Soviet Federalism at Work: Lessons from the History of the Transcaucasian Federation, 1922–1936
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This paper starts from a discussion of a forgotten page of South-Caucasian history, the existence from 1920 to 1936 of a Transcaucasian Federation (ZSFSR) uniting Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, in order to reconsider two claims generally made about the Soviet regime. First, that the building blocs of the Soviet state were national republics, a fact that only consolidated after the Second World War. Second, that Soviet federalism was a mere Potemkin village camouflaging an exceedingly centralized state. The author argues that federalism was taken seriously because it provided Soviet leaders, notably in the initial period of the USSR, with original political and administrative tools, that allowed for a management of multinational societies and multilevel conflicts, and created structures of mutual control between Transcaucasian actors. This argument is made on the basis of numerous published and archival sources coming from the three Transcaucasian republics and Russia, as well as European and Turkish diplomatic sources. Far from being a footnote in the history of the Soviet Union, the ZSFSR can indicate new paths for a wider reconsideration of the political uses of federalism in authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Transcaucasian Federation, Federalism, 1920ies, 1930ies

The Stalin constitution of 1936, in its quest for social order and political symmetry, laid the ground for a key Soviet mantra, emphasizing the national character of Soviet republics. Official interpretations of Soviet federalism after the Second World War fully embraced the idea that Union republics were in essence national units whose coming together at the beginning of the 1920s had created a “wholly new and higher type of federation”.¹ This idea stands, however, in contradiction with the practices of early Soviet federalism which demonstrate that the republics were not considered as coterminous with national boundaries in the strict meaning of the concept, even though some would already extol the “separate rooms” of the various national units.² The contingencies of early Bolshevik state-building and the diverging theories of territorial constituency-mak-
ing led to experiments in asymmetric federalism, with heterogeneous building blocks and rights. Foremost among these experiments is the case of the Transcaucasian Federal Socialist Republic (ZSFSR) or Transcaucasian Federation, an embedded federation grouping the three republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaidžan from 1922 to 1936. These republics, which gained “federal immediacy” with the Stalin constitution, were until then part of the USSR as components of the Transcaucasian Federation. Exploring the history of this Federation fills a lacuna in Caucasian studies but is also a reminder of early Soviet practices in federalism.

Soviet federalism does not, at first sight, fit in with the Western-modelled ideal type of federalism, premised upon democracy and liberal values. Democratic centralism in the Bolshevik Party was seen from the very beginning as a major obstacle to the existence of any real territorial autonomy. Similarly, the instrumental conception of law that dominated the early decades of the regime precluded a clear-cut repartition of competences, since central organs could routinely modify this repartition without much regard for such concepts as the hierarchy of norms or the supremacy of the constitution.

However, the liveliness of the debate over federalism in the first years of the Bolshevik regime bears testimony to the fact that it was not perceived as an empty shell. The debate was particularly strong during the drafting of the first Soviet Constitution, a time when the exact nature of interactions between central and territorial organs was widely discussed. Later on, federalism remained a key feature of the Soviet system, an idea that did not exclude violent politics. It could be inserted in a broader theoretical debate

4 I hereafter refer to the concept of “federal immediacy”, a phrase modeled on the Early Modern German “imperial immediacy” (Reichsunmittelbarkeit) in the Holy Roman Empire, to emphasize the political importance attached to gaining Union status.
5 Burgess Comparative Federalism; Livingston A Note on the Nature of Federalism, pp. 81–95.
6 A subtle analysis of these early discussions in Plotnieks Petr Stučka i istoki Sovetskoj pravo

voj mysli, pp. 83–90.
7 An overview of these debates, prepared by the Institute of Soviet Law, was published in 1930:
Rejchel’ (ed.): Sovetskij federalizm; Palienko Konfederacii, federacii i Sojuz Socialističeskich
Sovetskikh Respublik.
8 Riker Federalism, p. 40; Raffass The Soviet Union.
about the connection between federalism and authoritarianism. Contrary to what normative interpretations suggest, federalism is not bound to liberal democracy but is a political form that has also been mobilized by authoritarian regimes, as forms of constitutionalism have too. In the late 19th century, Bismarck made use of federal institutions in order to stifle the democratic movement that fed on national politics, prompting Austrian constitutional lawyer Hans Nawiasky to write in 1928 that “Bismarck was a federalist because he was a monarchist”. As an ideology based on state rights rather than individual rights, federalism could also be a powerful tool of conservatism, a fact that left-wing and Soviet lawyers denounced in the early 1920s.

