



RUSSIA

ABKHAZIA

SOUTH OSSETIA

BLACK SEA

GORI ●

ADJARA

**TBILISI ●**

ARMENIA

AZERBAIJAN

TURKEY

IRAN

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# POLITICS OF MEMORY IN INDEPENDENT GEORGIA

## SELECTED ASPECTS

### Abstract


This article outlines the question of politics of memory in independent Georgia (since the collapse of the USSR). The author argues that Georgia is not yet conducting such a policy, but we may nevertheless discuss a sum of activities which during the rules of Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1990–1992) and Eduard Shevardnadze (1992–2003) were sporadic and intuitive, but since the Rose Revolution and the government of Mikheil Saakashvili (2004–2013) have become more thoughtful and methodical (the Museum of Soviet Occupation was opened in Tbilisi during this time). The actions taken were influenced by the political situation – the civil war, the wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the 1990s, and the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 – as well as the regional diversity of the country, its multi-ethnicity, and its position in the South Caucasus (which in Soviet times was known as Transcaucasia). This article discusses the most important topics that appear in Georgian narratives about the past, highlighting the historical ties between it and the West (the aim is to prove that in cultural-axiological terms Georgia belongs to Europe, and thus to justify Tbilisi's aspirations to integration with the EU and NATO), and depicting Georgia as the victim of the Russian and Soviet empires (and whose successor is contemporary Russia). However, the Georgian message is hindered by the existence of the Joseph Stalin State Museum, which glorifies the Soviet dictator.

**Keywords:** Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Gori, Tbilisi, Joseph Stalin, USSR, Russia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili, politics of memory, Transcaucasia, Southern Caucasus

## 1. Introduction

This article aims to outline the question of politics of memory in independent Georgia, i.e. since 1991 and the collapse of the USSR. At the beginning it should be noted that Georgia has not and still does not formally conduct such a policy, understood as a conscious, deliberate and consistent promotion of its own vision of the past (cf. Korzeniewski 2008, pp. 10–12). There are no established specialised institutions for doing so, and a broader public debate has not developed. This is why the title refers to policy **in** this country, and not to the policy **of** the state.

This is because elements of a politics of memory and some manifestations thereof are, in fact, visible in Georgia. Initially the actions taken were sporadic in nature, perhaps more intuitive than fully conscious. The main objective of these activities was – and consistently remains so today – to show the historical links of Georgia with the West, and thus to demonstrate that Georgia belongs to the wider Europe in a cultural and civilisational sense. Certain actions on a broader scale – and which were now completely conscious – took place after the Rose Revolution and the rise to power of Mikheil Saakashvili (at the turn of 2004); this is why the existing studies on the subject discussed herein (which are not numerous, and whose authors are usually Georgian researchers) are generally limited to this later period (see Dundua, Karaia, and Abashidze 2017). The narrative of Georgia's Europeanness has also been accompanied by the theme of Georgia as an “eternal” victim of Soviet and Russian imperialism (after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, Georgian textbooks began to portray the ethnic conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s as being rooted in Kremlin policy). Non-governmental organisations dealing with issues of memory also became active at that time. One of them, the equivalent (*toutes proportions gardées*) of the Polish *Karta*, is SovLab (from the English: Soviet Past Research Laboratory; the organisation's English website can be found at <http://sovlab.ge/en>). The departure of Saakashvili and the rise to power of the Georgian Dream camp of Bidzina Ivanishvili (2012–2013) has not substantially altered the public narrative, although official statements now contain



On the right:  
Leaflet of the State Museum  
of Joseph Stalin. Publisher:  
The State Museum of J. Stalin,  
Stalin Avenue 32, Gori,  
Georgia. Collection  
of Wojciech Górecki



ი.ბ. სტალინის სახელმწიფო მუზეუმი  
The State Museum of J. Stalin  
Государственный музей И.В. Сталина

less anti-Russian rhetoric than before. In 2018 Tbilisi reported its accession to ENRS, the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, which includes Germany, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary, and in which Albania, Austria and the Czech Republic have observer status (as told by the ENRS's director Rafał Rogulski, Warsaw, September 18, 2018). Irrespective of the question of membership, representatives of Georgia participate in many events within the ENRS).

A coherent Georgian message about its past – and thus, the transformation of the sum of the activities in the field of politics of memory into a politics of memory as such – is severely hindered, among others, by the existence of the Joseph Stalin **State** Museum, which portrays the Soviet dictator in a hagiographic manner (the exhibition's messaging is clear regardless of the barely visible information provided about Stalin's crimes). The Georgian perception of Stalin, which is burdened by the lack of any attempts to come to terms with the Soviet past, will be discussed later in this article as a case study.

Successive editions of post-Soviet history textbooks on the history of Georgia are the most widely mentioned source texts in this article. This follows firstly from the fact that this type of message – as authorised by the authorities – inevitably has the broadest impact on society; and secondly, from the assumption that in light of the limits on the content of the text, the question under discussion can only be outlined (focusing on “selected aspects” as mentioned in the title), and so there is no room here to present a full and exhaustive monograph on the subject.



