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The Transcaucasian democratic federative Republic (TDFR) as a "Georgian" responsibility

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the historical perspectives and positions of key Georgian political figures – mostly leading Social Democrats such as Noe Zhordania and Akaki Chkhenkeli, as well as National Democrats such as Niko Nikoladze – on the making and unmaking of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) by analyzing their reflections on the most heated political concepts of the first two decades of the twentieth century: nationality, nationalism, the nation-state, federation, economic development, and socialism in the Georgian, Transcaucasian and imperial contexts, given the rapidly shifting geopolitics of the region triggered by the onset of the Great War and aggravated by the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917. The article demonstrates that already having conceptualized the socio-economic and cultural needs of the nation as developing outside of the framework of the nation-state, Zhordania and Chkhenkeli viewed these instead within a regional federative context under a revolutionarily transformed imperial centre, while assuming that the Social Democrats would hold the commanding political position in Georgia. This prepared them to take responsibility for establishing de facto federative political institutions for Transcaucasia. That responsibility facilitated the making and unmaking of the short-lived, independent TDFR.

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A "new political formula"

The Georgian political parties were divided when, together with their Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts, they agreed on 22 April 1918 to declare at the Transcaucasian *Seim* (Assembly) in Tiflis the independence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR). The debate in the *Seim* on the motion for independence showed that the Azerbaijani Musavat Party fully backed the motion, the Armenian Dashnaktsutyun Party opposed it, and the Georgian Social Democrats, the National Democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries were split (Dokumenty 1919, 200–203; Kazemzadeh 2009, 103–105; Reynolds 2011, 205). But in the end they all agreed to it nonetheless.

The reason why the Georgian political elites agreed to the independence of a common state for the three nationalities was much more straightforward than the reason why they were divided. De facto, the Transcaucasian Commissariat and the *Seim* – the political

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institutions established on 15 November 1917 and 28 February 1918, respectively – had taken on the functions of a state, but most of the Georgian political leaders, like their Armenian counterparts, were reluctant and even opposed to the idea of independence for this federation. Yet they were not opposed to the concept of federation *per se*. In fact, as this article will argue, key figures among the Georgian leadership[1] had already for some time engaged seriously with this concept. And when such political institutions came into existence, the Georgian political parties, particularly the Social Democrats, took the political responsibility of playing a central role in declaring independence – albeit pressured by the outcome of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and the decisions of the Ottoman state – and maintaining it for as long as they could. They were divided because of different understandings and conceptualisations of the past and future of the Georgian nation, both in the region and vis-à-vis the Russian Empire.

One of these understandings was that geopolitically, political elites viewed an independent Georgia or Transcaucasian region as impossible: tsarist Russia would never allow it. Prominent intellectual and political figures of late 19th and early twentieth century Georgia, such as Ilia Chavchavadze and Niko Nikoladze, had contemplated this alternative for Georgia. But while Chavchavadze did not see the necessity of its independence (1987, 178–186), Nikoladze did not view it as a possibility (Brisku 2016, 306). One group, however, which did consider Georgia's independence was the "League for the Liberation of Georgia." Initially established to restore the Georgian monarchy and its privileges – when Russia annexed Georgia 1801 it reneged on the terms of the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk that had guaranteed Georgia's sovereignty – this group appealed to the Hague International Conference of 1907 to restore Georgia's lost political freedom (Gordadze 1999, 76). The other understanding was purely ideological. Noe Zhordania, who, as one of the leaders of the Georgian Social Democrats espoused Marxist doctrine, did not see political nationalism as the path to Georgian national development (1922, 55–56), and by extension to the development of the Caucasian/Transcaucasian region.

Thus, a "Georgian perspective" for Transcaucasia's independence required that conceptual and geopolitical shifts be made. To be sure, in early March 1918, Zhordania gave a speech in the *Seim* entitled "On the Independence of Transcaucasia" asserting that independence could come to be only if a democratic Russia left the Georgians alone to face the Ottomans (1919, 76). At this particular moment there was strong Ottoman pressure to declare Transcaucasian independence, while the Georgians themselves were highly reluctant to go it alone and take the responsibility for independence. Indeed, just two days before the declaration of independence the Social-Democrats voted against the motion at their Tiflis party conference. The final decision to declare independence was taken by the Georgian National Council, one day after Akaki Chkhenkeli, another leading Social Democrat figure who headed the *Seim*'s delegation to the peace negotiations with the Ottomans in Trabzon, convinced them of the policy of independence on which "he had been working for weeks" (Hovannisian 1967, 159–160).