Histories of the Caucasus in the interwar period generally adopt a national focus, which leaves little room for the consideration of regional structures of power, and no less than Ronald Grigor Suny himself could call the ZSFSR a “pseudo-federal system”. A recent essay on regional integration in the Caucasus includes the ZSFSR as one of its failures and assumes that “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”. The few works related to the Federation were essentially published by Armenian and Georgian scholars in the 1980s and their mix of positivist history and communist rhetoric has failed to gain full credibility among historians, despite real contributions. The contention of this paper, however, is that this dismissive assessment of the Transcaucasian Federation which is not based upon archival evidence fails to take up the question in a meaningful way. During its lifetime, the ZSFSR was actually frequently discussed, both in the Soviet Union and abroad, as a particularly interesting example of federation within a federation.

The Transcaucasian Federation was quite obviously not a Union republic based on nationality. According to the Soviet census of 1926, the Federation’s population of nearly 5.8 million was made up of 44 different nationalities, twelve of which had populations above 30,000. Moreover, the three dominant nationalities – Georgians, Armenians and Turks-Tatars – were not confined to their republics, in a striking case of “ethnic imblica-

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11 Suny Looking Toward Ararat, pp. 140–142; Baberowski Der Feind ist überall.
12 De Waal A Broken Region, p. 1718.
13 The first scholarly work after 1936 is to my knowledge: Parkosadze Principy sovetskogo federalizma; Charmandjarjan Spločenie narodov; Gvitr’aria Amierk’av’asis Federaciis šekmna; Giaç’atrjjan Andrp’ederaç’aiji peta-iravakan statusu.
15 The first three nationalities were officially Turks-Tatars (1.4 mln), Georgians (1.3 mln) and Armenians (978.000). CSU SSSR. Vsesojuznaja perepis’ naselenija, pp. XVI–XVII; on the difficult definition of ethnic categories, Hirsch Empire of Nations and Cadiot Le laboratoire impérial.
tion” (черезполосита), as S. Abramov put it in 1935.\textsuperscript{16} The resistance of the so-called national communists to the creation of the Federation in 1922, culminating in the crisis between Sergo Ordżonikidze and the Georgian Central Committee in the fall gave rise to several works during the Cold War and in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{17} The Georgian Affair nonetheless needs to be approached in a non-normative way and put into the context of what was and remained the main role of the ZSFSR — dealing with a deeply divided region and restoring a measure of unity and order. The ZSFSR was indeed closer to the original Bolshevik conception of sovereignty, as class-based and internationalist, than other national republics, an idea conveyed by the parodist cartoon The Barge Haulers of the ZSFSR, featured by numerous Transcaucasian newspapers in 1922–1923, where Georgians, Armenians, Turks and Russians could be seen hauling out the boat of the Federation.\textsuperscript{18} It was also closer to the Soviet ideal of a Союз between equal republics than the Soviet Union, let alone the Russian Federation (RSFSR), being based upon the principle of autonomy. The republic was, in this conception, not a national unit but a political unit designed to keep a check on national passions and inculcate communist values. The federal mechanisms of the ZSFSR were as important in establishing order in the Caucasus of the 1920s as sheer domination and repression. In the early Soviet context, far from being a “Potemkin village”, federalism was integral to building power relations, and was part of a conscious effort to create intermediary political buffers and “redundancies” that partially replaced top down authority by horizontal controls and checks, making Bolshevik power more palatable.\textsuperscript{19}

