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“Christian Stalin” – The Paradox of Contemporary Georgian Politics

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ABSTRACT

The following study sets as the starting point of analysis the paradox which one can observe in contemporary Georgian public space. Religious discourse refers to Stalin as a believer and even talks of his contribution to the revival of Christianity in the Soviet Union, despite the vast historical evidence suggesting otherwise. A considerable part of the Georgian population expresses respect or sympathy towards this historical figure. In this research, it is argued that explanations stemming from memory politics, nationalism or from the attempts of turning the image of Stalin into a commodity, fail to substantially address the puzzle and shed light on the phenomenon. Hence, the following study proposes a chain of signification developed within the discourse theory as a theoretical and methodological tool for looking at these developments. The discourse on national identity with Orthodox Christianity as a nodal point explains the possibility of such an image, religious Stalin, coming into existence.

Keywords: Stalin; Georgia; National Identity; Discourse Theory; Orthodox Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

The so-called Liberty Charter adopted by the Parliament of Georgia in the year 2011, in addition to other major issues, addresses the controversies connected with the Soviet legacy and how to properly deal with it in the contemporary Georgian state. To be more precise, it limits the employment in state institutions of those people who were affiliated with the Soviet security services or held high ranking positions in those units. The Charter also prohibits the display of any symbol that represents the totalitarian regime of either Nazi Germany or the USSR (Liberty Charter, 2011). But an interesting paradox can be observed in relation to this legislation. Despite the legal ban on Soviet symbols which might in any way refer to the oppressive system of the past, Stalin has somehow become an exception to the rule. One of the main avenues in Gori, the town in Georgia where Stalin was born, is still officially carrying his name, in spite of the fact that the Liberty Charter clearly lists among the main goals of this piece of legislation “the eradication of Communist totalitarian and Fascist symbols, cultic buildings, sculptures, monuments, bas-reliefs, inscriptions, the names of streets, squares, villages and towns...” (ibid). In addition to the ex-Soviet leader’s museum which is still operating, his image is widely used for tourist attraction purposes as well. For example, one can encounter the picture of Stalin on the wall of a store in Gori, on wine bottles, fridge magnets and even on the boxes of matches. The empirical part of this paper explores more of such instances as well as the political dimension of the usage of Stalin’s image in public discourse, and an attempt is made to connect the role of his personality with the broader discourse on Georgian national identity.

The main argument put forward in this paper is that an explanation for such an extensive presence of the image of Stalin in Georgian public space, despite his controversial role in the nation’s history, is to be sought in the populist discourse on Georgia’s national identity. Acknowledging the fact that one cannot speak of clear, distinctive identities and represent them as dichotomous entities, as the subject can have multiple identities at the same time, this study, for the purposes of simplifying the complex social world, nevertheless consolidates multiple parallel identity discourses in operation in Georgia down to two basic ones. They can be labelled as liberal and populist.

While the first is inclusive, one which overcomes ethnicity or religion as a marker of belongingness to the nation and substitutes those with citizenship, the second type is exclusive. It largely draws on ethnicity and religion as the markers of national identity, and as a result develops the formula Georgian equals Orthodox Christian. Orthodox Christianity, in the case of Georgia, is defined in research as the nodal point around which the populist discourse starts to organize and it excludes other possible definitions of nationality, which itself is a floating signifier. Additionally, as discourse theory argues, a discourse strives to achieve hegemony by expanding its chain of significations (i.e. chain of equivalence and chain of difference) further into the field of discursivity, which is to be understood as all the other possible meanings a sign could have in other discourses. In other words, the chain of equivalence organized around religion as the nodal point expands into the field and invests meaning into the floating signifier – Stalin. In the alternative, liberal discourse on national identity, the chain of equivalence is organized around Europeaness, and therefore the meaning this discourse is investing in the image of Stalin is different. But this alternative, liberal chain is not explored in detail within the scope of this particular paper.

Instead, this study is focused on the analysis of the first type of identity discourse and argues that the definition of one's national belongingness based on their religious faith, and the subsequent chain of equivalence expanded by the adoption of this view, is the key explanatory tool for understanding the emergence of the paradox of Christian Stalin, which can be observed in Georgian society.

