

From Discord to Autonomy: The Idea of Unity between Georgia and the North Caucasus, 1917–1920

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Abstract

This study explores the evolution of relations between Georgia and the North Caucasian Mountain Republic from 1917 to 1920 in the context of revolution, independence, and regional crises. The article identifies three stages in these relations: territorial disputes and divergent international orientations, a period of close cooperation, and attempts at political unification based on principles of autonomy. Drawing on extensive archival sources, the analysis demonstrates how shared external threats fostered closer collaboration between the two sides. The study shows that Georgia's support for the Mountain Republic was primarily shaped by strategic interests. It further reveals the political factors that influenced Georgian–North Caucasian relations, highlighting both the feasibility and the limitations of unification efforts. Overall, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical foundations of regional cooperation in the Caucasus and underscores the role played by the idea of unity in the region's political reality in the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Caucasus; Georgia; Mountain Republic; confederation.

Introduction

The Caucasus is one of the most diverse regions in the world, not only in terms of its ethnic, cultural, and political realities, but also with regard to its historical experience. One of the most significant periods in the region's history unfolded between 1917 and 1921. The Russian Revolution of 1917 led to the collapse of the Russian Empire, allowing the peoples of the Caucasus to regain *de facto* independence. During this time, the South Caucasus remained a hotspot of World War I. Simultaneously, the empire's sudden disintegration triggered domestic chaos, and the civil war in Russia—along with the campaigns waged by Denikin and later by the Bolsheviks against the independent Caucasus—had particularly severe consequences for the North Caucasus. In an effort to preserve their sovereignty, the peoples of the Caucasus initially sought cooperation with the Ottoman Empire and later with Western European states. In this context, relations with Georgia were significant and, at times, decisive.

At the dawn of independence, the idea of a Caucasus Confederation gained prominence as a means of addressing shared problems. The South Caucasus itself embarked on its independent path within such a framework: beginning in the



autumn of 1917, the region was governed by a coalition of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, and from April to May 1918 the Transcaucasian Federative Republic briefly existed. However, the republics held sharply divergent views regarding the Ottoman Empire, which was advancing into the Caucasus and occupying territory.¹ These differences rendered a federal union impossible, leading to the failure of the first attempt at Transcaucasian unity.² Amid this instability, the form of coexistence with the North Caucasus had not yet been clearly defined. Nonetheless, during the short-lived period of independence, the idea of shared political organization or coordination with Georgia remained relevant, as Georgia served as the only bridge between the North Caucasian mountaineers and the West.

Cooperation between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus between 1917 and 1921 went through three general stages: it began with sharp territorial disputes, moved into a phase of close cooperation, and ultimately gave rise to the idea of unification based on an autonomous framework. The evolution of this relationship has its own internal logic, reflecting a specific set of values and offering a distinctive case of regional interdependence.

This article explores the role of internal Caucasian dynamics in shaping political relations, using the case of Georgia and the North Caucasus. It highlights how shared challenges influenced cooperation and the development of both regional and international partnerships. The study examines the factors that shaped the initial relations between independent Georgia and the North Caucasus and identifies the key obstacles to good-neighborly cooperation. By analyzing how these challenges were embedded in the political coexistence of the two sides, the article outlines the principles underlying regional relations and the factors that periodically shaped and transformed their interdependence. International and regional developments that directly affected the interests of each side also influenced their political ties. Accordingly, the nature of relations between Georgia and the North Caucasus—including political coordination and the enduring relevance of the idea of unity during the period 1917–1921—is analyzed through an examination of the factors that improved, worsened, or otherwise shaped their interactions and shared challenges.

Methodologically, the study relies on a combination of historical and comparative approaches. It draws on archival sources, including diplomatic correspondence, government documents, and contemporary press reports, to reconstruct the sequence of events and decisions that shaped Georgian–North Caucasian relations. These primary sources are complemented by secondary literature in order to contextualize regional and international dynamics. The analysis focuses on key internal challenges that influenced political cooperation

¹ Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917–1921* (Oxford: George Ronald; New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 109–117.

² Beka Kobakhidze, “Feeble Projects and Aspirations: The Caucasian and Transcaucasian Federation/Confederation in the Geopolitics of 1918–1920,” *Caucasus Survey* 8, no. 1 (2020): 69–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2020.1712905>.

and on the ways these challenges were addressed or mitigated. This approach enables the study to demonstrate how internal Caucasian issues affected regional and international interactions, highlighting both opportunities for cooperation and structural obstacles. By examining interactions between Georgia and the North Caucasus across specific historical episodes, the research clarifies the principles that guided political coordination and decision-making.

Through this methodological framework, the article presents a clear picture of how shared challenges and strategic interests shaped the political landscape of the Caucasus, illustrating the practical mechanisms of cooperation and conflict resolution during the period from 1917 to 1921.

The article argues that external threats significantly shaped internal regional relations, and that shared goals at times took precedence over individual national interests. The central problem in the coexistence of Georgia and the North Caucasus was consistently the issue of borders. Although this question was particularly acute during 1917–1921, it receded in moments when the defense of sovereignty and independence required unconditional consolidation.

The literature on the history of the Mountain Republic of the North Caucasus and related issues is diverse and multifaceted. Notably, Mairbek Vachagaev's book provides a comprehensive account of the history of the Mountain Republic, including important details regarding its relations with Georgia.³ Daudov and Meskhidze likewise examine questions of Caucasian unity, the Trabzon Conference, territorial demarcation, and political cooperation.⁴ Within scholarly debates, however, opposing views exist regarding Georgia's support for the mountaineers' struggle for independence. Ambartsumyan concludes that the mountaineers' attempts to secure assistance from Georgia and Azerbaijan were largely unsuccessful,⁵ whereas Matiev,⁶ Dobryakova,⁷ and Vachagaev and Mamulia⁸ argue the

³ Mairbek Vachagaev, *Soiuz gortsev severnogo Kavkaza i Gorskaiia respublika: istoriia nesostoiavshesgosia gosudarstva, 1917–1920* [*The Union of the Highlanders of the North Caucasus and the Mountain Republic: The History of an Unfulfilled State, 1917–1920*] (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2018).

