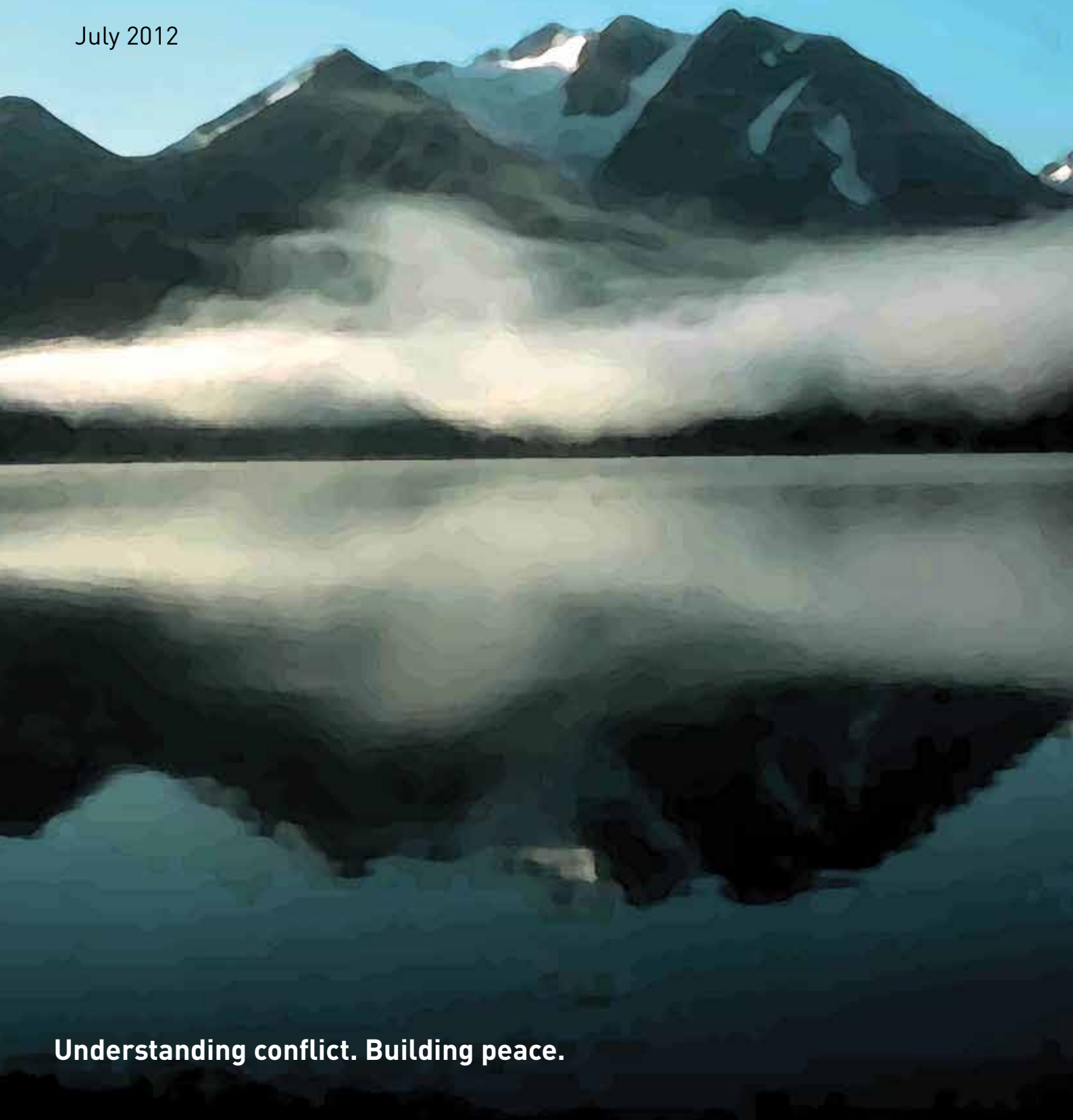
International Alert.

THE NORTH CAUCASUS FACTOR IN THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT CONTEXT

July 2012



Understanding conflict. Building peace.

Historical aspects of the North Caucasus factor in relation to modern Georgia (up to 2008)

GEORGE ANCHABADZE

Nature of Georgian-North Caucasus relations prior to 19th century

There have been relations between the people living in what is now Georgia and the tribes of the North Caucasus since the remote past. Even in antiquity, the residents of the northern and southern slopes of the Caucasus mountain chain were seen, despite their ethnic and linguistic diversity, as belonging to the same historical and cultural "community", to use a modern term. Strabo, the famous Ancient Greek geographer, wrote in the first century BC of the inhabitants of the Caucasus uplands: 'They all speak different languages, since they live apart and secluded as a result of their pride and savagery. But they are all … Caucasians.'