## 2. Background and key contexts

### 2.1. Geographical location, size and terrain

Georgia occupies the western part of the Caucasian isthmus, which extends between the Black and Caspian seas, acting as the borderland of two continents. “Even we do not know whether this is still Europe or Asia already” noted Wojciech Materski (Materski 2000, p. 7). Most authors, however, situate Georgia – as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan – in Asia: the opinion that the entire region belongs to Europe

is encountered ever less frequently. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, in this area the boundary runs along the watershed between the drainage basins of both seas, which would mean that the western part of Georgia lies in Europe and the east in Asia (Górecki 2017, pp. 260–261).

Georgia is a mountainous country; mountains and foothills account for 87% of its surface. The shape of the land – and the consequent limited access to many places, especially in winter – has contributed to great regional differences. Despite the relatively small area (69,700 km<sup>2</sup> within its internationally recognised borders), Georgia is divided into nearly twenty historic provinces, whose inhabitants are characterised by numerous distinctions, and even, in the case of the Mingrelians or the Svans (Georgian ethnic groups), their own languages (see the map “Historyczne, etniczne i etnograficzne regiony Gruzji” [Historical, ethnic and ethnographic regions of Georgia], Baranowski and Baranowski 1987, p. 15). The second important reason for Georgia’s diversity is its history. Around the mid-fifteenth century the hitherto united Georgia disintegrated into a number of independent political bodies, including three kingdoms (Kartli, Kakheti and Imereti). This situation continued until the Georgian lands were absorbed by Russia, which essentially took place in the first decade of the 19th century. During this period of disintegration the Georgians were unified by the following factors: their language, their Orthodoxy (in the form of the Georgian Orthodox Church) and the Bagrationi dynasty, representatives of whom ruled all the Georgian kingdoms.

## 2.2. Issues of population and religion. Para-states and terminological problems

Leaving aside the regional differences, the Georgian state is also very ethnically and religiously heterogeneous. According to the last census in the USSR (1989), in Soviet Georgia only 70.1% of the population were Georgians (in Soviet Armenia, Armenians made up 93.3%, and Azerbaijanis in Soviet Azerbaijan were 82.7% of the population). Soviet Georgia was also home to Armenians (8.1% of the population), Russians (6.3%), Azerbaijanis (5.7%), Ossetians (3.0%), Greeks

(1.9%), Abkhazians (1.8%) and others (Maryański 1995, pp. 185–191). The Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and to a lesser extent the Ossetians lived in Georgia in dense clusters in areas adjacent to their historical homelands (Armenia, Azerbaijan and North Ossetia [then part of the Soviet Russian Federal Republic] respectively); the Abkhazians were the titular population of autonomous Abkhazia, which is geographically close to areas of the Russian Caucasus. In the period of *perestroika* and the collapse of the USSR, this situation was conducive to the development of separatism and centrifugal movements, which were supported by the authorities in Moscow.

A quarter of a century later, in November 2014 when the latest census was held, Georgia remained a multi-ethnic state, although the percentage of Georgians had risen to 86.8%. Moreover, the country was inhabited by Azerbaijanis (6.3% of the population) and Armenians (4.5%), and also included Russians (0.7%) and Ossetians (0.4%). In religious terms, Orthodox Christians predominated (83.4%), although a significant number also professed Islam (10.7%; in Georgia, the Muslim population consists of Azerbaijanis, Chechen-Kists and Georgian Muslims from Adjara) and the Armenian Apostolic Church (2.9%; this percentage is less than the number of Armenians, as Armenian Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians and atheists also live in Georgia). The percentage of Catholics was 0.5%. The separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not included in the 2014 census (*Census 2014*).

Authors who write about Georgia – if they do not raise the issue of the country’s territorial integrity – usually only consider the area controlled by the Tbilisi government, and tacitly assume that their readers understand the concept of “Georgia” in the same way. When it is necessary to define this area, the phrase “Georgia proper” is usually used, although it is debatable (as it suggests that the separatist regions are somehow “Georgia improper”). However, in the absence of a better proposal, it seems such wording may be accepted.

From the point of view of Georgian legislation, Abkhazia (like Adjara) has the status of an autonomous republic, as was the case in the USSR. South Ossetia, which in Soviet times was an autonomous district, now no longer has any special

status, and is formally called the “Tskhinvali region” which forms part of the province of Inner Kartli (Tskhinvali is the capital of the region; the Georgian authorities liquidated the autonomy of South Ossetia, and therefore also its name, on December 11, 1990). In practice, both in journalism and some official statements, in both Georgia and beyond its borders, the term “South Ossetia” is still widely used.


The separatist regions of Georgia (and, more broadly, of the former USSR), which form *de facto* separate states but lack international recognition (on a wider scale, or – as in the cases of Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh – any recognition at all), are frequently referred to in Polish literature as “para-states” (a term proposed by Wojciech Górecki, Górecki 1996, pp. 19–20).

Tourist folder of Dmanisi.  
Collection of Wojciech Górecki

### Dmanisi, the homeland of first Europeans.

Dmanisi is one of the special corners, where the most ancient Georgian culture was created.