⁴ Abdulla Kh. Daudov and Djulietta I. Meskhidze, *Natsional'naia gosudarstvennost' gorskikh narodov Severnogo Kavkaza (1917–1924)* [*The National Statehood of the Highland Peoples of the North Caucasus, 1917–1924*] (Saint Petersburg: Saint Petersburg State University, 2009), 43–95.

⁵ Karine R. Ambartsumyan, "Gorskaiia Respublika v predstavleniakh britanskoi missii i Dobrovol'cheskoi armii (1919–1920 gg.)" ["The Mountain Republic in the Perceptions of the British Mission and the Volunteer Army (1919–1920)"], *Gumanitarnye i iuridicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 4 (2020): 19–20.

⁶ Timur K. Matiev, "Rol' menshevistskoi Gruzii v podderzhke gorskogo antidenikinskogo dvizheniia v period grazhdanskoi voiny na Severnom Kavkaze" ["The Role of Menshevik Georgia in Supporting the Mountain Anti-Denikin Movement during the Civil War in the North Caucasus"], *Sovremennaia nauchnaia mysl'*, no. 6 (2019): 88.

⁷ Natalia A. Dobryakova, "K voprosu o deiatel'nosti pravitel'stva Gorskoi respubliki (mai 1918 – mai 1919 gg.)" ["On the Activities of the Government of the Mountain Republic, May 1918–May 1919"], *Kavkazologiia*, no. 4 (2023): 95, <https://doi.org/10.31143/2542-212X-2023-4-88-98>.

⁸ Giorgi Mamulia, *From the History of Relations between the Entente States and the Mountaineers' Republic of the Northern Caucasus (1919)* (Tbilisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2021), <https://gfsis.org.ge/ge/publications/view/2912>.



opposite. This article engages with these debates and seeks to clarify the role these states played in one another's political trajectories, showing how internal conflicts and shared challenges were embedded in the structure of their mutual relations.

Moreover, Karmov also addresses the interdependence between Georgians and the mountaineers, suggesting that Georgia did not always fully uphold the role of a "friendly" state in territorial matters.⁹ Georgian archival collections contain documents—some of which remain virtually unknown in both Georgian and international scholarship—that are essential for a fuller and more balanced understanding of these issues. This article aims to make a modest contribution by bringing such materials into broader scholarly circulation.

Through this research, the authors seek to contribute to a deeper analysis of specific Caucasian problems. Such analysis helps to illuminate the historical experiences, challenges, and prospects of interethnic relations among the peoples of the Caucasus. Given the persistence of conflicts in the region today, revisiting past models of Caucasian cooperation in response to shared challenges remains highly relevant and of practical significance.

Desire for Unification and Incompatible Vectors

The 1917 Revolution in the Russian Empire led to its collapse. At the time, the South Caucasus was one of the active frontlines of World War I (1914–1918). Following the upheaval, Russian forces began to withdraw. This sequence of events allowed the Caucasus to seize a moment of freedom but also immediately exposed the region to a range of acute problems. For Georgia and Armenia, the immediate priority was halting the Ottoman advance and preserving territorial integrity. Meanwhile, the North Caucasus focused on shielding itself from the civil war erupting in Russia. Across the region, all Caucasian actors shared the challenge of securing reliable allies in order to preserve statehood and contain the chaos caused by the empire's sudden collapse.

The Caucasian nations also had to determine their mutual borders, a process that required regional cooperation. The South Caucasian states initially attempted to establish a unified political structure. In January 1918, the Transcaucasian Seim was formed—a coordinating legislative body uniting Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. In April of that same year, the three states proclaimed the establishment of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic under a coalition government.¹⁰ During this period, Georgia was governed by an Interparty National Council.

Most members of Georgia's delegation to the Seim and of the Interparty National Council were Social Democrats. Georgian social democracy had

⁹ A. Kh. Karmov, ed., *Materialy s'ezdov gorskikh narodov Severnogo Kavkaza i Dagestana 1917 goda* [Proceedings of the Congresses of the Highland Peoples of the North Caucasus and Dagestan, 1917] (Nalchik: Publishing Department of KBUGI, 2014).

¹⁰ Shota Vadachkoria, *Erovnuli sakhelmtsipoebriobis sakitkhi kartul politikur azrovnebashii: Nakveti I (1917–1918 ts'ts')* [The Issue of National Statehood in Georgian Political Thought: Part I, 1917–1918] (Tbilisi: Ivane Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnology, 2008), 77–78, 102.

emerged in the late nineteenth century and, by 1903, had become part of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party.¹¹ From the outset, their aim was to bring about revolution and establish socialism, which, in turn, would lead to the full democratization of the Russian Empire. Georgian socialists thus viewed Georgia as part of a unified democratic space. They continued to pursue this vision both during the post-Bolshevik period and in the early days of Georgia's de facto independence. While minority political parties advocated declaring full Georgian independence, the Social Democrats remained focused on preserving Transcaucasian unity. On January 21, 1918, during a plenary session of Georgia's National Council discussing the Transcaucasian Union, Socialist leader Noe Zhordania¹² remarked: "I must tell you that separating Georgia is easy. However, when it comes to separating nations, our wishes and intentions are always blocked by the unavoidable wall of Armenian–Tatar division."¹³ Amid existential threats, unresolved border disputes, and growing chaos, the Social Democrats regarded Transcaucasian political unity—founded on democratic representation and confederative principles—as essential.¹⁴ However, diverging international alignments and internal contradictions rendered such unity impossible, and the Transcaucasian union collapsed on May 26, 1918.¹⁵