**A Response to Disunity**

In a famous letter sent to the Caucasian communists soon after the Sovietization of Georgia, on 14 April 1921, Lenin warned them against slavishly imitating Russian Bolshevism and invited them to develop their own path toward socialism by taking into account regional specificities.\textsuperscript{20} Beyond its appealing anti-chauvinistic commitment, this letter was tightly connected to Moscow’s unwillingness to grant too much aid to a region ruined by several years of economic disruption due to independences and wars. On 9 April 1921, a telegram directed to Sergo Ordżonikidze, head of the Transcaucasian Front of the Red Army and of the Caucasian Bureau of the Party, emphasized the impossibility

\begin{itemize}
  \item[16] Abramov Federativnoe ustrojstvo Zakavkaz’ja, p. 20.
  \item[17] This episode is so famous in Soviet history that I do not think it necessary to address it hereafter. The crisis started on 22 October 1922, with the resignation of nine out of the eleven members of the Georgian Central Committee. A commission headed by Dzeržinskij was sent to Tiflis to evaluate the situation and Lenin simultaneously sent a personal envoy, Rykov. Despite substantiating the ruthless behavior of Ordżonikidze, the affair did not stop the creation of the Federation, since Lenin was already seriously weakened. Smith The Georgian Affair of 1922, p. 531–534; Leven Le dernier combat de Lénine, pp. 55–73.
  \item[18] Martakoč’ (22 April 1923), No. 47; Dullin/Forestier-Peyrat Flexible Sovereignties of the Revolutionary State.
  \item[19] Landau Federalism.
  \item[20] Charnandarjan Spločenie narodov, p. 21–22.
\end{itemize}
of any Russian economic help to the region and the consequent necessity to “create a re-
gional economic organ for Transcaucasia” in order to accelerate a self-reliant reconstruc-
tion. Although three Soviet republics had been established since the Soviet invasion of
Azerbajdzhan in April 1920, something more was needed to reestablish a regional integra-
tion. Admittedly, Russia had started vertical integration by signing bilateral agreements
transferring some competences to Moscow in areas such as finances, posts and tele-
graphs, and military affairs. Justified by the necessities of the civil war, these treaties
created but a few direct subordination channels: although the most important decisions
could be transferred through the Party command line, most of the daily interaction be-
tween Russia and the republics went through Russian consuls and representatives in the
region, notably Boris Legran in Tbilisi, who could not act without cooperation from local
authorities.

Regional integration at the Transcaucasian level was thus the dual outcome of unsatis-
factory bilateral relations between Russia and the republics and Russian unwillingness to
pay for Caucasian reconstruction. It was ultimately a question how to create a network of
self-help between nations that had been fighting violently among themselves for more
than three years. A symbolic step was made in late April 1921 when a Transcaucasian ad-
ministration of railways was recreated, followed at the end of June by an agreement uni-
fying foreign trade for the three republics. This success of functionalist integration can-
not be explained without integrating personal politics. The Transcaucasian project
emerged by mid-1921 in the mind of Šergo Ordžonikidze and his close associates. After
having completed the Sovietization of the region in the past year and a half, Ordžoni-
kidze was keen to consolidate a basis of power extending to what he saw as one region,
in the direct continuity of the Caucasian viceroyalty existing until 1917. National re-
publics should not be an obstacle to the realization of such a project for a man whom
foreign consuls already called a “near heir to the viceroys of the Caucasus.” Unsurpris-
ingly, Ordžonikidze first came up with the project of a federation in a letter to Stalin and
the Russian Central Committee, on 8 September 1921. In a politically astute maneuver,