The *Seim's* declaration of independence was a manifestation of geopolitical pragmatism on the part of the three nationalities rather than any sort of expression of enthusiasm for the newfound political freedom of their multinational state. According to prominent historian Richard Hovanissian, only "second rate" Social-Democrats tried to generate enthusiasm by viewing it as a "new political formula" for the region's nationalities, faced with existential threats from the north (from Soviet Russia) and from the South (from the

Ottoman Empire), and united in pursuit of a foreign policy of peace and international recognition (1967, 160–162) For his part, Chkhenkeli, as one of the architects of this independence, took state building seriously. He had been chosen as the Chairman of the *Seim* and the foreign minister in the government that was formed three days later, comprised of twelve posts: four ministers for each of the three constituent nations, with Georgians occupying the most important ministerial profiles: Foreign Affairs, War, Interior, Agriculture. Chkhenkeli pledged to the *Seim* a foreign policy of peace and international recognition, and a domestic agenda of state-building: establishing public order, writing a constitution, drawing the borders and land reform (Dokumenty 1919, 219–233; Kazemzadeh 2009, 107–108).

Locating the Georgian nationality: nation-state, federation, or part of democratic revolutionary Russia

To be sure, the geopolitical changes allowed for a conceptual shift towards a "new political formula". But what exactly were some of the understandings of the leading Georgian political figures and parties that came to public attention after the Imperial Manifesto of 1905 which legalized political participation in tsarist Russia about national statehood and about potential federative arrangements for the Caucasus and for the whole of the empire?

As briefly mentioned above, the conceptualization of independent Georgian statehood ranged from viewing it as an impossibility to seeing it as an unnecessary alternative. Within this spectrum it was possible to find attempts at conceptualizing the needs of the Georgian nation within a Caucasian federation. Indeed, the earliest such attempt was contemplated in 1874, when some Georgian students, including Niko Nikoladze and Giorgi Tsereteli, both active figures during the months of the Transcaucasian state, together with other Russian, Dagestani and Armenian students organized a conference in Geneva on the questions of an independent Caucasian federation (Bendiashvili 1980, 139–154; Jones 2005, 45). Nothing came of this at the time, until the geopolitical flux stirred up in the region by the First World War and the Bolshevik Coup/Revolution of November 1917, in large part because the Social-Democrats, as the oldest and the largest political force in the Georgian context (Kautsky 1921) opposed separatism in principle, finding the idea of a nation-state unpragmatic and outdated (Jones 2005, 192).

Zhordania, for one, thought that the future of the Georgian nation should not be built on the framework of the nation-state. In 1894 in a seminal article entitled "Economic Development and Nationality" Zhordania defined the nation in terms a growing economy, a national culture and common interests of both capital and labour, rather than by history and common blood (1922, 22). Nearly fifteen years later he argued in "The Georgian People and Nationalism" (1911) against Georgian political nationalism. For him political nationalism threatened to undermine a renewed alliance with the Russian state and interethnic relations in Georgia. Indeed, in his understanding of the evolving nationalistic discourse of the time, Zhordania thought that Georgian nationalists, by which he meant the new Georgian entrepreneurs among the national bourgeoisie, "invented a chauvinist, anti-Russian and anti-Armenian discourse" in order to gain the support of the Georgian people because they were unable to challenge the influence of the Armenian bourgeoisie in Tiflis (1922, 56; Brisku 2016, 308). He opposed the idea of a nation-state for Georgians on the grounds that theoretically "the notion of one nation

– one state does not exist" (1922, 200; Brisku 2016, 310), as in fact Georgia was ethnically diverse. Hence, emphasizing Georgians national rights diminished those of non-Georgians. The state, which he saw as primarily an economic phenomenon, had to remain neutral not only with regard to religious differences, but also to ethnic ones (1922, 172; Brisku 2016, 311), particularly in Tiflis and the entire region of the Caucasus where "Georgians blended with other nations and vice versa, Georgia does not comprise Georgians and Georgians do not comprise Georgia" (1922, 173).

While opposing nationalism and the nation-state, Zhordania nevertheless embraced the concept of nationality. When reflecting on this, Zhordania drew also on the perspective of the Austro-Marxist Karl Renner. He saw Renner's "culturalist" reading of nationality, implying establishing cultural autonomy through schooling, arts and professional skills taught in the native languages in the multinational Austro-Hungarian context, as fitting for circumstances in Georgia and Transcaucasia. Taking seriously the political task of the Social-Democrats in Georgia and the region as one of generating economic development and supporting the rights of "working people" rather than strictly those of only the proletariat, he conceived of a future in the region whereby Georgian labour and capital were not confined by politically defined ethnic borders. He envisaged the possibility that these "working people" could be open to foreign political (meaning Russian) and economic (meaning Armenian, Russian and Western European) influence, while at the same time defending their interests in a "new worker's organization in the Caucasus" (1922, 78–80).