It was clear that the North Caucasian mountaineers' path to freedom—confronted by both Denikin's White forces and the Bolsheviks—ran through Georgia and Azerbaijan. Yet relations between Georgia and the mountaineers began so tensely that even the prospect of political unity seemed unrealistic. In 1917, the Union of Mountaineers, composed of representatives of North Caucasian ethnic groups, admitted Abkhazia as a member of the North Caucasian Confederation. Although regional cooperation was essential for managing international relations, recent domestic turmoil, territorial claims, and unresolved border issues complicated political negotiations. Soon thereafter, representatives of the North Caucasus entered into talks with the Georgians to establish relations and explore avenues of cooperation. The Georgian side, however, responded cautiously, particularly because of the Abkhazian question. On December 17, 1917, during a session of Georgia's National Council, the head of the Foreign Affairs section, Akaki Chkhenkeli, noted that while Georgia's entry into the union would be desirable, unresolved border issues—including Abkhazia—posed a

¹¹ Giorgi Batsikadze, "Kartuli sotsial-demokratiis zogadi khasiati da pirveli nabijebi Batumshi" ["The General Character of Georgian Social Democracy and Its First Steps in Batumi"], *Shavizghvispireti tsivilizatsiebis gzajvaredinze* [*The Black Sea Region at the Crossroads of Civilizations*] 2, no. 2 (2025): 105, <https://doi.org/10.61671/bsrcc.v2i2.8665>.

¹² Noe Zhordania later became the chairman of the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

¹³ Central Historical Archive of Georgia (CHAG), fond 1836, inventory 1, case 3, folio 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, folio 49.

¹⁵ Kobakhidze, "Feeble Projects and Aspirations."



major obstacle.¹⁶ At that point, the outcome of the Russian Revolution and the fate of Caucasian independence remained uncertain, and the formation of stable relations between the mountaineers and Georgia progressed slowly.

By the end of the year, a provisional agreement was reached. The mountaineers clarified that Abkhazia had joined their union voluntarily and not at their invitation. This diplomatic maneuver produced tangible results. Georgians and mountaineers agreed that the latter would not take any decisions regarding Abkhazia without Georgia's participation and that the issue would be resolved in accordance with the principle of self-determination.¹⁷ The Georgians understood that access to the Black Sea was of existential importance to the mountaineers, and in exchange for certain concessions, Georgia promised support and a pathway to the sea via Tuapse. For the mountaineers living along the Russian border, the connection between their own freedom and a strong relationship with Georgia was likewise evident.

Nevertheless, the prospect of close political cooperation still appeared vague at this stage. On February 28, 1918, the leadership of the Union of Mountaineers established a special delegation to the South Caucasus, composed of Abdul Mejid Tapa Chermoev, Haidar Bamat, Zubair Temirkhanov, and Qadi Debirov. The delegation's mandate was to take decisive steps toward the territorial unification of the North Caucasus and Dagestan with the South Caucasus. In addition, it was tasked with establishing relations with the Ottoman Empire and its allies in order to explore the possibility of securing their support for the formation of an independent Caucasian state that would be economically and militarily integrated with the Ottomans and the Western European powers.¹⁸

In the context of growing Georgian–Ottoman disagreements, this theoretically ambitious but practically naïve mission placed the mountaineers in an almost impossible position, as they sought a middle ground that was difficult to sustain. In March 1918, during the existence of the Transcaucasian Seim, a peace conference was held in Trabzon between representatives of the South Caucasus and the Ottoman Empire to negotiate disengagement from World War I and determine new borders. The Ottomans demanded territories in southwestern Georgia. The mountaineer delegation—including Alikhan Kantemir and representatives of the Azerbaijani Musavat Party—traveled to Trabzon and expressed support for the Georgian delegation regarding the retention of Batumi, which was considered vital for the economic and political future of the entire Caucasus.

The presence of the mountaineers in Trabzon also raised the issue of unifying the South and North Caucasus. However, the radical incompatibility of Georgian and mountaineer foreign policy orientations at the time created a dramatic

¹⁶ Central Historical Archive of Georgia (CHAG), fond 1836, inventory 1, case 3, folio 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Giorgi Mamulia, "Kavkasia da otkhta kavshiri 1918 tsels: gaertianebis elitaruli mtsdelobebi" ["The Caucasus and the Entente in 1918: Elite Attempts at Unification"], *Istoriis rekonstruktsi-ebi*, no. 1 (2015): 56, <https://iliauni.edu.ge/uploads/other/35/35074.pdf>.

situation. The mountaineers delivered a note to the Georgian delegation warning that if Georgia entered into war with the Ottoman Empire, they would not remain neutral.¹⁹ In effect, this constituted a warning that, in the event of conflict, they would side with the Ottomans—further undermining the prospects of regional unity. Although the mountaineers continued to seek paths toward unification, their alliance with the Ottoman Empire remained a strategic priority.

In May 1918, both the Mountainous Republic and Georgia declared their independence. The mountaineers proceeded under Ottoman patronage, while Georgia turned to Germany for support. Although this alignment placed both polities within the same broader geopolitical constellation, the Georgian–Ottoman conflict emerged as a significant obstacle to cooperation. Every newly independent Caucasian state urgently needed a strong external ally to preserve sovereignty and ensure security. For the Muslim mountaineers, Ottoman Turkey—an Islamic power that had emerged as the dominant regional force following Russia’s retreat—appeared both a natural and desirable partner. By the end of May 1918, Turkish General Yusuf Izzet Pasha had been appointed commander-in-chief of the Mountainous Republic’s army. The Ottoman government supplied arms, equipment, and transportation to its forces, and in June–July 1918 Ottoman troops entered the territory of Dagestan.²⁰ As long as the Central Powers—Germany and the Ottoman Empire—remained strong, the mountaineers had little incentive to alter their alignment.

