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## THE SOUTH CAUCASIAN UNION – CHALLENGING GEOPOLITICAL CONCEPT REVISITED

**Abstract:**

*In the paper, we discuss a very complex and contestable idea, proposed and developed by us already for several years, about strengthening the uneasy political, economic, social, cultural and most significantly – security relationships between the three South Caucasian countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, towards forming new geopolitical centre in the south-eastern shore of the Black Sea, or more precisely, just in the middle of the Black and Caspian Seas; in one of the most important and complicated regions in the world. The South Caucasian Union (SCU) concept has quite reasonable historical roots and although not successful enough until now, however certain examples, which could serve as preconditions, whether predispositions more: the existence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) (22 April-28 May 1918) and even the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (Transcaucasian SFSR or TSFSR) (1922-1936). Along with the corresponding consideration of the region's hardest internal conflicts, at the same time globally so meaningful, and especially almost the dilemmatic dispute of Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), but not limited to, we have drawn some feasible conflict-resolution scenarios under the effective SCU model, which ensuring first of all security or in particular, protection of independence and sovereignty of the South Caucasian states as their basic interests, is to logically counterweight any threats coming from bigger, more powerful and ambitious regional competitors, whether dominants and due to evident aggression, from – Russia, in specific.*

**Keywords:**

*The South Caucasian Union (SCU); Armenia; Azerbaijan; Georgia; Russia*

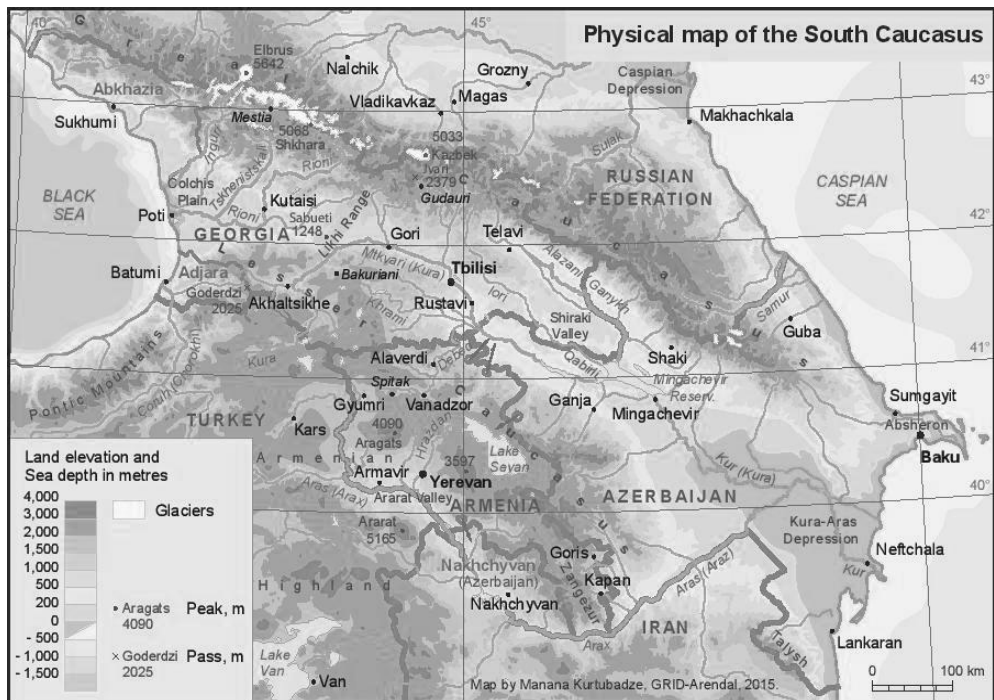
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## The South Caucasus – United?

Besides many things that Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia might and might not share in common in terms of history, politics, social-economic development, culture, etc., if one looks especially at the physical map of the South Caucasus (SC), it will be quite challenging to doubt certain unity of this piece of the world. At the same time, seems possible as well to speak even about the cohesion to some extent.