The paper is organized in the following manner: the first part elaborates on key theoretical and methodological concepts of discourse theory. It offers definitions of the main terms and explains their application. The second part of the paper explores the empirical data and tries to link it to the theoretical framework. Finally, conclusions are drawn and possibilities for further research explored.

Discourse Theory and Identity Studies

This research takes as its starting point the paradox which can be described as Christian Stalin. This image is largely present in Georgian public discourse and represents a puzzle the following paper tries to address. It is not designed as historical research, hence, the author does not intend to engage with historical narratives to look for a confirmation or a repeal of Stalin's religiousness. Instead, this paper looks at the contemporary discourses, and the references made to the Soviet leader when the idea of the nation is invoked, and questions how it is possible that such a contradictory image could gain ground.

There is a substantial body of literature which addresses this phenomenon and investigates the role of Stalin in contemporary Georgian society (Bogishvili et al, 2016; Gugushvili et al, 2015; Martinez, 2017). Some of these works look at this issue from the perspective of memory politics and try to incorporate their findings into the study of nationalism. While Martinez (2017), for instance, in his work also touches upon the case of turning the name of Stalin into a commodity for tourist purposes in Gori. This paper argues, however, that such approaches fail to substantially address the research puzzle put forward and instead suggests that the concept of chains of signification developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) within the framework of discourse theory (DT) can serve as an important theoretical and methodological tool for looking at these developments.

Starting with the definition of discourse, following Laclau and Mouffe, it is understood as the result of articulation which itself is "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of articulatory practice" (1985: 105). Elements are signs whose meanings are not fixed yet, but once their meanings are defined by their positioning in relation to others, they become moments.

Another important concept which is introduced in DT and is applied in the following case study, is nodal points – sometimes also referred to as master signifiers. They are privileged signs around which a discourse starts to organize. "The nodal point creates and sustains the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings" (Torfing, 1999: 98). The meaning of

other signs is defined in relation to the nodal point. To put the process in simpler terms, “a variety of signifiers are floating within the field of discursivity as their traditional meaning has been lost; suddenly some master signifier intervenes and retroactively constitutes their identity by fixing the floating signifiers within a pragmatic chain of equivalence” (ibid: 99). Every discourse then itself becomes an expansion of the chain of significations to partially fix the meanings of the floating signifiers within the field of discursivity i.e. in all the possible meanings the sign could have in other discourses. Here it is important to mention the distinction between the discursive and the discourse. Latter, as it was already mentioned, is the partially achieved fixation of the meaning of signifiers, whereas the “unfixed elements of a disintegrated discourse” fall into the field of discursivity (Torfing, 1999: 93). Disruption of the conditions of possibilities upon which the partial fixations achieved by a concrete discourse rest, might lead to the reincorporation of other meanings, which were previously excluded by that particular discourse or in other words, new or additional meanings would be drawn and transferred from the field of discursivity into the discourse. This process requires the existence of a constitutive other, something in negation of which one’s identity is constructed.

It is important to note that the discourse theory argues that there is no essential identity, but only forms of identifications. Even national identities, while they appear as something natural, “are always contingent constructions made possible through a variety of practices, discourses and language games, and they can be transformed and rearticulated in different ways” (Mouffe, 2013: 45). The creation of identity in such processes always implies the establishment of a difference. To put it differently, the creation of ‘we’ can only exist through the formulation of ‘they’ (ibid). The constitution of the collective identity requires the creation of the frontier between those who belong to the community and those who do not. Hence, this paper follows the understanding of nationalism as the DT would define it: a certain articulation of the empty signifier – the nation, which functions as the symbol of an unachievable fullness. This means that nationalism is a myth – a distorted reality, which at the same time is vital and constitutive, as it establishes “a necessary horizon for our acts” (Jorgensen and Philips, 2010: 39). The nation or a society as a totality does not really exist,

instead it is constantly produced by the discourses and is verbalized as such, “but the totality remains an imaginary entity” (ibid). From this perspective, the terms that are used to describe society as a total entity are empty signifiers at the centre of discourses, invested with different meanings based on the articulation. Constitution of the society ends up in the paradox of a vain attempt to institute the impossible object – society (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