At this stage, strengthening ties with the Ottomans took precedence over broader Caucasian cooperation, although the latter remained a parallel objective. Efforts to identify viable paths toward unity nevertheless continued. On May 27, 1918—just one day after Georgia declared independence—Akaki Chkhenkeli, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, wrote to one of Dagestan’s leaders, Haidar Bamat, stating that Georgia welcomed a close confederative alliance with the peoples of the Caucasus and with Dagestan in particular. At the same time, Georgia sought to support the mountaineers’ rapprochement with Germany. On May 31, Chkhenkeli informed Tapa Chermoev, head of the Mountainous Republic, that Georgia would represent the mountaineers’ interests in negotiations with Germany and support their efforts to secure international recognition and independence.²¹

It appears that Georgia hoped strengthening German–Caucasian relations could help bridge the divergent international vectors separating the North and South Caucasus. The collapse of the short-lived Transcaucasian union had already cast doubt on the feasibility of broader unity, and emerging contradictions further complicated future cooperation. It may therefore be argued that during

¹⁹ CHAG, fond 1836, inventory 1, case 5, folios 85–86.

²⁰ Irada S. Huseynova, “Seeking International Recognition: The Challenge the Mountain Republic Had Faced,” *Istoricheskaya i sotsialno-obrazovatel'naya mysl* [Historical and Social Educational Ideas] 7, no. 5, pt. 1 (2015): 122–123, <https://doi.org/10.17748/2075-9908.2015.7.5/1.121-125>.

²¹ CHAG, Fond 1864, Inventory 2, Case 43, Folios 1–2.



this first stage—spanning from 1917 to mid-1918—relations between Georgia and the mountaineers were shaped by conflicting conditions. Although both sides articulated a desire for unity and closer cooperation, the prevailing geopolitical environment did not yet favor meaningful coordination.

An Attempt to Consolidate Around Common Goals

In mid-1918, a turning point occurred, driven by two major developments: the defeat of Germany and, by extension, the Ottoman Empire in World War I, and the internal destabilization of the North Caucasus caused by Bolshevik advances and growing chaos. The Bolsheviks became particularly active in 1918, founding the Terek Soviet Republic in March and establishing control over parts of Dagestan by April.²² These aggressive actions sparked a widespread anti-Bolshevik uprising among the mountaineers that lasted through the summer months.²³ While the Russian Civil War raged between Denikin's White Army and the Bolsheviks, both forces were hostile to the independent Caucasus. It became increasingly evident to the mountaineers that neither Denikin's nor the Bolsheviks' Russia would tolerate their independence. This realization, in turn, enhanced Georgia's importance for the mountaineers.²⁴

The defeat of the Central Powers in World War I placed pro-German Georgia and the previously pro-Ottoman North Caucasus on a shared international trajectory. By the end of 1918, British forces had entered the Caucasus. General Thomson of the British Expeditionary Forces demanded the withdrawal of Ottoman troops from the North Caucasus, a process completed by December. This development removed a key obstacle to regional cooperation by eliminating the Ottoman factor, which had earlier been a source of tension.

At the same time, the peoples of the Caucasus began seeking international patrons to solidify their sovereignty, turning to the Allied Powers, particularly Britain and France. Toward the end of the year, the mountaineers dispatched a diplomatic delegation to Switzerland in an effort to gain Western recognition and support.²⁵ Their international orientation now increasingly mirrored that of Georgia. Despite occasional disagreements—especially regarding the British attitude toward local states, which were not treated as equal partners—the

²² Vladimir B. Lobanov, "Grazhdanskaya voyna na Severnom Kavkaze: Gorskaya respublika (May 1918 – May 1919 gg.)" ["The Civil War in the North Caucasus: The Mountain Republic, May 1918–May 1919"], *Elektronnyi zhurnal 'Kavkazologiya'* [*Caucasology Electronic Journal*], no. 3 (2022): 97–98, <https://doi.org/10.31143/2542-212X-2022-0-95-104>.

²³ See Vladimir B. Lobanov, "K istorii grazhdanskoy voyny na Severnom Kavkaze: Terskoye vosstanie 1918 g." ["Toward a History of the Civil War in the North Caucasus: The Terek Uprising of 1918"], *Noveishaya istoriya Rossii / Modern History of Russia*, no. 1 (2013): 56–65.

²⁴ Ruslan T. Djambulatov, "Grazhdanskaya voyna v Terskoy oblasti v 1918 – nachale 1919 g." ["The Civil War in the Terek Region in 1918–Early 1919"], *Voprosy istorii*, no. 12 (2008): 78–90.

²⁵ Mamulia, *From the History of Relations*, 6.

presence of British forces in Georgia gave the government a sense of security, particularly against the Bolshevik threat. For this reason, one of the primary goals of the Georgian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference was to persuade Britain to maintain its military presence in the country.²⁶

Whereas the Ottoman factor had previously hindered cooperation between Georgia and the North Caucasus, the convergence of their foreign policy orientations now proved insufficient to achieve political unity. Georgia's foreign policy increasingly focused on securing sovereignty and full independence. With threats emanating from both Denikin's White forces and the Bolsheviks, Georgian leaders turned to the West for security guarantees. The primary objective became international recognition and, ultimately, membership in the League of Nations—a goal formally pursued in July 1920 through an official government memorandum.²⁷ To secure international recognition, the consolidation of Georgia's independence took precedence, and the idea of a Caucasian confederation was deferred to the future. In this vision, a key precondition for any confederation was the firm establishment of independence by each Caucasian state.

In late 1918, the Georgian government secretly instructed its diplomatic corps not to oppose the idea of a confederation, but to insist that such a structure could only emerge once all constituent nations had developed into fully independent states.²⁸ The ruling Social Democrats viewed the failure of the Transcaucasian Union as the result of political immaturity and underdeveloped state institutions. They believed that independent democratic development would eventually lay the groundwork for future federal unity among the peoples of the Caucasus.²⁹

In essence, the idea of unification retained relevance primarily during the early stages of freedom, when the internal fate of Russia and its revolution remained unresolved and the inexperienced and unprepared peoples of the Caucasus hoped to find stability through consolidation. However, they were unable to overcome the complex challenges of political unification. Once geopolitical conditions pushed them decisively toward independent statehood, Georgia's main concern became the consolidation of its sovereignty. While a confederation of separate, sovereign Caucasian states may have appeared more structurally sound and conducive to cooperation, it remained uncertain whether such a project could ever be realized.

