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Thomas De Waal
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A Broken Region: The Persistent Failure of Integration Projects in the South Caucasus

THOMAS DE WAAL

Abstract

This essay reviews failed historical attempts at regional integration in the South Caucasus since the early twentieth century, and in particular the failed Transcaucasian federations of 1918 and 1922–1936 and the breakdown of Soviet economic integration in the region. It argues that there is much that makes the South Caucasus a viable region in terms of geography, culture and economic potential, but political contradictions and persistent perceptions of insecurity make for a pattern of recurring fragmentation. Both Caucasians and outsiders have a role to play if voluntary integration is to work as a project in the future.

The place that used to be the Transcaucasus and which is now called the South Caucasus presents a paradox in that it can be plausibly described both as a region and as not a region. The debate over this definition is not merely a theoretical one and raises fundamental questions about how the problems of the South Caucasus should be addressed. Is regional integration an inherently flawed strategy, or has it merely been wrongly applied, or has it faced obstacles that were too great? In answering these questions, it is instructive to look at the attempts to achieve overarching regional integration that were attempted in the last century—the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation and the looser Soviet Transcaucasian Federative Republic of 1922–1936, as well the integrationist processes of the Soviet period as a whole—and understand why they failed. A broader look at the repeating historical patterns suggests that exclusive national projects tend to overwhelm regional ones and that recurring problems of insecurity undermine integration projects.

Despite its history of disorder and disintegration, there is a strong case to be made that the South Caucasus does constitute a region and outside policy makers should treat it as such—although without trying to impose overly rigid limits on how the concept

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should be applied. This is not a universally shared view. Some argue that the concept of a South Caucasus region is merely a post-colonial legacy, a construction that has outlived its historic usefulness. Some scholars prefer to locate Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia within a wider context, by putting an emphasis, for example, on a ‘wider Black Sea region’ (Cornell et al. 2006). Most policy makers in foreign ministries tend to see their relationship with the region as three bilateral official relationships with Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan, paying little attention either to the three de facto breakaway states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh or to the South Caucasus regional dimension. Yet I want to make the argument that, although the boundaries of the South Caucasus are blurred and its identities are varied, it does make sense to talk about it as a region and to encourage efforts for consensual regional integration.

What binds the region together?

Several elements make this a region. The first is geography. Its first two boundaries to the east and west, the Caspian and Black Seas, are indisputable. The third, to the north, the Greater Caucasus mountain range, forms one of the strongest natural borders in the world, in Strabo’s famous words, ‘forming a rampart to the isthmus which separates one sea from another’ (Strabo 1856, p. 226). The boundary is blurred only at three points, in Abkhazia, Dagestan, and across the mountains of Georgia (on just three roads), with the result that the Abkhaz, Lezghins, and Ossetians have a foot in both worlds of the North and South Caucasus. But the mountains make the distinction between the North and South Caucasus much sharper than that between, for example, European and Asian Russia. The barrier has given the two regions strongly diverging histories. The North Caucasus was subject to much more brutal and complete colonial subjugation by tsarist Russia than the south, in part due to the perception that the peoples of the North Caucasus were less ‘civilised’ and susceptible to imperial rule, but also, crucially, because of the resources the Russian empire could commit to each place. For centuries, the only good viable route to the southern Caucasus was along the shore of the Caspian Sea via the Dagestani city of Derbent—a road taken initially by Peter the Great and chosen subsequently by other invaders from the north, including the Bolsheviks in 1920. The route into Georgia through the Daryal Pass was much more difficult; even after the Russian takeover of Georgia in 1801 the imperial army still faced a hazardous journey on this route. In 1812, rebels led by Alexander, younger son of former Georgian King Erekle II, cut the road across the mountains and massacred an entire Russian garrison. The only road, the Georgian Military Highway, was poorly built, ran through thick forests and, at only 10 feet wide, was too narrow for artillery to negotiate. The 130-mile long highway, with bridges spanning the multiple gorges, was finally completed in 1817. In the North Caucasus, by contrast, the only physical obstacles to conquest were the thick beech forests and winding gorges of the highlands which eventually, tens of thousands of conscript troops would overcome. As a result, Russia was always constrained by the mountains in the military resources it could deploy in the south and tended to rely on consent and co-optation of elites to rule the region. The history of two small peoples with archaic customs living on either side of the mountains, the Balkars and the Svans, makes for an instructive comparison. The North Caucasian Balkars were subjected to
the full process of colonial subjugation and modernisation by Russians, which included, in the twentieth century, collectivisation, Nazi conquest, Soviet re-conquest and then mass deportation in 1944. The South Caucasian Svan was—and still are to a large extent—mostly left to their own devices and retain many of their pre-modern ways.