There were found on this spot many and various archeological (old settlements, tombs), architectural (churches and monasteries) and other sorts of monuments of Bronze and Antique Ages.



The special, unique monument of this place is the Dmanisi city remains. In this territory there are revealed by the historians all the periods of the history and pre-history.


In the V century there used to be a bishop's residence here.

In V-VII centuries there was built a big city. In the Middle Ages Dmanisi used to be one of the strongest Georgian cities coming in the list below Tbilisi, the capital city. Georgian money was cut here as well in the XIII century. Into Dmanisi there used to enter main trade routes from the East,



the Anterior Asia and the Europe. The unique nature of the Dmanisi city remains is revealed also by the fact that in the sedimentary layer beneath the buildings of the Middle Ages there were found bones of the most ancient animals (unicorn, elephant, saber-toothed tiger, a giant ostrich, etc.) and humans (5 skulls, 4 mandibles, up to 60 other parts). It was finally ascertained by the scientists that the Dmanisi hominids appertain to the early group of the HOMO ERECTUS,

namely, HOMO ERGASTER and are dated by 1.8-1.7 million years. Hence, outside Africa there was found the oldest human being in the world in Dmanisi. It is already formed an opinion in the whole world that Dmanisi is the homeland of the first Europeans.



Dmanisi city remains and this corner in general do not only carry the unique scientific value, but also they are characterized by unusual beauty in the aspect of sightseeing: unique valleys, natural lakes, woods, sub alpine and alpine pastures, tumuli of the Bronze Age, early Christian church complexes, castles and fortresses, cult monuments, etc. Their number exceeds a thousand for the present moment.





### 2.3. From failed state to leader in the Eastern Partnership

Georgia entered its post-Soviet independence in a state of civil war, which broke out in autumn 1991. The two parties were supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia (after his group won the first democratic parliamentary elections in November 1990, he became the speaker of parliament, and six months later won the popular presidential election), and the opposition, led by Jaba Ioseliani (the creator of the Mkhedrioni paramilitary organisation), Tengiz Kitovani (the commander of the National Guard, which later went over to the opposition) and Tengiz Sigua (the once and future prime minister). In the first days of January 1992 the opposition, who had been armed by the remaining local units of the Russian army, took over the parliament building and Gamsakhurdia decided to flee the country, although his supporters still controlled Mingrelia in the west of Georgia, where the president's clan had its roots. The fighting in that province lasted for two years. In the final phase Gamsakhurdia returned to Georgia, and he either died or was killed on December 31, 1993, which marked the end of the war.

In parallel to these events, two wars of secession were fought in Georgia: in South Ossetia (January 1991–June 1992) and Abkhazia (August 1992–September 1993). As a result, the separatists – who were unofficially supported by Russia and, particularly in Abkhazia, volunteers from the North Caucasus – took control of large parts of both areas (individual enclaves loyal to Tbilisi were liquidated after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008), creating nominally independent republics, although they were not recognised as such by anyone. In addition, Adjara still remained outside Tbilisi's real control, although it had not formally announced its secession; centrifugal tendencies had also been noted in areas inhabited by Armenians (Javakheti), Azerbaijanis (Lower Kartli) and the Chechen-Kists (the Pankisi Gorge in Kakheti).

After Gamsakhurdia was overthrown, an unconstitutional Military Council took power, which was then transformed into the Council of State. In March 1992 the coup's leaders invited Eduard Shevardnadze to head this body; he was the most famous Georgian politician at the time (a former Soviet foreign minister and a close associate of Mikhail Gorbachev),

who had hitherto been living in Moscow. In the autumn of that year, won an unusual general election for the position of parliamentary speaker, and as such he ruled Georgia for the next three years, using the time to stabilise the situation (concluding a truce with the separatist regions, and eliminating the independent armed formations which still operated on the territory of Georgia proper), and to marginalise potential competitors for power. In November 1995 Shevardnadze won the presidential elections (and repeated his success in the 2000 elections), and his group won the parliamentary vote.

The new president moved closer to Russia (he announced that Georgia would accede to the Commonwealth of Independent States, and consented to the presence of Russian military bases); this led to Russian assistance in fighting Gamsakhurdia's supporters and blockading Abkhazia. When Shevardnadze came to the conclusion that the Kremlin was conducting a "divide and rule" policy which would not help him regain control over the para-states, he decided on an alliance with the West: he declared that Georgia intended to join NATO, and forced President Yeltsin to declare that the Russian bases would be withdrawn, which took place at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in autumn 1999. (For more on Georgia in the first years after the collapse of the USSR see Czachor 2014; Furier 2000; *Źródła* 2009).