21 Lenin to Ordžonikidze, 9 April 1921, quoted in Genkina (ed.): Obrazovanie SSSR, p. 269.
22 The first such treaty was signed between Azerbajdzhan and Russia, on 30 September 1920, see
ARSPIHDA, f. 28, op. 1, d. 66, l. 9; Mustafa-Zade Dve respubliki, pp. 153–155; Čičerin to Or-
džonikidze, 19 June 1921, in: Sarkishian Diplomatičeskaia missiia RSFSR, p. 98.
23 Protocol of the Georgian Central Committee, 9 September 1921, SSSA PA, f. 14, op. 1, d. 8,
l. 4; Čičerin insisted that their role was that of coordination with the republics: Čičerin to Or-
džonikidze, 19 June 1921, in: Sarkishian Diplomatičeskaia missiia RSFSR, p. 98.
24 Kaspiuroprotokol, 4 September 1921, SUICA, f. 735, op. 1, d. 1, l. 5; Merkvelidze Sozdanie i
ukreplenie sovetskoi gosudarstvennosti, pp. 42–43; for the independence period, Yilmaz An
25 Report of the Iranian consul-general in Baku, Sá’ed ol-Vezâra, 27 Sha’bân 1339 (6 May 1921),
quoted by Bayat Tufan bar farâz-e Qafqâz, p. 385.
26 Ordžonikidze to the Russian Central Committee, 8 September 1921, RGASPI, f. 85, op. 18,
d. 327, ll. 1–3; Smith The Georgian Affair of 1922, pp. 529–530.
Ordžonikidze succeeded in presenting his project as the best way to contain national hatreds and rebuild the region.

The Transcaucasian Bolsheviks were heavily influenced by the Tsarist precedent of a regional power as a direct result of their life experience. First established in January 1846 by imperial decree, the Transcaucasian viceroyalty had survived until the end of the regime, with an intermezzo from 1883 to 1905 when the Caucasus was supposedly on the path to normalization. In popular conceptions, the viceroyalty enjoyed an indubitable measure of support, as it illustrated a form of regional identity and embodied allegiance to the Tsar through the figure of the viceroy.

The viceroyalty had a clear territorial power framing as all kinds of public and private institutions adopted the Transcaucasian mould for their activities. Ironically, senior Tsarist officials justified the creation of an Ochrana office for the entire Transcaucasia by the fact that Russian Social Democrats were themselves organized on this scale. It was rather on the failed Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (April-May 1918) that Bolshevik leaders heaped criticism, as it allowed them to disparage the nationalist leaders of the Georgian Menshevik, Armenian Dashnak and Azeri Musavat parties and accuse them of fostering inter-ethnic strife.

The process that led to the creation of the Transcaucasian Federation is of broader relevance, since it was the first Soviet experiment in mobilizing the masses around the federal idea, a fact the representatives of Transcaucasia were quick to cite during the negotiations over the constitution of the Soviet Union.

27 Rhinelander, The Creation of the Caucasian Viceregency, pp. 15–40; Le Donne, La réforme de 1883 au Caucase, pp. 21–35.
28 AUCH, Muslim-Untertan-Bürger; Ismail-Zade Voroncov-Daškov.
29 Daly, The Watchful State, pp. 53–57.
30 Among many other critical works, see Arkomed Materials po istorii otpadenija.
31 Thomas De Waal suggests that “the Caucasus set the blueprint for the Soviet Union, not the other way round”. De Waal, The Caucasus, p. 74; Gevondjan, AndrSFSR masnak’ur’juny, pp. 45–54.
32 Politburo protocol, 29 November 1921, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 237, ll. 1–2; on the campaign, Tamrazova, Dejatel’nost’ kommunističeskich organizacij, pp. 22–23; Mentešasvili Bol’shevistskaja pressa Zakavkaz’ja.
33 Kirov to Ordžonikidze, 30 October 1921, RGASPI, f. 85, op. 18, d. 342, l. 1; Protocol of the Georgian Central Committee, 2 December 1921, ŠŠSA PA, f. 14, op. 1, d. 8, l. 37.
34 ZKK protocol, 22 March 1922, ŠŠSA PA, f. 13, op. 1, d. 17, l. 12; Van Den Berg, De regering van Rusland, p. 63.
manov and the Georgian Filipp Macharadze, emphasized the dangers of nationalist reactions to the Federation. 35 “I have always told the same thing at the Kavbiuro’s meetings”, wrote Narimanov to Lenin in January 1922, “unification is a necessity, but we should not hurry too much”. 36 This discontent notwithstanding, the federalization of Transcaucasia was judged successful enough to inspire similar projects for Central Asia, where territorial structures were still hotly disputed in an attempt to accommodate local leaders while ensuring the efficiency of Bolshevik power. The decision to create national republics instead of a Turkestan republic was not seen as an obstacle to the establishment of a Central Asian Federation. 37

Transcaucasian Interests?

