

## THE STALIN PUZZLE: DECIPHERING POST-SOVIET PUBLIC OPINION

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Joseph Stalin is not yet dead, it would seem. The Soviet leader who was responsible for the deaths of millions over his thirty-year rule still commands worryingly high levels of admiration for a host of reasons. These findings are clear in the first-ever comparative opinion polls on the dictator in the post-Soviet countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia. The surveys, commissioned by the Carnegie Endowment in 2012, suggest de-Stalinization has not succeeded in the former Soviet Union and most post-Soviet citizens have not come to grips with their history.

### Poll Findings

- In Russia, support for Stalin has actually increased since the end of the Soviet Union.
- There is a correlation between Stalin's rehabilitation in Russia and the presidency of Vladimir Putin.
- There is a growing level of indifference toward Stalin, especially among young people. This is especially apparent in Azerbaijan, where 39 percent of young respondents do not even know who Stalin is.
- Georgians display alarmingly high levels of admiration for Stalin—45 percent of them express a positive attitude toward the former Soviet leader.
- The polls are symptomatic of a case of “doublethink.” Respondents say that Stalin was both a “cruel tyrant” and a “wise leader.”

### Analyzing the Results

**Post-Soviet citizens are confused.** The poll results are more an illustration of feelings of dependency and confusion than genuine support for a dictatorial government. Russians in particular lack alternative historical models.

**Stalin is still identified strongly with victory in World War II.** The memory of the defeat of Nazi Germany remains very strong in all four countries polled, especially among older citizens. Stalin is still admired as a wartime leader—even as the same people reject his acts of repression.

**De-Stalinization in Russia has been half-hearted.** There have been two-and-a-half attempts to engage the public in a debate on Stalin's crimes, but only one of them, begun under Mikhail Gorbachev, had some success. Putin's Kremlin has found the image of Stalin useful in his effort to solidify his authority.

**A new generation thinks differently.** Many Russian urbanites are de-Sovietized, more self-sufficient, and more critical of Russian history. Stalin is losing his power to attract or repel this segment of society.

**De-Stalinization in Georgia has not run deep.** The anti-Soviet and anti-Stalin campaigns launched by the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili were conspicuous but superficial, and underlying opinions of the leader remain favorable. However, for Georgians, Stalin is much more a national icon than a political model.

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