Certainly not everybody shared his understanding. For Nikoladze and even Joseph Stalin – whose approaches could be read as "territorialist" – cultural autonomy had to be bounded by a geographical and historical territory (Nikoladze 1913, 4–5; Brisku 2016, 306). Chkhenkeli, too, agreed with most of what Zhordania had to say about the question of nationality. For his part, Chkhenkeli, as he discussed in his article "The National Question" (1908), thought that the concepts of the nation and the state should not be mixed. In hindsight, however, in the late 1930s, years after the fall of Transcaucasian and Georgian democratic republics while in exile in France, he argued in his booklet *The State and Nation* that they were reconcilable in the Georgian context through the notion of citizenship (1939, 35–37). But more than Zhordania, Chkhenkeli saw the Social-Democrats in Georgia as "a national party … [and an] expression of the aspirations of the Georgian people" (1908, 3; Jones 2005, 230). Nationality, he believed, would not dissipate with the rise of capitalism and socialism, and recognizing like Zhordania the reality of ethnicity in the Caucasus, he favoured institutionalizing cultural autonomy at the regional level. He suggested setting up "decentralized institutional structures based on cultural autonomy for Caucasia," and an "administrative plan for Caucasia" in which the region's nationalities would have jurisdiction over cultural matters through national representative bodies (a Georgian Parliament in this case), while cooperating with each other in an all-Caucasian *Seim*. A transformed Russian centre would still maintain jurisdiction over the region's legal and economic issues, but "the Transcaucasian peoples, in keeping with 'self-determination', must have fully independent cultural autonomy" (1908, 3; Jones 2005, 231).

This institutional arrangement, he thought, would encourage inter-Caucasian cooperation, even though there was the potential for ethnic "conflicts over resources among immature nations" (1908, 3; Jones 2005, 232). To Zhordania, however,

Chkhenkeli's approach was problematic because in its essence it remained a "territorialist" one. What constituted "immature nations" and who decided this remained undetermined questions. In this way, the Georgian ruling classes, for instance, could suppress the cultural rights of Armenians, Jews, Tatars, Ossetians and Leks in the Georgian territories, while the others could do the same to the Georgians in other parts in the Caucasus. For him, there were needs of Caucasian nationalities that could be discussed and institutionalized in a regional body (a *Seim*), but such needs would be "the natural economic interconnections among the Caucasian population" rather than cultural interconnections. Like Chkhenkeli, he thought that economic interactions at the regional level should be dealt with in an all-Russian legislative framework. Yet it was crucial for Zhordania that while handling economic and political issues in the *Seim*, these nationalities should demonstrate to the imperial centre that they had the capacity for self-rule and that they could avoid conflict (Jones 2005, 234).

Irrespective of these contested "culturalist" and "territorialist" positions, Zhordania, Chkhenkeli and "almost all Georgian groups envisaged some form of federalism to accommodate Georgia's needs" (Jones 2005, 43). But the Social Democrats exhibited a "conceptual preparedness" to see Georgian nationality within a federative framework, more than within a nation-state that would be independent of Russia. No Georgian political force, including the most pro-independence ones, such as the Georgian National Independence Committee that was established at the onset of the First World War and played a key role in establishing German-Georgian relations of the spring 1918 that led to the declaration of Georgia's independence on 26 May 1918 (Bakradze 2010), viewed independence from Russia as a possibility. One of this Committee's most prominent voices, at least until 1917, Mikhail Tsereteli, thought that a protectorate status for Georgia rather than full independence, similar to that outlined in the Georgievsk Treaty of 1783, would be the most viable option, particularly if Georgia would be left to fend for itself against the Ottoman Empire (Jones in Bakradze 2010, 312).