To recap what has been argued above, this paper is looking at the image of Stalin in Georgian public discourses from the discourse theory perspective. Stalin is understood as a floating signifier, which is open to different kinds of meanings and there is a constant struggle going on between the various discourses to fix the meaning of this sign. Christianisation of the Soviet leader can be regarded as the result of the chain of signification articulated by the populist discourse on national identity, the nodal point of which is Orthodox Christianity. It should be noted that such fixation of signs is always temporary and hence the society can never be regarded as an objective totality, despite the discourses on the national identity constantly referring to it as such.

Methodology of Poststructuralist Research

Discourse theory shares ontological and epistemological grounds with poststructuralism. The latter takes as its starting point the understanding of language provided by Saussure’s structural linguistics. To be more exact, it agrees with structuralism in perceiving language as a kind of net, where meanings of the signs are acquired through differentiation from each other; the positioning of the sign in the net gives meaning to it. But in addition, poststructuralist scholars would argue that the structure itself is not stable but always open for new meanings (Jorgensen and Philips, 2010). In the same manner as language, social phenomena are never finished or total. Instead, DT suggests that this “opens up the way for constant struggles about definitions of society and identity” (ibid: 24). It means that the creation of meanings is a social process with constant struggle, negotiations and attempts to fix the signs in the structure of language. But as it was already mentioned above, discourse theory also argues that no total fixation is possible, hence the analysis should be

focused on the processes or attempts of achieving such a structure and on how some of the meanings come to be accepted as natural.

As it was elaborated in the theory part, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 105) defined discourse as “the structure of totality” which is the result of articulatory practices, or the process “of establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified.” The main focus of discourse theory as a research framework should be on how certain meanings are developed through the establishment of the relationship between the elements, and how certain elements are excluded. It is also important to look at what specific discourses the articulation process draws on and reproduces; and whether it tries to challenge and change an existing discourse or aims to transform it (Jorgensen and Philips, 2010).

In such context, identifying nodal points is what the analysis should start with. Orthodox Christianity is the master signifier in the case of the populist discourse and the chain of equivalence which is explored in texts is the following: Orthodox Christianity = Georgian = Stalin. Discourse not only constitutes the meaning, but at the same time it sets the limits of what can be said or produced. It is important to note that Orthodox Christianity is only a nodal point in case of one particular discourse, but it becomes a floating signifier or even an empty signifier when we are looking at the broader picture of competing discourses trying to invest different meanings in it.

In addition to the emphasis on the importance of the language, discourse theory follows poststructuralism in departing from Cartesian understanding of the subject and argues that one is not autonomous, but his or her identity is rather determined by his or her positioning in discourses. Such positioning is not only in one way, but it changes and gets altered from discourse to discourse. These multiple positionings might clash with each other when competing discourses try to organize around the same social space (Jorgensen and Philips, 2010). As a result, social antagonism arises. In the case explored in this paper, one can characterize the clash and competition between the inclusive and exclusive discourses over the meaning of Stalin as an example of such social antagonism. It can be overcome only with what the DT calls hegemonic intervention, but this

line of identity (re)production processes is not explored within the framework of this study.

To complement the methodological framework, this paper borrows the conceptualization of identity developed by Lene Hansen (2006) in her study of the war in the Balkans. Hansen conceptualizes identities as discursive, political, relational and social. The first two aspects signify that identities are not objective; identity cannot be found somewhere in an extra-discursive realm. The relational feature of identity means that it is always given through a reference to something else, something it is not. While social features of identity stem from it being articulated collectively, individual identity is being constituted within the collective. Identity and policy are understood to be linked through discourses, but not being in a causal relationship, “as representations of identity are simultaneously the precondition for and (re)produced through articulations of policy” (Hansen, 2006: 10). In other words, those actors who formulate foreign policy or are interested in altering the existing goals, try to present their claims as legitimate and natural.

