

On the Issue of the Caucasian Union in the 1920s-1930s

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Abstract

The paper analyses the futile attempts of the political elites of the independent Caucasus states created at the end of the First World War (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus) to create the united Caucasus during their presence in power and then in political emigration in the 1920s and 1930s, and also the attitude of influential European politicians towards this matter. The merits of the 'main dreamers' fighting for the integrity of the Caucasus – Akaki Chkhenkeli, Ali Mardan Bek Topchibashev, and Haidar Bamatov (Bamat) – have been outlined. The article discusses the factors that created fertile ground for the existence of their dream, on the one hand, and examines the real circumstances and objective reasons that hindered the realization of the ideas and actions of the historical figures working in the period under the lens. The work emphasises that, despite separate impediments (especially disagreement over boundaries and the annexationist policy of Turkey and Russia), the idea of Caucasian unity in the 1920s was based on the solid background created by the three main cultures that coexisted harmoniously over the centuries: 1. Religion - Judaism, Christianity, Islam; 2. Caucasian rule of thinking and 3. Caucasian mentality. Based on the research, we conclude that the happy future of the Caucasian people is linked to the unity of the Caucasus as it was in the case of the European Union.

Keywords: *Caucasian Union, Caucasus elite, Caucasian mentality, Caucasian people*

Introduction

Although the Caucasus Confederation failed, the issue does not lose its actuality, given that, based on critical analysis of their own subjective mistakes or objective circumstances, the Caucasian political elite of the 1920-30s realized within a few years the difficulty of the existence of independent Caucasian states and close cooperation without a joint response to the external threats, and formally stated the need to form a confederation after the restoration of independence by the Caucasian states. This should be a lesson for the current political elite of the Caucasus countries. The situation created after the collapse of the Soviet Union seems to resemble the events going on a century ago. The political reality created in the South Caucasus

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today is a reminiscence of the situation of the previous century and is distinguished by the abundance of historical parallels.

In the preface to Firuz Kazemzade's famous study 'The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921', Mikhail Karpovich, a Harvard University Professor born in Tbilisi and the founder of Russian studies in the United States, stressed in 1950 the importance of the aforementioned book, while expressing his hope that Transcaucasia would once again become an important scene of international life and that knowledge of history lessons would allow us to avoid the pitfalls, should the complexity of events in the Caucasus in the 1920s still be a problem. "This equally refers to the nations living in the region, which in the future will have to build the relations with each other, as well as to foreign states that will try to influence these processes," added the historian (2016: 15-16). That is why understanding the past, in the modern geopolitical context, has special political significance along with pure cognition. Russia is still trying to regain influence over the former Soviet republics and the countries of the socialist camp.

Discussion

As a result of the conquests and the wars between Iran and the Ottoman Empire from the beginning of the 19th century, the whole Caucasus was united under the Russian throne, which existed within the empire in the form of different administrative units at different times until 1917. The bourgeois revolution in February 1917 and the subsequent October coup led to substantial changes in the organization of the Caucasus. In fact, the process of its separation from the centre began despite the subjective aspirations of the public strata of this side and the influential political parties, which mainly supported the idea of Russian unity and patiently awaited the Constituent Assembly. After the recall of the Constituent Assembly by the Bolsheviks in January 1918, the attitude of the latter towards the issue changed, and the process of secession of the Caucasus from Russia took, in fact, an irreversible look. At the same time, this process was greatly influenced by the states involved in the First World War. If the countries of the Triple Entente considered the Caucasus as part of the "Russian issue" and regarded the assistance of the *de facto* Transcaucasian government as a temporary event before the defeat of the Bolsheviks in Russia, the Central Powers facilitated the secession of the Caucasus from Russia. The latter, relying on Lenin's principle of the right of nations to self-determination, sought to thwart his demand for annexed peace and to make the territorial concessions too necessary for them by establishing new

independent states from the Baltic to the Black Sea and establishing their protectorate (Gotsiridze 2009: 157).

For this purpose, on January 3 (16) 1918, along with other peoples of the former Russian Empire, the Central Bloc invited the representatives of the Transcaucasus for separate talks with Russia to participate in the Brest-Litovsky Conference: "The delegates of the interim states gathered in Brest-Litovsk are ready to do everything possible to recognize the independence of the Transcaucasian government, which, confident of complete success, can send its proxy delegates to Brest-Litovsk" is the content of a telegram sent to Tbilisi (Dokumenti I Materiali, 1919: 52).