The fourth border of the South Caucasus, to the south and south-west, with Iran and Turkey, is the one chiefly defined by politics. The Iranian border, running mostly along the Araxes River, has been established since 1828, but it is basically a political line drawn on the map. The fact that Batumi is part of Georgia and Kars and Igdir are part of Turkey is a result of the shifting battle-lines of 1918–1921. And yet, I would argue, the experience of the Soviet Union, the Cold War and closed borders has given those boundaries a real historical solidity. Post-Soviet Azerbaijanis in their secularised way of life have more in common with post-Soviet Armenians than they do with either Turks or even Iranian Azerbaijanis. After the end of the Soviet Union, a major reason why Ajaria did not become a conflict flashpoint, as it had been in the 1915–1921 period, was that the Muslim Ajarians had grown apart from their ancestral patrons, the Turks, after the enforced separation of the years of the Cold War. The two had become part of different regions (de Waal 2010, pp. 145–47). This geography continues to shape the lives of residents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Eldar Ismailov and Vladimer Papava have made an interesting proposal to rename the geographical space of these countries ‘The Central Caucasus’, and redefine the ‘South Caucasus’ as parts of northern Iran and north-eastern Turkey. But connections across the borders of Iran and Turkey are currently too weak to make this more than a theoretical proposition (Ismailov & Papava 2006).

The second element that binds the South Caucasus together is a shared culture. The inhabitants of the South Caucasus share many customs and assumptions that a visiting anthropologist would quickly recognise. However much urban Europeanised intellectuals in Tbilisi and Yerevan prefer not to acknowledge it, the peoples of the region share an enormous amount in terms of social traditions, music, cooking, family behaviour and the way they celebrate great life rituals such as weddings and funerals. The Soviet era added a further layer of identity, giving Soviet Transcaucasians a lingua franca in Russian and a shared experience of being ‘southerners’ within the Soviet system. These affinities mean very little when political quarrels break out, but where different ethnic groups feel secure and on uncontested territory, as for example Armenians and Azerbaijanis do in Georgia, observers notice that they quickly find a rapport and modus vivendi.

There is also a persistent intellectual strain, which identifies shared Caucasian traditions formed by history and topography and celebrates the uniqueness of the region. The heyday of this common culture was probably the court of Irakli II in Tiflis in the eighteenth century, where the Armenian-born monk-turned-troubadour Sayat Nova composed songs in Armenian, Georgian and Persian and chiefly in the lingua franca of the day, Azerbaijani Turkish. In the twentieth century it was best exemplified in multi-ethnic Baku, but also survived in exile. It can be found in émigré publications, which were of course coloured by nostalgia, but also given a clarity of perspective by distance from local politics. In 1955, the Circassian scholar Aytek Namitok, in a programmatic essay entitled ‘The Caucasus’ wrote that:
The Caucasus became a living museum of the ancient races, the repository of a deep and rich stratification of various cultures, protected by topography against all attacks from outside. This long past has left in the character of the peoples traces which may be found in the old traditional families: pride and the reflexes of honour and nobility. And as their ethnic conservatism is wedded among Caucasians to extreme individualism, they are naturally hostile to any system which reduces personality to one common level, and to any form of oppression as well. (Namitok 1955, p. 6)

Despite its romantic tint, Namitok’s views point to a recurring dynamic of this region. A collection of small peoples are surrounded by larger neighbouring powers, Iran, Russia and Turkey. Although they seek protection from and alliance with these powers, they also resist assimilation and have more in common on a day-to-day level with local neighbours, even though they may be in a state of political conflict with them.

Finally, economics and trade cleave this region together. The geographic location of the South Caucasus between Russia and the Middle East and the Black and Caspian Seas has made it a natural east–west and north–south trade corridor. In medieval times it was a conduit for a northern branch of the old Silk Road, but this potential was only fully realised by nineteenth-century technology. Prior to that, there had been a strong east–west division into Ottoman and Persian spheres of influence. Modern-day Georgia was split, with Mingrelia, Guria and Imereti belonging more in the Ottoman world, and Kartli and Kakheti in the Persian world. The dividing line was the Surami Highlands east of Kutaisi. In 1890, Russian engineers made the biggest step towards reunifying the old Georgian lands since the days of Queen Tamar, when they blasted a railway tunnel through the Surami Highlands, linking the Black and Caspian Seas by train for the first time. In 1906 the world’s first ‘kerosene pipeline’ from Baku to Batumi followed the same route. In Soviet times, this transport infrastructure was extended, linking Sukhumi, Yerevan and Nakhichevan and Ijevan, Kazakh and Tbilisi in interlocking railway networks. The potential is still there for these connections to be restored and for the South Caucasus to be the pathway between Russia and Iran and Turkey and the Caspian Sea.

