

Statues Defaced as Stalin Makes Georgian Comeback

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Deep divisions on latest campaign to bring back monuments to dictator.

The reappearance of statues of Joseph Stalin in towns around Georgia reflects a backlash by conservatives upset at attempts to distance the country from its Soviet past, analysts say.

In early September, Telavi became the fifth town in the eastern Kakheti region alone to bring back a statue of the dictator.

The monument was originally set up in 1982 in the town's central square, but it was taken away after the fall of the Soviet Union a decade later.

However, its restoration was not universally welcomed. Within hours, the statue in Telavi had been defaced with paint. The same fate was suffered by another returning Stalin statue in the village of Zemo Alvani in January.

Shota Lazarashvili, head of Stalinets, the organisation behind the push to honour Stalin by restoring statues, said he was not discouraged by such opposition.

"Every village must have its Stalin," he said.

Telavi's mayor Zurab Butskhrikidze said that although Stalinets had obtained permission to set up the monument, there was a chance it might be taken down again.

"You can't take decisions like that all at once. Society is divided on Stalin. We are going to hold public debates and decide what to do with the statue," he said.

After he was first elected in 2004, President Mikheil Saakashvili made removing the country's Soviet legacy one of his priorities. But his United National Movement (UNM) party lost a parliamentary election last October, and the new government does not share his enthusiasm for eliminating emblems of the past.

For some people, Stalin, born in the Georgian town of Gori, remains an important part of their national identity.

The local authorities in Gori removed his statue – the largest in the country – three years ago in a carefully planned overnight operation. But last December, the town council voted to restore it to the town centre. Funds have been set aside for the work, and Georgia's culture ministry said in July that Stalin should be back on his plinth in time for his birthday, December 21.

Gori still has a Stalin museum, kept just as it was in Soviet times, with no mention of the millions of people deported, jailed and murdered under his rule. The main street is still named after Stalin.

Gori's mayor, David Razmadze, who is part of the governing Georgian Dream coalition, is unapologetic.

"It's very easy to criticise Stalin, to sling mud, given the low ebb we're currently at," he said. "But Gori's residents believe Stalin's name is famous worldwide.... Georgia is known around the world thanks to Stalin."

"As for the previous government's position on Stalin, I think it did more harm to itself than anything else," he continued. "I believe we can criticise the Stalinist period and the repression, but we don't have to attack him personally."

Razmadze pointed to an interview given by the head of the Georgian Orthodox church, Patriarch Ilia II, to a Russian publication in June.

"He was a Georgian by blood and knew Georgian perfectly, as well as Georgian songs and religious hymns," the patriarch said. "When he died, I was a student at the church seminary. We all stood in the hall and cried when they buried him. Stalin was an outstanding individual. Such people are born rarely. He was aware of Russia's global significance."

These comments, like the plan to return Stalin's statue to Gori, provoked a political storm.

"The Gori assembly's decision to restore the statue is encouraging a return to the Soviet past. No decent country should have symbols propagating a tyrant's cult," said Giorgi Kandelaki of Saakashvili's UNM. "The whole world knows Stalin was a bloodthirsty tyrant. It is very dangerous to restore his statues. We lost the

[2012] election, but the main problem is that the country is turning away from the democratic path.”

Giorgi Khutsishvili, head of the International Centre of Conflicts and Negotiations, said the last government had gone too far, too fast, so that the move to return the statues was a kind of counter-reaction.

“The older generation took Saakashvili’s aggressive anti-Soviet policy very badly,” he said. “For many people, Stalin was a fellow countryman,” said Khutsishvili. “He was a Georgian who ran a huge empire and of whom the whole world was scared. Many people are proud of him. The repression and tyranny are less important.”

Lasha Bakradze, a professor of Soviet history at Tbilisi university, said the UNM had failed to explain to the average Georgian why the Soviet period – which many look back to as a time of stability and prosperity – was so bad.

“Nothing was done to explain to people who Stalin really was. Nothing was said about it,” he said. “The school textbooks don’t contain any explanation of what a totalitarian system really. Aggressively and without explaining, the last government tried to destroy the cult of Stalin and change the Soviet mindset all in one go. But as one might have predicted, it didn’t succeed.”

Of an estimated 20 million victims of Stalin’s government, 300,000 were from Georgia, which then had a population of around 2.5 million. Despite this, most opinion polls show that around 45 per cent of Georgia’s population have a positive opinion of him. Curiously, at the same time, 70 per cent support plans to move Georgia closer to NATO and European institutions.

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Location: Georgia

Topic: Crimes Against Humanity

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/statues-defaced-stalin-makes-georgian-comeback>