This view also underpinned the so-called genealogical schema of Leonti Mroveli (Leontius of Ruisi), the 11th century Georgian bishop, writer and historian. In his view, the Armenians, Georgians and tribes who populated the territories of modern Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus shared the same origin and a common ancestor, traditionally related to Togormah, one of the biblical patriarchs (in Georgian, Targamos).

Georgian high culture (including Georgian literature and the Georgian liturgy) spread throughout the North Caucasus, particularly in the 11th to 12th and early 13th centuries at the height of the Georgian kingdom, which the scholar Nikoloz Berdzenishvili refers to as 'the centre of Caucasian feudal relations'. Cultural interaction went both ways. In the words of another famous Georgian historian, Simon Dzhanashiya: 'the energies of the other peoples of the Caucasus, including Abkhaz and Circassians, made a significant contribution to the cultural mix in pre-feudal and feudal Georgia.'

In political terms, despite occasional military clashes, the North Caucasus was a relatively safe hinterland for Georgia, which it used to recruit auxiliary troops to fight alongside the Georgian people against foreign invaders. This is well attested over a historical period of more than 2,000 years, since the last centuries BC, in chronicles in Georgian and other languages.

The conversion of the peoples of the North Caucasus to Islam (particularly from the 15th century onwards) created a barrier between them and Christian Georgia that we know today. However, this did not mark a fundamental change. According to historical sources, the Caucasian mountain peoples continued to take part in the military campaigns of the Georgian emperors. It is clear that they did this not simply as hired mercenaries but under the terms of an alliance – as is shown, for example, by a description of a meeting of Kabardinian troops in Tbilisi who came at the bidding of the Emperor Irakli in 1751.

It is not until the 18th century that we see signs of strain, and then only with Dagestan, whose rulers carried out looting raids in the countries of Transcaucasia. These raids, which have entered Georgian historiography as *lekianoba* or "the invasion of the Leks" ("Leks" being the Georgians' collective term for the Dagestan mountain people), ravaged the country, causing a huge demographic decline. However, Georgian-Dagestani relations, despite these regular military confrontations, never descended into all-out warfare and political, cultural and economic ties were maintained.

At the end of the 18th century, therefore, the "Caucasus factor" had a dual significance for Georgia, with the mountain peoples (who themselves did not form a single political unit) being both enemies and allies. Both these aspects are revealed in a funeral oration for Irakli II given by the statesman and diplomat Solomon Lionidze in 1798. Here the orator, speaking of the

deceased's military glories, notes: 'The Lion of Judah from the house of David[1] … fought against three empires: the Ottoman, the Persian and the Caucasian peoples.' The latter is a reference to the Caucasian mountain people and primarily the Dagestanis, with whom Irakli had crossed swords on more than one occasion. However, Lionidze goes on to speak of camaraderie in battle: 'As soon as Emperor Irakli's joyous banner is unfurled, the Dagestanis hasten to join his army, Ossetians and Circassians are happy to shed their blood for Emperor Irakli.'

Under the patronage of the two-headed eagle

By the 1830s, the lands of the Southern Caucasus had been incorporated into the Russian Empire. Conquering the North Caucasus proved more difficult, since additional pockets of mountain peoples' resistance appeared both in the east of the region (Chechnya and the mountainous area of Dagestan) and in the west (where the Adyghe tribes and the Ubykhs formed a bastion of independence). It cost the Empire a great deal of effort, in terms of finance and lives, to subdue them, and the "Russian Mountain War" or "Caucasian War" lasted for just under a century until 1864.

This protracted armed conflict had a lasting impact on the development of Georgian-North Caucasus relations. Following its annexation of Georgia, the Russian government used the country to impose a blockade on those bordering districts where these recalcitrant mountain people lived, as part of a war of attrition intended to starve them into submission. The Tsarist Empire also used a mixture of force and incentives to strengthen its hold over Georgia, by co-opting the local elite – both the aristocracy and royal family. This military caste – faced with the loss of its position and function in the now abolished Georgian state apparatus – rallied to the Russian banner and later became actively involved in military actions in the Caucasus.

The involvement of the Georgian military in the mountain campaigns, and particularly in Dagestan, was made easier by the idea that they were wreaking revenge on the "Leks" for their earlier raids on Georgia. This is mentioned by the 19th century Dagestani poet and thinker Magomed-beg in his poem 'The Capture of Shamil':

'The Georgian regiments marched to drum and horn;
They called on them to recall their former enmity:
You must crush all the Dagestanis, they said,
To avenge your forefathers, they said.'
Translation based on Derzhavin's Russian version

Evidence of this attitude among the Georgian gentry can be found in Georgian letters and literature in the first half of the 19th century. A typical example is a poem by the Romantic poet Nikoloz Baratashvili – 'The campaign of the Georgian princes, nobles and peasants against the Dagestanis and Chechens in 1844 under the leadership of the provincial Marshal Prince Dmitrii Tamazovich Orbeliani'. The poem begins with the words: 'Quake, Caucasus! Your end is nigh,/The sons of Kartli are coming/To avenge innocent blood …' and more in this vein.