Failed federations

On the other hand, the South Caucasus has persistently failed to work as a region. Nothing serious was attempted until the turn of the twentieth century, and since then regional integration projects have failed. To talk of the Georgian kings David the Builder and Erekle II as integrationist is too anachronistic. The tsarist empire governed a collection of provinces named after their principal cities which slowly gained a loose regional identity within the imperial system, after a viceroyalty was established in Tiflis in 1844. At the end of the nineteenth century, with the technological advances of railways and communications, it became more feasible to look at the region as a distinct whole. The culmination of this was the only attempt to form a Trancaucasian state in the spring of 1918, which collapsed after just one month. However, the Transcaucasian Federation did not last long enough to bear serious scrutiny. It was an improvised strategy, devised in April 1918, when it was clear that Russia was too preoccupied with its own problems to care about the
Transcaucasus, and as an Ottoman invasion threatened the region. In November 1917, Georgian Menshevik leader Noe Zhordania still believed his country’s best hopes lay through a more democratic Russia. He said, ‘This union [with Russia in 1801] was not the result of some kind of personal caprice or a matter of simple chance. It was a historic inevitability. At that time, Georgia stood before a dilemma: the East or the West. And our ancestors decided to turn away from the East and turn to the West. But the road to the West lay through Russia, and consequently to go toward the West meant union with Russia’ (Zhordania 1919, p. 52). Five months later, events made the Caucasian leaders change their mind. Russia was embroiled in a destructive civil war, leaving Turkey a free hand to pursue its ambitions in the Caucasus. Enver Pasha’s Ottoman Third Army captured Erzerum, Ardahan and Batum in quick succession. On 22 April 1918, the leaders voted to form a Transcaucasian Federation, nominally so as to form a unified position in the face of the new Ottoman threat. Zhordania himself abstained on the vote. But, as Enver Pasha marched further, the Armenians were desperate to ward off an Ottoman takeover, while Azerbaijanis mostly welcomed the advance of their Turkic brethren. Zhordania secretly negotiated a new alliance with Germany and on 26 May 1918 declared Georgia independent and the federation bankrupt. ‘At the present moment the Georgian people says it is ready to accept the dominion of anyone rather than fall under the dominion of Turkey’, Zhordania declared (Zhordania 1919, p. 94). The Georgian move signed the death warrant of the federation, and left the other two Transcaucasian Republics no choice but to declare independence two days later. They did so on Georgian territory in a situation of extreme crisis. The Armenians had just managed to avoid complete destruction by the Ottoman Army by their actions at the Battle of Sardarapat. The Azerbaijani nationalists declared independence in the Hotel Orient in Tiflis and set up a provisional government in Ganja because the Bolsheviks were in control of Baku.

This was the context for the short-lived independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In the autumn of 1919, the US general James Harbord was sent to the region by President Woodrow Wilson to study the feasibility of adopting independent Armenia under an American mandate. He painted a picture of the region at its most dysfunctional:

The three Governments from an occidental standpoint are now thoroughly inefficient, without credit, and undoubtedly corrupt. Alone each faces inextricable financial difficulties. Religious differences, added to racial, threaten to embroil them unless brought under a common control. Two of them have no outlet to the Black Sea except through Georgia over the railroad. They have no present intermonetary, postal, or customs union, and, as stated, no definite agreement for common control and use of the railroad, and are in continual squabbles over boundaries. Azarbaijan has no educated class capable of well administering a government; Georgia is threatened by bolshevism; Armenia is in ruins, and partial starvation. (Harbord 1920, p. 14)

From integration it was a short step to disintegration—an interesting parallel to what happened to the region at the end of the Soviet period. General Harbord’s conclusion in 1919 was dramatic, but utopian: ‘All our investigation brings conviction that the people in each would welcome a mandatory [sic] by a trustworthy outside power’ (Harbord 1920, p. 14).
In other words, if the small nations of the Transcaucasus could not sort out their problems, a bigger power should do it for them. As we know, the United States was too far away to take up this challenge and besides the situation on the ground was changing fast. In fact in 1919 only one power was willing and able to assume a mandate to govern the Transcaucasus as a single whole, but very much on its own terms, and that of course was Bolshevik Russia.

The Soviet project

By the spring of 1921, the Bolsheviks had re-conquered the South Caucasus. They encountered strong resistance but also received support from workers and minorities, such as the Abkhaz, Ossetians and Karabakh Armenians. Integration was again the watchword. They used the breakdown and bloodshed of the preceding years as their chief rationale for their own attempt at top-down regional unification and, in their own brutal way, put an end to seven years of strife and disintegration. In April 1923, the chief Bolshevik in the Caucasus, Sergo Orjonikidze, made a spirited defence of the virtues of the Bolshevik-imposed integration in the form of the new Soviet Transcaucasian Federation.1 Orjonikidze said the South Caucasus was a 'single economic organism' and that, 'Our enemies, the Mensheviks, Musavatists and Dashnaks understood this, they understood that the Transcaucasus is a single economic whole and when in power, they created not distinct republics but a Transcaucasian Republic'. However, he then went on to comment that the national leaders had failed to unite in 1918, with disastrous results:

The formation of separate national republics led to a historically unprecedented worsening of national relations between the Transcaucasian peoples. Wars between the republics over frontiers—the war between Georgia and Armenia, the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, wars inside the republics—the destruction and burning of South Ossetia by the Mensheviks, the war of the Mensheviks with the Ajarians, war with the Abkhaz, war with the Akhaltsikhe Muslims. The mutual slaughter, in the literal sense of this word, of Muslims and Armenians filled the atmosphere of the Transcaucasus with the poison of hatred. The republics shut themselves off from one another with a Chinese Wall of customs barriers.