The Rose Revolution broke out after the government rigged the parliamentary elections in autumn 2003. When the elections were re-run (and an early presidential election was held), the United National Movement and its leader Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, and it was he who ruled the country for the next decade. The main points of his plan were curbing corruption and purging the state, restoring territorial integrity and integrating Georgia with the institutionalised West. He proved generally capable of implementing the first of these points, and Georgia, which in the 1990s had exemplified a "failed state", came to the fore among the post-Soviet states in terms of its democratic transition (this was also noticed in Russia, as exemplified by a book, popular in its time, which bore the significant title of *How did Georgia do it? [Почему у Грузии получилось]*; published in English as *Georgia's Rose Revolution: How One Country Beat the Odds, Transformed Its Economy, and Provided a Model for Reformers Everywhere*,

Burakova 2011]). The second point was partly achieved, as Tbilisi restored control over Adjara and strengthened – albeit only temporarily – its hold over the enclaves in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; but as a result of the war with Russia, the separatists took over the two regions’ territories as a whole (with military assistance from Moscow). Russia and several other countries, including Nicaragua, Venezuela and Syria, have now recognised the regions as independent states. The third point remains open, although today (mid-2019) full membership for Georgia in NATO and the EU is difficult to imagine. However – since Saakashvili’s departure – the country has signed an Association Agreement with Brussels (signed in June 2014, and valid as of July 2016), and in March 2017 the EU lifted the short-term visa requirement for citizens of Georgia to enter the Schengen zone. In this way Georgia, next to Moldova and Ukraine, has become the leader among the former Soviet states which are part of the EU’s Eastern Partnership programme (the other member states are Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus).

As is apparent from the above, the main vectors of Georgia’s foreign policy have remained unchanged since the turn of the century and the rule of “late-period” Shevardnadze (not forgetting that Gamsakhurdia also presented a pro-European orientation); but these were articulated most strongly by Saakashvili’s United National Movement team (see e.g. Falkowski 2016).



### 3. Georgia as Europe

#### 3.1. South Caucasus *versus* Transcaucasia

Even back in the times of the USSR, Georgian authors postulated that the whole region, then known as Transcaucasia (Rus. *Закавказье*), should be called the South Caucasus. This was logical, as the area north of it (and north of the Caucasus mountains’ main ridge) was known as the North Caucasus. However, it was more important for these authors that the name of the region not be determined by its position relative to Moscow – looking from the other direction, it does not lie “beyond” (за) the Caucasus, but rather “in front” of it

(Górecki 2017, p. 184). In the “Conversion of Kartli”, the oldest surviving monument of Georgian historiography, Georgia is known as the “land of the north”: Christianity was brought there by Saint Nino, who came from Cappadocia, and whose youth had been spent in the Holy Land (*Conversion of Kartli* 1995, pp. 15 and 36).

After 1991 – and the popularisation of the term “South Caucasus” (the leading advocate of the introduction and consolidation of this name was Professor Tamaz Gamkrelidze, linguist and orientalist, and a member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR) – some Georgian authors began to locate their country in the “Black Sea region”; and after the Rose Revolution, they even started speaking of “South-Eastern Europe” or even “Southern Europe”. The reason for using this language was to emphasise that Georgia is part of Europe, understood as a cultural-axiological community, as well as the symbolic separation of the country from their “Asiatic” neighbours in the Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Górecki 2017, p. 184). Clearly, these efforts were intended to bolster Tbilisi’s ambitions to join NATO, and in particular the EU.

Examples of arguments that Georgia is part of Southern Europe were raised at a conference entitled “Southern Dimension of the European Security”, organised by the South Caucasus Institute for Regional Security (SCIRS) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Tbilisi on November 5, 2007. Alexander Rusetsky, a political scientist and the director of SCIRS, said that Georgians are similar to European southerners (Greeks, Italians, Spaniards), sharing viticulture, a passion for football, a soft spot for children, late starts and ends to the day, and a tendency towards unpunctuality, among other things. On the other hand, Nino Chikovani, a historian and cultural scientist at Tbilisi State University, said that there was a separate, “Balkan-Caucasian region of Mediterranean culture”.

### 3.2. Under a new flag

One of Mikheil Saakashvili’s first reforms was the adoption of a new state flag, referring to the flag of the united kingdom of Georgia, with a system of crosses resembling the cross of Jerusalem (from 1990 to 2004, the flag of the Democratic

Republic of Georgia of 1918–1921 had been used). In addition to the new Georgian flag, EU flags appeared *en masse* all over the country, in offices, schools or cultural institutions – and they still fly to this day.