As the first Transcaucasian Congress of Transcaucasian Soviets was being held in Baku in December 1922, one could have paraphrased Massimo d’Azeglio’s famous observation: now that Transcaucasia had been made, Bolshevik leaders still had to make Transcaucasians. 38 Making Transcauscians was simultaneously a political, an intellectual and a material endeavor. The Federation was marketed to the inhabitants of the region through numerous and sometimes unexpected media, such as the Transcaucasan branded cigarettes that could be bought in 1923. This project of making Transcauscians was considered serious enough that the federal leadership established a series of institutions entrusted with studying the region and producing cadres of regional communist elites. 39 Policies of cultural and social modernization were largely discussed at the Transcaucasian level, as is demonstrated by measures toward women, religion or education. 40 The most important of them was the Transcaucasian University of the 26 Commissars, in Tbilisi. 41 The university was part of the network of communist universities and affiliated with the Transcaucasian Regional Committee (ZKK), the Party’s successor to the Kavbiuro. Recruiting students in all three republics starting from the academic year 1923–1924, the University set itself the goal of creating a common political identity and producing new elites for the region. 42 Transcaucasian identity, the curriculum insisted, was the best way to ensure that the region remained tightly connected to the new Soviet state, while retaining a strong level of autonomy. M. M. Dubenskij, lecturer for economic geography, em-

35 Macharadze to Cchakaja, 18 March 1922, RGASPI, f. 157, op. 1c, d. 14, l. 2.
37 EDGAR Tribal Nation, pp. 57–58; URZADEV Rol’ RSFSR i SSSR, p. 122.
38 The first Constitution of Transcaucasia did not mention a Transcaucasian citizenship distinct from All-Union and republic citizenships, but the Constitution of 1925 introduced the concept (Chapter 2). ANANOV Zametki, p. 121.
41 GEVORGJAN 26 komisarneri anvan andrkovkašjan, pp. 12–22.
42 Protocol of the university board, 19 June 1924, SSSA PA, f. 128, op. 1, d. 2, l. 221.
phasized in his course syllabus: “The strong attention devoted to Transcaucasia does not mean at all less attention for the Soviet Union as a whole, of whom Transcaucasia is an inseparable part, economically and politically.”

Training a new Transcaucasian elite was, however, not sufficient, since there always remained the danger that they would once again fracture along national lines. Transcaucasian authorities had to demonstrate that they were best placed to defend republic interests and transform them into regional ones. As early as 1922, the Federal Council succeeded in such a move by advocating for the Azeri project to launch a trade fair in Baku. A Transcaucasian coalition proved to be essential in overcoming the resistance of the Russian Commissariat for Foreign Trade, and the fair opened its pavilions in September 1922, becoming in later years a symbol of Transcaucasian autonomy in trade with the “East”. The existence in 1922–1923 of a Transcaucasian commissariat for Foreign Trade created a distance from Moscow and autonomy for local economic actors, who could with its complicity bypass many rules of the central government’s monopoly of foreign trade. Šumjackij, the Russian ambassador to Teheran, complained during the first Baku fair about the policy of “commercial separatism” pursued by Transcaucasian actors in the region. Producing such coalitions of interests was vital to the Federation, whose elites were otherwise too prone to split. These coalitions were also key moments to test the cohesion of the new elite, and served in the early years of the Federation to eliminate those political leaders who did not support Ordžonikidze’s project.

A vital place for the production of this Transcaucasian vision was the Permanent Representation of the ZSFSR in Moscow. In July 1927, the Soviet journal Ogonek ran a centerfold of pictures of the Republic Representations in Moscow, featuring the Art Nouveau mansion at 6 Malyj Rževskij Street, that hosted the Transcaucasian Representation. Permanent Republic Representations were a key, although neglected, feature of Soviet federalism, and Šahak Ter-Gabrielian, the first Transcaucasian representative who served until 1927, took his task very seriously.

