

Chapter 7

Abkhazia, Georgia and the Caucasus Confederation

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The post-Soviet period, reminiscent of and in many cases seeming to repeat, the events of 1917-1921 after the break-up of the Russian Empire, has demonstrated quite clearly that the difficulties in Abkhazian-Georgian relations cannot be resolved by those two countries alone, without involving the Caucasus as a whole in this issue.

At the same time it is obvious today that the entire Caucasus has become the arena for a struggle for energy resources and fierce clashes between the geopolitical and strategic interests of Turkey and Russia, Iran and the West. The marked weakening of Russia's position in this key region was a result of the war in Chechnya and of the continuing complete blockade of Abkhazia. The battle for the pipeline, or rather for the route for transporting Caspian oil, cannot fail to influence political developments and automatically puts the people of the Caucasus on the knife edge between war and peace.

In this state of imbalance, neighbouring countries and powers are trying to create their own areas of responsibility, new alliances and regional as well as international associations under the aegis of the United Nations, the OSCE and NATO. Over the centuries the entire Caucasus, or portions of it, has been alternately or simultaneously part of Iran, Turkey or Russia, which still regard these territories as traditionally theirs. Thus Turkey sees a substantial part of the Caucasus as part of an extensive Turkic state, Turan. Iran in turn sees the future of some Caucasian countries in an alliance including Iran itself and certain Central Asian republics. Russia, though still laying claim to Transcaucasia ("Transcaucasia" is a peculiarly Russian term, resulting from its wars with Iran and Turkey), mostly because of oil, is now forced to keep an eye on the North Caucasus, realising late in the day what is happening on its southern flank.

Early pacification of the explosive Caucasus region is most unlikely, given this distribution of forces in obvious conflict. As regards the prospect of future state and legal relations between Abkhazia and Georgia, the way forward seems to be within the framework of a Caucasus Confederation.

Not long before the break-up of the USSR the eminent Sovietologist A. Avtorkhanov gave the following warning and advice:

“Caucasians must understand that if they fight among themselves they will never be either free or independent. In the eyes of the outside world such a region does not deserve freedom, but should be permanently occupied by a strong state and its armed forces... I would recommend all autonomous regions in the Caucasus to combine in one republic, which already existed under the name of "Gorskaya Respublika" (Mountain Peoples' Republic). In spite of our multilingual nature, but in view of our common historical, social, cultural and geopolitical heritage, the outside world gave us one general national name - the Russians

called us the "Caucasus gortsy" (mountain people)" and in the West we were known as "Circassians". We have never known racial discrimination or religious friction.[\[1\]](#)"

The idea of a Caucasus Confederation had its origins in the spring of 1917 and was developed further in 1918. Caucasian unity was proclaimed at the first Mountain People's Congress on 1 May 1917 in Vladikavkaz. At the Congress the "Alliance of United Mountain People of the North Caucasus and Dagestan", headed by T. Chermoev, a Chechen, R. Kaplanov, a Kumyk, P. Kotsev, a Kabardian, V. Dzhabagiev, an Ingush, and others, was officially established. The Abkhazian people also became full members of this alliance. A Mountain Peoples' Government was formed in November 1917. S. Ashkhatsava represented Abkhazia in it.[\[2\]](#)

On the eve of this important event, on 8 November 1917, the Abkhazian People's Congress in Sukhum elected the first parliament, the "Abkhazian Peoples Council" (ANS) and the following vital documents were approved: "Declaration by the Abkhazian People's Congress" and the "Constitution of the Abkhazian People's Council". It is interesting to note that the representative of the Abkhazian Parliament gave the following address on 19 November 1917 in Tiflis at the opening of the first Georgian parliament (the Georgian National Council): "I am happy that the high honour of conveying warm greetings to you on behalf of the Abkhazian People's Council has fallen to my lot. The Abkhazian people, as part of the Alliance of united mountain peoples, congratulate fair Georgia on its first steps on the way to national self-determination... The Abkhazians, having formed an alliance with their northern brethren are therefore convinced that in the near future they will join the noble Georgian people in a common alliance of all the peoples of the Caucasus. In this future alliance the Abkhazian people see themselves as full members of the United Mountain Peoples' Alliance".[\[3\]](#)

However, according to Emir-Khassan, a prominent figure in North Caucasus emigration, this was the period when a number of mistakes were made, which led to the isolation of the South Caucasus from the North Caucasus and the creation of the "so-called Transcaucasian Federation". Emir-Khassan observed:

The differences that began to appear even during the first revolutionary period became even more pronounced. A narrow national egoism flourished. The minds of Caucasian statesmen were entirely directed to organising separate nations; each one was protecting and establishing only his own frontiers, without regard to what neighbouring peoples were doing.[\[4\]](#)