Russian-Georgian solidarity, which reached its peak during Prince Vorontsov's vice-regency in the Caucasus (1844–1854), started to decline in the second half of the 19th century. On the Georgian side, this was caused by a rising tide of resentment at Tsarist authority, increased ethnic self-awareness, and the emergence of a civic society that absorbed the national and social ideas of the age. Members of the social-political and literary movement headed by Ilia Chavchavadze, which came to prominence in the early 1860s, played an important role in the development of Georgian public thought. A phrase put in the mouth of a simple peasant by Chavchavadze in his

1 This refers to Irakli II; the Georgian emperors from the Bagration dynasty traced their genealogy back to the Biblical Emperor David.

book 'A Traveller's Notes' (1871) – 'we should belong to ourselves' – became a rallying call for the restoration of the country's political sovereignty.

This also came at a time when the Russian government, once the outcome of the Russian-Mountain War became clear, was beginning to lose interest in using Georgia as a "base" beyond the Caucasus mountain range. By now, it was initiating a systematic Russification policy, which meant the growth of nationalist and revolutionary ideas in Georgia was met with harsh countermeasures.

In this context, the Georgian public started to revise their view of the events that occurred in the recent Caucasian war, which impacted on their perception of the North Caucasus region as a whole. The literature of the late 19th century began to contain inspiring examples of courageous and noble mountain peoples, Chechens, Ingush and Circassians, whose heroic struggle against an invader's superior forces were presented as an example to follow. The mountain people were already conceived as Georgia's natural allies in any movement for national liberation.

On the verge of a new era

After the February Revolution in 1917, ideas of autonomy and self-determination spread rapidly through ethnic populations on the periphery of the Russian Empire. In the North Caucasus, a multi-ethnic political centre – the Alliance of United Moutain Peoples – had already emerged on 5th March 1917. Its aim was to unite the mountain peoples 'from the Black Sea to the Caspian in a union to strengthen freedom and establish life on democratic principles'.[2] In November 1917, this organisation formed a Mountain Peoples' government, which directed its efforts towards creating a North Caucasian, or Mountain, Republic.

The processes in the North Caucasus were closely monitored in Georgia. When a telegram was read out at a session of the Georgian National Council – in which the mountain government declared full sovereignty on 2nd December 1917, pending the convening of a pan-Russian Constituent Assembly – the message was greeted by loud applause.

Tributes to the mountain peoples' traditions of liberation struggles flooded in from Tbilisi, perhaps all the more so since – even at this historic moment – their movement for political self-determination was still confined within the former Russian Empire. Commenting on these events at the time, the famous politician, poet, publicist and member of the Georgian National Council, Shalva Amiredzhibi (1886–1943), stated: 'The Northern side of the Caucasus mountain range has already begun to shine under the rays of freedom. The fact that it was the mountain people who were the first of all the peoples of the Caucasus to declare autonomy recalls their impetuous and vital nature. We, inhabitants of the lowlands, are accustomed to walking along long, flat roads and this has also affected our character. But in the mountains, people walk along mountain paths, and footpaths are the quickest route to a destination.'[3]

The events of the following days confirmed how fitting these words were. On 21st December 1917, the rulers of the Alliance of United Mountain Peoples had already declared complete secession from Russia and refused to attend the Constituent Assembly.[4] The North Caucasus, along with Finland, thus became the first region of the Russian Empire to declare full independence from the metropolis (with the important difference that Finland had already been an autonomous state within the Russian Empire, had precise borders and large numbers of well-armed Cossack troops were not within easy reach).

2 Nal'chik (2004). *Istoriya Dona i Severnogo Kavkaza (1917–2000)* [The History of the Don and the North Caucasus (1917–2000)], p. 9.
3 S. Amiredzhibi. Dagestan-Chechnya//'Sakartvelo', 12th December 1917 (in Georgian).
4 V-G. Dzhabagiyev (1991). *Revolyutsiya i grazhdanskaya voyna na Severnom Kavkaze* [The revolution and civil war in the North Caucasus].

In April 1918, Transcaucasia also seceded from Russia to form a federative state. However, this state quickly fell apart (in May 1918) into autonomous republics – Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Faced with the threat of retaliation from Russia, representatives of the North Caucasus gave active consideration to a close alliance with the peoples of Transcaucasia and in particular the Georgians, to whom they were linked by long tradition and cultural affinities. Amiredzhibi recalls the enthusiasm with which the Georgian emissaries to the first mountain congress in Vladikavkaz (May 1917) were welcomed: 'In honour of our delegates, the mullah recited a prayer to which the entire congress listened standing. The mountain people then assured us that it expressed the warmest feelings for the Georgian people.'[5]

The idea of a union with their southern neighbours is a keynote that runs throughout the documents and actions of the rulers of the Mountain Republic. In 1918, for example, the official mission of the mountain government published a manifesto in Trebizond with the following wording: 'The North Caucasians are convinced that Transcaucasia is incapable of existing as an independent state without links with the peoples of the North Caucasus and Dagestan. For geographical, economic, strategic and political reasons, it is essential to create a united Caucasus.'[6]

This was a proposal that Transcaucasia was unable to meet – although even here, during the brief period of existence of the local independent republics, the idea of a pan-Caucasian confederation was not extinguished. However, continuing disagreements between the republics, as well as the complex external political situation, prevented them from taking any action that might put the idea into practice.