The making of the de facto Transcaucasian state: the social-democrat dominance

Although the Georgian political elites, especially the Social-Democrats, were proactive in considering the needs of the Georgian nation in some form of a regional federal arrangement, the impetus to do so – and their "natural default" – was triggered by the "geopolitical existentialism" engendered by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution/Coup on 7 November 1917. As the largest political force in the tsarist Georgian *guberniyas* (provinces or governorates), the Social-Democrats, led by Zhordania, felt it was their responsibility to lead the way not only for the Georgian nation but for the region as a whole. Four days after the Bolshevik capture of the imperial state, in a gathering of all political parties in the region on 11 November, the Georgian Social-Democrats (Mensheviks) and the Bolsheviks joined in a political compromise, together with all the soviet, military, party and trade union representatives, in front of 400 delegates. Zhordania suggested the idea of establishing a "political authority which will lead Caucasia out of this catastrophic position … We must organize a regional power to lead us until a constituent assembly or an authoritative central power is established", including a "temporary Caucasian parliament" (1919, 52). At the same time, this new regional "political authority" was to

replace the recently-established regional political structure, the *Ozakom* (which had replaced the tsarist viceroyalty) that had answered to the Provisional Government in Petrograd that the Bolsheviks had overthrown several days earlier (Kazemzadeh 2009, 57).

To be sure, though, the Transcaucasian Commissariat, which came to the existence four day after Zhordania's proposal, went far beyond what Zhordania and Chkhenkeli had conceived of in their earlier writings, becoming a political institution underpinned by the local soviets and local self-governing bodies that took up far more regional prerogatives. This was apparent in the pledge made by the Chairman of the Commissariat, the Georgian Social-Democrats Evgeni Gegechkori, who promised social-democratic financial, economic, administrative, and land reforms for the region (Jones 2005, 279). While doing this, Gegechkhori also declared that the Commissariat's authority was to last until an all-Russian Constituent Assembly was formed. If not, he added, then the "Constituent Assembly members from Transcaucasia and the [northern] Caucasus" would supplant its legitimacy (Hovannisian 1967, 108). The Commissariat had in its ranks political figures from the most influential regional parties, except for the Bolsheviks: the Social-Democrats (mostly Georgians), the Musavatists (Azerbaijanis), the Dashnaktsutyun or Dashnaks (Armenians) and the Socialist Revolutionaries (mostly Russians and Georgians) (Kazemzadeh 2009, 57). Yet despite this diverse representation, the Social-Democrats took for granted their leading role because of their previous international political experience (their exposure to the socialist movement), their domestic experience (positions held in the Russian soviets), and the grassroots support that their party had enjoyed in the tsarist Georgian *guberniyas*. Their preponderance did not go unnoticed. Some Armenians criticized their own Dashnaktsutyun Party for allowing this "Georgian supremacy" in the Commissariat (Hovannisian 1967, 108).

Beyond the composition of the Commissariat, the Social-Democrats' preponderance – Chkhenkeli became the Commissariat's Internal Affairs Commissar – was exercised through the national military and political structures that each of the three nationalities agreed to maintain, in this case, the Georgian National Assembly that was constituted in lat|e November 1917. Significantly, Zhordania also chaired the Soviet Regional Centre in Tiflis. It was again Zhordania who stated during the first session of this Georgian National Assembly that the Assembly was necessary for discussing national issues, assigning tasks to the Commissariat, and even planning ahead for establishing a representative regional legislature, a Transcaucasian *Seim* (Hovannisian 1967, 116). Gegechkori experienced the Georgian influence – as well as those coming from other national councils – on the "weak and inefficient body" that was the Commissariat in regional administrative, law and order, and military matters; as concerned the latter, the Military Council of Nationalities was created to defend Transcaucasia after the departure of the imperial army (Kazemzadeh 2009, 57–83).

Certainly, Georgian political forces and the Social-Democrats, most notably Zhordania, had a powerful influence in forming the de facto federation's nascent foreign policy, even as it came under internal and external pressures. When the Brest-Litovsk negotiations began on 22 December 1917 between the Central Powers (Imperial Germany, Austro-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire) and Soviet Russia, the Ottomans put increasing pressure on the Commissariat to establish formal relations and to negotiate a mutual and just peace with an "independent government of Caucasia", and Zhordania made sure that the Commissariat did not bow to this pressure. In a speech in late January

1918 at the Georgian National Assembly, he rejected the idea of independence from Russia unless the all-Russian Constituent Assembly failed to convene, to which a Georgian National Democrat responded that an independent Transcaucasia was possible with the support of the Central Powers (Kazemzadeh 2009, 84), to which the Ottomans were allied.

