

# Georgia: Stalin still moves

written by Régis Genté Rejis Jante

Seven decades after his death, the phantom of Stalin still haunts Georgia. And it does so because various forces, inside and outside the country, use the Soviet totalitarian dictator's image to achieve their goals: to prevent Georgia from joining the West, the liberal world, the European family. This instrumentalization of Stalin's image is quite surprising in his native land; it looks quite artificial. Nostalgia for Stalin is not that strong in the South Caucasian republic, though he hails from Georgia.

Orthodox Christmas this year was not a day of national communion in Georgia. On 7 January, some citizens discovered with amazement a new icon in the Trinity Cathedral (Sameba) dedicated to the *Matron of Moscow* that included, in one of the seventeen small scenes arranged around her full-length representation, a representation of Stalin. The Soviet dictator appears in a gray coat standing in front of the *Matron*, an unofficial saint who lived from 1885 to 1952 and is the subject of popular worship, particularly among Russian women. It was more than enough to trigger a virulent controversy in Georgia, which is nowadays the theater of a civilizational trench war between those who aspire to become *Europeans* (more than 80% of the 3,7 million Georgians according to latest polls[\[1\]](#) characterize themselves this way) and various segments of society and the government who seem to be willing to come to terms with the former colonial power.

"It was too much, especially in this year when we commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the August 1924 uprising in which thousands of our compatriots who wanted to restore the Georgian independence were killed by the Bolsheviks on orders from Stalin," says Giorgi Kandelaki, member of Sovlab, a collective of historians who explore the totalitarian past of the former Soviet republic. For Kandelaki, a former deputy of

pro-Western Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement, "this is unfortunately the result of the work of the Russian security services and propaganda, which through the image of Stalin are trying to cut us off from the Western world."[\[ii\]](#) Recent opinion surveys show, for example, that 43%, 12% more than in 2021, of Georgians think that culture and national values were better protected during the USSR.[\[iii\]](#)

"Kandelaki and the other liberasts[\[iv\]](#) mounted this controversy for purely political purposes," retorts Irma Inashvili, the Secretary General of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, a nationalist party which advocates for the neutrality of the country vis a vis the West and Russia. She and fifty petitioners published an open letter in 2020 to Russian President Vladimir Putin to ask for his "assistance" in building "sincere and friendly" relations between Georgia and Russia.

Ms. Inashvili was in fact the sponsor of this new icon. "We asked a Georgian nun to 'write' this icon, as we say here, in order to ask the Matron of Moscow, renowned for her healing miracles, to save one of our close friends who suffers from a terrible cancer, and because the Matron is very popular in Georgia. This icon is 2,7 meters high, the representation of Stalin ten centimeters. Contrary to what Kandelaki says, it is an icon of the Matron, not an icon of Stalin. And it was the author who chose to paint this scene where Stalin went to consult the Matron in 1943, not me," explains the Georgian politician, with an eye on the notes she prepared for our interview.[\[v\]](#)

In the tense context that reigns in Georgia, against a backdrop of war in Ukraine and rapprochement with Moscow led by a government under the leadership of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, the image of Stalin crystallizes contradictions in Georgian society. "It is not true that the *Matron of Moscow* is popular in Georgia. It's a kind of an artificial import.

And of course, we suspect that this is the work of the Russian security services, knowing that the rewriting of history, particularly around the figure of Stalin, is at the heart of how Putin projects his power. The Matron makes the link between Putin's story on the one hand about a Russia victorious over Nazism – which elides the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939 – and on the other hand, about orthodoxy and an orthodox Stalin, who serves to justify its [contemporary Russia's] imperialist ambitions," said Beka Mindiashvili, an expert on the Georgian Orthodox Church.[\[vii\]](#)

A number of clues convince Georgian liberals, the pro-Europeans, that this is another manifestation of the hybrid war that Putin's regime is waging in their country fifteen years after Russian tanks invaded South Ossetia and part of the country. And this is so even though, as Nikolay Mitrokhin, an expert on Russian Orthodox Church, explains, "the Matron of Moscow is not an instrument of Moscow's propaganda. This saint, blind from birth, is the subject of worship especially among women in Russia and the post-Soviet space. But the Moscow Patriarchate did not recognize the meeting of the Saint and the Bolshevik leader, which means that it is not officially recognized by the Russian Church."[\[viii\]](#)