In a totalitarian state

The Soviet victory in the Caucasus (1920–1921) ushered in an unprecedentedly repressive regime in the territory that was ruthless to indigenous and Russian residents alike. In the spring of 1921, a meeting of émigrés from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the North Caucasus was held in Paris which concluded an agreement on an anti-Bolshevik alliance. Georgian resistance to the Soviet occupation, expressed in partisan uprisings up to 1924, included a strong element of cooperation with the North Caucasus peoples. From 1922 to 1924, the North Caucasus was visited on more than one occasion by representatives of the Georgian underground who were in contact with local anti-Communist cells. There were also plans for the simultaneous deployment of large forces across the whole of the Caucasus, but for a number of reasons this came to nothing. However, the Kistin Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge on Georgian territory took part in the Georgian resistance. One division under Colonel Kakutsa Cholokashvili – the Georgian insurgency's main strike force – remained in hiding in the Pankisi forests for some time.

After the anti-Bolshevik uprising in Georgia was suppressed in August 1924, the remnants of the insurgent groups were forced out of the country. In the North Caucasus, particularly in the mountain strip of Chechnya, the partisan movement kept up a wide range of activities for a long time. This forced the Soviet administration to carry out periodic troop operations in Chechen-Ingush territory, involving major infantry and artillery forces along with airborne attacks on populated areas not under their control.

During the Second World War, the Soviet government resolutely attempted to cut the North Caucasus "Gordian knot" once and for all. Charged with brigandage and collaborating with German troops, entire peoples were deported to Central Asia in late 1943 and early 1944: Karachaevans, Chechens, Ingush and Balkarians. Almost all of the upper central slopes of the

5 S. Amiredzhibi. Op. cit.

6 G. Bammat. *The Caucasus after the fall of the old regime in Russia*, Russian translation from the French (by Giorgi Mamulia). Available at http://www.chechen.org/prometheus9.html.

North Caucasus were "purged" of their indigenous population. The only Chechens and Ingush left in their native land were insurgents hiding out in the forests and those who had managed to join them. These people also carried out an unequal fight with the enemy, attacking from their mountain hide-outs members of the administration, the military and settlers colonising the abandoned Chechen-Ingush lands.

The Soviet authorities moved in several divisions of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) to wipe out the resistance. Attempts to recruit the neighbouring peoples for counter-insurgency actions (Georgians, Ossetians and Dagestanis) met with little success in the Caucasus republics, except with previous members of the security forces.[7] The sympathies of the ordinary people lay more with the persecuted, with some Georgian shepherds even hiding Chechen fugitives.

The attitude of the Georgian mountain people to what was happening to their Chechen and Ingush neighbours is revealed clearly in their folk poems. Gabriel Dzhabushanuri (1914–1968), whose family together with many other Khevsurian families were settled in the now deserted Ingushetia in 1944, wrote a cycle of poems dedicated to the destroyed Kistin[8] *auls* [fortified village] and the fate of their inhabitants, driven from their native land. The poet was deeply moved by the sight of abandoned houses once full of life:

'You are sad, lonely aul
Abandoned and unpeopled,
I too am alone,
I want to join you
In shedding tears.'[9]

The scholar Meka Khangoshvili recently published poems by the peasant Khvtiso Aludauri, who witnessed a battle between an operational unit of Soviet troops and Chechen insurgents led by Ibi Alkhastovy:

'I saw the Russians engaging with the Kistins, the cliffs echoed loudly,
From Maista the machine-gun clatter reached me,
Ibi did not dishonour the cradle his mother rocked…
You fought for a just cause, Ibi, with many a heroic deed,
You fought for justice but you too were not spared by the enemy…'[10]

In recent years, as Russian-Georgian relations have deteriorated, Russian (including North Caucasian) political and newspaper articles have contained allegations that the real reason for the deportation of the mountain peoples was that this was an attempt by Stalin to extend Georgian territory. While it is true that some of the ethnic lands of the Karachaevans, Balkarians, Ingush and Chechens that bordered the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) were incorporated into it following the deportations, other lands were similarly transferred to neighbouring autonomous and administrative units in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), Northern Ossetia and Dagestan, and the Stavropol and Krasnodar Territories, within the Kabardinian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR).

