



The monument of Latvian legionnaires in Flanders is now a priority in Latvian-Belgian relations. (Photo: Occupation Museum)

**In Belgium, a scandal over a monument to Latvian legionnaires. We want to tear it down, our Foreign**

**Ministry is protesting**

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**Zedelgem has come under fire from political views this month because some local government politicians want to dismantle it - allegedly dedicated to "Nazi comrades" and "Hitler supporters". The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also been involved in resolving the issue.**

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Several Latvian politicians from both the position and the opposition (MEP Inese Vaidere, Union of Greens and Farmers, Association of Latvian Regions) have raised concerns about the fate of a monument dedicated to Latvian legionnaires in the Belgian city of Zedelgem, because the local government wants to demolish it Hitler's German forces.

## **Monument to legionnaires as a beehive**



Sculptor Kristaps Gulbis with the design of "Latvian Stand Strap". (Photo: Occupation Museum)

The monument "Latvian Stand Hive for Freedom" created by Zedelgem sculptor Kristaps Gulbis was erected in September 2018 on the initiative of the Latvian Occupation Museum as a tribute to Latvian legionnaires who spent the winter of 1945 and 1946 in the Zedelgem prisoner of war camp without losing faith in Latvia's freedom.

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The Occupation Museum at the time said: "The idea for the memorial came in 2014 when a film crew from the Occupation Museum visited Zedelgem with two former legionary legionnaires to film a prisoner of war camp, resulting in the documentary "Zedelgem ". Zedelgem Municipality, on the other hand, was interested in the story of our past, it wanted to know more about the history of the prisoner-of-war camp, so a cooperation agreement was signed with the museum on the creation of a memorial.

In 2017, the museum organized a sculpture competition for the design of the monument, in which the joint Latvian-Belgian jury recognized Kristaps Gulbs' design "Latvian Hive" as the best.

The author says about his offer: "There were almost 12,000 Latvian soldiers in the Zedelgem camp. Their number is equal to the number of bees in the hive. My idea is to combine in a monument the common European universal values and the language of symbols understandable to all Europeans with the special and visual characteristic only of Latvia. Latvian bee colony in Flanders. The bee colony is a nation. The hive is their country. With your army, with laws and order. Bees are peaceful - they do not attack anyone. They defend, fight and die for their hive, family, freedom. "

The cost of the monument was 100,000 euros, and it was halved by the municipality of Zedelgem and the Occupation Museum. This was the first monument in the urban environment outside Latvia dedicated to Latvian soldiers. It is located about three kilometers

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## **Promise not to demolish the monument, however**

In the last couple of weeks, interest in this monument has re-emerged in Zedelgelm, this time "unhealthy". After receiving criticism of "worshiping Nazism", the municipality intends to change the name of the square to include the word "freedom" (although this has not yet happened), as well as to place an explanatory text next to the monument that "Latvia's hive for freedom" is not dedicated to Hitlerism. At the same time, the issue of demolition of the monument is being considered.

"Two weeks ago, the media began to criticize Brivibaplein and the monument "Latvia's hive for freedom", because according to some historians and local MP Viki Reinert, it honors 12,000 Latvian soldiers who fought against the Russians in Hitler's German army during World War II.

The municipality of Zedelgem denies that the monument is a tribute to the Nazi comrades, "writes the local media [flandersnews.be](http://flandersnews.be).

Annika Vermeulen, the mayor of Zedelgem, stated that the dismantling of the monument was not intended: "We have decided that the square will be given a different name and that a plaque with an explanatory text will be added to the monument.

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monument. We wanted to name this square freedom, but maybe we did it in a hurry. ”

## **Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The ambassador will travel to Zedelgem**

The Communication Group Jauns.lv of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia informed that the Ministry will pay increased attention to the Zedelgem monument:

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is well aware of this monument in the city of Zedelgem in Belgium, and representatives of the Foreign Service have taken part in the unveiling of this memorial to prisoners of war.

The Ambassador of Latvia to Belgium has contacted the municipality of Zedelgem and clarified the circumstances, receiving confirmation that no operations with the monument plaque will be carried out at present.

It should be emphasized that the municipality of Zedelgem never intended to dismantle the monument. The Latvian Ambassador has also informed the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the incident and asked to participate in resolving the issue.

The ambassador's visit to Zedelgem and a meeting with the

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Occupation Museum, jointly covering the costs of the monument, coordinating the placement of the monument.

For thirty years, the Latvian diplomatic service has persistently continued to explain the complex issues of Latvia's history and refute the countless slander, provocations and misleading information that regularly appear in foreign media. ”

## **Latvian politicians are worried**

Edvards Smiltēns, Chairman of the Board of the Association of Latvian Regions, Deputy Mayor of Riga, has indicated that every effort must be made to keep the monument in place. It has historical, memorial and political significance.

"Allowing the demolition of the monument means allowing a message that is dangerous for Latvia's image to win, the consequences of which will be difficult to correct even in the long run. The Foreign Minister must be aware of this and act accordingly, ”said Smiltēns, adding that in case of failure, Latvia

Inese Vaidere, Member of the European Parliament, says: "When I found out that the monument dedicated to Latvian soldiers was in danger of being demolished, I realized that urgent action was needed. I therefore called on my colleagues, who are working with the European Parliament's Historical Remembrance Group, to address the mayor and Members of Zedelgem together, explaining the historical significance of this monument, refuting false claims and asking for it to be preserved. "

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The Greens and Farmers Union (ZZS) has issued a statement stating:



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"ZZS calls on the Foreign Minister to take all necessary steps, including submitting a note to Belgium, as well as

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further explaining aspects of Latvia's history and the events of the

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ZZS considers that it is unacceptable that as a result of insufficient understanding of Latvian history and the efforts of some countries to denigrate legionaries, the monument erected on the initiative of the Latvian Occupation Museum is destroyed and the name of Freedom Square is changed.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs must work not only on topical international issues, but also continue to explain the twists and turns of Latvia's history so that the international community understands the course of the Second World War and its impact on our country. ”