But as the political situation was changing by the day – on 19 January the Bolsheviks disbanded the all-Russian Constituent Assembly in Petrograd which all three nationalities hoped would preserve the link with Russia and would serve as a source of legitimacy for the region – the Georgian Social-Democrats' position came under further pressure. Indeed, at a Commissariat session on 28 January a debate flared between Gegechkori and Chkhenkeli on the fallout from this event. Chkhenkeli suggested that the Ukrainian legislature, the Central Rada, could serve as the constituted all-Russian Constituent Assembly, and Transcaucasia could follow the example of its Ukrainian counterpart and enter into negotiations with the Central Powers, and hence with the Ottomans. Even further, he suggested the necessity of a unified Caucasia, inviting the newly constituted Union of Allied Mountaineers (the Mountain Government from the Dagestani and Terek *oblasts*), because "on the Caucasus Front it is our own Caucasian nationalities who are responsible, and if all of the local nationalities were united, things would not be so bad. Our misfortune is that we are not unified" (Dokumenty 1919, 34). Neither of these suggestions was taken up – in fact the Ukrainian government declined the invitation – yet the decision to establish a regional body, the *Seim*, that could enter into peace negotiations with the Ottomans was agreed at the Regional Centre of the Soviet. The *Seim* was expected to come into existence by mid-February, so Gegechkori informed the Ottomans that his government was prepared to enter into negotiations with them once the *Seim* set out the conditions for "an acceptable and just peace" (Hovannisian 1967, 124).

The Seim as the realm of unity, and Transcaucasian independence as the cause of its disunity

Together with the Musavatists, the Georgian Social-Democrats played the leading role in establishing the Transcaucasian *Seim*. In early February 1918, Zhordania presented a Menshevik-Musavatist resolution at the Regional Centre of Soviets that called for the creation of the *Seim,* which in addition to making peace with the Ottomans – given that the all-Russian Constituent Assembly was no longer viable – was required "to exercise legislative prerogatives in all local questions" (Hovannisian 1967, 125), and to function as a strong government "capable of maintaining revolutionary order in the country and of carrying out reforms" (Dokumenty 1919, 28; Kazemzadeh 2009, 85). The *Seim* thus came into existence on 23 February, and it elected the veteran Georgian Menshevik Nikolai Chkheidze as its chairman by a wide margin. The Georgian Social-Democrats and the Musavatists held 30 seats each in the body, and the Dashnaks 27 seats (Kazemzadeh 2009, 88).

The consensus, to a large extent, rested on shared perceptions among the political elites of the three nationalities about the situation in Russia, the Ottoman threat, and their political-economic visions for the federation. In one *Seim* session, Gegechkori drew a contrast between Bolshevik Russia, which in negotiating with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk had become a "colony of German imperialism", and the democratic Transcaucasia. The Dashnaks in this session supported his view, and were keen to embark on social-democratic

policies (such as nationalization and the abolition of private land ownership) and to create "just provincial boundaries within a federated Transcaucasia" (Hovannisian 1967, 127). Zhordania, in a session on 28 February, agreed with the Dashnaks' pursuit of socialist policies within a democratic framework, and called for the "country's" (i.e. Transcaucasia's) defence against "Bolshevik reaction". He did not recognize the Bolshevik's negotiations with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk, and authorized the Commissariat to negotiate a separate peace with the Ottomans (1919, 65–71; Kazemzadeh 2009, 89). Particularly on the latter point, the *Seim* acted in unison by setting out four conditions for the Transcaucasian delegation (to be led by Chkhenkeli): the delegation could negotiate, but only the *Seim* could conclude peace with the Ottomans; the peace agreement had to be permanent; the pre-1914 boundaries – this was one of the items negotiated at Brest-Litovsk – were to be maintained; and finally, a self-determining, autonomous Turkish Armenia as part of the Ottoman state had to be demanded (Dokumenty 1919, 83–84; Kazemzadeh 2009, 90).

When the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was concluded between the Central Powers and Soviet Russia on 3 March 1918 – an outcome that the *Seim* had declared it would not recognize – Chkhenkeli's delegation, comprised of delegates from the three nationalities, began negotiations with its Ottoman counterparts on 14 March. The Transcaucasians were faced with the provision of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty that returned the three regions of Kars, Ardahan and Batumi to the Ottomans and an Ottoman ultimatum (issued by General Vehid Pasha) that this be implemented. Zhordania, in a session in the *Seim* on 11 March, rejected the outcome of Brest-Litovsk and gave assurances that the Transcaucasians would hold these vital regions, because for him Batumi was Transcaucasia's "window to the West", and the fortress at Kars was a pillar of the region's defence. If they were to be taken, said Zhordania, speaking in the name of all nationalities, then the Transcaucasians would seek to claim Ottoman Armenia from the Ottomans (Hovannisian 1967, 132). The *Seim*'s unanimous official statement – delivered by its chairman Chkheidze – was that Transcaucasia did not recognize the Russian Soviet government and its peace deal at Brest-Litovsk (Dokumenty 1919, 87–88; Kazemzadeh 2009, 93).

