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Russian Monuments to Stalin Highlight Controversy Over His Legacy

By Anna Dolgov

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Former Soviet leader Josef Stalin

Two monuments to Josef Stalin were unveiled in separate Russian regions in one day this week in a face-off that marks a deepening rift within the nation about the Soviet dictator's legacy.

The Communist Party branch in Penza — the capital of the eponymous central Russian region — on Wednesday moved a bust of Stalin from its headquarters to the city's center, despite protests from hundreds of residents, Russian media reports said.

"The monument to Stalin in Penza is not only an insult to the memory [of Stalin's victims], but is also the effective justification of a totalitarian regime," a local activist said in a protest petition on the Change.org website.

The petition had gathered more than 600 signatures on Thursday, a day after the bust was

unveiled.

The activist said more than 26,000 residents of Penza had been victims of Stalin's political repression, according to archives in the local branch of the Federal Security Service, or FSB.

Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the liberal opposition party Yabloko, has called on prosecutors to investigate the "unauthorized installation of the monument to Stalin," the party said Wednesday in an online statement.

The appeal cited both legal technicalities — such as a requirement to receive approval from the city's administration — and ethical concerns.

"Today, the Communists decided to exalt Stalin, but if tomorrow they decide to erect busts of Pol Pot, [Jean-Bedel] Bokassa or [Adolf] Hitler, would prosecutors remain passive as well?" Mitrokhin said in the statement. "From the point of view of history, all of these dictators are criminals."

A spokeswoman for the Penza city administration, Darya Samarina, said the monument was placed on privately owned land, and its installation did not appear to have violated any laws, state-run TASS news agency reported Wednesday.

The Communist Party in the republic of Marii-El in an online statement also announced the unveiling on Wednesday of a statue to Stalin in the village of Shelanger at the entrance to a meat factory — in what some Russians who describe Stalin as a butcher could consider a symbolic location.

At 2.7 meters high, it could be the first monument to Stalin of such scale to appear in post-Soviet Russia, the party said in its statement, calling the monument a "tribute to a great man" whose "name has been unjustly forgotten for 60 years."

At a time when many Russians bemoan what they see as their country's loss of its Soviet-era greatness, more than half of Russians view Stalin positively, according to a Levada Center poll conducted last December.

The Marii-El Communist Party branch in its statement reported "a growing interest in Stalin, as Russia is going through tough times due to a decline in industrial production and the sanctions imposed by Western countries," and suggested that Russia could benefit from a return to Stalinist practices.

There have been numerous calls praising the dictator's supposed achievements and requesting the building of monuments and museums in Stalin's honor.

Communist activists have erected busts of Stalin in the North Ossetia and Sakha republics, the city of Lipetsk and several other locations, the Marii-El Communist Party said in its statement.

In Tver, another central Russian region, a museum has been opened in honor of Stalin's political and military achievements in a house where the dictator spent one night in 1943, local news portal TverNews.ru reported.

The calls praising Stalin have been met with equally impassioned responses from opponents who denounce him as a mass murderer who sent tens of millions of people to perish in the gulags.

The statue of Stalin in Lipetsk was doused with pink paint on the eve of its planned unveiling and continued public outcry prompted prosecutors to have the bust removed.

Leading human rights group Memorial has denounced any monuments to Stalin as "blasphemous," adding: "Stalin's crimes have no analogues in our nation's history," according to a statement quoted by the Interfax news agency this spring.

A Russian Orthodox Church leader, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, in April urged fans of the dictator to "sober up" by visiting the mass graves of political dissidents executed under Stalin's regime.

Human rights activists and liberal thinkers also held a "tribunal" against Stalin this month to discuss the role of the dictator, who ruled the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953.

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