Unfortunately, the Transcaucasian Commissariat, the *de facto* governing body of the South Caucasus, still obsessed with the idea of a united Russia, did not accept an invitation. The head of the government, E. Gegechkori, sent the following telegram to Brest: "Since the Caucasus is part of Russia, the issue of the armistice is up to Russia's competence" (Gotsiridze 2009: 158). In such a situation, Article IV of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty was adopted, according to which Ardagan, Kars and Batumi districts in the Caucasus should be immediately freed of Russian troops, Russia should not interfere in the new state-legal organization of these districts and their population should be given a right to establish a new agreement with new states, especially with Turkey (Dokumenti Vneshnei, 1957: 121).

Despite protests by the Transcaucasian Commissariat against territorial losses, the Ottoman government demanded that the Transcaucasian Commissariat recognize the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and formally separate the South Caucasus from Russia, which it achieved through military and diplomatic struggle. As a result of military operations, new territories of the South Caucasus were conquered in parallel with the negotiations with the Transcaucasian delegation in Trabzon in March-April 1918. Due to the advance of the Ottoman troops in the depths of the Caucasus, the Transcaucasian Seim, composed of deputies elected to the Constituent Assembly from the Caucasus, decided on April 9 (22) 1918 to establish an independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federal Republic.

In making this decision, the perception of the situation created by the "imperialist South and the anarchist North" in the Transcaucasus was crucial for most members of the Transcaucasian Sejm (Dokumenti I Materiali, 1919: 228). N. Jordania, the leader of the Georgian Social Democrats, stated at the meeting of the Seimas: "Given that we have been abandoned, Russia, which has been protecting us here for 100 years and establishing order in one way or another, abruptly refused to go on so, thus relinquishing its own orientation, and thus instructing us to stand on our

own two feet and defend ourselves, when there is a choice – Russia or Turkey, we choose Russia, but when there is a choice – Turkey or an independent Transcaucasia, we choose an independent Transcaucasia” (Zakavkazski Seim, 1918: 20).

The Transcaucasian Federation, unfortunately, existed for a total of 33 days. Its disintegration was due to external factors that led to its creation in its time. The Ottomans were not satisfied with the Declaration of Independence of Transcaucasia, nor with the recognition of the Brest Treaty, and demanded new territories. Against the background of the aggression from the south and the new territorial conquests, it became difficult to maintain a balance between the interests of Georgians, Azerbaijanians and Armenians in the Transcaucasian Federation. There were heterogeneous, often mutually exclusive, views on the issues of war and truce among the peoples of the Caucasus. During the ongoing negotiations with the Ottomans in Trabzon and Batumi, the head of the Transcaucasian delegation and later the Chairman of the Government of the Transcaucasian Federation, Foreign Minister Akaki Chkhenskeli, wrote about this: “When one article of our demands was in favour of one nation, at the same time it abased the interests of another and it was against the interests of a third, etc.” (Materiali po Istorii, 1931: 48-49). The Azerbaijanian delegates to the Seim loudly declared: “If you do not meet the demands of the Turks, war is inevitable ... Muslims will not take part in this war.” (55)

In fact, the advance of the Ottoman troops into the depths of the Caucasus, their transcendental demands and claims, the Turkish orientation of Azerbaijan formed due to the created situation undermined the unity of the Transcaucasian Federation and made its disintegration inevitable in order for the nations of the Caucasus to be able to physically survive independently of each other.

On the day of the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Seim (May 26, 1918), the Democratic Republic of Georgia was proclaimed, and in the following days, the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan (the North Caucasus Mountain Republic had already existed since May 11). Based on the agreement signed with Germany, Georgia was declared its protectorate and ensured the protection of the borders of the Georgian state from the Ottoman invasion. Georgia and Armenia were forced to cede territories to the Ottomans in exchange for peace in the June 4, 1918 agreement. At that point, only the Azerbaijanians took advantage of the alliance with the Ottomans and began a successful struggle for the liberation of Baku, which had been occupied by the Bolsheviks.

Even at a time when, for a number of objective and subjective reasons, the issue of disintegration of the Transcaucasian Federal Democratic Republic and the establishment of independent Caucasian states in its place was on the agenda, the Georgian political elite was well aware of the importance of integrity among the peoples of the Caucasus in strengthening Georgia's state independence. At the historic meeting of the National Council on May 26, 1918, the speech of the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Georgia, Noe Jordania, was imbued with hope and desire for the formation of the Caucasus Confederation in the future. Speaking about the representatives of national minorities living in the territory of Georgia, he hoped that

these peoples, united under a common flag, would establish ties with the peoples living without the borders with Georgia and thus will revive the state union, which will restore the state disintegrated in their eyes. This state would be the Confederate Union of the Caucasus. The way and ideal of Georgia was directed towards making such a connection. This union would be the state organism - the union of states - which would gather the common forces around itself, would meet the external enemy and protect itself from it (Damoukidebeli Sakartvelo 1927: N17).