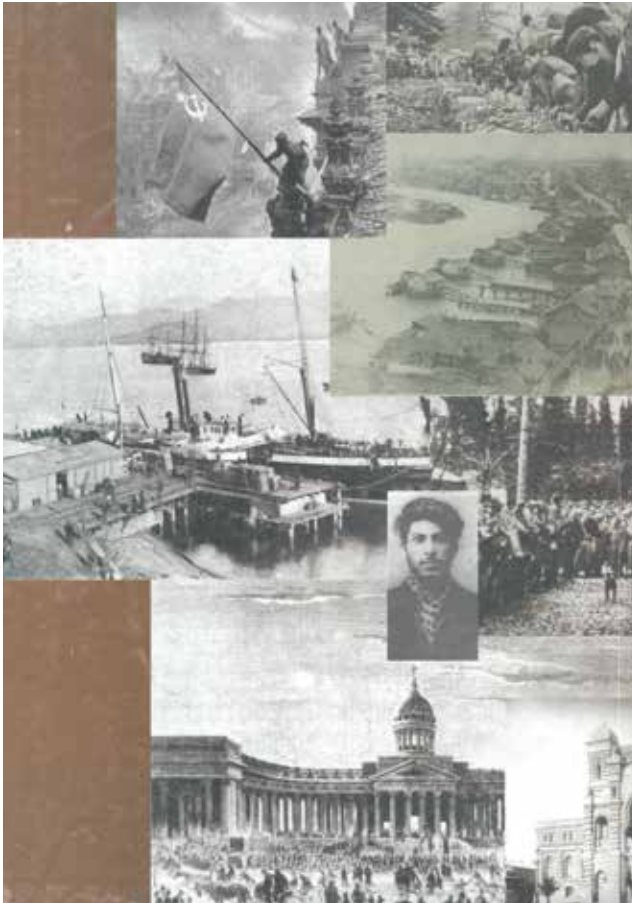
This demonstrative closeness with the West – flying the new Georgian flag and that of European Union – on the one hand fits in with the above-mentioned use of language; but on the other, it represented a further step, serving as an announcement of qualitatively new activities, including in the area of politics of memory (the goal of the nation's aspiration was not just an abstract “Europe”, but also its institutional and Occidental emanation).

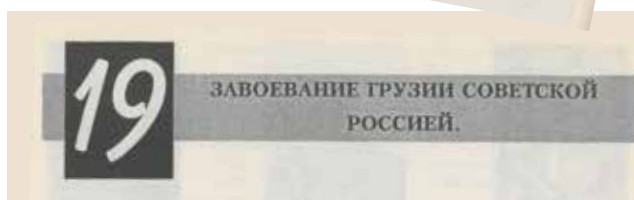
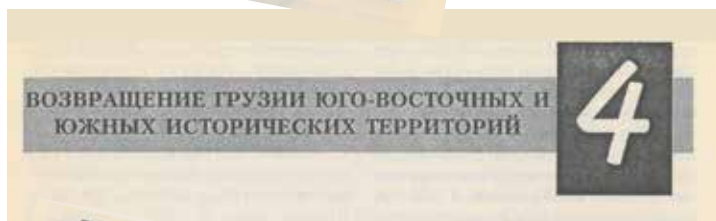
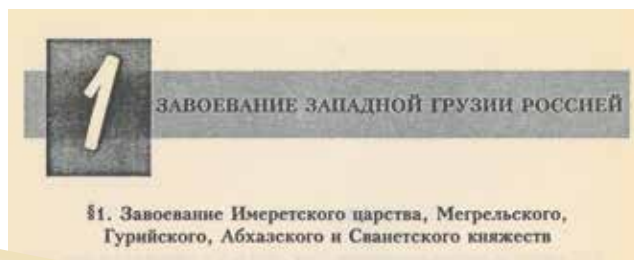
Above all, such actions (including in education) have finally become possible. In the period prior to 2003, especially



Covers of the history textbook: Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli. 2003. *Istoriya Gruzii (XIX–XX veka). Uchebnik dlya IX klassa* [History of Georgia. 19th–20th centuries. Textbook for the 9th class]. Tbilisi: “Artandzhi”. Collection of Wojciech Górecki

in the 1990s, there was above all no money for any such things (funding started to arrive after the Rose Revolution), and the central authorities were more focused on stabilising the security situation. Second, any more determined attempts to promote a particular vision of the past could have deepened the divisions within society, and made it difficult or even impossible to restore control over at least the whole of “Georgia proper” (for example, the Armenians of Javakheti, where a Russian base employing many locals was stationed, did not share the vision of an European Georgia, as they were afraid of breaking their ties to Armenia and Russia). Thirdly, a Georgian foreign policy was only now being created – the “early years” Shevardnadze had still hoped for an alliance with Russia and had carefully avoided causing friction in





Titles of the chapters  
in textbook *Istoriya Gruzii*:

1. Russian conquest of the Western Georgia;
2. Russian colonial policy in Georgia;
4. Return of its southern and south-eastern historical territories to Georgia;
18. Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921);
19. Soviet Russia's conquest of Georgia.

Collection of Wojciech Górecki

their relationship. Fourth, in the opinion of the para-states' inhabitants (especially Abkhazia), as well as many residents of "Georgia proper", Shevardnadze's team bore much of the blame for the conduct of the war and the lack of progress in the peace process (they were accused of wanting not so much to resolve the conflicts as to subjugate Sukhumi and Tskhinvali once again). In this situation Shevardnadze would have been too implausible as the author or promoter of such identity proposals to the whole country.

It was only Saakashvili – who won 96% of the votes in the elections of January 4, 2004 – who could afford a policy which took the regional and ethnic diversity of the country into account without the risk of threatening its unity, or of strengthening its centrifugal tendencies. A positive message was also directed to the para-states; promises were made that their populations would be able to enjoy the same benefits (such as health service) as the residents of "Georgia proper".