Soviet power intervened in this over-heated atmosphere of national hatred. The population sighed with relief. It sensed that an end had come to these horrors. At the height of massacres of Armenians by Muslims in the Shusha-Aghdam region in Azerbaijan, Soviet power was proclaimed and the Red Army instantly put a stop to the massacres by its intervention in Soviet Azerbaijan, was welcomed by the whole population as a saviour from bloody horrors, destruction and devastation. (Gorny 1992, pp. 144–5)

Read straight off the page, without consideration of what was to follow, Orjonikidze’s arguments read very well. Seen retrospectively from the 1980s however, the devising of the new ethno-territorial map of the Caucasus by Orjonokidze and his comrades was viewed as a cynical game of ‘ethnic engineering’ or ‘divide-and-rule policies’. But historians and scholars, such as Arsène Saparov, Jeremy Smith, Valerii Tishkov and Anatolii Yamskov, have revealed more method and pragmatism in the

1Pravda, 12 April 1923.
decisions made by the Bolsheviks, seeing them as being also driven by concerns of conflict resolution and economic integration—what might be called a policy of ‘combine-and-rule’. For example, analysing the creation of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, Saparov wrote, ‘Ossetian autonomy was a compromise solution the Bolsheviks adopted to solve the fierce civil war conflict. It was not a product of any deliberate policy to divide and rule’ (Saparov 2010, p. 121). Yamskov has explained how one justification for putting the Armenian-populated highlands of Karabakh within Soviet Azerbaijan and making them into a new autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh was that it would allow shepherds to move their flocks from winter to summer pastures without crossing a republican border (Yamskov 1991, p. 20). Interpreting Bolshevik decisions in the North Caucasus in a similar light, Tishkov wrote, ‘In reality, a prevailing motive behind this was to establish economically viable republics, with mountain and foothill resources and with natural communications and appropriate geographies—not to implement the “divide and rule” principle’ (Tishkov 1997, p. 34).

Stalin and Orjonikidze also had plans for a single regional federation. In 1922 they founded a new Soviet Transcaucasian Federation, known chiefly by its Russian initials, the ZSFSR (Zakavkazskaya Sovetskaya Federativnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika). This is not the place to revisit the ‘Georgian affair’ and the fierce arguments between the local Georgian Bolsheviks on the one hand and the Moscow Bolsheviks, led by two Georgians, Stalin and Orjonikidze, and supported by most Armenians and Azerbaijanis, on the other. Suffice it to say that the centralisers were not merely motivated, as is sometimes suggested, by a desire to impose direct and comprehensive rule from Moscow over the region—or rather this may have been their long-term aim, but they also had shorter-term objectives, the first of which was to stabilise the region by giving its restless minorities, such as the Abkhaz, Ajarians, Karabakh Armenians and Ossetians a stake in the new order. The bloodshed and chaos of the preceding years had been so intense that there were obvious attractions to erecting a single overarching Soviet structure to cover over all the old contradictions. The creation within that structure of four of the autonomous entities of the Soviet Transcaucasus: Ajaria, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, can be seen as an improvised solution to the conflicts that had been raging there over the previous four years.2 A future scholar would be advised to study whether the Bolsheviks imposed a ready-made ethno-federal structure on the South Caucasus, or whether, in actual fact, they were compelled by force of circumstance in the fragile situation of 1921 to devise their complex ethno-federal system in order to manage the conflicts of the Caucasus; in other words, it would be worth investigating whether the Caucasus was the blueprint and the ethno-federal system the result rather than, as is frequently assumed, the other way round.

The ambitions of the Georgians were to be sacrificed to this goal of a larger federation. In the event, the ZSFSR project was approved but the Georgians succeeded in watering down its functions to essentially economic ones. In practice, the

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2 A fifth autonomous republic in Nakhichevan was evidently more a product of geography and Turkish interests, while the short-lived Red Kurdistan was abolished when the Stalinist regime began to persecute ethnic Kurds.
separate republics (initially, Abkhazia among them) kept most of their institutional powers. Lavrentii Beria, appointed head of the ZSFSR in 1931, was content to see it quietly dissolved in 1936 into the three Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Beria stayed on as head of the Georgian Communist Party (Sakartvelos Komunisturi Partia) before he was moved to head the NKVD in Moscow in 1938 (Knight 1995; Rayfield 2004).