As Hansen argues, the study of discourses on foreign policy “calls in addition for particular attention to the methodology of reading” (Hansen, 2006: 2). As she writes, all the texts that are constituting foreign policy debates, are organized around common themes, “around certain constructions of identity” and as a result, foreign policy debates are bounded together by a small number of discourses (Hansen, 2006). She suggests guidelines for identifying and selecting this small set of discourses, so-called “basic discourses,” which can provide a lens through which one can see the representations and policies as systematically connected, or key points around which the disagreements within the debates are structured. This research follows those methodological guidelines for identifying the basic discourses.

First of all, basic discourses are based on the reading of a larger number of texts. Secondly, according to Hansen, “basic discourses should be built on explicit articulation of key representations of identity, for example: “The Balkans” and “genocide”” (Hansen, 2006: 53). Within the framework of this particular research, what is looked at, for instance, is the articulation of Orthodox

Christianity as Georgian and its expression in the public discourse. She also argues that basic discourses should be drawn upon “available conceptual histories of the representations chosen” (ibid) and should be composed of Others and Selves being differently articulated as spatial, temporal or ethical constructions of identity. Hansen also claims that due to the fact that basic discourses articulate different Selves and Others, it is logical to expect that they will argue for different foreign policies. The final point Hansen makes in terms of tracing those discourses is that “it is likely that at least one discourse will be argued relatively quickly as an issue manifests itself on the foreign policy agenda, while the other basic discourse(s) will be argued in response to and in criticism of this position” (Hansen, 2006: 53-54). To translate it for the purposes of this study, the dominant discourse in Georgia in relation to identity is Orthodox Christianity = Georgian, and other discourses organize in response to it. What is important to note is that despite this research drawing on Hansen’s works on the relationship between foreign policy and identity, it does not engage with the former.

Another concept which is borrowed from Hansen’s methodological framework is intertextuality, meaning that “every individual text is always located within a shared textual space” (Hansen, 2006: 55). In other words, while the discourse analysis of the text is performed, it is important to look at how it is presented in “later re-readings” and how these two differ from each other. Such intertextual reading within the framework of discourse analysis helps to understand how discourses embedded within the official texts and representations are projected to the larger public and legitimized. This leads to the concept of interdiscursivity which “indicates that discourses are linked to each other in various ways” (Wodak, 2008: 3). Such interdiscursive reading, in addition to intertextuality, helps to identify how discourses on human rights, education etc. are, for example, interlinked with discourses on identity.

Finally, regarding data selection and sampling, as this research focuses on public discourse, it does not intend to uncover the true meanings or intentions behind statements or newspaper articles. It simply aims to illustrate the chain of equivalence and how it is expanded in the field of discursivity, giving meaning

to floating signifiers. Data, which were looked at, are part of a larger research project. These texts were selected from two widely-read populist newspapers, "Asaval-Dasavali" and "Saqartvelo da Msofllo." Four issues from each year, from 1991 to 2016 in case of the former, and from 2009 (the year it was first issued) to the year 2016, in case of the second newspaper, were selected. In addition, speeches and statements made by clergymen and politicians were analysed. It must be noted that for discourse analysis, texts should not be understood in the literal meaning. Instead, a discourse analyst should look at symbols, institutions, traditions etc. that represent the texts. But for this particular paper, only those texts were selected, which explicitly articulated the chain of significations of the populist discourse in relation to Stalin.

Christian Stalin

The Caucasus Barometer opinion survey results from 2012 illustrated an interesting trend. In response to the question what best described their attitude towards Stalin, 3% chose admiration, 27% - respect, and 15% - sympathy, which altogether makes 45% of the respondents' feelings rather positive towards Stalin. In comparison, in Armenia this number is 25% (3%, 16%, and 6% respectively) and in the case of Azerbaijan, only 21% feel rather positively towards Stalin. In contrast, in response to the question of whether Stalin was a cruel tyrant who was responsible for the death of millions, 53% of Georgians either completely or mostly agree, in comparison to 24% who disagree completely or mostly. The percentage of those who agree with that statement in Armenia and Azerbaijan was 69% and 68%, respectively (Caucasus Barometer, 2012). These figures are interesting, as in addition to those who do not see the Soviet leader either in a negative light or as a brutal dictator, there is about 8% of Georgian respondents who mostly agree that Stalin was a tyrant who is responsible for the death of millions, but still either respect him or have sympathy for him. The reason for such an odd picture is not to be sought in those respondents' admiration of murderers and brutal dictators, but instead it has its roots in the Georgian discourses on national identity. Stalin's ethnic background is the source of pride and egotism for what this paper labels

