The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Last Major Soviet Statues Come Down in Lithuanian Capital

By The Moscow Times

July 20, 2015



VILNIUS — Workers started dismantling monumental statues of soldiers, students, laborers and farmers in Lithuania's capital early on Monday, the last major Soviet artworks in a city now on the eastern frontier of the European Union and NATO.

Cranes began hauling them off plinths after midnight, a quarter century after the Baltic state re-emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union, a highly charged demolition job as Lithuania faces fresh tensions with its neighbor Russia.

"The statues represent a lie. Their heroic portrayal of the Soviet people — that is all a lie ... The statues are a mockery of the real people who had to live during the Soviet period," Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Simasius told Reuters before the first monument, a pair of soldiers, came down in a metal cage.

Lithuania, together with other Baltic and east European states, has been on edge since Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea region in March last year and was accused of backing separatists in

Ukraine's east.

But city authorities said the now-aging statues — four pairs of people — were removed primarily for health and safety reasons, not politics, and the soldiers had gone first because they were the most dilapidated.

"I do not intend to spend public money to renovate them and to bring them back," Simasius said.

Overtly political statues of Lenin and other figures in Lithuania disappeared after the Soviet Union collapsed. Rock fans persuaded the city to build a monument to musician Frank Zappa instead, seeing his experimental work as a symbol of freedom after communism.

But the four pairs of statues — erected in 1952, shortly after Soviet forces largely stamped out armed Lithuanian resistance against the country's annexation — stayed in place on a central bridge. Locals say it was partly a mark of respect for the Lithuanian artists who carved them.

Most of the other Soviet monuments have been moved to a political theme park, though the mayor said he had not decided what to do with the bridge monuments.

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