### 3.3. A return to European roots

Georgia's history textbooks, which were written and published after the educational reform, and were introduced by Saakashvili's team in 2004–2008, emphasise a multiplicity of possible interpretations and perspectives, a breakthrough in the national discourse (i.e. contextualising the country's history within that of the region and the continent; the historian Giorgi Anchabadze, the co-author of the new textbooks, emphasised in conversation with the author that the history of Georgia more closely resembles those of European states than of the Middle East – there were periods of a united kingdom, regional and national partitions; the kings had to deal with a powerful and numerous aristocracy, the position of women was relatively high, the church enjoyed broad autonomy [Tbilisi, April 19, 2015]); as well as the formation of a consciousness which was more civic than national (attention should be paid to the fact that Georgia's history was made by both Georgians and representatives of the minorities, sensitising students to the presence of non-Orthodox Christian denominations and religions). The basic objectives of the reform were contained in Decree No. 84 by the Government of Georgia of October 18, 2004,



on the “National Goals of Secondary Education”, and the law on “General Education” which came into force in April 2005. The new laws on the teaching of history are contained in the “National curriculum for comprehensive schools for the school year 2008/2009” (*Natsionalnyy* 2008).

The Armenian and Azerbaijani researchers who analysed these manuals as part of a project by the Armenian-based Analytical Centre for Globalisation and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC) entitled “A cross-analysis of school textbooks in South Caucasus countries” emphasised the works’ “Eurocentrism” (the researchers also analysed each other’s books, and the Georgian researchers examined the Armenian and Azerbaijani textbooks; Radzhabov, Grigoryan, and Kolbaya 2012). The learning cycle begins with the myth of the Argonauts’ expedition for the Golden Fleece (information about Colchis – the ancient land of the proto-Georgians – comes in large part from Greek sources) and ends with the return to the “civilised”, i.e. the Western world, after centuries of separation when foreign empires blocked the path to Europe (the last of which was the USSR).

In their narrative of a time when relations with Europe were not intensive, the textbooks’ authors emphasise the Caucasian dimension of Georgian statehood (these contacts were weakened after the Battle of Manzikert fought by the armies of Byzantium and the Seljuk Turks in 1071, which opened the way for the Turkic invaders to conquer Anatolia, and significantly hindered Georgian access to southern Europe, including the Greek monasteries of the Holy Land). When discussing the united kingdom (from the beginning of the 11th to the end of the 15th century), attention is drawn to its pan-Caucasian character and its dominance in the region; while discussing the regional partitions (mid-15th to the end of the 18th century), emphasis is placed on the moments of common struggle between the peoples of the Caucasus and foreign powers (especially Persia and the Ottoman Empire), and the multi-ethnic character of Georgian cities. The period after the Russian conquest (from the turn of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th) is presented in a dichotomous way (see the next point); and the Soviet period as unambiguously negative, as a time of persecutions and multi-level repression (see the series of

Russian-language textbooks by Kiknadze, Pataridze, Surguladze, and Uzunashvili 2010; Surguladze, Anchabadze, Bakhia-Okruashvili, Eremashvili, Mshveniradze, and Uzunashvili 2010; Anchabadze, Gamkelidze, Kiknadze, Surguladze, and Shvelidze 2009; Ramishvili, Akhmeteli, Sartania, and Chkhikvishtli 2007; Akhmeteli and Murgulia 2009).

In the textbooks' narrative, much space is devoted to the Democratic Republic of Georgia as the first Georgian state of the 20th century (1918–1921). The Armenian researcher Tigran Zakarian, who participated in the above mentioned project, noted:

The narrative of obtaining (or “restoring”) the independence of Georgia in 1918 repeats the structurally different narratives about obtaining or “restoring” (as in the case of the Polish narrative) independence and “returning” to the European family, from whom it was ripped away because of one or another non-European or half-European empire (the Russian or, as in the Balkans, the Ottoman). (Zakaryan 2012, p. 115).

The researcher pointed out that the textbook quoted the words of the then Georgian leader Noe Zhordania that “our path leads to Europe” (full quote as follows):

You know that Soviet Russia has proposed us a military alliance, but we have definitely refused. [...] Our road runs towards Europe, Russia's towards Asia. I know that our enemies will say that we are supporters of imperialism. That's why I should definitely state – I prefer the imperialists of the West to the fanatics of the East. (after Materski 2000, p. 91).

### 3.4. The first Europeans

Eduard Shevardnadze's propaganda exploited the fact that the oldest remains of *Pithecanthropus* outside Africa (*Homo erectus*) were found in the country; they were discovered by archaeologists in 1991 (the following years brought further discoveries) near the town of Dmanisi, less than 100 kilometres south-west of Tbilisi. The Russian researcher Victor Shnirelman, in his examination of the “memory wars” in the Caucasus, stressed that the then Georgian

president had personally appeared at the exhibition which was opened for the occasion in Tbilisi in 2000 (Shnirelman 2003, p. 349).

In Saakashvili's period, a jocular narrative was constructed around "Dmanisi man" that the "first Europeans" came from Georgia, and the slogan "Europe started here" became the country's motto promoting the campaign. Echoes of this narrative, however, have even reached formal scientific discourse (for example, see the title of an article by Tea Shelia from the Georgian National Museum, which was published in the Polish Kartvelological periodical "Pro Georgia": *Dmanisi – the homeland of the most ancient Eurasians*, [Shelia 2018]).