From that point on, the three South Caucasian republics maintained markedly independent traditions and grew further apart. Naturally, the Soviet Union made for integration on many levels, provided the lingua franca of Russian and many shared elements of a Soviet identity. But for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia there was no longer a shared Transcaucasian structure, merely rule by Baku, Tbilisi, Yerevan and, of course, Moscow. As many scholars have noted, the Soviet Union preserved and sharpened ethnic and national differences. Despite their natural communications links, Trans-Caucasian trade was also surprisingly limited, due to the eccentricities of the USSR-wide command economy. After the death of Stalin, the leaders of the republics increasingly resembled feudal princes, who vied with one another for the patronage of Moscow and had little interest in regional cooperation. Each cultivated republican institutions, from party networks to academies of science, which then transmuted into the institutions of independent statehood in 1991. To cite but one case of intra-regional rivalry, Armenian and Azerbaijani Communist Party leaders, Karen Demirchian and Heydar Aliev, clashed in the 1970s and 1980s over what was supposed to be an intra-regional project, a highway from eastern Azerbaijan across Armenia into the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan. Demirchian succeeded in blocking what was supposed to be a project benefiting the Soviet Transcaucasus as a whole because he judged it deleterious to Armenian interests (de Waal 2003, pp. 135–36; Martin 2001; Suny 1993).

Reasons for failure

Why did integration in the South Caucasus fail? The contradictions of 1918 stand out clearly as you read the émigré journals of the 1920s and the 1930s and the essays of the leaders of the former independent republics. To study them is to read hand-wringing accounts of how the Caucasians forgot their common interests and allowed the Bolsheviks to take over. However the spin that different authors put on their defeat reveals how unbridgeable the divisions actually were: either the Caucasians were too close to the Bolsheviks or to Denikin, too close to the Turks or not firmly enough opposed to them. For example here is the Azerbaijani author Shefi Rustameili writing in the Paris-based journal Kavkaz in 1935 and giving a very slanted version of how Azerbaijan fell to the Bolsheviks. He writes, ‘By April 28 [1920], Azerbaijan, having endured a grave internal political crisis, drawn by the combined actions of the Armenian government and the command of the 11th Soviet army into battle with Armenian insurgents in Karabakh, with allied Georgia adopting a complete indifferent and passive position, was basically powerless to resist the armed forces of the attacking Red Army’ (Rustameili 1935, pp. 10–11). This is not a version of events that Karabakh Armenians, whose community in the town of Shusha had been ravaged by an Azerbaijani army in March 1920, would recognise.
The fundamental issue was—and remains—that the shorter-term political agendas of national groups out-trump broader economic interests. This can take extreme forms. On several occasions, Caucasian rebels have blocked the main economic arteries of the region—its railways—in the name of immediate political goals. In 1905 for example Georgian Marxist rebels blocked the tunnel through the Surami highlands with a captured engine and instantly cut the Transcaucasus in two. In 1990 Georgian nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia organised a blockade of Georgia’s railway system, with disastrous economic repercussions, to try to force through the electoral law he wanted for the new Georgian Supreme Soviet. The Azerbaijani Popular Front (Azerbaijan Khalq Jabhasi) also severed rail links to Armenia and by doing so, helped cut off the Azerbaijani exclaves of Nakhichevan from the rest of the republic.

These events illustrate a phenomenon widespread in many states in a state of breakdown but apparently especially marked in the Caucasus, that security is defined in extremely narrow terms—that of the survival of one’s close national kin—and that all other notions of solidarity with others or broader ownership of an economy are secondary. This certainly is what seems to have happened with the quick—and from one perspective suicidal—collapse of the Transcaucasian Federation in 1918.

Geography is also kinder to some residents of the region than others. There is a kind of inbuilt asymmetry in the way, that the different countries in the region regard regional projects. Landlocked Armenia has a greater interest in them than does Georgia. Armenia needs a stable Georgia because in good times Georgia is Armenia’s route to the west and the north, to Europe and Russia and in bad times, Armenia shares Georgia’s problems and can do nothing about it. Russia’s vengeful economic sanctions against Georgia in 2006 hit Armenia badly, while the continued closure of the railway through Abkhazia arguably damages Armenians even more than Georgians. During the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, on 16 August 2008, the destruction of the Grakali railway bridge in central Georgia halted imports to Armenia for a week and cost the country an estimated half a billion dollars. The same geographical curse was almost fatal for Armenia during its worst ever crisis from 1915 to 1921. James Harbord, the US general identified many of the same problems:

Georgia does not hesitate to embargo freight against Armenia, and from her position of vantage simply censors the railroad traffic to that unfortunate country. Azerbaijan controls the fuel supply and combines with Georgia against Armenia, which alone of the three has nothing by which to exert leverage. The railroad can neither be consolidated nor properly operated under native control. Roadbed and rolling stock are rapidly deteriorating. An example of the power of Georgia over Armenia is that the latter is not permitted to import either arms or ammunition, though under almost constant menace from its neighbours. (Harbord 1920, pp. 14-15)