At the level of declarations, practically all political forces supported the idea of a united Caucasus. Even Musavat of Azerbaijan, who in 1918 "had the main responsibility for the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Federation", realized after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1919 that "the country could not cope with the stormy events alone" and that "only the united front of the peoples of the Transcaucasia could guarantee the territorial integrity of the three republics" (Kezimzade 2016: 275).

Well-known Azerbaijanian political figures, such as Ali Maardan Beg Topchibashev, Mehmet Emin Rasulzadeh and others, were very active in this case. At the second congress of the Musavat party, it was decided that Azerbaijan would address Georgia and Armenia to establish a free union of the Caucasian people. The events going on in the North Caucasus, in particular Denikin's attempt to consolidate power in the Republic of the Highlands, and the latter's address for assistance to the Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities accelerated: on the one hand, the holding of the Caucasus Conference in April-May 1919, which the delegates from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Republic of the Highlands attended, and, on the other hand, the signing of a defense military agreement between Georgia and Azerbaijan on June 16, 1919. The Armenians did not join this agreement.

Unfortunately, the ruling political elites of the South Caucasus countries were not able to overcome the difficulties faced by their states, manifested primarily in border disputes and conflicts. If the border problem between Georgia and Azerbaijan was resolved to some extent, we cannot say the same about Armenia's relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan. On October 27, 1918, the Georgian authorities invited representatives of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the mountain republics of the North Caucasus to a conference in Tbilisi to resolve the problems existing in the very first months of the restoration of statehood and to work out a common position at the Paris Peace Conference.

Prior to the conference, Armenia requested to resolve the border issue with Georgia at the bilateral conference, which led to the postponement of the All-Caucasian Conference several times. Finally, it was held without the participation of Armenia; however, the absence of the Armenian delegation at the conference cast a shadow over the common Caucasian idea. The enemies of Transcaucasian independence, through the tense relations between the Caucasian states, captured excellent material to prove that, under the leadership of the Dashnaks, Mensheviks, and Musavats, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan had no ability to provide peaceful life for their peoples. The wars between Armenia and Georgia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan greatly damaged the independence of the Transcaucasian republics.

Consequently, although the idea of unification as a confederation existed among the peoples of the Caucasus, it was outweighed by the animosity between them. Even the powerful Western states did not have a solid approach to the Caucasus. Initially, they linked the Caucasus problem to the resolution of the "Russian issue" and considered it an integral part of democratic Russia. After the eventual defeat of the Volunteer Army by the Bolsheviks, they even began to think of supporting the Transcaucasian republics as a barrier to Soviet Russian expansion, but it was too late. Such attitudes of the Western states towards the Caucasian region and the inability of the Caucasian states to resolve their own conflicts and cooperate against foreign aggressors made them easy prey for Soviet Russia. Some European leaders have even openly stated that peace in the Caucasus and normal relations between its nations are impossible and that this role should be assumed by some great state. Unfortunately, this role was taken over by Bolshevik Russia. The latter invaded the Mountainous Republic in March 1920, Azerbaijan – in April, Armenia – in November, and Georgia – in February-March 1921, stripping them of their right to exist independently, uniting them into the Transcaucasian Federation, and subjecting them to

Kremlin's sole dictatorship. The ruling political elite of the Caucasus, emigrated to European countries, critically understood the mistakes, and began to take practical steps to form the Caucasus Confederation.

Upon their arrival abroad, the political elite of the Caucasus states immediately saw the need to work and coordinate with each other, as well as with foreign states, political parties, public movements, and individuals. The famous Georgian politician Giorgi Gvazava wrote: "Russia conquered the Caucasus twice in a century, and this will always be the case until the nations of the Caucasus rise to the realisation that only the whole Caucasus can solve the way to Russian imperialism." (1926) The first step of the Caucasian political elite in the process of creating Caucasian unity in emigration was a meeting held on April 19, 1921 in the cabinet of Akaki Chkhenkeli with representatives of Georgia, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus to discuss the establishment of a union between the four republics (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Mountainous Republic). Its basis should have been producing unified custom, military and foreign policy, an orientation towards itself, which precluded Russian or Ottoman domination in the Caucasus (GNA, 1831. Rev. 2, Case 280).