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43 Course syllabus for economic geography, 15 September 1923, ŠSSA PA, f. 128, op. 1, d. 2, l. 90.
44 FORESTIER-PÉYRAT Red Passage to Iran, pp. 85–86.
45 Federal Council protocol, 15 July 1922, ŠSSA PA, f. 13, op. 1, d. 20, l. 110.
46 Šumjackij to the Federal Council, 10 September 1922, SUICA, f. 612, op. 1, d. 62, ll. 9–10.
47 Narimanov complained in December 1923 in a letter sent to Stalin and published during the Perestroika, BELYADOVIH Istoriia Azerbajdzhana, p. 268.
48 Shešt’ respublik v Moskve, in: Ogonek, (10 July 1927), 28 (224).
sentative of Soviet Armenia to Moscow, but he fully embraced his mission to defend Transcaucasian interests in All-Union institutions starting from April 1923. The reports regularly sent to the Transcaucasian government by the Permanent Representation, conserved in the Georgian National Archives, are a precious source to understand the way those interests were produced and defended. In order to produce coherent Transcaucasian positions, in early 1924 Ter-Gabrielian obtained a decree demanding that all official interaction between state institutions of Transcaucasia and Moscow be channeled through the Representation. Here, in the small building of the Malyj Rževskij Street, a few consultants and experts were to formulate Transcaucasian opinions and interests on the entire scope of issues dealt with by the central organs. Instructions were not always sent from Tbilisi, forcing the Representation to improvise the Transcaucasian stances.

As the permanent representative had a sit in the All-Union government, Central Executive Committee and in the Council of Labor and Defense (STO), he could participate in the elaboration of all central legislation. The monthly reports of the Representation emphasized the necessity of defending Transcaucasian interests by introducing amendments to bills prepared by central organs. In September 1926, Ter-Gabrielian complained that Transcaucasian commissariats should respond more quickly to the Representation’s requests concerning law-making issues since the ZSFSR would otherwise remain powerless against bills that could go counter to its vital interests. Economic legislation was particularly important, he reminded in his activity report for 1925–1926: the Representation had intervened on bills concerning cooperatives, mining, land property and land use, and budget rights, with a view to smoothing relations between the republics and All-Union institutions. For instance, during discussions on the industrial tax (promyslovyj nalog), the representative expressed the Transcaucasian desire to keep as much Baku oil revenue in the region as possible and opposed proposals made by Ukraine and Uzbekistan to share the income generated by this tax. Of course, Ter-Gabrielian’s reports were self-serving in their presentation of the achievements of the Representation. However, they point to a key dimension of the way Transcauscians were ‘made’ at the level of political elites.

For these elites, a key aspect of the ZSFSR was the possibility to use its political structure to make the most out of the mechanisms of Soviet federalism in financial terms. Despite the fact that its leaders tried to negotiate new tax structures for the region, Transcaucasia perennially generated a budget deficit and relied upon permanent subsidies from Moscow. Out of a budget of 68 million rubles in 1925–1926, the ZSFSR could pay only

50 Decree of the Transcaucasian SNK, 28 April 1923, SUICA, f. 617, op. 1, d. 16, l. 7; the creation of a unified representation was demanded by Russian authorities: Karachan to Orachelašvili and Mjasnikov, 21 March 1923, SUICA, f. 617, op. 1, d. 67, l. 42.
51 Circular letter of the Transcaucasian SNK to republican SNKs, 6 February 1924, RGASPI, f. 298, op. 1, d. 167, l. 1.
52 Report of Ter Gabrielian to the Transcaucasian SNK, 5 September 1926, SUICA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, l. 169.
53 Report of Ter Gabrielian to the Transcaucasian SNK, undated, SUICA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, l. 185; see also Kratkij obzor dejatel’nosti Zakavkazskogo Central’nogo Komiteta, p. 12.
54 Report of Ter Gabrielian to Orachelašvili for August–September 1926, SUTTsA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, l. 329.
36 million from its direct income, the remainder being provided by Moscow as subsidies. The quest for Moscow’s money was an ideal way to bring together Transcaucasian interests in a time when the fight against economic underdevelopment was the main tenet of Bolshevik power in the region. Budget negotiations occupied an important portion of the Representation’s activity in the 1920s and its reports boasted of the particular proximity it enjoyed to the All-Union organs thanks to day-to-day intercourse: “Last year, we obtained from the VSNCh [Supreme Economic Council] 6.5 million rubles for our industry, but we agreed on 10 million rubles this year, a change that was made possible thanks to our constant connection to the work of the VSNCh”. The Representation was actually quite effective in obtaining funds for extra-budgetary projects. The fiscal year 1925–1926 saw 1.9 million rubles allocated to the ZSFSR for public works, health, culture and regional development. With a population of 5.8 million, it matched the subsidies obtained by Ukraine and its 29 million citizens. This was well above the per capita subsides of the RSFSR, which could get only 6.4 million rubles. Money was used for projects all across the region, being allocated to combating animal plague, building resorts on the Black Sea, agricultural colonization, support for the press, the construction of a bridge in Tbilisi, as well as refugee aid.