*Map 1: Physical map of the South Caucasus.*



Source: M. Kurtubadze, *Physical map of the South Caucasus*, GRID-Arendal, <<http://www.grida.no/resources/7628>> (29.11.2019)

## The South Caucasian Union – Origins of the Idea: Tekali

On May 24, 2014 in the village of Tekali, Georgia, at the intersection of the borders of the three South-Caucasian republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, I gave a speech entitled: “The South Caucasian Union: Pros and

Cons. The Role and Potential of Georgia”<sup>2</sup> during the public hearing as part of an open competition for participation in the Tekali Process, the peacemaking, freedom, and cooperation zone initiative implemented and supported by different South Caucasian and international NGOs that work towards regional cooperation and conflict transformation. The public hearing was conducted in the framework of the project ‘Symbolic Court of Human Rights’ with the support of National Endowment for Democracy (USA). Other reports presented on the same topic there, however provided through different lenses, have been addressed to the Tekali public by two colleagues: Zardusht Alizadeh, well-known independent Azerbaijani political analyst, and former politician, representing Azerbaijan, and Samvel Israelian, an expert from Armenia.

The idea of the union emerged among first of all the human rights defenders and academicians, namely especially Khamis Masimov, living and leading their activist or academic work in the South Caucasus, while the same concept afterward was developed for the years following particularly 2008, after the famous Georgian-Russian confrontation.

Noteworthy to mention that the proposition to establish the South Caucasian Union was first publicly debated, fiercely opposed, however finally supported with 42 votes for – against 16 rejecting, when 3 voters remained abstain, during the public hearing with the participation of the dwellers of Tekali and guests from Agstafa, Baku, Gori, Gyumri, Ijevan, Marneuli, Kazakh, Noyemberyan, Tbilisi, Rustavi, Yerevan and the frontier villages of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, that took place in Tekali on March 8, 2014.

