

History

Georgia's Foreign Policy in 1917-1918

Vakhtang Guruli

Faculty of Humanities and Law, Saint Andrew the First-Called Georgian University, Tbilisi, Georgia

(Presented by Academy Member Roin Metreveli)

The focus of foreign policy was very important at all stages of Georgian statehood. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Russian Empire conquered the Georgian kingdoms and principalities which made the issue of foreign policy orientation irrelevant. The revolution in Russia in February and March of 1917 brought the end to the Empire. The legal successor of the Empire was the Provisional Government. At the end of March 1917, the Russian Provisional Government established a Transcaucasian regional governing body – the Special Transcaucasian Committee (Ozakom). This political course was declared a strategic mistake by public and political opinion and in the historiography of 1917-1921, which practically continues to this day. Our opinion on this issue is the as follows: at that time it was impossible to restore the state independence of Georgia, but a preparatory period was necessary for the restoration of independence, for which the existence of Georgian autonomy within Russia was quite acceptable. The course of the Georgian political elite was fully in line with the national state interests and did not necessarily mean rejection of independence. © 2025 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

policy orientation, Georgian kingdoms, Special Transcaucasian Committee

After the Revolution, the political elite of Georgia considered it possible for Georgia to exist as part of the Russian democratic state with extensive autonomous rights. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks staged a coup d'état in Petrograd and overthrew the legitimate Provisional Government. The Georgian political elite were well aware of the Bolshevik leaders' goals and anticipated political regime in Russia. On November 15, 1917, the Transcaucasian Commissariat was established in Tbilisi on the initiative of Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani politicians (chaired by Evgeni Gegechkori). The

Transcaucasian Commissariat claimed to be a regional authority that would exercise its powers until the restoration of the legitimate provisional government in Russia. This meant that Transcaucasia practically dissociated itself from Soviet Russia and did not recognize the Soviet power. However, in the given military-political situation conditioned by certain reasons, the state refrained from declaring independence. [Among these reasons, the most important was that World War I was still ongoing and the Transcaucasus, including Georgia, was protected by the Russian Caucasus

Army from Ottoman aggression. If Georgia declared state independence, it was expected that the Caucasian army would return to Russia, which meant that the Ottomans would conquer the territory of Transcaucasia without much trouble, since Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis had no armies of their own]. The same was confirmed by the First National Congress of Georgia (November 19-22, 1917). The Congress discussed the issue of foreign policy orientation and determined: "The Georgian nation, as it has been for a hundred years, stands on the ground of Russian orientation" [1: 21-24]. This meant that Georgia remained oriented not Soviet Russia, but rather to a democratic Russia.

The events that took place in Russia in January 1918 (expulsion of the Constituent Assembly and mass repressions), clearly showed that the Soviet power would be impossible to change using democratic forces. Pro-Russian foreign policy orientation was meaningless. Transcaucasian politicians took this into account and in January 1918 convened the Transcaucasian legislative body, the Seim.

The situation on the fronts of World War I was tough. It was obvious that Russia could no longer withstand the burden of the war and would be defeated. The government of Soviet Russia preferred to conclude a shameful armistice with the German Empire and its allies in place of losing the war. On March 3, 1918, in Brest-Litovsk, Russia signed a separate armistice with the German Empire and its allies (Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria). Thus, Russia withdrew from the war. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had its effect on the South Caucasus, including Georgia. Since the Transcaucasian Commissariat was only a regional authority and not the government of an independent state, the parties to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk considered the South Caucasus to be Russian territory. Paragraph 2 of Article 4 of the Armistice Treaty stated: "The indigenous historical territory of Georgia, the districts of Ardahan, Karsi

and Batumi will likewise and without delay be cleared of Russian troops. Russia will not interfere in the reorganization of the national and international relations of these districts, but leave it to the population of these districts to carry out this reorganization in agreement with the neighbouring states (Ottoman Empire and Russia – V.G.), especially with the Ottoman Empire". As it is obvious, the districts of Ardahan, Karsi, and Batumi were not directly given to the Ottomans [2: 121]. True, the term was not mentioned, but practically it was a referendum. The Ottomans did not accept this interpretation of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and sent their troops to occupy the districts of Ardahan, Karsi and Batumi. The Transcaucasian Commissariat, which did not recognize the Brest-Litovsk armistice, managed to get the Ottoman government to agree to negotiations. On March 1 (14), 1918 in Trabzon there opened a conference on truce between the Ottoman Empire and Transcaucasia. The Transcaucasian delegation was headed by Akaki Chkhenkeli and the Ottoman delegation was led by Hüseyin Rauf Orbay. The conference in Trabzon did not yield any favorable results. The Ottoman delegation demanded unconditional fulfillment of Article 4 of the Brest Treaty [3: 107-184].