exclusive national identity narrative. As a contemporary Georgian philosopher nicely put it, Stalin's heavy Georgian accent when he spoke Russian was a source of the national pride. Once a Georgian living in the era of Stalin would put the radio on and hear the leader speaking Russian with a Caucasian accent, he or she would realize that the "father" of all the nations is of the same ethnic origin, which "gives such a power to the Georgian self-conscious, that any kind of humanitarian discussion of Stalin's crimes sounds ridiculous" (Maisuradze, 2011: 73). Stalin being a symbol of national pride is the reason that the destalinization processes which started immediately after his death in 1953 caused unrest and mass protests in Georgia. Events which shook the streets of Tbilisi in the spring of 1956 were not so much about defending the name of Stalin or his legacy, but rather it was an expression of Georgian nationalism. Khrushchev's famous speech at the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U. in February of 1956 where he denounced the cult of Stalin, was perceived by Georgian youth as an attack on their national pride. In the beginning of March of the same year, around the anniversary of Stalin's death and just a couple of days after the Congress, tens of thousands of students started protesting in the streets of Tbilisi, Gori, Kutaisi and other towns of Georgia. By the 9th of March, Soviet authorities were forced to use firearms to disperse the manifestations. The exact number of victims of the events, which are known in Georgian history as the tragedy of the 9th of March, 1956, is still unknown. Historians estimate it to be somewhere between 100 and 800. Ironically, the processes which escalated in defence of the person who was responsible for the occupation of the first republic of Georgia by the USSR, became the source of the birth of the new wave of Georgian nationalism. The offspring of the tragedy of the 9th of March was the very first underground organisation which started propagating for the independence and national self-determination of Georgia (Abdaladze et al., 2008: 184-185).

While looking at national pride as the source of admiration towards Stalin among Georgians sheds some light on the phenomenon, it does not fully explain, if it does at all, the paradox which was the starting point of this research i.e. the image of Christian Stalin. In the year 2013 Ilia II, patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), within the framework of his visit to Russia, where he

personally met with his Russian counterpart and President Vladimir Putin, gave an interview to the journal *Caucasus Politics*. In his interview, he praised Stalin, calling him a prominent figure who was aware of Russia's importance to the world. He also claimed that he thought Stalin was a believer, especially in his later years. In the same interview, the head of the GOC claimed that Stalin, as a former student of the seminary himself, did a lot for the development of the religious education in the Soviet Union. In addition, the Patriarch stated that he was crying after he heard the news of Stalin's death (Netgazeti, 2013).

In the summer of 2010, the last standing monument of Stalin in public space was removed from the main square of Gori. As it was mentioned in the introduction, the hometown of the Soviet leader still cherishes his name and in some cases even violates state legislation. To be more precise, it acts in direct violation of the Liberty Charter, which sets as its goal the eradication of the street names, monuments and symbols in any way representing the totalitarian regime. In addition to street names, the museum dedicated to him and other traditional ways of honouring the name of Stalin, his image is actively used for tourist purposes. In the autumn of 2017, news appeared that a new café is supposed to open in Gori soon called "Joseph" and it will be decorated with Stalin's portraits (Information Centre of Inner Kartli, 2017). An interesting detail which should be mentioned here is that Stalin in this sense is an empty signifier. It is a sign with no meaning in itself, but is actually the subject of competition between discourses on national identity trying to define it. This is what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call social antagonism i.e. conflict which arises as the result of a subject's identity being defined at the same time by mutually exclusive discourses. The events unfolding in Gori are a good example of such phenomenon. In 2017, an attempt was made by the members of Gori city council to name the square where Stalin's monument used to stand, the square of Europe, but the attempt failed. The official reason for the rejection was that such a decision required further engagement with citizens, while some suspect that it actually speaks of the special status of Stalin in Gori. What is interesting for this particular study is how Europe is constructed as something opposite of Stalin. For example, Radio Liberty titled the news piece covering the developments as "Gori Will Not Have the Square of Europe – the Joy of

Stalinists” (Aptsiarui, 2017). This is how the liberal or what is labelled here as an inclusive national identity discourse, would expand its chain of significations in the field of discursivity and try to fix the meaning of Stalin as someone uncivilized, a stranger to Europe and hence to Georgian national identity as well, as this discourse is centred around the nodal point of Europeaness.