Therefore, the redrawing of the borders is not conclusive proof that the deportation of the mountain peoples was implemented to promote Georgian interests, and no other arguments are advanced by the authors of this theory. In fact, the real motives for deportations are easy to

7 For example, in 1955 the famous Ingush *abrek* [member of Caucasian mountain bands who fought the Russians in the 19th century], Akhmed Khuchbarov, who fought against Soviet power from 1929.

8 The Georgian mountain people use the term "Kistin" to refer to the mountain Chechens and Ingush.

9 A. Arabuli (Ed.) (2010). *Gabriel Dzhabushanuri – Poems, ballads, diaries, records, private letters*, Tbilisi, p. 42 (in Georgian).

10 M. Khangoshvili (2011). 'The Kistin in Georgian oral literature', in *Archaeology, Ethnology, Folklore of the Caucasus*, Collection of abridged reports, Tbilisi, p. 665.

discern in the context of the Stalin administration's general policy of "global" resettlement of peoples in the 1940s. Its victims included not only the North Caucasians, but Soviet Germans, Finns and Koreans, Crimean Tartars, Kalmyks and "Meskhetians" as well as a number of other peoples and ethnic groupings.

Because of this, after the deported peoples of the North Caucasus were politically rehabilitated and given the opportunity to return home (1957), they remained on good terms with Georgia and the Georgians.

Generally, throughout most of the 20th century, the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus were drawn to and sympathised with Georgia, clearly on the basis of cultural and historical affinity. Some even proposed an administrative union with Georgia. For example, in June 1920, the ruler of Western Dagestan, Colonel Kaitmas Alikhanov – in response to the threat posed by the attacking Red Army but also based on ties "of spirit and blood" – appealed to the Georgian Foreign Minister on behalf of influential Avarians to incorporate Avaria into the Georgian republic on an autonomous basis.[11]

The Georgian government, which was committed to the integrity of the RSFSR under the Moscow Agreement of 7th May 1920, which also recognised Dagestan as a part of Russia, refrained from responding to the Avarians. Nevertheless, this did not stop the Bolsheviks from carrying out a military incursion into Georgia to establish their own authority there (February 1921).

A few years later, with Soviets firmly in power, there were serious discussions in Moscow and in the North Caucasus on incorporating North Ossetia into Georgia, together with South Ossetia, to form an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. It is important to note that the Ossetian delegation which led the talks with Stalin agreed to this plan.[12]

As we know, North Ossetia also came out strongly in favour of incorporation within Soviet Georgia in October 1981, when large numbers of people protested during the escalation of an Ossetian-Ingush territorial dispute.

Nevertheless, the emotional link between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus gradually weakened over the Soviet period, despite contacts in the economic, scientific, cultural and educational spheres. The central authorities had no interest in building up intra-regional links between the individual parts of the USSR, although it is unfair to lay this entirely at Moscow's door, as many analysts currently do. The rise in national self-consciousness of the peoples of the Soviet Union (which was to some extent a result of state policy on science and education) gained in momentum after the Second World War. This effectively put an end to the original plans to create a single Soviet nation and meant that the collapse of the Union was only a matter of time. It was also accompanied by an increase in ethnocentrism and national myth-making, which disturbed the equilibrium of inter-ethnic relations.

In the post-Soviet period

The first Georgian Republic (1918–1921) already showed signs of embryonic ethnic disagreement between the Georgians on the one hand and the Abkhaz and Ossetians on the other. In the Soviet period, these disagreements (which had both internal and external causes) were strengthened and exacerbated. During the *perestroika* period, they came out into the open, with unrestrained nationalism replacing the Soviet myth of friendship between peoples.

11 N.G. Dzhavakhishvili (2005). *The struggle for the freedom of the Caucasus*, Tbilisi, pp. 40–41.

12 M.M. Bliyev (2006). *South Ossetia in collision with Russian-Georgian relations*, Vladikavkaz, p. 326.

Inexperienced politicians placed at the helm in Georgia in the first free elections of the Soviet period (1990) were incapable of maintaining stability in the country. This led in 1991 to the bloody Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. In Abkhazia, a fragile peace lasted until 1992. However, the incursion of Georgian military formations into the autonomous republic (14th August 1992) was countered by armed resistance from the Abkhaz, which grew into the 1992–1993 war.

As we shall see, the Georgian-Abkhaz war (and its consequences) was an important factor in the transformation of relations between Georgia and the North Caucasus. However, the crisis in the Soviet system initially encouraged rapprochement between the North Caucasus and Georgia. Contacts were established on environmental, cultural, humanitarian and other urgent issues. This process as a whole was not even seriously affected by the events of 1990–1991, when a blockade of Avarian villages in Kakhetia was organised by activists in the Georgian national movement under Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict began. In fact, the then president of the Chechen Republic, General Dzhokhar Dudayev – the most prominent leader in the North Caucasus at the time, who had declared the political independence of his country – was extremely interested in maintaining close relations with Georgia, which Chechnya saw as its route to the outside world.