In this unequal regional power geopolitics, Azerbaijan is in a stronger position than Armenia but it is weaker than Georgia. Separated from its closest ally Turkey and also from its own exclaves of Nakhichevan by Armenia and Iran, Azerbaijan must rely on Georgia as its most stable route to Europe. But that cannot be taken for granted as was shown when its oil and gas pipelines through Georgia were shut down during the August 2008 war.
Finally, Georgia, the central country in the Caucasus, is the most blessed by geography and largely for that reason the one with the smallest vested interest in regional cooperation. Perhaps the problem is that it takes the benefits for granted and, as in May 1918, often has the freedom to avoid the risks. Sharing projects with Armenia and Azerbaijan means benefiting from Caspian Sea energy, having greater access to Iran and Turkey and lessening tensions with Georgia’s Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities, but it also means taking on the burden of Armenia and Azerbaijan’s problems—and by extension those of Turkey and Iran. At crucial moments, as we have seen, in May 1918 and in 1922 Georgian leaders decided that a regional federation was not in their interests and tried to withdraw from it.

The Georgian position may also explain the quiet death of the ZSFSR in 1936. As far as I am aware, there is no academic study of this process. Quite possibly, the dearth of the references to the ZSFSR in the scholarly literature reflects the fact that the new federation relatively quickly became a hollow and ineffective structure, with real power exercised by republican leaders in Baku, Tbilisi, Yerevan and of course Moscow. Certainly, as in 1918, without explicit Georgian support, any integrationist project was doomed to failure. The evidence suggests that Beria was more of a Georgian nationalist than Stalin. Beria’s son, Sergo, a close if unreliable witness, writes, ‘Of the Transcaucasian Bolsheviks only the Armenians had been favourable to this idea [of a federation]. They doubtless counted on reigning as masters over their new territory, by utilising the substantial minorities of their people living in Georgia and Azerbaijan. My father had been against the Federation from its creation and when he became its head he lost no time in causing it to disappear’. In Sergo Beria’s words it is interesting to see anti-Armenian prejudice and zero-sum thinking transferred to the next generation (Beria 2001, p. 13; Rayfield 2004, pp. 333–44).

Georgian political thought also has its own strong particularist tradition which urges the country down its own separate path. It was most strongly expressed in the introverted tradition of Georgian nationalism embodied by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who saw Georgia as a unique Caucasian civilisation that was set apart from the rest of the world. In a less malign way it has found expression in the views of Mikheil Saakashvili, who, after some brief flirtation with Europe during his first years in office, identified the United States as his main ally and model. More recently he has talked about turning Georgia into ‘Switzerland with elements of Singapore’. What the two have in common is the idea that Georgia is not to be bound by its geographical location but can pursue its own individual political destiny with only passing reference to its neighbours.

Foreign officials have frequently expressed their frustrations at what they see as the suicidal tendencies of Caucasian politicians in times of crisis. Amidst the turbulence of the first republics, at the 1919 Paris peace conference, British Foreign Office official Robert Vansittart was vexed by the failure of the Caucasian politicians to unite: ‘In the circles of the Supreme Council many are of the opinion that the Transcaucasian Republics have no future at all, as they are unable to achieve any sort of solidarity, and are exhausting themselves in conflicts with each other . . . Is it not clear to you that the despatch of arms and munitions for you has been delayed precisely because of your divergences, because of the fear that these arms would be used in your conflicts with each other?’ (Lang 1962, p. 221).
Yet Vansittart was being a little disingenuous. A servant of the British Empire, he knew only too well that there was an external dimension to the problems of the Caucasus. Its conflicts would have been much more liable to resolution but for the fact that Caucasian nations played the role of proxies in Great Power politics. This could be called the problem of ‘asymmetrical security’: small nations are unable to defend themselves against a determined invader with vastly greater manpower and that in turn means that they ally themselves with a rival Great Power to survive. That is how small communities such as Karabakh Armenians or Ossetians have got sucked into the major international rivalries of the day. To get involved means fighting a war, but to do nothing is to risk being destroyed.

There are some tragic illustrations of this unhealthy dynamic in Caucasian history. The Georgians learned this lesson in 1795 when their capital Tiflis was completely destroyed by a Persian army and they entered into union with tsarist Russia. Faced by the 50,000 men of Enver Pasha’s Ottoman Third Army in 1918, the 70,000 men of the Bolshevik 11th Army in 1920—or indeed the Russian Army of 2008—you need a powerful defender and that will not be a neighbour, but a Great Power of equal ferocity. That could be the Russia of Catherine the Great, it could be NATO, but it will not be someone local. This is the dynamic by which the combination of local quarrels and Great Power politics pulls the Caucasus apart.