In contrast, the exclusive discourse on national identity which articulates its chain of significations around Orthodox Christianity as the nodal point, invests Stalin with a different meaning. Turning back to the summer of 2010, when the monument of Stalin was taken down, newspaper “საქართველო და მსოფლიო” (Georgia and the World) published a long opinion piece entitled “The Country of Slaves” (Berdzenishvili, 2010). Since the publication touches upon key elements of the discourse, some parts should be cited at length. Firstly, the author claims that the removal of the statue is the biggest act of vandalism the world has ever seen:

“In addition, every bastard and bitch, call a “bloodsucking tyrant” the person, who because he was following the way of Christ, was recognized as a saint by the Orthodox Church” (Berdzenishvili, 2010: 13).

Then opinion piece goes on to argue how Stalin saved Georgia from extinction, and how the Soviet Union eradicated unemployment, provided free housing, healthcare, education etc. The author also engages in reproducing the image of Stalin taking care of Georgian territories by claiming that “the truth is Stalin united with Georgia Abkhazian SSR as SS Autonomy in 1931 ... if America had not exploded an atomic bomb in 1945, Stalin was ready to return back to Georgia territories conquered by Turkey” (ibid).

There are two basic themes in this article which are important to highlight within the framework of this study. Firstly, the image of an Orthodox Christian Stalin, who was a true believer and was recognized so by the Church. And secondly, he is portrayed as a true patriot who cared about Georgia. As a combination of those two strands of thought, Orthodox Christianity and the notion of being Georgian form a chain of signification which fixes the meaning of Stalin in relation to other possible meanings he could have, such as dictator, tyrant, enemy of Georgia etc.

Finally, Christian Stalin is the offspring of the discourses articulated from 1990s. The reason for this is very simple, as only after the breakup of the Soviet Union did Orthodox Christianity become the master signifier for the populist discourse on national identity. With the disappearance of the communist ideology, the traditional meaning of Stalin was lost, and the chain of equivalence with Orthodox Christianity as the nodal point expanded in the field of discursivity and tried to invest new meaning in Stalin. Hence, it is necessary to further explore how the chain of Orthodox Christian equals Georgian is articulated and the idea of Christian Stalin is reproduced.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, an ideological vacuum occurred, which emerging Georgian state institutions were not able to fill. To be more exact, since the declaration of independence in 1991, Georgia has gone through armed conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a so-called Tbilisi civil war which ousted the first president, three assassination attempts on the second president Shevardnadze, and the rose revolution in 2003, all the while battling with corruption and the collapse of basic state institutions. In this period, which is known in Georgian popular culture as the dark 90s, the only institution which remained intact, and in fact, even managed to get stronger, was the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Due to historical circumstances, Christianity has always played a major role in the Georgian national consciousness as a marker of identity. Surrounded by Muslim empires and involved in a constant struggle for survival, religious faith was a major constitutive factor of what it meant to be a Georgian. Therefore, it is not surprising that with the economic and social breakdown which followed the collapse of the USSR, the role of religion re-emerged again, and it gained new significance. This trend can be observed in surveys by the Caucasus Barometer (2015), according to which, from 2008 to 2015, trust in religious institutions in Georgia was never lower than 80%, whereas in contrast, trust in the parliament for instance, fell from 35% in 2008 down to 16% in 2015, trust in the president decreased from 52 to 33% within the same timeframe, while trust in political parties in 2015 was as low as 8%. Translating these numbers into the national identity discourse, research on collective memory and identity