Yet as the peace negotiations began in earnest in Trabzon – there were five sessions between 14 and 20 March 1918 – the consensus on the future of the de facto federation among the three nationalities, and also among Mensheviks as well as between Zhordania and Chkhenkeli, began to founder. From the very outset, Chkhenkeli's negotiating position was undermined by his Ottoman interlocutor, Rauf Bey, who wanted Transcaucasia as a state to accept of the results of Brest-Litovsk. Chkhenkeli's response, in the second session, was that "Transcaucasia de facto [*sic*] presents itself in the form of a state, even though it has not yet declared itself independent" (Protokolebi 15 March 1918, 10) and had acted as such since the Bolshevik Coup (Protokolebi 14 March 1918, 5–9; Dokumenty 1919, 117–119; Hovannisian 1967, 133; Kazemzadeh 2009, 95). However, Rauf Bey increased the pressure further by declaring that "it would be desirable for Transcaucasia to declare its independence and announce its form of government before these negotiations reach the final agreement so coveted by both sides". Chkhenkeli responded that the *Seim* was considering the question of independence (Hovannisian 1967, 138–141).

This Ottoman pressure to declare independence as a precondition to concluding a peace deal triggered disagreements, distrust and accusations among the Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians. This discord was laid bare at the *Seim's* session of 25 March,

summoned to debate the Ottoman proposition; the Georgian Social-Democrats and Dashnaks opposed it, whereas the Azerbaijanis called for separation from Russia and a peace deal with the Ottomans. This disagreement was not made easier given the eruption of open inter-ethnic violence among the three nationalities throughout the month of March. A bloody and vengeful situation reigned between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the Yerevan district, and between Georgians and Armenians in Ardahan, where the Georgian Social-Democrats declared that there was "an enemy within the country". Even more tragic events took place in late March and early April in the Soviet-controlled city of Baku, in which Red Guard and Armenian Dashnak militias violently suppressed an Azerbaijani uprising, killing more than ten thousand Azerbaijanis. Considering this dark situation, it is surprising how the Transcaucasian political forces were able to stand together in the *Seim* in Tiflis, with Georgian Social-Democrats dominating the *Seim's* stance to not declare independence and investing Chkhenkeli with extraordinary powers to achieve an "honourable settlement" between the Transcaucasian and Ottoman sides (Hovannisian 1967, 145–149; Kazemzadeh 2009, 97).

From Chkhenkeli's vantage point in Trabzon, however, such a stance was no longer sustainable. Having been vested with extraordinary powers, he put these to use at the sixth Trabzon plenary session that began on 6 April by breaking with the *Seim*'s position and agreeing to Ottoman demands to vacate Batumi, Kars and Ardahan, to declare independence, and to sign a peace deal, with the provision that this be done with the mediation of the Central Powers. To be sure, Chkhenkeli had informed the Georgian Social-Democrats of his intentions the night before in a secret message sent to the Georgian National Assembly on 10 April, pointing out that the Ottomans threatened to overrun Tiflis if they did not agree to concede Batumi. The Menshevik leadership refused to accept this, on the grounds that conceding Batumi would result in a collapse of the Georgian economy and then to political destruction (Hovannisian 1967, 152). The split between Chkhenkeli's policy and that of his party's leadership in the *Seim* became apparent when the latter ordered mobilization to defend Batumi (Dokumenty 1919, 160; Kazemzadeh 2009, 98). The *Seim* declared war on the Ottomans on 13 April with the passage of three resolutions, drafted by Zhordania, that established martial law and called in multiple languages for the defence of Transcaucasian democracy (Dokumenty 1919, 187; Kazemzadeh 2009, 102). At the same time, the Georgian Social-Democrats' leadership recalled Chkhenkeli's delegation from Trabzon without having reached an agreement.

The Transcaucasian intentions to defend Batumi fell short, however, as they were virtually unable to mount any resistance against the Ottoman troops. Thus, the Ottomans reannexed both the economically vital port town of Batumi and the strategically important castle at Kars (Avaliashvili 1940, 24; Reynolds 2009, 159). This devastating outcome forced the three nationalities in the *Seim* to agree to declare the independence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic on 22 April. Rather than displaying enthusiasm about political independence and the implementation of the "new political formula", most of the representatives instead felt "forced to be free" (Reynolds 2009, 166).