Gamsakhurdia, by that time president of Georgia, was also interested in strengthening regional ties. However, he received a mixed reception in the North Caucasus. The Adygheyan peoples, the Abaza, the North Ossetians and some Dagestanis were not generally positive towards Gamsakhurdia as a politician (due to the events in South Ossetia and Kakhetia and the tension in Abkhazia). On the other hand, he had the confidence of Dudayev and the Ingush national movement, which had asserted its territorial claims to North Ossetia. Apart from that, as far as I am aware, Tbilisi's representatives also attempted to establish links with Karachaevan-Balkarian civil and political groupings to use them to help neutralise Adygheyan support for the Abkhaz.

To complete this picture of intra-Caucasus relations which emerged around the first president of post-Soviet Georgia, we should note that there was strong opposition to Gamsakhurdia even in his own country. Measures to put this down led in December 1991 to armed conflict within Georgia. Battles were fought on the streets of central Tbilisi with sidearms and rocket-launchers. This was a rude shock for Dudayev. He sent a special mission to Tbilisi in an attempt at reconciling the two sides. However, the opposition leaders rejected the Chechen mediation. Their aim was to depose the president and Dudayev was seen as his ally.

On 6th January 1992, after holding out for two weeks, Gamsakhurdia left Tbilisi and Georgia with his closest entourage, only to re-appear soon in Grozny under the protection of President Dudayev.

When the Georgian opposition came to power, it invited Eduard Shevardnadze, the former ruler of Soviet Georgia and later Foreign Minister of the USSR, into the country. Shevardnadze was head of a makeshift ruling body, the State Council, which was made up of unelected members of the opposition. Dudayev issued public statements that the State Council was illegitimate, but he could not of course interfere in the internal affairs of Georgia.

Despite this, a massive propaganda campaign backed by the new Georgian administration, which was worried that Gamsakhurdia might return, portrayed the Chechen president as virtually the main instigator behind the actions of the "Zviadists" in Georgia. A typical example was the satirical poem entitled 'What did you do in the forests?', which was published in the press and directed at Zviad Gamsakhurdia's armed supporters active in Western Georgia. It begins:

> *'You, who grew up in the Georgian cradle and were educated on the poetry of Vazha-Pshavela, Crept up to us with a Chechen dagger dipped in Chechen poison…'*[13]

13 *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 12th September 1992 (in Georgian).

This was part of an attempt to use official propaganda to discredit Gamsakhurdia in the eyes of the Georgian population, by presenting the enemy as the Chechens giving succour to the Georgian exiles.[14]

This process was accelerated when the war in Abkhazia began. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which had been latent for some time, flared up in the late 1980s amid the political upheavals in the Soviet Union. After the first inter-ethnic clash in mid-July 1989, which resulted in 21 victims, the Georgians and Abkhaz realised that confrontation on an even larger scale was likely in the future and each side began to take their own precautions.

The Abkhaz were considerably outnumbered by the Georgians even on Abkhaz territory, but they found allies in the ethnically and culturally related peoples of the North Caucasus. These were mainly Abaza and Adyghe (Kabardinians, Circassians, Adygheyans) but also Chechens and other mountain peoples. As the Soviet system collapsed around them, they attempted to overcome their relative vulnerability by uniting with other Caucasian peoples under the banner of the pan-Caucasus idea. Books on the Mountain Republic and its actors became increasingly popular. Many mountain ideologues and thinkers in the late 1980s and early 1990s would not have been against Georgia taking the lead in a Caucasus-wide movement. However, then, as now, Georgia's sole priority was for the country to move closer to the West. In contrast to the Georgian nationalists of the early 20th century (Cholokashvili, Amiredzhibi, etc.), their descendants clearly underestimated the North Caucasus factor at the end of the century.

The Abkhaz national movement chose a different path. Following the outbreak of open conflict with the Georgians, it speeded up the process of integration of the mountain peoples (more precisely, the popular movements which enjoyed influence in the Caucasus at the time). On 25th to 26th August 1989, just a month after the incident in July, the First Congress of Mountain People was held in Sukhumi at which the Assembly of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was created. At its third meeting, held again in Abkhazia from 1st to 3rd November 1991, the Assembly had already given way to a Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. It was also decided at the meeting to form a Caucasian Parliament, a court of arbitration, a defence committee and other confederation institutions, whose capitals were declared as Sukhumi and Grozny.

The central authorities in Tbilisi took a very dim view of these actions, which had not been agreed with them in advance. They gradually came to the decision that the quickest way of establishing Georgia's full jurisdiction over the autonomous republic would be to mount a campaign of military deterrence. They were encouraged by the United Nations' swift acceptance of Georgia as a member state on 31st July 1992. This took place before elections were held following the military takeover (due largely to respect for Shevardnadze, one of the world's major statesmen of the period) and Russia's handover to Georgia of a large amount of weapons and military technology, including dozens of tanks and other armoured vehicles.