On the path toward consolidating sovereignty, Georgia occupied a significantly stronger position than the North Caucasus. Even during the period of German dominance in the region, Germany avoided direct support for the mountaineers. As Haidar Bamat wrote to Tapa Chermoev: "Russia has recognized Georgia's independence and has no objection to the continued presence of German troops in the Transcaucasus. As for the North Caucasus, Russia is uncompromising. German diplomatic efforts to secure recognition of our independence have

²⁶ CHAG, fond 1864, inventory 2, case 129, folio 3.

²⁷ CHAG, fond 1864, inventory 2, case 351, folios 2–17, 26–29.

²⁸ CHAG, fond 1861, inventory 3, case 4, folios 7–8.

²⁹ *Ertoba* (newspaper), no. 150 (1918): 1, "For the Democracy of the Transcaucasus."



failed.”³⁰ Moreover, for the mountaineers, the issues of securing sovereignty and forming a Caucasian confederation were deeply intertwined. Recognition and support were expected from the West, but the fragmented political landscape of the Caucasus made the region less attractive to Britain and France—a reality the mountaineers understood well. In January 1919, Haidar Bamat stated explicitly that without clearly defined political relations with the Transcaucasus, the cause of mountaineer independence could not succeed.³¹

Denikin and Bolshevik Russia placed great strategic value on controlling the North Caucasus. While Russia could, at least formally, relinquish control over the South Caucasus temporarily, the North Caucasus remained under intense pressure amid the civil war between White and Red forces. In early 1919, the White Army launched a major offensive in the North Caucasus.³² Denikin aimed to dismantle the Mountainous Republic. On April 11, 1919, during British-organized peace talks attended by Denikin, the mountaineers, and British representatives Brex and Pawelson, Denikin categorically refused to recognize the Mountain Republic or its government.³³ Georgian–North Caucasian relations thus entered a new phase. Although the idea of a confederation lost relevance in Georgian political discourse during 1919–1920, supporting the mountaineers’ sovereignty—both diplomatically and materially—became a new priority on Georgia’s political agenda.

In the face of White Army aggression, the mountaineers placed their hopes in Georgia and Azerbaijan, expecting their assistance. Shortly after Denikin’s attacks, the Democratic Republic of Georgia issued a loan of three million rubles to support the Mountainous Republic.³⁴ Beyond financial aid, technical and logistical assistance was also critical. In March, Georgia supplied the mountaineers with four automobiles and two airplanes from its military reserves; in April, a radio station and mast worth over 300,000 manats were provided as well.³⁵ In the summer of 1919, several dozen machine guns and millions of rounds of ammunition followed. Notably, Georgian military personnel of various ranks were present in the North Caucasus during combat operations, directly involved in military planning and execution. By order of the Georgian government and the Minister of War, a military unit composed of Georgian officers and instructors was deployed to Chechnya between July 1919 and early 1920 to assist the fighting mountaineers. The legion received a budget of 250,000 manats and was equipped with hundreds of rifles, machine guns, ammunition, grenades, and other supplies.³⁶ Moreover, Colonel Kereselidze, the commander of the Georgian

³⁰ Mamulia, *Kavkasia da otkhta kavshiri*, 65–66.

³¹ Mamulia, *From the History of Relations*, 9.

³² Matiev, *Rol menshevistkoy Gruzii*, 86

³³ CHAG, Fund 1864, Inventory 1, Case 131, Folio 1.

³⁴ CHAG, fond 1861, inventory 2, case 13, folio 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, folios 7–17.

³⁶ Giorgi Batsikadze, “Eastern Policy of the Democratic Republic of Georgia: Relations with the

legion, was appointed acting commander-in-chief of the Mountainous Republic's armed forces.³⁷

This support was not merely symbolic or motivated by goodwill, but reflected Georgia's broader strategic considerations. Denikin's forces were not only attacking the Mountainous Republic but were also threatening Georgia from the Sochi–Abkhazia direction. Diplomatic efforts and British involvement proved insufficient to halt Denikin,³⁸ making joint Georgian–mountaineer military efforts necessary to contain the threat. For Georgia, the continued existence of an independent political entity in the North Caucasus was of existential importance: it strengthened the overall prospects of Caucasian independence and served as a defensive buffer between Russia and the South Caucasus. Georgia thus viewed the mountaineers' struggle for freedom as closely linked to its own.³⁹

Once again, the Caucasian republics mobilized their diplomatic resources alongside military action. In the spring, a Caucasian Conference was held in Tbilisi to develop a comprehensive strategy for regional political consolidation. The conference formed commissions on political affairs, railways, postal and telegraph services, finance and economics, refugees, legal matters, nomadic populations, and territorial disputes.⁴⁰ Given the existential threats they faced, Caucasian leaders decided from the outset to resolve internal disputes through parity-based commissions and, if no agreement could be reached, to turn to the arbitration of neutral states. This mechanism was intended to prevent regional disagreements from undermining the conference's success at a critical moment.

The proposed model for unification included the following steps: (1) mutual recognition among the Caucasian republics; (2) solidarity and mutual support in defense of sovereignty; (3) preventive measures to block foreign intervention; (4) joint action against White Army aggression; and (5) the establishment of a joint international Caucasian body to coordinate domestic and foreign policies. However, despite the shared threat posed by White Russia, not all four Caucasian republics perceived the danger equally. The head of the mountaineer delegation, Alikhan Kantemir, complained that the Armenian delegation was obstructing the conference process.⁴¹

As diplomatic negotiations dragged on, the White Army occupied most of the territory of the Mountainous Republic. By the summer of 1919, this reality

North Caucasus (1918–1921)," *Herald of Oriental Studies* 7, no. 2 (2024): 239–256, <https://doi.org/10.61671/hos.7.2024.8276>.