among Georgians (Gugishvili et al, 2015) has revealed that while it is very important to speak fluent Georgian or to be born in Georgia to be considered Georgian, the most important thing, according to the participants' responses, is to be Christian. About 44.2% think of religion as the most important marker of identity, in contrast to 33.4% for language, 23.4% for citizenship or 19.3% for being born in Georgia. This link or, in the discourse theory terms, the chain of equivalence can be widely observed in the contemporary populist discourse. One of the recent studies conducted by the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre (Ghvinianidze and Barqaia, 2014) illustrated that among school teachers there is a widely-held belief that being Georgian and being Orthodox Christian are identical, equal concepts. One of the teachers who participated in the study claimed that while a Georgian was fighting for his/her own country, he or she was protecting Christianity. According to another, it is unacceptable for a Georgian to be a Jehovah Witness. This belief is so deeply embedded in discourses that, for instance, in July of 2017, at the opening ceremony of a hotel in the village where the current patriarch of the GOC was born, the prime minister was quoted to have called the GOC and the Georgian state "interwoven" and "secularism in its classical sense" misplaced in Georgia. In addition, he claimed that the relationship between the Church and the state currently present in Georgia is a "unique model" (Civil Georgia, 2017).

In addition to the origin of the formula, Georgian equals an Orthodox Christian, the origin of the phenomenon of Christian Stalin must be explored as well. What is important to note here is that the roots of the image are not solely Georgian, but go deep into the Russian religious discourse as well. But it acquires a different level in the former case, as it is interlinked with the national identity discourse. Briefly discussing the origin of the myth of the Soviet leader believing in God might shed some light as to why such an idea managed to gain roots in some of the Orthodox Christian Churches. This image started to take its shape during the Second World War. To be more precise, as Hitler's army was marching deeper into the territory of the Soviet Union, the communist propaganda machine started reproducing a more nationalist discourse in order to increase patriotic sentiments and support among the population. References to patriotic feelings were actively employed. World War II became the Great

Patriotic War in Soviet Russia to associate it with the tsarist-era Patriotic War against Napoleon. Movies and novels started to appear based on the lives of the historical heroes, battles and events. In the year 1943, Politburo decided to edit the national anthem of the USSR and replace the word “international” with Russia. The new anthem verses were:

“An indestructible union of free republics
was bound together by Great Russ!”

Invoking nationalist sentiments required references to be made to Orthodox Christianity, as well as the abandonment of the war on religion. Stalin went as far as restoring the Russian patriarch which had been abolished since the tsarist era. Churches were allowed to start functioning again, and priests were encouraged to perform prayers for the USSR. The Metropolitan of Moscow of that time is quoted to have called Stalin “our common father” (Sixsmith, 2011: 345).

There are two interesting legends which were born only in the beginning of the 1990s, but which actively contribute to the reproduction of the myth. One of them also became an inspiration for a controversial icon placed in the church of Saint Nikolas in Moscow. It was condemned by the officials from the Moscow Patriarchate and was quickly removed, but the story depicted on the icon is still reproduced as true fact in some of the discourses (Achmatova, 2010). The icon depicted Stalin meeting Matrona of Moscow, a saint living in his era. According to the legend, while Germans were advancing towards Moscow, Stalin payed a visit to Matrona. The blind saint predicted the victory over Nazism, as long as Stalin would remain in Moscow. The Soviet leader indeed stayed in the capital and the USSR won the war, but there is no historical evidence of such a meeting ever taking place.

Second, a similar story argues that in 1941, while Metropolitan Ilya of the Antioch was praying to God, the Virgin Mary appeared to him and instructed him to tell to Russians that they should carry the Icon of the Mother of God of

Kazan in Stalingrad, as well as in Moscow and Leningrad. In the battle of Stalingrad, the icon was present and the victory was attributed to it. The legend has it that the Virgin Mary was also present on the side of Soviets in the attack on Königsberg in 1944 and that German soldiers saw the image of her in the sky while their weapons would not fire (Orthodoxy.ge, n.d.). This legend is so strongly embedded in the clerical discourse of the Georgian Orthodox Church that references to it come up even in 2017. The most recent example being in November of the same year, as a minor incident took place in Georgia. Namely, one of the high clergymen came under fire from some members of society as he was accused of using a border police helicopter to fly over some towns in Eastern Georgia and blessing the region. In his defence, metropolitan Sergi responded: “Our eparchy and borders of Georgia are blessed and flown over by icons sometimes ... During the war, in the same manner, icons were taken around Moscow and the enemy could not enter” (Tabula, 2017).