#### 4. Georgia as the victim of an empire / empires

During the Soviet period, the occupation of Georgia – that is, its different kingdoms and principalities – was presented by Russia as "the unification of the Georgian lands". This view also turned up in later narratives, as seen in the chapter titles of a ninth-grade history textbook, which appeared as part of an earlier series of books published at the turn of the century – that is, before the Rose Revolution and the reform of the educational system. On the one hand, we can read about "the conquest of the kingdom of Imereti and the principalities of Megreli, Guri, Abkhazia and Svaneti" (as well as "Russian colonial policy in Georgia" and detailed information about anti-Russian demonstrations); and on the other, "the return to Georgia of historical sites in the south-east and south", and "the return to Georgia of Adjara and other Georgian areas in the south-west. The consolidation of the Georgian people". (Vakhnadze and Guruli 2003, pp. 4, 7, 11–18, 19, 49).

A dichotomy can also be seen in the latest series of textbooks: they refer to the conquest and "subjugation" of Georgia, of colonial exploitation, Russification, and finally, unfavourable demographic trends (i.e. Russian settlement), but also about the Europeanisation of the country and its elites. In this context, mention is made of the *Tergdaleulebi* movement; the word literally refers to those who drank water from the

river Terek (which symbolically separates Georgian territory and the Caucasus mountains from Russia). It included people who gained their education in Russia (i.e. beyond the Terek) and who imported from there – via Russia and the Russian language – the European “news” of liberalism and modernisation, and thus ushered in the Georgian national revival. According to the Armenian researcher:

I feel here, of course, the thought that the Russian Empire was a “screen” between Europe and Georgia, which in a certain sense can be treated positively – if we take into account that, for example, in the 18th century, in the absence of such a “screen” and the lack of a minimum level of stability, the dissemination of European culture and thought was quite difficult. (Zakaryan 2012, p. 110).

The lack of a comprehensive and full assessment of Georgian-Russian relations in the 19th century (in present-day Georgia the topic is “not being worked on”) derives from the fact that, since the collapse of the USSR, historical issues have been dominated by the current, rapidly changing and often dramatic relations between the two countries. By merely raising the matter – which is something certainly worthy of further investigation – we may hypothesise that the ambiguous perception of the Russian annexation is a reflection of the Georgian people’s complex attitude towards Russia today: their deep fear of Russian (neo) imperialism is accompanied by a certain sympathy for the Russians as a “fraternal” nation (due to, among other things, their common Orthodox culture), as is evidenced by the large number of Russian tourists visiting Georgia. In 2018 1.705 million Russians arrived, with more tourists coming only from Azerbaijan (1.807 million) and Armenia (1.725 million); taking into account the presence in Georgia of Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities, some portion of these visits no doubt had a family dimension (see Varaksina 2019). Certainly the use of the Russian language is not met with hostility in Georgia; on the contrary, the foreigner is often treated as “one of ours”, although with time, and as successive generations who speak better English enter adulthood, this situation will probably change.

In contrast to the tsarist era, in independent Georgia the Soviet period was and still is assessed unconditionally negatively, both in school curricula (this was already true of the first books which appeared after the collapse of the USSR, such as Lomashvili 1999), as well as in official statements, although with the passage of time this narrative is developing new threads. In the latest books Russia, as the heir of the USSR and the national policy carried out at that time, has been blamed for the wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the early 1990s. The Abkhazian and Ossetian peoples are portrayed not so much as “perpetrators” of the conflict as – almost on a par with the Georgians – its “victims”, not enemies. They are even described as brothers who “succumbed to the whispers of evil” and went astray (see Radzhabova and Abbasova 2012, pp. 44–45). This approach is part of the current programme’s fundamentals, promoting “civic consciousness” with the aim of binding the multi-ethnic and regionally diverse society, and emphasising the national minorities’ role in the creation of the common state. Another novelty is the admission that the introduction of Georgian troops into Abkhazia in August 1992 was a mistake by Tbilisi (Zakaryan 2012, p. 117).

Apart from textbooks, at this point we should also mention the consistent removal of major Soviet monuments, including the monument to Lenin in the central square of Tbilisi (1991) and the Memorial of Glory in Kutaisi, dedicated to the Great Patriotic War (2009). On the other hand, many monuments to less-known activists – and the streets named after them – have remained; the perception of Stalin, discussed below, is itself a separate issue.

The official attitude of the Georgian state towards the Soviet period is displayed by the Museum of Soviet Occupation, opened in 2006 as part of the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi, and which is reminiscent of similar museums in the Baltic states. With over 3000 exhibits, the exhibition depicts the period from 1921 to 1991 as an occupation, and Georgia as one of the victims of the Soviet Empire (see the museum’s video presentation: *Museum* 2011; it is noteworthy that after Saakashvili’s team departed, the museum continued to function – and still operates today – in unchanged form). Leaving aside the

museum, in the years after the Rose Revolution a series of memorials dedicated to the twentieth-century heroes of the struggle for independence was erected in Georgia, and new national holidays have appeared in the calendar, such as 25 February (the anniversary of the Soviet occupation of Georgia) and 9 April (the anniversary of the Soviet pacification of a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi in 1989).