³⁷ Mairbek Vachagaev, *Georgian Legion in Chechnya* (Tbilisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2022), 5, <https://gfsis.org.ge/ge/publications/view/3205>.

³⁸ Beka Kobakhidze, "Under the Menace of the 'White' Russia: The First Diplomatic Encounters between the Independent States of Georgia and Poland in 1918 and 1919," in *Polish-Georgian Historians' Commission, Collected Works*, vol. 1, ed. David Kolbaia (Warsaw: Institute of National Remembrance of Poland, 2019), 56–57.

³⁹ Giorgi Batsikadze, "Eastern Policy of the Democratic Republic of Georgia," 253.

⁴⁰ CHAG, fond 1864, inventory 1, case 131, folios 2–3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, folio 3.



undercut any remaining hopes for forming a confederation. The only tangible outcome of the recent diplomatic efforts was the Georgia–Azerbaijan agreement of June 16, 1919, in which both parties committed to mutual defense against foreign intervention.⁴²

Leaders in both Georgia and the Mountainous Republic nevertheless continued to press forward. In August, a new conference was held in Tbilisi, organized by the mountaineer committee in exile. Once again, the need for Caucasian unification was emphasized. Georgian representatives stressed that this was not merely a political preference, but a practical necessity for the region.⁴³ On October 2, 1919, Georgia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Evgeni Gegetchkori, sent a note to Colonel Haskell (Supreme Allied Commissioner in Transcaucasia), Sir Oliver Wardrop (British High Commissioner), and the heads of the Italian, French, and Greek missions. In the note, Gegetchkori warned that the recent advances of Denikin’s army and the fierce resistance in the North Caucasus would lead to greater anarchy and endanger the entire Caucasus. He called for stronger international engagement and issued the following appeal: “The Georgian government protests attempts to resolve political issues by force and calls upon Your Excellency to intervene and halt the bloodshed and anarchy. We urge that these conflicts be settled not through arms, but through the free expression of the people’s will and the implementation of the principle of self-determination.”⁴⁴

The Allied powers, however, viewed the situation through a different lens. Bolshevism was perceived as the primary threat to Europe, and Denikin was fighting it. Consequently, the Allies supported Denikin and were unlikely to intervene on behalf of the Caucasian republics.⁴⁵ Thus, the survival of Caucasian independence increasingly depended on internal regional cooperation. Georgia allocated an additional 500,000 manats to support the Mountaineer Committee,⁴⁶ while Azerbaijan contributed even more. Under these circumstances, not only the Mountainous Republic, but also the sovereignty of the Transcaucasian republics themselves, faced a growing threat. Despite this, the idea of unity between Georgia and the North Caucasus persisted. However, Georgia’s insistence on first consolidating national statehood as a prerequisite for regional unity placed the Mountainous Republic in a difficult position. Without political union with the Transcaucasus, securing international recognition appeared increasingly doubtful.

Meanwhile, White advances and Bolshevik offensives in Chechnya and Dagestan created a desperate situation. Some anti-Denikin factions began

⁴² Giorgi Batsikadze, “Democratic Republic of Georgia and Neutrality,” *Museum and Globalization* 1, no. 1 (2023): 38, <https://doi.org/10.52340/gmg2023.01.04>.

⁴³ CHAG, fond 1969, inventory 4, case 6, folio 8.

⁴⁴ *Sakartvelos respublika [Republic of Georgia]*, no. 223 (1919): 1–2.

⁴⁵ See G. G. Popov, T. G. Chshiev, and O. Yu. Kazenkov, “The Entente’s Support for the White Armies in Southern Russia (Late 1918–1919),” *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* 13, no. 5 (2020): 80–94, <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2024-3-96-170-196>.

⁴⁶ CHAG, fond 1861, inventory 3, case 4, folio 59.

aligning with the Bolsheviks. Mountaineer writer Akhmed Tsalikov warned the Western Allies that Bolsheviks and pro-independence Caucasians were being pushed into the same camp. If the West failed to provide military support to the Mountainous Republic, sympathy for the Bolsheviks would inevitably grow.⁴⁷ This was a genuine danger and further complicated the Mountainous Republic's internal political situation.

By late August, the focus of the Tbilisi conference shifted toward the internal consolidation of the dispersed North Caucasian forces. On August 28, during a session chaired by Tsalikov, a proposal was advanced to create a centralized political body capable of unifying the fragmented mountaineer factions.⁴⁸

The Path to Autonomy

At the beginning of 1920, the Bolsheviks gained the upper hand in the Russian Civil War, and the leadership of the Mountainous Republic joined the struggle against them. The Bolsheviks also opposed Georgia's independence, and the Democratic Republic of Georgia had maintained an anti-Bolshevik policy from the outset. By 1920, Georgian state security had arrested 513 Bolsheviks and their agents.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, given the critical situation in the north, it was unlikely that the fragmented and weakened resistance could achieve any tangible success. By early summer 1920, the Bolsheviks controlled most of the territory of the Mountainous Republic, including large parts of Chechnya and Dagestan.⁵⁰

The mountaineers found themselves in such a dire situation that both the idea of independence and the prospect of a confederation of the Caucasian republics had effectively disappeared. The question was no longer whether freedom could be preserved, but rather under whose authority the mountaineers would ultimately fall. The leadership of the Mountainous Republic was left with only two options: Georgia or Soviet Russia. For the mountaineers, Soviet rule was as unacceptable as Denikin's imperialism. The newspaper *Volni Gorets*, the official outlet of the United Mountain Organization of the North Caucasus and Dagestan, emphasized that Soviet Russia would expand as far as possible and that those who believed its victory over Denikin would bring peace were naïve.⁵¹ It argued that the correct course for the Bolsheviks would have been to recognize the right of the North Caucasian peoples to self-determination and national identity. Instead, bloodshed and coercion only provoked widespread dissatisfaction among the population.⁵² By the end of April 1920, the Bolsheviks had easily taken over Azerbaijan,

⁴⁷ CHAG, fond 1864, inventory 2, case 102.