In 2015, one of Georgian priests, father Ioane Chigogidze, filmed a documentary about Stalin, titled “Who Won the War” (Tskhoidze, 2015). In the movie, it is argued that the breakout of the war between Germany and the USSR was a punishment from God for their struggle against the Christian faith. But later on, father Ioane suggests that the icon of Virgin Mary was leading the Soviet army in the battles against the Nazi Germany (ibid). Coming back to interdiscursivity and intertextuality, which are the vital concepts of discourse analysis, this movie serves as an example of those, as it refers to the legend already mentioned above about Metropolitan Ilya and his vision. It goes even further, by claiming that after the news of the vision reached Stalin, he asked Metropolitan Sergi if the Church was in need of anything else, to which he got the response that there was a lack of qualified clergymen.

Sputnik-Georgia quotes father Ioane from the movie, where he argues that “after the war, Stalin, as promised, built 22,000 churches and monasteries. Clerical seminaries and academies were opened in the country. An age of the raising of faith began in the Soviet Union because all the prophecies came true and Stalin kept his promises” (ibid).

The key strength of discourse theory in explaining this paradox lies in the understanding of identity as something that is never fully fixed, but in a constant flux. It is always constituted and renegotiated according to the circumstances. Hence, despite the national identity discourse which uses Orthodox Christianity as its nodal point clearly being the product of the post-USSR epoch, it redefines and reproduces the image of Stalin by investing meaning through the expansion of the chain of signification. It excludes all the other meanings this sign could have and tries to fix it within the discourse. Looking from this perspective, the fact that about 41% of Georgian respondents thought that Stalin believed in God, in contrast to 22.6% who said the opposite (Gugishvili et al, 2015), does not seem so paradoxical anymore. Especially if one takes into consideration that the 77% of them mentioned Georgian as his nationality (ibid). These figures show that there is a strong connection between Stalin's ethnic background and his alleged religious faith. The empirical part of this research revealed how such image is produced and maintained by populist discourse on national identity.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the paradox which can be observed in contemporary Georgia. Despite historical evidence of damage and suffering religious institutions experienced under Stalin's rule (Gelava, 2016), and the fact that he was largely responsible for the invasion and occupation of the Republic of Georgia by Soviet Russia in 1918 (Khundadze, 2017), he remains a popular figure for what this paper labelled as the populist discourse on national identity. As it was illustrated above, he is often represented as a deeply religious man, who took care of the Church and clerical education, restored the Russian patriarchate etc.

Looking at these developments from a discourse theory perspective, the idea of Christian Stalin seems less paradoxical. Theoretical and methodological tools offered by this school of thought help to shed some light on how such discourse came into existence. To be more precise, one of the key characteristics of the populist discourse is its reproduction of the exclusive idea of national identity. In other words, the main identity markers for distinguishing someone as Georgian

is their religious and ethnic belonging, which is represented through the formula Georgian = Orthodox Christian. This is what discourse theory considers to be the chain of significations, which organizes around the nodal point of Orthodox Christianity. Stalin, who in this context is a sign floating in the field of discursivity (i.e. any possible meaning it could have) by this chain of equivalence acquires the identity of being a Christian since he is also Georgian, and it cannot be otherwise. Methodological tools, such as intertextuality and interdiscursivity, further helped the research to illustrate how these images are interlinked and reproduced in various texts.

Lastly, it is important to note, such an image of Stalin is purely the product of the post-Soviet era. The identity/meaning of Stalin varies from discourse to discourse and changes according to the circumstances, as history can be perceived only through contemporary gaze. The Soviet leader is Georgian and a believer according to the populist identity discourse, while at the same time, he is invested with the meaning of bloody tyrant, dictator etc. by other discourses. But alternative chains of significations were not covered within the framework of this particular paper.

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