One of the main arguments of the Ottoman delegation at the Trabzon Armistice Conference was that Transcaucasia was not an independent state, and thus, it was not considered a party. On April 9 (April 22), 1918, the Transcaucasian Seim announced the establishment of an independent state – the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic [3: 221-222].

The Transcaucasian Seim agreed to certain concessions. The Ottoman government, on the one hand, recognized the need for negotiations, while on the other hand, continued occupying the territory of Georgia. On April 1 (14), 1918 the Ottomans occupied Batumi [3: 195-196]. The Transcaucasian Seim was forced to agree to continue peace talks with the Ottomans. The negotiations were scheduled to take place in Batumi. The Batumi

armistice conference opened on May 11, 1918. The Transcaucasian delegation was headed by Akaki Chkhenkeli and the Ottoman delegation was led by Halil Bey. At the Batumi conference, the Ottoman delegation made the same demands as those at the Trabzon conference. Moreover, the Ottomans made their demands even more challenging: they insisted on the right to use the Transcaucasian railroad for the transportation of their troops [3: 268-316]. Thus, the Batumi conference was meaningless as it was impossible to negotiate with the Ottomans.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk has not been objectively evaluated in historiography. Thanks to this Treaty, the Ottomans managed to revise the terms of the Treaty of Berlin (1878) and agree with Russia on a new redistribution of territory in the Caucasus. The Ottomans began to play a diplomatic game; the revision of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk could not be agreed between the Ottomans and the Transcaucasus due to international law. Unfortunately, the Transcaucasian delegation followed the diplomatic game of the Ottoman Empire and gained deplorable outcome. Under the Georgian-Ottoman Treaty of June 4, 1918 the Ottoman Empire regained the territory lost under the Treaty of Berlin of 1918. This did not end the redistribution of the historical territory of Georgia between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, but it continued until 1921.

Even at the Trabzon Conference, it was clear that there was no unanimity in the Transcaucasian delegation. At the Batumi Armistice Conference it became obvious that the three main peoples of the Transcaucasian Union State recognized different foreign policy orientations: Georgians – Germanophile, Armenians – Anglophile, and Azerbaijanis – Turkophile orientation. The Transcaucasian Union State seemed to be near dissolution.

Akaki Chkhenkeli and Niko Nikoladze had a great merit in the development of the Germanophile orientation of Georgia. Major General Otto Hermann von Losov, head of the delegation of the German Empire, supported the aspirations of Georgians and helped them with practical advice at

the Batumi Armistice Conference. Akaki Chkhenkeli regularly informed the National Council of Georgia about the situation at the Armistice Conference. He considered the situation disastrous and saw the only possible way out in the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic and the proclamation of the state independence of Georgia. General von Losov promised Akaki Chkhenkeli that in case Georgia declared independence he would ask the German government to protect the country [4: 13-15].

On May 14, 1918, a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Georgia was held. The meeting confirmed the Germanophile foreign policy course of Georgia, and it was decided to appeal to Germany for military and political assistance [5: 67].

The resolution of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Georgia of May 14, 1918, allowed Akaki Chkhenkeli to vigorously start implementing the Germanophile foreign policy. The situation at the armistice conference escalated again. On May 24, 1918, the Ottoman Empire rejected von Losov's petition at the Conference. As a result, on May 25, von Losov completely refused to participate in the Transcaucasus-Ottoman negotiations [3: 306]. Nevertheless, he did not cut his relations with Akaki Chkhenkeli and in every possible way contributed to the development of a course of Germanophile foreign policy orientation of the National Council of Georgia.

In the morning of May 26, 1918, the Seim met in Tbilisi and declared the Union State of Transcaucasia dissolved and withdrew its powers. In the afternoon of the same day, the National Council of Georgia adopted the Act of State Independence. The Germanophile foreign policy proved itself successful and there appeared a new state – Georgia on the world political map [6: 1-3; 3: 332-336].

