.)

Mari: Nothing will ... Russian people won't leave Estonia, because it's their home. And why should they? I would only like them to speak Estonian to me when we are in Estonia. Even if they really can't learn it, they should try.

Häli: It would show their attitude ... if they would try, but they don't want to learn it. They can't stay as Russians in Estonia; they must make a compromise. They should adjust to this community. They make their life harder when they don't try to learn Estonian.

Anu: A year ago, when I conducted interviews, I asked about the Soviet times. Since you are all quite young, you didn't remember much about it. You have heard these different interpretations from parents, grandparents or school. Do you think that this pain of the past, these difficult events, can go straight into you, like you have experienced it yourself? Like the Nashi youngsters in Moscow? Why were they so unhappy about the moving of the Unknown Soldier Statue here? They heard about it from somebody else. Everywhere in Europe we are still so unhappy about the Second World War, but we don't have any experience of it, none of us here in this room.

Steven: Why do we even care about it?

Anu: Why do we feel it so closely?

Ronald: Because parents say: 'Your father was eliminating all these Nazis or all these Russians.'

Häli: Terrible things happened. My grandfather has told me so many things and I have written some of it down. It's in my heart and I can't live ... because of him I have grown up to be the person I am. His beliefs are very strong in me too. I believe almost the same things. I know that some things I can't take as the whole truth, but mostly ... he has had a strong influence on me.

Ronald: Is it a proper question, on whose side he was?

Häli: What do you mean?

Ronald: Well, a communist or ...

Häli: No, no no! Communists killed his whole family.

Ronald: Just came and killed?

Häli: Just for the fun of it.

Steven: But what does it mean to be on someone's side? For instance, my wife Kristi's grandfather was on the Nazi's side. Her father is from Yemen, practically a black guy, and they got along so well. It doesn't really mean anything to be on someone's side. For example, it's such propaganda to hate Hitler, to see him as a really bad guy. But who is doing propaganda for

Stalin? He killed 20 million people with death camps. For instance, in Ukraine there was massive starvation in the Soviet times, just because they were exporting things from there ... It's propaganda. This is what annoys me. We make somebody look bad, even though all governments are bad. They all manipulate people, put out propaganda, and make minorities suffer. They all do it. But we decide: let's make Hitler exactly the bad guy, let's make Saddam Hussein the bad guy.

Ronald: Stalin is not considered a good guy either. I don't think it is a question of nationality but of being human beings. They were both ...

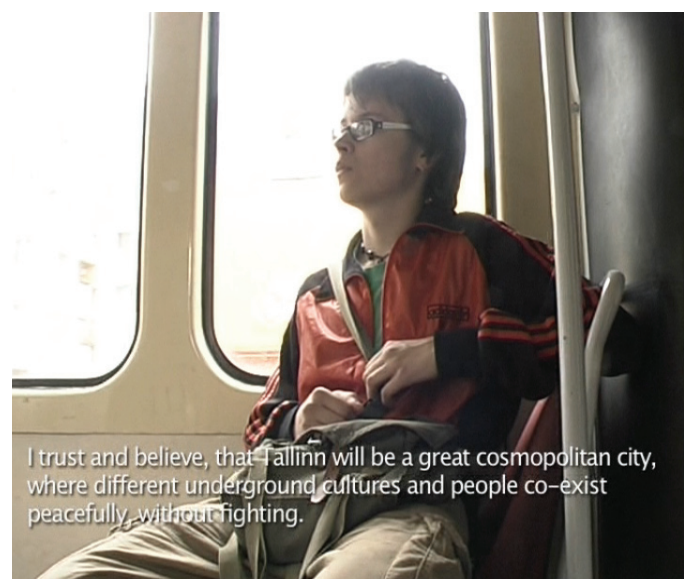
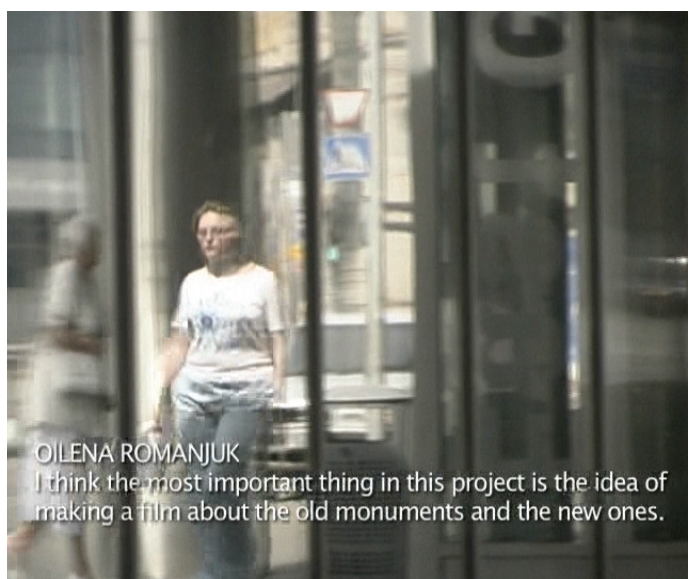
Häli: Crazy ...

Ronald: Almost the same thing happened on both sides, with different languages and a little bit different points of view.

Steven: I really don't care about the statue or the problems with it. There are much more important problems in the world. Patriotism, pollution, occupying countries. We are at a point where we should do many things very differently. Here we are arguing about a statue, the past that happened to our parents and our grandparents. We should make a better future.

Ronald: Don't you see that removing the monument brought all this history from a long time ago up here. It was a mistake, if ...

Steven: Who knows? To me, it was a statue. In the beginning I thought it was nice, when the fire was in front of it. I remember the flames from when I was a child. At the same time, I thought that a monument for people who died and a graveyard shouldn't be right next to a tram station. I work in a hotel reception area eight hours a day and next to me is a Russian guy working as a doorman. We get along well, we talk and laugh and we don't care about the statue.



'You don't realize it used to be different'. Video stills.

Anu: If we think about statues ... we have this statue in front of Viru Keskus in the project. If you think about monuments, public memorials ... what do you think about them when you walk in the

city? Do they mean anything to you? Do some of them mean something special to you, or would you like to remove some of them?

Steven: I think they should remove the Liberty Monument from Freedom Square; its ugly. For the liberty of Estonia, they should do something better than just two numbers! I understand it's modernistic, just an electronic clock, but ...There should be something abstract, or even a guy depicted.

Anu: Do you think it would be valuable today, this year, to raise a statue to someone or something?

Steven: Putting up Yuri Lotman's statue is a good idea. They are putting it up in Tartu. This guy didn't speak any Estonian. He was a founder of cultural semiotics, and he was a world famous thinker, and he lived here.

Mari: I think we all have memories in our hearts. No statue will change anything.

Häli: The purpose of a statue is to remind us of something. Just one day a year we can look at the statue, and all these things will come to us, so we don't forget our past.

Anu: What about the statue of Kalevipoeg?

Steven: I think they should make it as big as the Statue of Liberty, in the same proportions. Then it would be cool, a real Kalevipoeg! (Laughs.)



From left: Statue of Liberty, New York. Artistic impression of the future Kalevipoeg statue in Tallinn harbour, www.pilleriin.ee. Model for the statue of Kalevipoeg by Tauno Kangro.

Layout: Kätlin Tischler

Translators: Epp Aareleid, Dmitri Shmorgun, Richard Adang

Special thanks: Hanno Soans

 EESTI KUNSTIMUUSEUM

KUMU