On a permanent basis, central subsidies helped to finance the administrative apparatus of the Transcaucasian Federation. Embedded federalism was costly, and administrative expenses were twice as high as in the rest of the country – 2.06 rubles per citizen per year, against an average 1.09 ruble in the USSR as a whole. This is partly explained by the fact that compared to the republic administrations, the federal apparatus was disproportionately made of executive and senior positions, due to the federal focus on coordination, planning and law-making. In addition, the federally sponsored regional bureaucracy of around a thousand employees created an opportunity for patronage and patrimonial practices, whose importance for Stalinism has been recently reassessed by John Arch Getty. Since September 1923, a decree of the Transcaucasian government concentrated the power to appoint federal officials in the hands of its chairman Mamia Orachelašvili, a Georgian follower of Ordžonikidze. Staying in this office from 1922 until 1927, Orachelašvili fully used patronage opportunities to support Sergo’s network

55 Dochody i raschody ZSFSR, pp. 103–104; for a general insight into budget rules of the Transcaucasian Federation, Položenie o bjdužetnych pravach ZSFSR.
56 Activity report of the Transcaucasian representation for 1925–1926, SUICA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, l. 182.
57 Activity report of the Transcaucasian representation for period 1 January–13 February 1926, SUICA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 158–164; Krylov Bjudžetnoe pravo SSSR, p. 141; Jakubovskaja Stroitel’stvo sojuznogo sotsialisticëskogo gosudarstva, pp. 303–304.
58 Activity report of the Transcaucasian representation for 1925–1926, SUICA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, l. 181.
59 ZSFSR na novom etape. Tiflis 1929, p. 37, quoted in Merkviladze Sozdanie i ukreplenie Sovetskoj gosudarstvennosti, p. 348.
60 Getty Practicing Stalinism, pp. 2–6.
in the region.\textsuperscript{62} That central subsidies should pay for such a structure was part of the political bargain that ensured stability in the region in return for a great deal of autonomy. The Federation was therefore an integral part to the functioning of the “regional clique” ruling the region.\textsuperscript{63}

A Political Buffer

This political bargain demanded that national conflicts in the South Caucasus should be solved within the framework of the ZSFSR, without bothering central institutions. Transcaucasian authorities had thus tackled border and land conflicts between the three republics in the early 1920s. Starting from 1922, a special body was created in the Transcaucasian Central Executive Committee to solve these problems.\textsuperscript{64} The Commission on Land, Water and Forest Disputes was to transform highly political conflicts into technical questions by producing geographical, economic and anthropological expertise. While similar Soviet enterprises have been described elsewhere in the production of republic territories, the Transcaucasian case diverged insofar as it had to resolve intense conflicts in South Ossetia, Karabach, Zangezur and Nakhchivan.\textsuperscript{65} Moreover, the resolution of these conflicts relied upon horizontal negotiation in the framework of the Transcaucasian Federation. Although parts of the compromises produced in the 1920s have been criticized in the last years of the Soviet Union, one should not underestimate the practical achievements of the Federation in solving numerous territorial conflicts at a local scale. Until the very end of the 1920s, it remained very active and was assigned new missions to settle pending disputes.\textsuperscript{66} The Transcaucasian elite quickly got accustomed to this autonomous conflict resolution, a fact which was expressed during the Georgian uprising in late August 1924, when Ordžonikidze and his allies first kept Moscow uninformed about the course of the revolt and had several leaders executed without central approval, much to Stalin’s dissatisfaction.\textsuperscript{67}

