In 2007 the Estonian government began to relocate a highly contentious Soviet era war memorial from the centre of Tallinn to a nearby military cemetery. The ‘Bronze Soldier’ was erected in 1947 to honour the memory of the fallen Soviet soldiers who had fought in the battles that liberated Tallinn from German forces during the Second World War. At that time it was known as the ‘Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn’. An eternal flame was added in 1964. Following independence, Estonian authorities rededicated it to all soldiers who had died during the war and dismantled the eternal flame in an attempt to depoliticise the memorial. For ethnic Estonians, however, it remained an acrimonious symbol of annexation and repression, although Russophones viewed it as one of the few remaining public symbols of Soviet victory over fascism. The April 2007 exhumation of Soviet soldiers buried below the monument triggered an unprecedented two days of Russophone rioting and looting in Tallinn.

The Bronze Soldier incident revealed the enduring salience of the titular–Russophone divide in Baltic society. More than 20 years of nation-building, language laws and integration policies have had only partial success in Estonia and Latvia. On the other hand, the rioting also pointed towards the increasingly assertive and confident civil society that has emerged in the twenty-first century in Estonia in particular, but progressively also in Latvia and Lithuania. In the 1990s political observers noted that, similarly to other post-communist countries, the Baltic states had weak civil societies with: few significant nongovernmental organisations (NGOs); low political participation; and little trust in state institutions or in each other. While trust remains a problematic issue, especially in Latvia and Lithuania, the number of NGOs has grown and citizens increasingly participate in various communal, social-capital-building events. A growing number of social entrepreneurs have adopted both traditional
approaches and seized new information technology (IT) opportunities to engage Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian society.

This chapter evaluates the development of civil society in the Baltic states. It begins by briefly recalling the vibrant civil societies that emerged in the three Baltic states in the latter years of the Soviet Union and drove the Baltic independence movements. It then moves on to discuss the significant economic, political and social challenges that the sector faced in the decade after 1991, before turning to the resurgence of civil society in the twenty-first century. The second part looks at the continuing salience of corruption in Latvia and Lithuania and considers its negative impact on civil society's development. The third and final part focuses on the ongoing division between the Russophone and titular communities, especially in Estonia and Latvia, and considers the paradox that much of civil (and ‘uncivil’) society is spurred on by enduring differences between these two communities.

4.1 Civil society

Civil society is the expansive ‘realm of freedom’ between state and individual that upholds and promotes freedom of expression through multiple competing and cooperating organisations, groups and communal activities (Keane, 1998, p. 114). These activities develop social capital by promoting vertical links between public and government as well as horizontal links between organisations and individuals, encouraging exchange of the tools and skills that foster civic activism (UNDP, 1996, p. 83). In countries with sharp ethnic divisions (such as Estonia or Latvia) these horizontal links also boost inter-ethnic contact and nation building.

Civil society in the Baltic states has gone through several phases of development since the communist era. The Soviet regime had largely eradicated independent civil society by taking full control of the space between society and the individual: ‘The Communist Party assumed responsibility for everything that is happening in society; therefore it [felt] obliged to direct and control the whole of social life’ (Vajda, 1988, p. 339). However, in the 1980s the growing public freedom, encouraged by perestroika and glasnost, led to the creation of a great number of cultural, economic and political organisations, many eventually operating under the broader umbrellas of the three popular-front parties or, in Estonia and Latvia, the more nationalist Citizens' Congresses. However, this was typically civil society fostering disorder and revolutionary change and working against the state (Keane, 1998, p. 6). The adjustment to a more cooperative spirit after the fall of communism proved to be difficult in all three countries.