On May 28, 1918 in Poti, Akaki Chkhenkeli and von Losov signed four agreements between the Democratic Republic of Georgia and the German

Empire on military-political and economic issues [7: 1-7].

In June of 1918, troops of the German regular army entered Georgia and occupied strategic points. The German army was deployed along the Georgian-Ottoman front line as well, which was of great importance for stopping the Ottoman aggression. Whether the Ottomans wanted it or not, they had to give an account to their ally, the German Empire.

Georgia regained its state independence under the protection of the German Empire, and this should be considered a success of Georgian diplomacy. Naturally, the question arises: what interests did Germany have in relation to Georgia? The reason lies in that Germany had no foothold in the Middle East, while national interests required it to gain a foothold in Iraq, Iran and Syria, despite the opposition of England and France. German politicians and military officers assumed that an invasion of the region from the Mediterranean would be very challenging. It was convenient for

Germany to make the invasion from the territory of Georgia by using the harbors of Poti and Batumi to access the Middle East. So, Georgia was to become a vanguard of Germany's eastern policy.

Georgia's pro-German foreign policy orientation was the only correct decision in the military-political situation created by May 1918. At the same time historiography does not pay attention to a very important issue: according to the third article of the Act of State Independence adopted on May 26, 1918, Georgia was declared a permanently neutral state in international military actions. This neutrality was violated by the Georgian-German Poti Agreement of May 28, 1918, and the entry of German troops into the territory of Georgia in June 1918. These two facts and the Georgian-Ottoman Batumi Treaty of June 4, 1918 reminded the victorious countries of World War I (England, France, etc.) very much of Georgia at the Paris Peace Conference (January 1919-January 1920), what eventually became one of the deterrents on the way to recognize Georgia's independence.

ისტორია

საქართველოს საგარეო პოლიტიკა 1917-1918 წწ.

3. გურული

წმ. ანდრია პირველწოდებულის სახ. ქართული უნივერსიტეტი, ჰუმანიტარულ მეცნიერებათა და სამართლის ფაკულტეტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. მეტრეველის მიერ)

საგარეო-პოლიტიკურ ორიენტაციას ქართული სახელმწიფოებრიობის არსებობის ყველა ეტაპზე დიდი მნიშვნელობა ენიჭებოდა. XIX საუკუნის დამდეგს რუსეთის იმპერიამ ქართული სამეფო-სამთავროები დაიპყრო. საგარეო-პოლიტიკური ორიენტაციის საკითხმა დაკარგა აქტუალობა. 1917 წლის თებერვალ-მარტში რუსეთში რევოლუცია მოხდა და იმპერიამაც დაასრულა არსებობა. იმპერიის სამართალმემკვიდრე გახდა დროებითი მთავრობა, რომელმაც 1917 წლის მარტის დამდეგს შექმნა ამიერკავკასიის სამხარეო ხელისუფლების ორგანო – ამიერკავკასიის განსაკუთრებული კომიტეტი (ოზაკომი). რევოლუციის შემდეგ საქართველოს პოლიტიკური ელიტა მიიჩნევდა, რომ რუსეთის დემოკრატიული სახელმწიფოს შემადგენლობაში საქართველოს ფართო ავტონომიური უფლებებით არსებობა შესაძლებელი იყო. ეს პოლიტიკური კურსი 1917-1921 წლების საზოგადოებრივ-პოლიტიკურმა აზრმა და ისტორიო-გრაფიამ სტრატეგიულ შეცდომად გამოაცხადა, რაც პრაქტიკულად დღემდე გრძელდება. ამ საკითხთან დაკავშირებით ჩვენი აზრი ასეთია: იმხანად საქართველოს სახელმწიფოებრივი დამოუკიდებლობის აღდგენა შეუძლებელი იყო, აუცილებელი იყო დამოუკიდებლობის აღდგენისთვის მოსამზადებელი პერიოდი, რისთვისაც რუსეთის შემადგენლობაში საქართველოს ავტონომიის არსებობა სრულიად მისაღები იყო. ქართული პოლიტიკური ელიტის კურსი სავსებით პასუხობდა ეროვნულ-სახელმწიფოებრივ ინტერესებს და სულაც არ ნიშნავდა დამოუკიდებლობაზე უარის თქმას. 1917 წლის ოქტომბერში ბოლშევიკებმა პეტროგრადში სახელმწიფო გადატრიალება განახორციელეს და კანონიერი დროებითი მთავრობა დაამხეს.

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