The Georgian military in Abkhazia, as already noted, had encountered resistance from the Abkhaz. In these circumstances, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus issued a public ultimatum to the Georgian authorities to withdraw their troops from Abkhazia, threatening that unless they did so, they would raise a volunteer army and send it to the areas occupied by the military. Shevardnadze went along with this game plan, announcing that self-defence units, which had begun to be set up throughout Georgia in response to the North Caucasians' ultimatum, had already enlisted over 30,000 men. The war machine had started and Georgia was drawn into an armed conflict that was to last more than a year.

14 This must be balanced by the fact that Gamsakhurdia himself helped to promote this by publicly stating that the Chechens and Ingush were on his side when he was still in Georgia and speaking out against the Georgian opposition. During the 1991–1992 "Tbilisi War", rumours spread throughout the city that there were Chechen snipers on Rustaveli prospect, on the roofs of houses, shooting at passers-by. However, no one actually saw these snipers, either alive or dead.

The assistance provided by the Confederation to the Abkhaz was considerable. In the autumn of 1992 alone, between 4,000 and 7,000 militants from the Confederation arrived in Abkhazia and took part directly in military action.[15] Humanitarian aid was also collected across the whole of the North Caucasus for dispatch to Abkhazia. This represented significant physical, material and moral support for the small Abkhaz forces. Alongside other outside forces that assisted the Abkhaz, the North Caucasians made a significant contribution to the final outcome of the war.

Despite this, it should be noted that the Abkhaz themselves bore the brunt of the fighting in the 1992–1993 war. Their units formed the core of the forces fighting against the Georgians. Approximately three quarters of those who died on the Abkhaz side were born in Abkhazia.

We emphasise this because, since the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict remains unresolved, many Georgian authors choose to ignore these facts and attempt to demonstrate that the war in Abkhazia was mainly inspired and supported by external forces. Today, Russia is probably seen as the only external factor. The events of 1992–1993 are even occasionally referred to as the "Russia-Georgia war". But the historical truth is that Yeltsin's Russia gave the green light to the Georgian-Abkhaz war and allowed it to spread by arming both sides. On its own, however, this does not explain the scale of the ensuing war, which was the result of other long-term (underlying) causes and a deliberate political decision to use force (direct cause). At that time, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian leaders would simply not have had the capacity to force the two sides into this against their will. In fact, in the early days of the war, as the situation in Abkhazia deteriorated, Shevardnadze made a personal appeal for understanding and support to Yeltsin. It was only later, once it realised that Moscow was playing a double game, that Georgia began to accuse the Russians openly of assisting the Abkhaz. Initially, however, the North Caucasians and primarily the Chechens under Dudayev were portrayed as the main enemy.

This is shown very clearly by the political cartoons that appeared regularly in the Georgian press. For example, in the very first days of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, a cartoon appeared in the newspaper *Sakartvelos Respublika* with the caption: 'General Dudayev threatens…'. The cartoon depicts a map of Georgia with the Chechen president wielding a huge axe and trying to cut off the North-Western part, Abkhazia, from the rest of the country. The words 'Union of North Caucasus Peoples' are written on the blade of the axe and the long handle which the General is holding is labelled 'Zviad Gamsakhurdia'.[16] The cartoon is thus clearly intended to convey to the reader the idea that North Caucasian aggression is the real cause of the events in Abkhazia and also to point the finger at the ex-president. A large number of pro-government experts and political scientists explained to the population through the media that Dudayev needed Abkhazia as a route to the sea. They did not, however, explain just how a chaotic Chechnya could ever control the Abkhaz shore across several entities within the Russian Federation that separated the two territories.

This kind of manipulation, against a background of military failures and economic deprivation, turned Georgian public opinion against Chechnya and the North Caucasus as a whole. Whereas 18 months earlier most people had been sympathetic to Chechen secessionism, during (and after) the Abkhaz war the predominant view was that support should be given to Russia's efforts to keep control of the North Caucasus. The implied trade-off was that Russia would be able to secure Georgia's territorial integrity.

This shift in public opinion allowed President Shevardnadze immediately after the cessation of hostilities in Abkhazia (September 1993) to take measures he thought would ensure that the lands lost during the war would be returned. While officially retaining its pro-Western stance, Georgian

15 Major-General V.A. Zolotarev (Ed.) (2000). 'Rossiya (SSSR) v lokal'nykh voynakh i voennykh konfliktakh vtoroy poloviny XX veka' [Russia (USSR) in local wars and military conflicts of the second half of the 20th century], Moscow, p. 390.