The situation in the North Caucasus very quickly worsened, with the increasing savagery of the civil war and the formation in March 1918 of the Terek Soviet Republic. However, the previous 1st Mountain People's Congress still traced "the outlines of national ideology", which led the North Caucasus to proclaim its independence within a year. It is clear from the minutes of the first meeting of the Batumi peace conference dated 11 May 1918 that it was attended by delegations from Germany, Turkey, the Transcaucasian Republic and the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus and Dagestan.[\[5\]](#) On the same day the independence of the Caucasus Mountain Peoples' Republic and its separation from Russia were announced. The Republic included Dagestan, Chechen-Ingushetia, Ossetia, Kabarda, Karachai-Balkaria, Abkhazia and Adygeya. Its territory extended from the Black Sea to the Caspian and amounted to 260,000 square kilometres, with a population of almost 6.5 million.[\[6\]](#)

The deputies from the Abkhazian People's Council, A. Shervashidze (Chachba), T. Marshaniya, S. Basariya and others then appealed to the Turkish government and declared at the Batumi Conference that "Abkhazia does not wish to be included in the group of

Transcaucasian peoples, but aligns itself with the North Caucasus union of mountain peoples, which should build a separate state under the protection of Turkey".^[7] Later, during the years of Stalinist repression, particularly in 1937-1941, this was the pretext for eliminating practically all the Abkhazian intelligentsia,^[8] who were in sympathy with the idea of a Caucasus Confederation.

The territory of the independent Mountain Peoples' Republic of 1918, which was recognised internationally, coincided precisely with that pan-Caucasian area that had been involved in the mountain peoples' national liberation campaign in the nineteenth century and developed under the banner of Shamil. After Shamil had been forced to lay down his arms in 1859, the Ubykh, Adygeyans and Abkhazians continued their unequal struggle with tsarism for a further five years. This ended on 21 May 1864 with a parade of Russian and Georgian forces on the Krasnaya Polyana, in historic Abkhazia. This marked the end of the Caucasian war (1817-1864). The historian Ali Sultan made the following comment with regard to the tragic events of those years:

“In none of the conquered regions did Russian imperialism produce such devastation as it did in the North Caucasus. Here, as a result of many years of aggressive war, many localities settled since ancient times disappeared from the face of the earth, the boundaries of areas settled by individual autochthonous tribes were altered and the cultural monuments of the past and an ancient civilisation were destroyed. In many cases entire ethnic units were uprooted and sent into the unknown... The western provinces of the Caucasus, Western Adygeya and Abkhazia were particularly hard hit: their populations were forced into large-scale emigration in the second half of the nineteenth century and found refuge in what was then the Ottoman Empire.”^[9]

This is a suitable place to note that on 9 May 1984 the US Congress approved an address of welcome to the peoples of the North Caucasus to mark the 66th anniversary of their declaration of independence. On that portentous day Congressman Robert Roy addressed the House of Representatives on the anniversary of the proclamation on 11 May 1918 of the Caucasian Mountain Peoples' Republic. The Congress documents also included a "Brief historical note on the struggle by the oppressed peoples of the Northern Caucasus for independence..."^[10]

The Transcaucasian Democratic Federal Republic (ZDFR) broke up after the formation of the Mountain Peoples' Republic and on the same day, 26 May 1918, following an ultimatum by Turkey, the Democratic Republic of Georgia was proclaimed (the Azerbaijan Republic was proclaimed on 27 May and the Armenian Republic on 28 May). This period in the history of the Caucasus has been called the "Caucasian May", and it was said in this connection in one of the proclamations: "When the anti-nationalist storm of bolshevism was raging in Russia, the idea of healthy national statehood was triumphant in the Caucasus".^[11]

The instrument of Georgian independence was adopted on the day on which the republic was formed (26 May 1918); however, this did not define the frontiers of Georgia. Preliminary outlines of the frontier were drawn for the first time by someone with a very keen interest in the matter, in a secret letter to Tiflis dated 28 May 1918, by the German general von Lossow, who undertook to make every effort to ensure that "Germany would assist Georgia in securing its frontiers".^[12]

However, even von Lossow, an ally of the Georgian government and at the same time a supporter of the Caucasian Confederation, proposed the temporary inclusion of the Sukhum district - Abkhazia - within Georgia (i.e. within Germany's area of influence) with a reservation

to prevent interference by his ally (Turkey). In commenting on this letter the international lawyer Z. Avalov (Avalishvili), a distinguished figure in the Georgian republic, wrote:

“The reservation in the letter is curious: the Sukhum district (including Gagry) shall be part of Georgia until Georgia forms a separate state within the Caucasus. However, should a confederation of Caucasian peoples (*italics mine - S.L.*) be formed involving Georgia the population of the Sukhum district should be allowed to determine its position among the Caucasian countries. In other words, in this case the population of Abkhazia would have the choice of union with Georgia, entering the Union of Mountain Peoples or being part of the Caucasus Confederation as a separate state-canton (*italics mine - S.L.*). It is apparent from this what importance was attached to the plan for political union of the Caucasian peoples at the precise time when circumstances made dissolution of the Transcaucasian Union essential.”^[13]

Thus Abkhazia was outside Georgian territory when Georgian independence was proclaimed on 26 May, because since 11 May 1918 it had been part of the Caucasus Mountain Peoples' Republic, which unfortunately lasted for only a year.

In breach of the arrangements with Abkhazia, as early as 17-19 June 1918, troops from the Georgian republic supported by the military might of Germany landed in Sukhum and virtually occupied the country. General A.S. Lukomskii, Denikin's comrade-in-arms, wrote in this connection: "Taking advantage of German support, Georgia occupied Abkhazia and the Sochi district against the wishes of the population ..."^[14] By this time Abkhazia was in an extremely difficult position, because it was virtually deprived of real support from the "Mountain Peoples' government" due to the increasingly brutal civil war in the North Caucasus. However, the Mountain Peoples' Republic government condemned the Georgian invasion of Abkhazia. Thus in June 1918 the Foreign Minister of the Caucasus Mountain Peoples' Republic (Gaidar Bammat) lodged a protest with the government of Georgia and with Schulenburg, the head of the German government diplomatic mission in the Caucasus about the incursion by German troops into Sukhum and "the presence of Georgian bands in Abkhazia".^[15]

Several months later, in August 1918, T. Chermoev, the president of the Mountain Peoples' government, again protested to the German government about the occupation of Abkhazian territory by Georgian troops supported by regular German army units. At the same time he gave a warning that the peoples of the North Caucasus, linked to Georgia by "race and a long-standing community of interests" must not allow any political complications to interfere with their drive for "the closest possible ties, up to and including confederation" (*italics mine - S.L.*), and subsequently

“On behalf of my Government I protest in the strongest terms against Georgian policy in Abkhazia, a constituent part of the Federal Republic of the Union of Caucasus Mountain Peoples (*italics mine - S.L.*) and my Government considers it essential for Georgian troops, civil servants and emissaries to be withdrawn from Abkhazia immediately, in order to avoid the serious complications that may result from this Georgian Government policy.”^[16]

It was during this period, in June-August 1918, that Aleksandr Shervashidze, Tatash Marshaniya, Simon Basariya and other influential Abkhazians appealed for aid to Abkhazian Makhadhirs living in Turkey whose forefathers had been compelled to leave their motherland in the nineteenth century as a result of the Russo-Caucasian war. The people and parliamentary deputies of Abkhazia regarded the forcible action by Georgia as armed intervention in the Mountain Peoples' State. Noi Zhordania, the president of the Georgian Republic government, recalled that at that time the representatives of the North Caucasus gave Georgia an ultimatum:

"Abkhazia is ours, get out!" [\[17\]](#) The Turks in their turn were dreaming of Sukhum and planning to "protect Abkhazia from the Georgians" with the help of the Chechens. [\[18\]](#)

On the night of 27 June 1918 an Abkhazian armed force from Turkey landed near the River Kodori. Turkey was not involved in this conflict at the official level; the landing party was essentially an armed force of the Mountain Peoples' Republic. In addition, German sources make clear that in June-August 1918 the "Mountain Peoples' government" was still laying claim to Abkhazia and the port of Sukhum. It is not surprising, therefore, that there were repeated seaborne landings by Abkhazian makhadhirs in Abkhazia during the same few months. These aspirations were fundamentally at variance with German policy interests in this region.

The Mountain Peoples' Republic government continued to regard Abkhazia as part of its state, in spite of the fact that it was occupied by Georgia. Thus a coloured ethnographic and political map of the Caucasus Mountain Peoples' Republic intended for the Paris Peace Conference was printed in French on the orders of the Mountain Peoples' Delegation in 1919 in Lausanne (a representative of Abkhazia also travelled to the conference as part of the Mountain Peoples' delegation [\[19\]](#)). On this map both Abkhazia and South Ossetia were shown as within the Mountain Peoples' State, [\[20\]](#) not in Georgia.