Even larger was the meeting of Caucasian emigrants held in Paris on May 8, 1921, in the work of which representatives of Armenia also took part. At the meeting, they outlined ways to overthrow the Bolshevik regime in the Caucasus, create a common Caucasian bloc and present the role of the Caucasus to the world community (Chumburidze 2018: 312-313).

Representatives of the Caucasus thought that their common history, kinship of habitats, ethnic mix, and the need for empowerment to protect themselves from a powerful Russian neighbor justified the organizational formulation of Caucasian unity (Coppeaux 1993: 16).

An important event on the way to the Caucasus Confederation was the 10-point Declaration on Political, Military and Economic Union of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus Mountains, issued in Paris on June 10, 1921. The Declaration expressed the desire of the signatories to work together to achieve the independence, democratic governance and economic prosperity of the peoples of the Caucasus. This also included disputes among them, especially because of border arbitration intended to establish the unity and consensus of the Caucasian states in the field of foreign policy or to enforce a unified military-defense, customs and transit system, envisioned to strengthen trade and industrial ties with foreign states and foreign capitals for the exploitation of the natural resources of the Caucasus. Their foreign policy priority was to establish friendly and good-neighborly relations with Russia, Turkey and Iran based

on the recognition of their territorial integrity and full independence by other states. The Declaration critically assessed the occupation of the Caucasus by the Russian and Turkish armed forces in 1919-1921 and called for the withdrawal of these forces from the country. At the same time, the Declaration considered illegal all agreements that were not based on the freely expressed will of the peoples of the Caucasus republics (Declaration 1921: N2).

They even more resolutely recognized the economic and political integrity of the Caucasus in the Second Declaration, adopted in September 1924. In November, a decision was made to give the Union of Caucasian Nations the legal form of a confederation in the future. They also undertook to draft the Constitution of the Confederation or its main provisions. At that stage, the Armenian representatives did not join this decision.

This way, the structure gradually increased. The Central Body of the Union of the Caucasus Republics, the Council of the Union and the Unified Information Bureau were established. The first included the heads of the delegations of the Caucasus countries, and the second, by the decision of the Council of Representatives of the Caucasus Republics of July 20, 1921, was composed of one representative from each of the republics and missions (Protokol Sobrania, 1921).

Representatives of the political elite of the Caucasus paid great attention to the issues of relations with foreigners, met with the heads of government of European countries, ministers, leaders of various political parties, individually and collectively propagandized in favor of the Union of the Caucasian Republics in the political, parliamentary and commercial circles of European countries. Powerful world powers viewed the Caucasus as a whole and pushed Caucasian leaders here (Protokol Sobrania, 1921).

The Prometheus chained to the Caucasus Mountains became the symbol of the "Promethean Movement" introduced by Parisian political immigrants in Paris in the mid-1920s. In 1926, it received the name of the Prometheus League of Peoples Oppressed by Russia, in which, in addition to the representatives of the Caucasus, the representatives of Cossacks of Dnipropetrovsk Ukraine, Don and Kuban Cossacks, Crimean and Volga Tatars, Turkestan of three small nations of Ugric-Finnish origin of Northern Russia entered.

The activation of the Promethean movement is connected with the name of the famous Polish political figure, Marshal Jozef Pilsudski. He was well aware of the need to consolidate the struggle of non-Russian peoples in order to create independent states and then save them. That is why, both in the Prometheus movement in general and in the unification of Caucasian

emigrants in particular, and in the establishment of a harmonious relationship between them, the Polish government invested great resources, which greatly influenced this movement.

Prometheus political movement began to form organizational structures in 1926 with the Independent Caucasus Committee and issued its own magazine, *Prometheus*, and two years later, the political club of the same name. In 1930, the Prometheus Movement Headquarters were established in Warsaw with branches in France, Turkey, Finland and China.

The highest achievement of the Promethean League was the finalization of the events leading up to the formation of the Confederation of Caucasian Nations, which was facilitated by the great discontent of the population in the Soviet Caucasus, conditioned by rural collectivization, total industrialization, oppression of intellectuals, the complete lack of free speech and democracy.

In July 1934, a conference of Caucasian emigrants was held in Warsaw, where the Pact of the Caucasus Confederation was signed. Here is one noteworthy fact to consider. Because of the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Poland in 1932, which did not allow hostile forces to operate on their territories, Brussels was indicated as a place of the Caucasus Confederation Act (*Dvijenie Prometei*). This conference was also notable for the decision to form a government in exile in the Caucasus, which was practically fulfilled in Paris a little later, in January 1935, as the Council of the Confederation of the Caucasus (*Dvijenie Prometei*).