## 5. Stalin, the greatest Georgian



The exhibition at the Joseph Stalin State Museum, which has existed since 1937, stands in total contradiction to the narrative found in the Museum of Soviet Occupation. It presents the Soviet dictator, who was born in the town where the museum is located (Gori), as a hero and a secular saint. It has existed in its current form – with minor modifications – since 1978, when the centenary of his birth was celebrated. After the Rose Revolution and the war with Russia, ideas of building a museum to Stalinism in that place were raised, but in the end, only a few signs discussing the dictator's crimes were added (and to this day they are not properly presented), and a hall symbolising a Stalinist torture chamber was opened. It should be noted that the museum is one of the biggest tourist attractions, not only for Gori but the whole of Georgia – in the gift shop visitors can choose from a wide range of Stalin souvenirs.

The Georgian people's evolving attitude towards Stalin deserves a separate study. Here it suffices to note that the cult of the dictator began there – paradoxically – during the Khrushchev thaw. In Tbilisi on March 9, 1956 there was a demonstration of thousands of people defending the good name of Stalin; according to official data, 22 people were killed. Eduard Shevardnadze outlined the background to these events:

Consciously or unconsciously, Khrushchev allowed himself to make a speech which was offensive to Georgian self-love. To Nikita Sergeyevich the facts were not sufficient – he fell prey to his emotions, as someone who had long been disregarded, and he lowered himself to making humiliating attacks on his

dead “master” (*хозяин*). He portrayed him not only as a tyrant, which in fact he was, but as an ignorant and stupid man. If he really had been such a person, many have asked, how did he manage to create such a powerful state and lead millions to follow in his wake? How could he have become a serious interlocutor with and partner to the renowned politicians of his time? Only by using lies, cruelty, violence, cunning? Impossible! Today I think that the cause of the explosion which inflamed the Georgian youth in those days of March 1956 was something much more serious and meaningful than the humiliation of national sentiments. It was an unconscious protest against the methods which led to the elimination of evil in unworthy ways, of injustice by injustice (Shevardnadze 1992, p. 47–48).

This paradox is deepened by the fact that the cult of Stalin in Georgia only blossomed after the fall of the USSR, when Georgia was experiencing a deep political and economic crisis; Stalin was associated with the power of the past, with order and stability; and the fact that he ruled all Russia in his time was also important for many Georgians.

For several years, the popularity of Stalin in Georgian society has been falling systematically: when a monument to Stalin in Gori – the largest in Georgia – was removed on June 25, 2010, it was not met with violent protests (earlier attempts to dismantle it, in 1953 and 1988, were abandoned in the face of resistance from people who gathered on the square and physically defended access to the monument). At the same time, however, Stalin started gaining supporters in Russia. In a prestigious multi-level internet survey “The Name of Russia”, which in late 2008 selected the most popular figures in Russian history, Stalin long occupied first place, and eventually finished third (cf. *Imya* 2008).

To some extent, the existence of the Stalin Museum in its present form undermines the Georgian authorities’ efforts to build a coherent narrative about its past (with Georgia as the victim of empires). At the same time this museum – which this article describes as a “case study” – is not the only item on the list of Soviet relics in Georgia. Their maintenance (at this point we may even recall the statue in Tbilisi of General Konstantin Leselidze, who took

part in the Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939) is the result of the absence of any broad public debate in the period between 1921 and 1991.

## 6. Conclusion

This article does not, of course, cover all the issues outlined in the title. It merely points to selected aspects of the politics of memory in contemporary Georgia, paying attention to its correlation with Tbilisi's current policy. Both the question of the politics of memory in Georgia (including the attempts to "put straight" the Soviet historical narrative which were being undertaken by independent and émigré groups even before independence), as well as its perception in the multi-ethnic and multinational society of Georgia need further research. The fact that we are dealing with such lively and dynamic material is demonstrated in the increasingly common statements by representatives of the Georgian intelligentsia, who have been talking about the need for a final settlement with the Soviet past. One example is found in an interview



Postcard "Stop Russia".  
 Publisher: Artanuji Publishers,  
 design: Tamri Bolkvadze.  
 Collection of Wojciech Górecki





in the *Plus Minus* supplement of the Polish daily *Rzeczpospolita* by the Georgian writer Nino Haratishvili, who currently lives in Germany:

The older generation does not have much nostalgia for the Soviet Union, but you can hear voices that Russia is our ally, and somehow we need to cooperate with her. Most people, however, are opposed to taking any steps in this direction, especially since Russia controls the border and is trying to push it further into Georgian territory. On the other hand, a lot of Russian tourists come to us, and traditional Georgian hospitality still operates, and we have a Stalin museum, which says a lot about us as a society. We haven't come to terms with the past, there isn't any official position about it, there isn't even anything in the education system. We like to say that we were just victims, and the Russians were behind it all. Of course, on the Georgian side were thousands of victims of Stalin's purges, but then many people from the communist leadership and the high officials of the KGB were actually Georgians. We can't call things by their real names. Certainly much remains to be done. (Haratishvili 2019).

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