But the political conflict around the country's Soviet history sharpens fears of with a coming Stalinist *propaganda bomb* attack. Since the August 2020 revelations of the Dossier Center, a project of former Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Ms. Inashvili's Alliance of Patriots of Georgia has been accused of directly receiving money from the Kremlin. Hacked documents from the team of a member of the Russian presidential administration, SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service) General Vladimir Chernov, show that the party received nearly 1,5 million euros for campaigning during the 2020 parliamentary elections and to enlist the services of a Russian communications firm for the party. "These are fabricated documents," says Ms. Inashvili, before emphasizing that she is "critical of Stalin because he was not a believer,

unlike me,” while recognizing that “he was a good strategist and a great politician.”[\[viii\]](#)

As for the Georgian church, its links with Moscow worry the country’s pro-European citizens. In September 2021, an anonymous former officer of the State Security Services made public thousands of files from his organization relating to the national church. Hundreds of these files were about the very numerous links between the hierarchs of the church and the FSB, heir to the Soviet KGB. The head of the church himself, the venerated Patriarch Ilia II “declared in the Russian press that only once in a thousand years are there politicians like Stalin,” recalls Beka Mindiashvili.[\[ix\]](#)

The controversy took a more heated turn after an activist, Nata Peradze, threw blue paint on the icon on 9 January. She quickly received a five-day prison sentence. Immediately, the ultranationalist and pro-Russian Alt-Info movement, which is accustomed to violent actions, organized an angry rally under Mrs. Peradze’s windows. “We must not politicize these declarations of the Patriarch or this Moscow Matron icon too much. I believe we are in a country that saw the birth of a character who played an immense role in world history, and that explains why people are not looking first at that leader’s bloody deeds. In Georgia, we prefer the Stalin who ruled a seventh of the planet while speaking Russian with a Georgian accent. We can deplore it, and I deplore it myself, but we must also understand it,”[\[x\]](#) suggests Levan Abashidze, a political scientist and a member of the expert committee of the Georgian church.

The figure of Stalin in Georgia embodies several fissure points in Georgian society where anti-West political forces, often pro-Russian and clearly linked to Moscow, clash with pro-European players. Giorgi Kandelaki laments: “This is how we have seen a dozen statues of Stalin reappear in our country since the Georgian Dream party came to power in 2012. It goes as well with the Prime Minister of at the time, Irakli

Garibashvili, who declared in 2015 during the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War that this day was so important and special in Georgia because this war had been won by a Georgian.”[\[xi\]](#) We should underline that there is a debate in Georgia about the day when to hold the celebrations of the end of the Second World War, on 9 May as it is now as in Russia, or on 8 May as in the West.

This civilizational battle is everything but harmless. It goes deep into the type of society, state, governance, and life that Georgians dream of. “This is why the propaganda of both the Russians and certain local forces relies so much on the figure of Stalin to combat the European and Western aspirations of the immense majority of Georgians. I believe that the current battle for information, against disinformation, must take into account the questions of memory. I regret that those who are fighting against fake news do not take this into account enough,” argues Mr Kandelaki.[\[xii\]](#)

In this context, the Sovlab collective has just published a book entitled *Georgia Against Stalin*, which was presented recently at the Goethe Institute in Tbilisi. The book is an experimental project in which historians explore sometimes unpublished documents, despite increasingly restricted access to national archives. The writing of the text was entrusted to a famous Georgian writer, Lasha Bughadze. “It is a question, through my modest pen, of making accessible to a wide audience the material that shows the real Stalin, who was booed in 1921 by Georgian workers when he addressed them in Russian, and who was responsible for the death of millions of people. This is crucial because Russian propaganda and the forces that echo it here are taking away our future, just as Stalin took away our twentieth century, which promised to be modern and not a rehash of old tyrannies,” says Bughadze.[\[xiii\]](#)

## Notes and references

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[i] NDI (National Democratic Institute), “Taking Georgians’ pulse – Findings from March 2023 telephone survey” (carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia, May 2023, page 50)

[ii] Author’s interview with Giorgi Kandelaki

[iii]

<https://twitter.com/ReimaginingG/status/1655548406947885056>

[iv] Neologism that refers to the word *pederast*. In the republics of the former Soviet Union, the right often instrumentalizes homosexuality in its attacks on liberals.

[v] Author’s interview with Irma Inashvili

[vi] Author’s interview with Beka Mindiashvili

[vii] Author’s interview with Nikolay Mitroxin

[viii] Author’s interview with Irma Inashvili

[ix] Author’s interview with Beka Mindiashvili

[x] Author’s interview with Levan Abashidze

[xi] Author’s interview with Giorgi Kandelaki

[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] Author’s interview with Lasha Bughadze

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