16 *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 18th August 1992 (in Georgian).

diplomacy began actively establishing relations with the Russian Federation. A declaration passed in November 1993 at the constituent assembly of the ruling political organisation, the Union of Georgian Citizens, emphasised: 'Our move to new relations with the new Russia is based on our countries' close and overlapping strategic interests in the Caucasus and Black Sea region.'[17]

In December 1993, Georgia became a participant and in April 1994 a *de jure* member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which it had previously refused to join on principle. In February 1994, a Russian-Georgian agreement on military cooperation was signed. This was followed in 1995 by an agreement on Russian military bases on Georgian territory which was signed between the governments of the two countries.

The North Caucasus was a priority within the new Russia-Georgia relations. The Georgian administration was attempting to ensure that the Caucasus factor would not operate in the event of a new war in Abkhazia and to convince Moscow that any separatism would have harmful consequences. As a result, when the First Chechen War began in December 1994, Shevardnadze's Georgia was perhaps the only country in the world to openly support this disastrous step.

However, Abkhazia remained a serious problem for the official administration in Tbilisi and one which Russia was either unwilling or unable to resolve. It was bogged down in Chechnya and had just ended its first military campaign with the Khasavyurt Agreement (31st August 1996). This was a period of a new shift in the attitude of senior figures in the Georgian administration to Georgia's policy on Russia and the Chechen Republic. The deterioration in Russia-Georgia relations was matched by a rapprochement between Georgia and Chechnya, as dramatically evidenced by the two-day visit to Tbilisi by the then Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, who was received practically as a head of state (September 2009). Zurab Zhvania, the speaker of the Georgian parliament, proclaimed that the meeting between the presidents of Georgia and Chechnya heralded a new stage in the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia. There were whispers in the corridors of parliament that Chechnya had its own plan, which would be a positive contribution to the resolution of this problem.[18]

After the Second Russian-Chechen War started (1st October 1999), the Georgian government rejected a Russian proposal to deploy Federal Border Service units on Georgian territory adjoining Chechnya (as had been done in the first Chechen campaign)[19] and opened its doors to Chechen refugees. Streams of civilian Chechen refugees appeared in Georgia, mainly in the Pankisi Gorge but also in Tbilisi. The media also reported that there were Chechen militants based in the Pankisi forests. This led to sharp protests from the Russian side and "unidentified" aeroplane bombings of Pankisi. In the circumstances, the Georgian authorities made the mistake of deploying a detachment in Abkhazia under the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev. This resulted in fighting in the Kodori Gorge, with losses on both sides (October 2001). Gelayev's troops were forced to withdraw.

The Kodori adventure was highly unpopular with the Georgian public, which was already suffering under Shevardnadze's rule. It was sharply criticised by the civil society movement, which issued a statement emphasising that 'dragging the Chechens into the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict will bring new sorrow to the Chechen people and escalate the pan-Caucasus crisis'.[20]

Despite the serious deterioration in Russia-Georgia relations in the second half of the 1990s and

17 *Svobodnaya Gruziya*, 26th November 1993.

18 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2nd September 1997.

19 O.A. Belov (2002). 'Pogranichnoye sotrudnichestvo mezhdy rossiyskoy federatsiyey i Gruziyey//Gruziya' [Cross-border cooperation between the Russian Federation and Georgia], in *Problemy i perspektivy razvitiya* [Georgia: Problems and prospects], Vol. 2, Moscow, p. 24.

20 'Po povodu obostreniya gruzino-abkhazskogo konflikta' [On the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict], in *Kavkazsky Aktsent* [Caucasus Accent], 16th–31st October 2001; G.Z. Anchabadze (2006). *Voprosy gruzino-abkhazskykh vzaimootnosheniy* [Georgian-Abkhaz relations], Tbilisi, pp. 164–165.

the strengthening of Chechnya-Georgia links, Shevardnadze refused to change his position on this issue. Abkhazia was his goal and he was playing the game in the North Caucasus for the sake of Abkhazia. As a former member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Shevardnadze was more at home with senior Russian officials and preferred to resolve problematic issues via Moscow. As a result, when there appeared to be a chance of resolving the Abkhaz issue with President Putin's help, Shevardnadze took a step which ran counter to Caucasian traditions. On the eve of the meeting with Putin at the Summit of CIS heads of state in Chisinau (October 2002), he handed over five Chechen resistance fighters who had sought asylum on Georgian territory to the Russian side. This fact was reported widely in the media.[21] The intention was undoubtedly to create a favourable background to the talks. The Georgian president also remained silent at the summit over the question of the Russian bases in Georgia, although their withdrawal had been an objective of Georgian policy for several years. However, despite the promising meeting with the Russian president (which Shevardnadze called 'historic'[22]), the situation relating to Abkhazia remained unchanged.

Since August 2008, the North Caucasus factor has become more relevant than ever to Georgia. However, discussion on this goes beyond the scope of the present article.

21 Some reports claim that, in individual cases, people were extradited clandestinely.

22 See article at http://lenta.ru/vojna/2002/10/07/summit/, 7th October 2002.