Carl Erich Bechhofer, who was in the Caucasus at the time, described Georgian government policy as follows:

“The "Free and Independent Social-Democratic State of Georgia" will remain in my memory forever as a classic example of an imperialistic "small nation", both in the matter of external territorial seizure and in bureaucratic tyranny within the country. Its chauvinism passes all bounds” [\[21\]](#)

The Georgian politician Z. Avalov also described the situation at the time very accurately:

“At the beginning of 1921 Georgia had a simple party organisation in its government and in the form of the Constituent Assembly...Georgian democracy in 1918-1921, which was a form of social-democratic dictatorship, i.e. right-wing Marxism, was the preparation for the triumph of Soviet dictatorship in Georgia.” [\[22\]](#)

The "Mountain Peoples' Government" was forced to emigrate in 1921 as Soviet power became established in the Caucasus. In the 1920s and 30s representatives of the Caucasus Mountain Peoples' Republic in Prague, Paris and Warsaw published the journals "Vol'nye gortsy", "Gortsy Kavkaza", "Severnyi Kavkaz", etc. During this period the political exiles carried out an enormous amount of research on the future national state structure of the Caucasus. They published a large number of articles, recommendations and books on this pressing problem, and on 14 July 1934 in Brussels representatives of the national centres of North Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan signed an international treaty of great political importance - the Caucasus Confederation Pact - with a place kept in the pact for Armenia. [\[23\]](#)

The Caucasus Independence Committee and the Caucasus Confederation Council, the governing body in all diplomatic activity, were set up at the same time. The Caucasus Confederation was to have been an alliance of states retaining a sovereign existence but bound together by several common ties: common customs frontiers, defence and foreign policy. The Caucasus Confederation Pact has been called a "tactical-strategic document". [\[24\]](#) The Polish

journal "Vostok" made this comment in 1934: "An independent and united Caucasus will cease to be a source of military conflict and will become a vital element in maintaining the overall balance".

Eminent political figures spoke in defence of the Caucasus Confederation, but were against a "Caucasus community" on a federal basis, rightly regarding it as an imperfect model. Thus B. Bilatti wrote:

“A federation cannot stand compulsion... A federal link can be forged only between materially and spiritually equal values; otherwise it is likely to turn into a screen, under cover of which the strong will strive to absorb the weak. The great-power aspirations of large nations are organic phenomena derived from the very nature of mankind, and for that reason the cohabitation of large and small nations, even where such cohabitation is initially absolutely voluntary, is likely to end in conflict. This has been the fate of all states in which small nations have united round large nations. The former were either absorbed by the latter or finally joined forces to bring down the state and free themselves from the tie...”^[25]

The issue of Caucasian unity was raised several times, but came into the open again on the eve of the break-up of the USSR, when Georgian-Abkhazian differences reached their high point and developed into conflict on 15-16 July 1989. This was the negative background against which a hasty consolidation of the North Caucasus nations and Abkhazia took place. The foundations of this movement were laid in Sukhum, the capital of Abkhazia, on 25 August 1989 at the first congress of Caucasus mountain peoples, which formed the Assembly of Caucasus Mountain Peoples (AGNK), by analogy with the 1917 United Mountain Peoples' Alliance.

The second AGNK congress on 13-14 October 1990 in Nal'chik (Kabardino-Balkaria) was a vital stage. It was announced then that a period of practical work to implement a programme for a new state structure for the North Caucasus and Abkhazia was on the way. Special attention was given to the unity of the Caucasus nations, put into effect on 11 May 1918 by the proclamation of an independent state - the North Caucasus Republic.^[26]

Great events followed this congress. The Russian Federation showed signs of breaking up after the collapse of the USSR, and the existence of former "union-republic" small empires was called into question. The resolve of the Chechen nation, the proclamation of an independent Chechen Republic and the election of a president in October 1991 raised the Caucasus mountain peoples' movement to a new level. The third AGNK congress was held in Sukhum in the context of the political turbulence in Chechnya (on 1-2 November 1991). It was attended by plenipotentiary representatives of the Abaza, Abkhazian, Avar, Adygeyan, Aukhov-Chechen, Darghin, Kabarda, Lak, Ossetian (North and South Ossetia), Circassian, Chechen and Shapsug nations. Representatives of social and political movements in Georgia were also present. In his speech a Georgian parliamentary deputy also called for the entire Caucasus to merge to form a "single fist".^[27]

Following a proposal by the deputies the AGNK was changed to the Confederation of Caucasus Mountain Peoples (KGNK) and a little later, in Groznyi in 1992, was renamed the Confederation of Caucasus Nations (KNK). The following declaration in particular had been made at the third KGNK congress:

“It is quite probable that, in the first stage at all levels, the Caucasian autonomous republics and oblasts will declare themselves sovereign states, and after this act of national self-assertion

will in all probability begin to unite to form a new alliance - a Caucasus Confederation, which Chechnya, Dagestan, Georgia, Ingushetia, Ossetia, Kabarda, Karachai-Balkaria, Abkhazia, Adygeya, etc. may join as equal members.”[\[28\]](#)

A Treaty was signed at the third congress and a "Declaration on a Confederated Alliance of Caucasus Mountain Peoples" was adopted. Decisions were taken to form a Caucasian Parliament, an Arbitration Tribunal, a Defence Committee, a Caucasus Communities Committee and other structures for confederation, the headquarters of which would be in Sukhum.

Even during the Georgian-Abkhazian war, in April 1993 at the London conference on the problems of the North Caucasus, representatives of Abkhazia also put forward a plan for the Caucasus Confederation.[\[29\]](#)

Under present conditions, such an alliance of sovereign Caucasus states in the form of a confederation is becoming a matter of particular urgency. Even in 1934 Emir Khassan was stressing in his paper "A Caucasus Confederation" that "the Caucasus can be liberated and can retain its freedom only provided that all the Caucasus nations unite fully".[\[30\]](#)

Today it is quite obvious that only the Caucasians themselves, within their own union and with the support of the international community, are capable of settling vexed questions and resolving conflicts in the North and South Caucasus. Inter-Caucasian peacekeeping forces will also be needed to implement such a programme. At the present stage this seems to be essential in building a "Caucasian home" and, as the Azeri academic R. Aliev rightly observed, the "concept of inter-nation reconciliation"[\[31\]](#) must prevail in this process.

Of course, today it would be Utopian to raise the matter of immediate union of all states and nations in the Caucasus to form a confederation, in view of the political, territorial and religious differences between them and the lack of any single unifying ideology.[\[32\]](#) However, it seems quite possible at this stage to create the nucleus of such a confederation, which could consist of, for example, three countries: Abkhazia - Georgia - Chechnya. Unfortunately some Georgian academics have seen the threat of "Georgian centrism" in this model; the problems inherent in this will recede into the background, while the importance of the Caucasus Confederation to the world community may become of paramount importance.

Later Ingushetia, Dagestan, Ossetia (North and South), Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Adzharia, Kabarda, Karachai-Balkaria, Circassia, Adygeya, etc. may join the A-G-C triangle, given the enormous popularity of the idea of a confederation among the Caucasian nations. A horizontal, not a vertical, structure for state legal relations among the Caucasian countries in a confederative alliance can solve the basic problem: together or apart? It appears that in such a confederation not only Georgia and Abkhazia but other Caucasian states will be both together and apart at the same time in their mutual relations. This is undoubtedly necessary at the present stage in order to overcome the existing mistrust and to build relations among the nations of the Caucasus based on equality and trust. It is quite probable that in the historical long term the Caucasus Confederation will transform itself into a federation, but this will occur peacefully and painlessly. However, to propose federal relations in the Caucasus today means complicating the situation and resorting to force and compulsion, which will never lead to pacification and stabilisation throughout the Caucasus. There cannot be partial freedom: only the Caucasus as a whole can be free.

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3. TsGVIA RF, f. 1300, op. 1, d. 130, l. 135 ob.
4. Severnyi Kavkaz, 1934, no. 2, p. 11.
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15. Soyuz ob'edinennykh gortsev, op.cit., p. 132.
16. Ibid., p. 133-135.
17. N. Zhordania, My Life, Stanford, 1968, p. 98.
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22. Z. Avalov, Nezavisimost' Gruzii v mezhdunarodnoi politike 1918-1921, Paris, 1924, p. XI-XIV.
23. Severnyi Kavkaz, 1935, no. 9, p. 11.
24. Severnyi Kavkaz, 1934, no. 8, p. 26.
25. Severnyi Kavkaz, 1934, no. 8, p. 13-14.
26. Edinenie (Sukhum) 1991, no. 1; Kavkaz, 1990, no. 1.
27. Abkhazia, 1991, no. 51, 1st issue, December.
28. Abkhazia, 1991, no. 51, 2nd issue, December.
29. See Central Asian Survey (1995), 14(1), p. 103.
30. Severnyi Kavkaz, 1934, no. 2, p. 12.
31. R. Aliev, "'Kavkazskii dom": vzglyad iz Azerbaidzhana', in: Alexei Malashenko, Bruno Coppeters, Dmitri Trenin (eds.), Etnicheskie i regional'nye konflikty v Evrazii, vol. 1, op.cit., p. 162.
32. Ibid., p. 168.