⁴⁸ *Volni Gorets* [newspaper], no. 2 (1919).

⁴⁹ CHAG, fond 1863, inventory 1, case 543, folios 1, 11.

⁵⁰ Mikheil Bakhtadze and Giorgi Mamulia, *Masalebi Sakartvelosa da Chrdiloet Kavkasiis Urtiertobis Istoriidan: 1917–1921* [Materials on the History of Relations between Georgia and the North Caucasus, 1917–1921] (Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2005), 63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵² *Volni Gorets*, no. 39 (1920), "Two Paths."



further worsening the mountaineers' already desperate position. Since the idea of a Caucasian confederation was no longer viable, the Mountainous Republic's autonomy now depended on cooperation with Georgia. The Sovietization of Azerbaijan left Georgia as the mountaineers' only remaining option.

On June 2, 1920, Dagestani leader Qayıtmaz Alikhanov sent a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. In it, Alikhanov stated that, following a decision by a council of Dagestan's leaders and influential figures, they were appealing to Georgia to incorporate Dagestan on an autonomous basis. According to the proposal, the union would establish common financial, educational, military, and foreign policy institutions, while Dagestan would retain self-government and its Sharia-based legal system.⁵³ The author of the letter emphasized the potential benefits of such a union for Georgia, including access to the Caspian Sea and oil resources. In essence, the mountaineers were prepared to relinquish their statehood in exchange for unification with Georgia. As they themselves argued, Bolshevik rule appeared to them as little more than a disguised attempt to revive the Russian Empire.⁵⁴ Unification with Georgia—a historic neighbor and a culturally compatible society—was thus seen, even on an autonomous basis, as the only remaining way to preserve some degree of independence under the prevailing geopolitical conditions.

It can be argued that the mountaineer leadership's anti-Bolshevik stance and determination to break free from imperial domination brought them to the point of seeking union with Georgia, despite the sharp misunderstandings that had characterized their relations just two years earlier. Nevertheless, Georgia never issued an official response to the mountaineers' proposal, for several reasons. On May 7, 1920, Georgia and Soviet Russia signed the Moscow Agreement, in which both sides pledged strict neutrality in their mutual relations.⁵⁵ Russia regarded the North Caucasus as part of its territory. Although the agreement did not explicitly address this issue, and Georgia did not formally recognize Russia's claim, open support for the mountaineers' resistance could have provoked direct conflict with Moscow. Given Georgia's limited capabilities and the dire conditions in the North Caucasus, Alikhanov's proposal could not be realistically implemented. Moreover, mounting internal and external challenges soon placed Georgia's own sovereignty under existential threat.

By 1919, the mountaineers had already lost most of their territory in the struggle against Denikin's forces. The Mountainous Republic was no longer able to control the situation in the region and, after evacuation, continued its activities from Tbilisi. From 1920 onward, the mountaineers entered into open conflict with the Bolsheviks but ultimately suffered defeat. At the same time, their parallel diplomatic efforts to secure international support ended in complete failure.

⁵³ CHAG, fond 1864, inventory 1, case 25, folio 63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, folio 62; See the document reproduced in the Figure.

⁵⁵ Otar Janelidze, "The Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921)," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* no. 1 (31/2018) (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2018): 168–190.