The draft consisted of 17 articles. It represented the Caucasus in its entirety: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, the state of the mountains. On July 14, 1934, the already reduced 6-article Caucasus Confederation Pact was signed by the National Centers of Georgia, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus. The Armenians did not sign the document, but a place was left for them. The basis of the Caucasus Confederation was the implementation of a common foreign policy course on condition of the protection of the sovereignty of each of its republics, provided by specially created "appropriate bodies" of the confederation. The borders of the Confederation would be guarded by an army of military units of the Confederate member states under a single command that would be directly subordinate to the governing bodies of the Confederation. Disputes between the Confederate States would be settled through direct negotiations, and if not possible, by compulsory arbitration, or by the Supreme Court of the Confederation, whose decisions would be binding on all subjects of the Confederation. (Journal "Samshoblo" 1934: N16). In addition to the magazine *Prometheus*, the unity of the Caucasus was preached by the magazines *Caucasus*, *Gorgy Caucasus*, *Independent Caucasus*, *North Caucasus*, a simultaneous collection

Caucasus published first in 1934 in Paris in Russian language and then in European languages (Sharadze 2005: v.VII: 408).

Many well-known representatives of the Caucasus political elite worked hard to unite the Caucasian nations and create a united confederate state, but the merits of Akaki Chkhenkeli, Ali Mardan Bek Topchibashev and Heydar Bamatov should be specially mentioned. In addition to discussing theoretical issues and publishing significant articles in periodicals, they also engaged in practical work to form a confederation. There was some disagreement between them in the process of working, but all of them were ardent supporters of the Caucasus Confederation. In a letter dated 1931, Akaki Chkhenkeli wrote: "The Caucasus and its four main nations belong to each other, their disconnection is unnatural and can not be justified in any way [...] The Caucasus is committed to playing a very honourable role in the international arena... on one condition: if his leaders are able to maintain the high standard" (GNA 1831: case 229).

Unfortunately, the Caucasus political elite gradually lost the levers of influence over the events. If in the early 1920s, the governments of European countries paid more attention to the Caucasus and, consequently, to the members of the Caucasus political emigration, their attitudes gradually changed from the early 1930s in parallel with the increasing role of the Soviet Union in the international arena, which was revealed by the treaties signed by a number of European countries with the Soviet Union and the admission of the latter to the League of Nations. From now on, no member of the League of Nations would be able to support those who were already considered separatists. The Confederacy became just an informal assembly of individual dreamers, defeated warriors.

A great friend of Georgians, Jean Martin, editor of the *Geneva magazine*, published an article entitled "Caucasus" in the journal *La Revue de Prometheus* in 1934, in which he expressed his sorrow over the forgetfulness of the problems of the Caucasian nations by Europeans (Martin 1939: 6-8). The Western nations ignored the violent annexations of the *de jure*-recognized republics by Moscow and themselves, and also the repressions and atrocities planned and carried out by the Kremlin.

The Caucasus political elite in exile, dreaming of the Caucasus confederation, believed in the principles of Western governments and Woodrow Wilson. Unfortunately, as the French scholar, Etienne Copo wrote: "Exiled governments had no experience of the cynicism of European political and diplomatic methods", and the expected result was also achieved: in the 1920-30s, "this movement was crushed by the cynicism and selfishness of the democracies of that time and the Bolshevik beast" (Copo 1993: N16).

Conclusion

Created by individual representatives of the emigrating Caucasian political elite, the Caucasus Confederation only existed on paper for a while, but the greatest result of their work was to acknowledge the need for close ties between the Caucasian nations, reassessing their common mistakes as well as the necessity to comprehend that the absence of a common struggle made it easier for Bolshevik Russia to achieve its goal and to fulfill the occupation-annexation of their countries.

The reality created today opens a window of opportunity in favour of the idea of creating a Caucasus confederation. Let us hope that the pro-confederal impulses of the past in the twenty-first century will give a stimulus first to the cultural and economic solidarity of Caucasians and then to the possibility of establishing new alliances aimed at establishing a full-fledged confederation of the Caucasus. The events occurring 100 years ago should serve as a history lesson and show the peoples of the Caucasus the right course of action to maintain state independence, while the leaders of modern powerful states should understand the guidelines for resolving the "Russian issue."

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