The independent TDFR and its exercise of foreign policy

Despite developing sophisticated conceptualisations about federalism that could accommodate Georgian national needs in the region – without foreseeing the possibility of

independence from Russia – and having played a key role in establishing a de facto federation while refraining from declaring independence until it was "forced upon them", Georgian political forces (excluding the Bolsheviks) took the main responsibility to try to make this state function. Yet their efforts were undermined by the exuberance of the Ottomans, who were keen to acquire even more territories and access, which in turn intensified the disunity among the three main nationalities. As a result, it would be the Georgians who would make the decision to end the Transcaucasian experiment in federalism.

This was not apparent from the outset, however, especially when the Federation began to exercise a foreign policy that sought peaceful relations with the only country that had pushed for and recognized its independence, the Ottoman Empire. It also vied for the recognition and backing of other Great Powers, most notably Germany. Five days after the declaration of independence, Chkhenkeli, serving as both prime minister and foreign minister, sent a letter to the Ottoman Foreign Minister seeking friendly relations between the two sides, for now that "we have declared independence many internal and external enemies are trying to create an unfavourable impression to disturb our inhabitants". As politically painful as the outcomes of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Ottoman ultimatum had been to the new state, Chkhenkeli asked the Ottoman side not to harass the Armenian population evacuating Kars and not to stir up the Georgian Muslim population on Georgian (Transcaucasian) territory (amierkavkaziis 1918, 5–7).

His efforts achieved equitable relations between the two sides to a degree, yet they were ultimately undermined from the outset. This became particularly evident when on 11 May 1918, at the second attempt to negotiate a peace agreement in the recently conceded town of Batumi, this time between two independent states, the Ottoman side, headed by Khalil Bey, produced a draft entitled "Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the Ottoman Government and the Confederative Transcaucasian Republic". The draft treaty stipulated that the Ottoman side would agree to a peace deal, provided that the Transcaucasian state allowed Ottoman troops, who were eager to seize Baku and Mosul, free access to Transcaucasian territory, including its railway network. This demand triggered intense disagreement between the Armenian and Georgian members of his delegation on the one side and the Azerbaijanis on the other, with the latter agreeing to the demands. In fact, three days later Ottoman troops traversed the Armenian towns of Alexandropol and Lori, against which Chkhenkeli protested forcefully to Khalil Bey, informing him that a letter of complaint had been sent to Major-General von Lossow, the German representative in the region. Khalil Bey responding that he taken the note and sent it to all of the Central Powers' governments (Dokumenty 1919, 271; Kazemzadeh 2009, 112). Chkhenkeli informed the Ottoman side that if any peace deal was to be achieved between the two sides, representatives from the Central Powers, and particularly from Germany, would have to serve as mediators (Kazemzadeh 2009, 102).

The need for third-party assistance became vital not only in terms of the peace deal with the Ottomans, but also in the context of the future development of the Transcaucasian state and its foreign policy. This was evident in Chkhenkeli's response to requests to expanding the Federation to include new members. The only request to join the federation came from the Provisional Mountain Government, a request first made in February and now backed by the Ottomans, on 30 April, which Chkhenkeli initially welcomed as a desire to unite on a federative basis (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 224). In fact, in a letter sent to Chkhenkeli on 8 May, the head of Mountain Government, Haidar Bamatte, informed

him that his people had decided to declare independence (kavkaziis mtiel khalta 1918, 1–2). Chkhenkeli responded from Batumi five days later, stating that it fell within "the shared political and economic interests of Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus" to establish "a single confederated whole" (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 235). However, Nikoladze, as an adviser to Chkhenkeli's delegation, made it clear to him that "We should not unite without outside help, and no Georgian can place the responsibility for his Motherland on unification with the North Caucasus without the certainty of a guarantee that no one will attack us" (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 224). This time, Chkhenkeli responded to Bamatte that his request would be discussed at the conference.

Thus, outside assistance, from the Georgian perspective, could come only from Germany. On 18 May, with the Batumi talks stalling, the German General agreed to serve as mediator. But in a move that undermined Transcaucasian unity, the Azerbaijani members rejected this. In fact, a meeting was held between the three nationalities of the Transcaucasian delegation three days later, at which Azerbaijanis questioned the viability of the federation, suggesting instead that a "dual state" between the Georgians and Azerbaijanis should be formed. It would be the Georgian side, however, that would decide a day later while meeting separately in Batumi and in coordination with the Georgian National Council – without informing either their Armenian or Azerbaijani counterparts – to dissolve the federation and declare Georgia's independence, entrusting Georgia to German protection (Kazemzadeh 2009, 115). On 26 May, the same day that the Ottomans delivered another ultimatum to the Transcaucasian state demanding further territories and vowing to continue their fight against Armenian forces, Zhordania read out Georgia's Declaration of Independence in Tiflis (Kazemzadeh 2009, 116–117). Meanwhile, Chkhenkeli sent a letter from Batumi to General de Lossow informing him of the Georgian government's decision to proclaim independence while seeking German support and protection from the latest Ottoman offensive (sakarvelos mtavrobis 1918, 12).