Towards voluntary integration

Given the frequent failures to unite and the darker pages of the Soviet era, it is tempting to say that regional integration in the South Caucasus is a utopian project best left alone. Soviet top-down integration imposed from outside eventually contained within itself the seeds of disintegration. Yet the experience of the past 20 years supports the argument that independence without inter-dependence is not a good option either. In 1991, for understandable reasons, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan set out on different and distinct paths but it is now painfully clear that in doing so they created further problems. Despite all the terrible parts of its legacy, the Soviet Union bequeathed the South Caucasus an integrated transport and communications network and an educated elite speaking Russian as a lingua franca. By jettisoning this, the new leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia weakened their own statehood. In 2010, two decades after the end of the Soviet Union, Armenia and Georgia were still extremely poor countries, with Gross Domestic Product purchasing power parity (GDP PPP) per capita of only around $5,000, a pitifully long way behind Russia and Turkey, let alone the Baltic states. Azerbaijan’s relatively better score of around $10,000 per capita reflects an influx of oil and gas revenues that have not benefited much of the population. In all three cases, the conflict and disorder of 1988–1994 still leaves a heavy legacy. With hindsight, it should be obvious that three small countries, with many overlapping interests, located in a small region surrounded by three larger neighbours, will gain a great deal if they can work on mutually beneficial regional projects.

Bleak though the picture is, in the early twenty-first century it is still much more favourable than it was a century ago. The ‘Great Powers’ are still inclined to clash in Georgia (although not so much in Armenia and Azerbaijan) but the age of mass
invasion is over. Tragic though the August 2008 war and Russia’s military intervention into Georgia were, the five-day conflict was, relatively speaking, a light skirmish compared to the kind of bloodshed the region saw in the years 1915–1921. South Ossetia itself suffered even more greatly in the war with the Mensheviks in 1920. The conflict also focused minds on what is and is not possible in the South Caucasus. Regional cooperation between Georgia and its neighbours has improved. Huge obstacles to successful integration remain, however the first of which is the unresolved Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. All regional projects are carried out in the shadow of this dormant volcano and in the knowledge that if it were to re-erupt, it would devastate the whole region.

It is logical to see the European Union, the exemplar of ‘soft power’, as providing the impetus for successful integration that the other more old-fashioned ‘Great Powers’ with an interest in the South Caucasus cannot provide. Yet the EU continues to be a hesitant partner for the region. Consider the European Union’s Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRASECA) project, launched in 1993 for the eight countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus and which has spent less than €200 million since then—far less than BP, Gazprom or USAID has spent in the region, to name three other foreign actors. Certainly, the EU in and of itself represents a successful model of shared sovereignty and economic integration, but it is unrealistic to expect that it can extend that as far east as the South Caucasus. Even before the latest economic crisis to hit the European project, it was showing signs of ‘enlargement fatigue’. Those countries with clear membership ambitions and an obvious European destiny, in the first instance Croatia and perhaps Serbia, may still manage to join the EU. The prospects for three countries bordering Russia and Iran, beset by poverty, conflict and corruption, are much bleaker and there is a fundamental question mark over whether the three actually aspire to be full parts of Europe. Even Georgia, which is the most self-consciously ‘European’ of the three has a distinctly ambiguous relationship with the EU economic model, as a powerful libertarian economic group still holds significant influence (de Waal 2011; European Stability Initiative, ESI 2010). Projects such as the Eastern Partnership program, promising better trade opportunities and visa facilitation with the EU, can have beneficial results for the region. But they are also premised on working with a region that is actively interested in adopting a European-style economic and political model. The semi-authoritarian leaders of the South Caucasus are at best ambiguous about this. This provides a sad contrast with the way that the Turkey of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) has made reforms that have moved it towards Europe, even though its membership perspective is at best dim.

The most successful European project in the South Caucasus comes not from the EU but from the Council of Europe (CoE) in which all three countries are members, having joined almost simultaneously in 1999 and 2000. It is successful mostly because it is modest and nudge the three countries to behave better. It has set up the European Court of Human Rights as the final recourse for all citizens of these countries. Yet it is not a powerful instrument: Georgia has still not fulfilled its obligations on the return of Meskhetian Turks and Armenia and Azerbaijan have both held very flawed elections in defiance of the CoE. This suggests that Caucasian leaders are more comfortable with organisations that can provide expertise but do not require them to delegate power.
On the ground, ordinary people are even further away from this kind of European aspiration. The experience of the last 20 years shows that local people in the South Caucasus are interested in economic collaboration, but in a very idiosyncratic way, that would be anathema to the EU. Two wholesale markets on the borders of Georgia exposed reserves of popular grassroots diplomacy and mutual confidence that most Western non-governmental organisations could only dream of. The Ergneti market on the border of South Ossetia and Gori region brought together Georgians and Ossetians in daily trade until it was closed down by the Saakashvili government in 2004. It was so large that traders travelled from one end to another by motorcycle. The Sadakhlo market on the Georgia side of the Armenian–Georgian border saw thousands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis do thriving business in many products. Both of these markets showed that, in the right environment, ordinary people were ready to forget about political conflict and do business together. Unfortunately, as neither market was properly regulated or taxed, they were identified as criminal zones that were to be closed down for the sake of propping up state budgets. Government economics trumped cross-conflict confidence building. The underlying message here is that there are untapped resources of entrepreneurial cross-border energy in the South Caucasus. If they are interested in promoting prosperity, the task of domestic governments should be to channel this energy into more and more legitimate trade, rather than merely suppressing it.