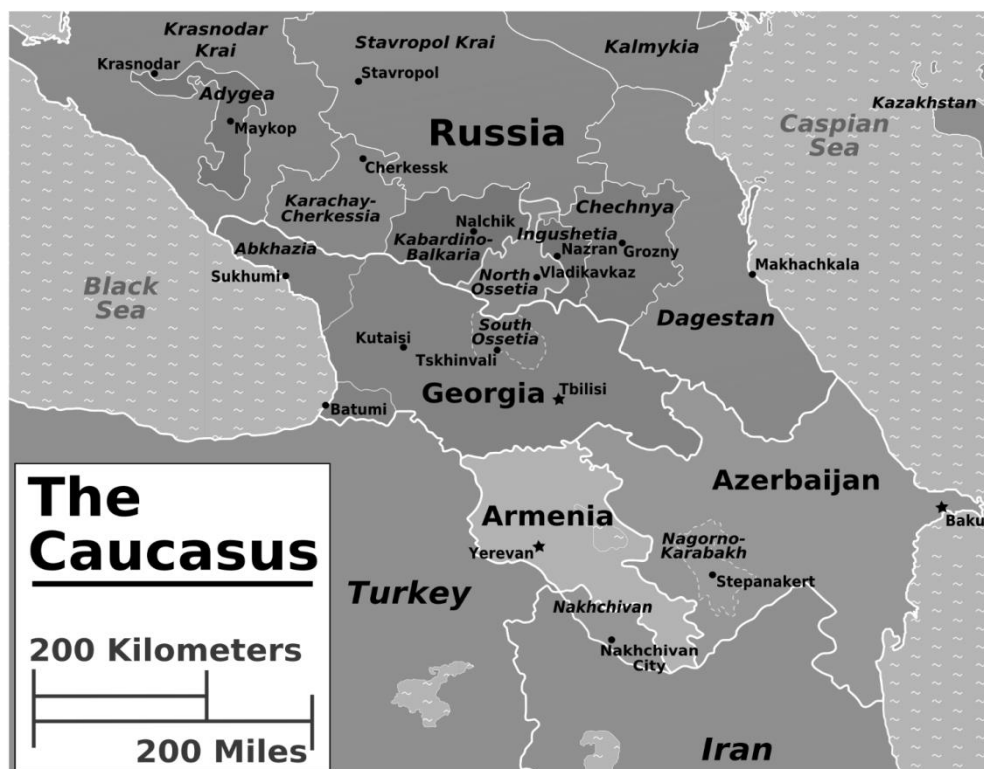
### **The South Caucasus – Divided**

Whenever we look at the political, whether a geopolitical map of the South Caucasus, as well as of the broader Caucasus region at large, we definitely see the big diversity, and taking into account quite complicated historical background and the current interethnic, territorial, religious, i.e. political and cultural cleavages that consequently often are turned into economic tensions and in some cases even military escalations as well, we can legitimately claim that the given part of the world faces deeply rooted and sharp divisions.

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<sup>2</sup> K. Chapichadze, „*Yuzhnokavkazskiy Soyuz: za i protiv. Rol' i potentsial Gruzii*”, Doklad na grazhdanskom slushanii, Tekali Process, Tekali, Gruzija, 24.05.2014, <<http://southcaucasus.com/index.php?p=khatunachapichadze>> (29.11.2019)

*Map 2: Caucasus regions map for use on Wikivoyage, English version.*



Source: <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caucasus\\_regions\\_map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caucasus_regions_map.png)> (29.11.2019).

### **The Union Concept has quite reasonable historical roots**

Although not successful enough until now, however, the meaningful precedent took place and certain significant examples we can evidently provide in terms of the South Caucasian unification, which could serve as preconditions, whether predispositions more; in particular, the existence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) (22 April-28 May 1918) and the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (Transcaucasian SFSR or TSFSR), also known as the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (1922-1936) is taken into consideration here.

### **The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) (22 April-28 May 1918)**

On November 15 (28), 1917 in Tiflis, the Mensheviks (Georgian Social Democrats), Esers (Socialist Revolutionaries), Armenian Dashnaks (Armenian

Revolutionary Federation members) and Azerbaijani Musavatists (members of the initial Muslim Democratic Musavat Party founded in Baku, in 1911), with the active support of the Entente countries, created the Transcaucasian Commissariat – the government of Transcaucasia (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia), which replaced the Special Transcaucasian Committee created by the Provisional Government of Russia to govern the Transcaucasus. The Commissariat was headed by the Menshevik Evgeny Gegechkori.

The decision to create an ‘Independent Government of the Transcaucasus’ was made on November 11 (24), 1917 at a meeting on the organization of local power in the Caucasus in connection with the October Revolution. The meeting was attended by representatives of all political parties, the Regional and Tiflis Councils, the Special Transcaucasian Committee, the Commander of the Caucasus Front, and Consuls of the Entente countries – Great Britain, France, and Russia. The meeting refused to recognize the power of the Council of People’s Commissars of Soviet Russia. Representatives of the Bolshevik party, who turned out to be in the minority at the meeting, denounced the declaration, condemning the organizers of the meeting and left it.

The Declaration of the Transcaucasian Commissariat of November 18 (December 1) stated that it would act “only until the All-Russian Constituent Assembly is convened, and if it is impossible to convene [...] until the congress of the Constituent Assembly members is convened from the Transcaucasus and the Caucasus Front”<sup>3</sup>.

On January 5 (18), 1918, a Constituent Assembly was convened in Petrograd, majority members of which were representatives of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. Deputies refused to recognize Soviet power and the decrees of the 2<sup>nd</sup> All-Russian Congress of Soviets. In response to this, the Bolsheviks dispersed the Constituent Assembly.

On January 12 (25), 1918, the Transcaucasian Commissariat, having discussed the political situation, decided to convene the Transcaucasian Sejm as the legislative body of Transcaucasia.

On February 10 (23), 1918, while still officially part of Russia, the first meeting of the Transcaucasian Sejm took place in Tiflis, in which the most numerous fractions were represented by Social Democrats (Mensheviks) – 32 members; Muslim fraction (Musavatists and non-partisan) – 50 and Dashnak fraction – 27 members. Karlo Chkheidze, a famous Georgian Social-Democrat, was elected Chairman of the Sejm. With the convocation of the Sejm, the Transcaucasian Commissariat emphasized the fact of the withdrawal of the region from Russia, although independence has not yet been officially declared.