Conclusion: From a Federation to a Confederation?

Despite the fact that the Georgian leaders had declared the independence of the first Georgian nation-state in modern times – driven more by geopolitical exigencies than by any pre-conceived conceptual clarity – they did not give up on the idea of federation in the Transcaucasus. In fact, they repeatedly called for of a Transcaucasian Confederation *(amierkavkaziis konpederatsia)*. In one such instance, in a speech before the declaration of Georgia's independence on 26 May 1918, Zhordania began by stating that this day was both "historical and tragical", because one state, TDFR, had perished in order for a new one, Georgia, to be born from its ashes. If the TDFR "was to ever be resurrected, you must rest assured that between them (the TDFR and Georgia) there will always be common interests (applause) [*sic*]" (2018 [1918]: 20), and such a resurrected version would most likely take the form of a "Caucasian Confederative Union" (2018 [1918]: 21). Moving on to reading the act of independence, he again recalled how the interests of the TDFR and of Georgia had been intertwined, and how Transcaucasia had been an exercise in freedom, self-rule and responsibility in unity for the three nationalities in which Georgia had played a leading role. As he put it, "left to their own devices, Georgia, and with her all of Transcaucasia, took into their hands the direction of their own affairs, creating the necessary institutions for this purpose". This unique exercise in

self-rule and political unity met with an undesired and unexpected collapse because of external pressures; "under pressure from exterior forces [the Ottomans]", he added, "the links which united the Transcaucasian nationalities were broken, and the political unity of Transcaucasia were thus dissolved", forcing Georgia to declare its independence (2018 [1918]: 22–23).

Thus, Zhordania and the members of his government never gave up the hope of re-establishing a possible Transcaucasian political entity. This point became especially important in November 1918, when Germany, the guarantor of Georgian's independence, conceded defeat in the First World War. As a Georgian delegation was preparing itself to participate at the Paris Peace Conference that opened in January 1919, the Georgian government drafted a set of recommendations for it. One of these was to seek support "for a future Transcaucasian Confederation, provided that the Great Powers recognize first the independence of the individual republics" (Claims 1919). Yet these hopes became increasingly difficult to sustain, for as Zhordania explained in mid-1920, "to build a real and strong federal state again, there is one indispensable condition: Armenia and Azerbaijan must take on a Transcaucasian orientation. This will only be possible when their particular antagonism will end" (in Mkhoyan 2017, 911).

Clearly, from the legalization of political participation in Imperial Russia in 1905 to the declaration of the independent TDFR in 1918, Georgian political leaders, and especially the Social-Democrats, conceived of the needs of the growing and ethnically diverse Georgian nation in terms beyond those of historical borders, but rather as part of an overlapping regional federative framework within a revolutionized imperial space. That federative framework was to evolve from the three nationalities, potentially including as well the nationalities of the northern Caucasus, and it would encompass cultural and economic issues as well as political and security-related ones. Because of this conception, together with the consequences of the geopolitical earthquake set off by the First World War in the Caucasus, the emergence, initially, of the Commissariat, and then of the *Seim*, and finally of the independent TDFR, guaranteed the Georgians a leading political role and thrust upon them the responsibility for the common political and security interests that emerged among the three nationalities. Ultimately, even when their interests diverged as separate republics, for the Georgians, and particularly for the Social-Democrats who formed the first government of the Georgian Democratic Republic, the idea of a federative arrangement or of a looser confederation for the region remained appealing.

Note

1. Ronald Grigor Suny saw the Mensheviks as "reluctant" towards independence, soon realizing that "the embryonic republic was doomed" (1994, 191–192). Eric Lee asserted that the TDFR was not a Menshevik initiative, but rather an Azerbaijani one (2017, 40). Meanwhile, Ghia Nodia and Alvaro Pinto Scholtbach view the TDFR as a first instance of an agreement among Georgian parties to establish a democratic republic independent of Bolshevik Russia (2006, 92). Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli read it as an unsustainable project because of the external military threats from both the Ottoman and the Soviet armies and from internal discord. Hence, in their view, the Georgian politicians took the right decision when they declared Georgia's independence and oriented it towards Germany in order to preserve national territorial integrity (2000, 108–109). As for Bakhadze

and Mamoulia, they see the TDFR as one of the main attempts at cooperation between Georgia and North Caucasus in the 1917–1921 period (N. D., 5).

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