Conclusion

For many reasons, the South Caucasus would benefit greatly from closer regional integration. If it were to function as a single organism, especially in economic terms, it would recover invaluable missed potential as a single market, communications hub and international crossroads. Closer integration would help overcome the region’s chronic poverty and isolation and soothe majority–minority disputes.

Reaching that position is much harder, however. While pragmatic and cultural interests may cleave ordinary South Caucasian people together, shorter-term politics and security concerns—or, to put it in more everyday language, fear—generally drive them apart. The history of the South Caucasus can be seen as a battle between centripetal integrationist processes and centrifugal tendencies in which the latter are more powerful. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the most recent phase of fragmentation has been aided both by traditional Great Power rivalries, real and perceived, between Russia, the United States, Europe, Turkey and Iran, and by the persistence in a new post-Soviet guise of political and economic monopolies, backed up by powerful nationalist narratives which entrench difference.

This essay makes the case that efforts at Caucasian integration do, however, rest on underlying geographical, cultural and economic realities. Currently, persistent attempts at cooperation, as witnessed in the two markets of Ergneti and Sadakhlo cited above, continue in the private sphere, even as central governments spin hostile narratives against one another.

In the past, efforts at integration in the South Caucasus have either been driven from above or by contingencies of the day. They failed because they could not withstand a change in geopolitical fortunes. The late tsarist period began to see slow economic integration, with the building of railways and pipelines connecting the Black
and Caspian Seas, but this was swept aside by an upsurge in revolutionary and nationalist politics. The independent Transcaucasian state of 1918 did not survive long enough for even its citizens to notice its existence and quickly fell victim to intra-Caucasian rivalries and contradictory attitudes to the Ottoman military advance.

The most successful example of Caucasian integration, that of the Soviet period, was more an instance of integration with Russia, accompanied by exclusion from the region’s two other neighbours, Iran and Turkey—than cross-Caucasian partnership. The Bolsheviks had an economic vision for the region and did a great deal to tie it together; for all the brutality of their methods, accusations of them implementing a ‘divide-and-rule’ policy are not well founded. But the Bolshevik–Soviet system, against its own declared goals, preserved national difference. An irremediably authoritarian system, the Soviet Union failed to foster horizontal connection and civic identities strong enough to over-ride ethnic distinctions when turbulence again broke out in the 1980s.

However, just because integration has persistently failed in the South Caucasus, that in itself is not an argument that it cannot work again in the future, if it is embarked on in a different way that is more inclusive and attractive to ordinary people.

Although trade may be the future it is probably not the best place to start. Recent academic literature on regional integration suggests that it is unrealistic to expect that business and economics will drive reconciliation and union. In his extensive study of successful instances of conflict resolution Charles Kupchan writes that only one of the 20 case-studies he cites was driven by economic incentives. He writes of the ‘causal insignificance’ of economic integration as a factor in peace processes, arguing however that, ‘Economic integration does advance stable peace during later phases, when societal linkages serve to consolidate reconciliation and promote cooperation and trust’ (Kupchan 2010, pp. 399–400, emphasis in original). In his analyses of the unions of Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates, two cases where economic motives might have been expected to play a leading role, Kupchan argues that other factors—strategic restraint, compatible social orders, cultural commonality—were more important in earlier stages of conflict resolution, with economics and trade playing a greater role later (Kupchan 2010, pp. 286–339).

In the case of the South Caucasus, this analysis confirms the impression that political difference continues to outweigh rational economic interest. That in turn leads to the (perhaps fairly self-evident) conclusion that Caucasian regional security needs to be addressed in the first instance before regional integration can be countenanced. So long as Armenia and Azerbaijan on the one hand and Georgia and the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (supported by Russia) on the other live in a state of profound mutual insecurity, little can be done to advance a common regional interest. The region’s persistent and chronic security problems pose a challenge to outside powers, who also stand to benefit from a South Caucasus that is integrated, stable and open for international business. To promote that goal, the bigger foreign powers are well advised to declare a truce in their geopolitical clashes (both perceived and real) in the region and promote the concept of a South Caucasus which, precisely because it is in no one’s sphere of influence, is set free to rediscover its own internal unity and lost connections.

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