On March 3 (February 18), Soviet Russia signed the Brest Peace Treaty with Germany and its allies, according to which the regions of Batumi, Kars, and Ardagan were transferred to Turkey. The terms of the agreement were not

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<sup>3</sup> A. Menteshashvili, *Iz istorii vzaimootnosheniy Gruzinskoy Demokraticheskoy Respubliki s sovetskoy Rossiyei i Antantoy 1918-1921 gg.*, Tbilisi 1989, s. 4.

agreed with the Transcaucasian Commissariat, since it was not recognized either by Russia, Turkey, or Germany. Turkey immediately demanded the regions transferred to it, although Transcaucasia rejected the demand, and tried to resolve this issue by diplomatic means. In March of 1918, the Trebizond negotiations began between the Transcaucasian side and Turkey, although they turned out to be inconclusive for Transcaucasia; the Turkish army began military operations and by April it had already occupied Batumi, Ozurgeti, and Meskheta. The Turkish troops were stopped only near the Choloki River (located on the territory of the south-western Georgia, in Adjara region. The river is the center of significant historical events taking place in 1854 and 1918 between Russian/Georgian and Turkish armies).

To resolve the tensed situation, the Transcaucasian Sejm convened on April 9 (22), 1918, where it was decided that only in the case of the official declaration of independence of Transcaucasia would it be possible to prevent the Turkish aggression. Consequently, the creation of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) was proclaimed on the same day, and Akaki Chkhenkeli, another well-known Georgian Social Democratic politician, was appointed chairman and minister of foreign affairs. The Sejm made a decision – to continue peace talks with Turkey.

On May 28 (June 10), 1918, Georgia signed the Poti Peace Treaty with Germany, which enabled to launch the German expedition in the Caucasus against the military forces of the Ottoman Empire.

### **The Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (Transcaucasian SFSR or TSFSR), Also Known As the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (1922-1936)**

On March 12, 1922, in Tiflis, a conference of representatives of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the Azerbaijan SSR, the CEC of the Armenian SSR and the CEC of the Georgian SSR approved an agreement on the creation of the Federal Union of Socialist Soviet Republics of Transcaucasia (FUSSRT).

On December 13, 1922, the 1<sup>st</sup> Transcaucasian Congress of Soviets (in Baku) transformed the FUSSRT into the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, while maintaining the independence of its constituent republics. The Congress approved the Constitution of the TSFSR, formed the Transcaucasian CEC and the government – the Council of People's Commissars of the TSFSR, which was headed by Ivan (Mamia) Orakhelashvili, a Georgian Bolshevik and Soviet politician.

On December 30, 1922, the TSFSR merged with the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

According to the 1936 USSR constitution, the Azerbaijan SSR, the Armenian SSR and the Georgian SSR became parts of the USSR as independent union republics.

In February-March of 1937, new constitutions of the Azerbaijan SSR, the Armenian SSR, and the Georgian SSR were adopted, and this decision legally consolidated the liquidation of the Transcaucasian Federation.

### **The History Does Matter!**

Based on the above-discussed historical facts, we can draw the following conclusions:

- First of all, it is obvious that the desire for the unification, even in political terms, is not an innovation for the countries of the South Caucasus, and there is a very interesting historical background in this regard, despite how successful the attempt/s was/were;
- Based on the historical experience, Georgia has traditionally been a geopolitical centre for the countries of the South Caucasus;
- It was interference in internal affairs and pressure, especially from the regional leader-states (Russia and Turkey) that served as a decisive factor for the collapse of the South Caucasus Association, although there were serious internal contradictions with such an alliance, mainly regarding the choice of foreign policy orientation and the vector of development by Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan; we mean the contradiction between the Georgian-Armenian pro-Western (and more specifically, pro-German) and Azerbaijani pro-Turkish orientation.