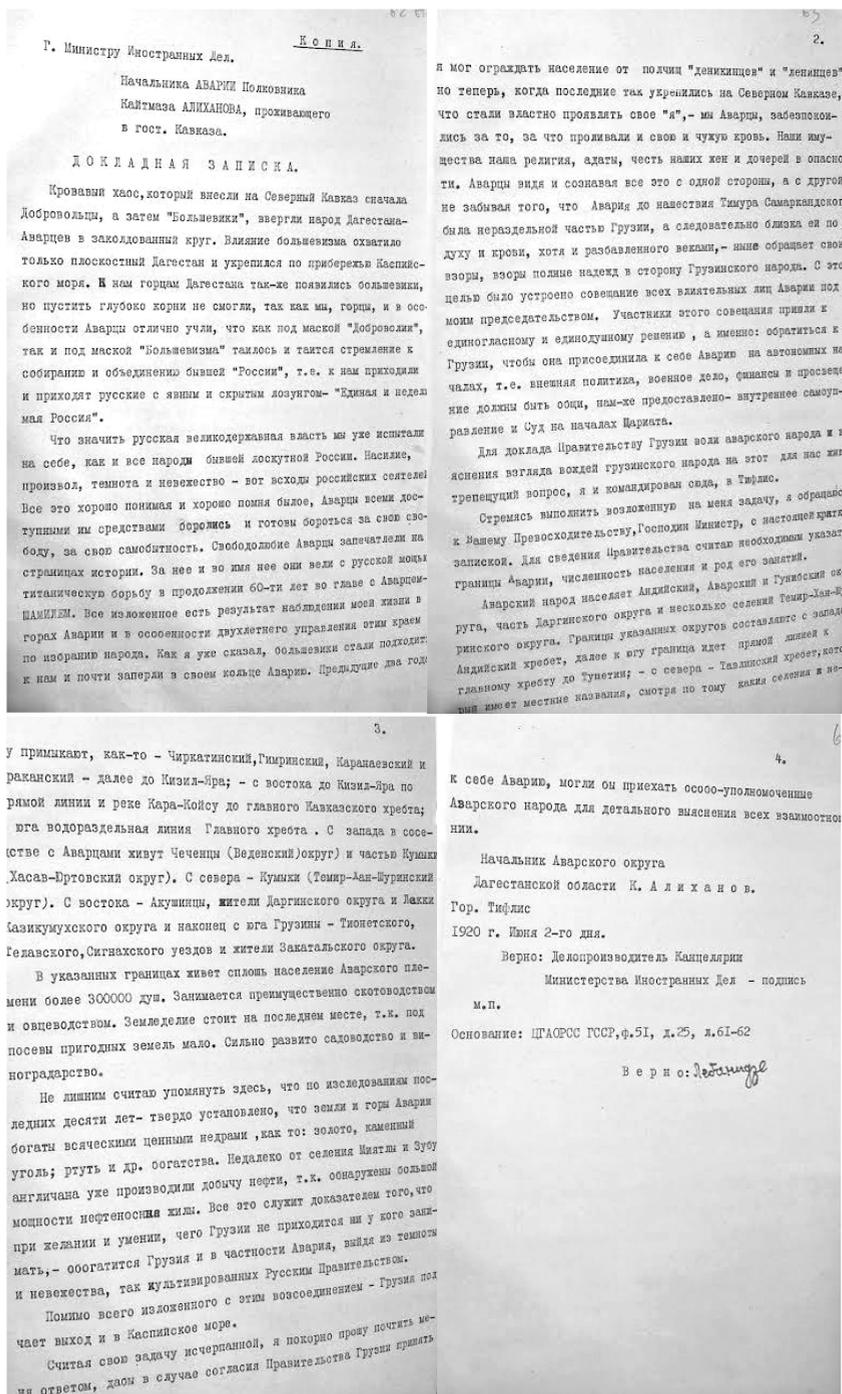


Fig. 1. Letter from the commander of Avaria (Dagestan), **Kaitmaz Alikhanov**, to the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, 2 June 1920. Central Historical Archive of Georgia (Tbilisi), Fund 1864, Inventory 1, Case 25.



In April 1920, the Bolsheviks occupied Azerbaijan—one of the Mountainous Republic’s vital arteries—leaving Georgia as its only remaining hope. Yet by 1921, Georgia itself was besieged and annexed by the Soviet Russia, extinguishing the last possibility of independence and political consolidation in the Caucasus.

Conclusion

Between 1917 and 1920, the political relationship between Georgia and the North Caucasian Mountainous Republic passed through several distinct phases. Even before either polity had formally declared independence, the Mountainous Republic proposed a political union with the South Caucasus. At the same time, Georgia’s political vision focused on unity within the Transcaucasus. The mountaineers’ similar aspirations inspired hopes among Georgian political elites for broader Caucasian unity. However, both internal and international factors ultimately impeded the realization of this potential union.

Internally, the main obstacle was the demarcation of borders and unresolved territorial claims. The two sides pragmatically chose to defer these disputes, postponing their resolution in order to avoid open regional conflict. Yet they were unable to overcome the incompatibility of their international orientations. Georgia sought to defend itself against Ottoman territorial claims, while the mountaineers placed their hopes in an alliance with the Ottoman Empire. At a time when the outcome of the Russian Revolution remained uncertain, and the full range of threats facing the Caucasus was still unclear, both sides prioritized loyalty to their respective international alignments over the pursuit of Caucasian unity.

Following the collapse of the fragile Transcaucasian Federation and Georgia’s declaration of independence, Georgia’s political strategy centered on consolidating sovereignty and achieving international recognition. For the mountaineers, by contrast, the idea of a Caucasian confederation gained even greater importance. In the aftermath of the Ottoman defeat, the failure to secure international recognition, and the advance of the White Army, their hopes became increasingly tied to regional unification. Whereas earlier the primary obstacle to unity had been conflicting international alignments, at this stage divergent conceptions of statehood came to the fore. Georgia had embraced a democratic path that implied administrative decentralization and a cautious attitude toward unification prior to the firm consolidation of independence by each Caucasian nation. For the mountaineers, however, the struggle to preserve sovereignty and the search for mechanisms of political consolidation unfolded simultaneously. In this context, Georgia emerged as one of the Mountainous Republic’s principal supporters. This support became an integral part of Georgia’s political agenda, as Tbilisi recognized that the survival of the Mountainous Republic was crucial to safeguarding the freedom of the Caucasus as a whole.

The character of Georgian–North Caucasian cooperation was shaped by shared goals and common threats. In their struggle first against the White Army and later against the Bolsheviks, the two sides occupied similar positions, which formed the basis for close political and military cooperation. At this stage, the preservation of independence became the overriding priority. Nevertheless, support from Georgia and Azerbaijan proved insufficient to alter the balance of power. After the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, the mountaineers expressed their willingness to join Georgia on the basis of autonomy. At this point, even a minimal form of Caucasian unification—albeit one involving unequal political rights—appeared more acceptable to the mountaineers than any alternative political arrangement. Despite numerous shared challenges and overlapping interests, the Caucasus failed to achieve lasting political consolidation. Ultimately, this failure of unity came at the cost of independence for the Caucasian states.

Rezumat

Acest studiu analizează evoluția relațiilor dintre Georgia și Republica Muntenească a Caucazului de Nord în perioada 1917–1920, în contextul revoluției, al proceselor de independență și al crizelor regionale. Articolul identifică trei etape distincte ale acestor relații: dispute teritoriale și orientări internaționale divergente, o perioadă de cooperare strânsă și încercări de unificare politică bazate pe principii de autonomie. Bazându-se pe un corpus amplu de surse de arhivă, analiza demonstrează modul în care amenințările externe comune au favorizat o colaborare mai strânsă între cele două părți. Studiul arată că sprijinul acordat de Georgia Republicii Muntenești a fost determinat în principal de interese strategice. Totodată, evidențiază factorii politici care au influențat relațiile georgiano–nord-caucaziene, subliniind atât fezabilitatea, cât și limitele eforturilor de unificare. În ansamblu, articolul contribuie la o înțelegere mai profundă a fundamentelor istorice ale cooperării regionale în Caucaz și evidențiază rolul jucat de ideea unității în realitatea politică a regiunii la începutul secolului al XX-lea.

Cuvinte-cheie: Caucaz; Georgia; Republica Muntenească; confederație.

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