### **But what about – Today?**

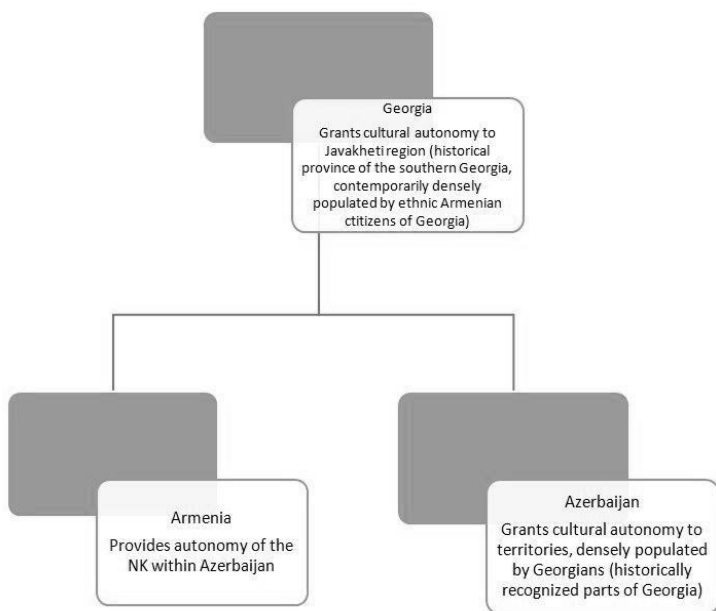
Today, although little has changed in the course of history (meaning the logic), especially in the foreign policy sense, and again there is a pressure caused by the regional leaders, particularly by the Russian Federation, which influenced the growth of internal problems too for the countries of the South Caucasus (ethno-territorial conflicts within the countries that also suffer from external or internal socio-economic pressure and destabilization; in this respect, the principle of ‘divide and conquer’ mainly works), but also in this situation, for example, Georgia has gained an opportunity to develop its role as a neutral zone and become an area for consolidation/reconciliation primarily for Armenia and Azerbaijan, given the desire and the need to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – the region’s hardest internal conflict, at the same time – globally so meaningful, and almost dilemmatic in a way, between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

### Tentatively Proposed Concessions

In order to achieve a common goal and create a strong player – the united and powerful South Caucasus, i.e. – the South Caucasian Union, the guarantor of security and future prosperity of the SC countries, the counterweight to any threats coming from bigger, more robust and ambitious regional competitors/dominants, and nowadays particularly – Russia, there is an absolute need for resolving the regional conflicts, and especially regarding – the Nagorno-Karabakh.

Therefore, we propose the following authentic scheme to make our suggestion real, and prepare foundations for the creation of durable SCU.

*Figure 3: Tentatively Proposed Concessions for Creating the South Caucasian Union (SCU)*



Source: Own work.

### Role of “Revolutions”

Since 2003, when the power in Georgia changed through the so-called ‘Rose Revolution’, this story became the main determinant of the country's mental transformation. Georgia, as a certain and more successful example of Euro-Atlantic integration, a country that, according to all estimates of international experts and Western countries, has carried out successful pro-



Western reforms (specifically, regarding building/importing democratizing political, civil institutions, etc.; values and power are transforming towards democracy logically – slower though), has real potential to become an exporter of its positive experience in the SCU in terms of ‘constructing’ a modern, democratic state, especially in the socio-political, economic and civil spheres.

The SCU Concept might seem even more relevant now, taking into account the recent substantial changes in the internal, as well as foreign policy choices and first of all, the system of mental preferences in Armenia after the 2018 Armenian revolution (#MerzhirSerzhin, i.e. #RejectSerzh), the country, which is seen as the second most successfully and rapidly democratizing country in the region after Georgia.

### Possible Interactions

Clearly greatly important and extremely interesting would be to find out the potential relationships of the SCU – with or within the EU, the Three Seas Initiative, NATO, and other geopolitical blocks/security initiatives, whether already functioning or still to be formed in the broader region/s.

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