As a political buffer, the ZSFSR was to maintain this distance while allowing for control and order. Although Soviet federalism never developed a system of constitutional review like Western federal regimes, the control of constitutional competences between ad-

\textsuperscript{63} EASTER Reconstructing the State; RIGBY Early Provincial Cliques, pp. 3–28; HARRIS The Great Urals.
\textsuperscript{64} For a detailed example of this process in a dispute between Armenian Zangezur and Azerbaijani Kurdistan in 1923, see SUICA, f. 607, op. 1, d. 13.
\textsuperscript{65} SAPAROV From Conflict to Autonomy, pp. 99–123; SAPAROV From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus, notably pp. 125–139; DULLIN La frontière épaisse, pp. 94–95.
\textsuperscript{66} Minutes of a special conference of the Transcaucasian CIK, 29 January 1929, SUICA, f. 617, op. 1, d. 2535, II. 2–7.
\textsuperscript{67} See ŠŠSA PA, f. 14, op. 2, d. 40 and 41; JIKIA 1924 c’lis ajanq’eba; Stalin to the members of the Politburo, 5 September 1924, in: GATAGOVA/KOŠELEVA/ROGOVAJA (eds.): CsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i nacional’nyj vopros, p. 233.
ministrative levels was debated in the 1920s. Ukrainian leaders were particularly keen to defend their positions through constitutional arguments and deny “implied powers” to central authorities. In the absence of judicial review, constitutional and political control could be exerted downward and, more significantly, upward, by Central Executive Committees and Councils of People’s Commissars. The Transcaucasian CIK could block decisions taken by the republics in case it considered them unlawful, but the republics could also appeal against decisions taken by Transcaucasian bodies thanks to an amendment to the Transcaucasian Constitution of April 1925. Similarly, relations between Transcaucasia and All-Union organs included such mechanisms. In this context, Transcaucasian institutions functioned as a field where conflicts could be resolved without central intervention, and created redundancies that could prevent political mistakes. Moscow was quite satisfied to have this organ serve as a mediating body for conflicts between regional actors, as is illustrated by the conflict that erupted between Adjar party boss Tachsim Chimšiašvili and the Georgian leadership in October 1925.

On 12 October 1925, Chimšiašvili vented his anger against Georgia, accusing its leadership of implementing a “nationalistic, chauvinistic and colonial” policy in Adjara. He decided to go directly to Moscow to plead his case against his Georgian rivals, but the Politburo was loath to intervene. On 15 October, Stalin sent a cable to the Transcaucasian Regional Committee, finding an excuse in the constitutional rules of the ZSFSR: “Although we recognize the right of the Adjar CIK to appeal to Moscow, I consider it more desirable that they appeal first to the Transcaucasian CIK, the highest organ of the Federation.” Following this cable, Ordžonikidze, Orachelasvili and Šalva Eliava, chairman of the Georgian government, suggested the creation of a joint inquiry commission of the Adjar, Georgian and Transcaucasian CIKs.

The ZSFSR, in a sense, could be compared to a self-regulated arena, where Bolshevik power was not so much exercised from the center as performed through mutual surveillance of Transcaucasian actors. In nationalities policy, with minorities scattered around the region, every republic could claim to defend the rights of its co-nationals through the institutions of the Federation. Federal institutions laid great emphasis on the use of all Transcaucasian languages in their interaction with society and multiplied procedures designed to service minorities in each republic. Fact-finding missions were organized in minority regions by inquiry commissions. Thus, in the spring and summer of 1925, Chimšiašvili led an inquiry commission to Muslim regions of Southern Georgia and Ar-

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69 MASSIS/HUBENY-BELSKY Droit constitutionnel des Etats, pp. 227–228.
70 BOURDIEU Sur l’Etat, pp. 40–41; LANDAU Federalism. Redundancy and System Reliability, p. 188.
71 Third session of the Adjar CIK, 12 October 1925, ŠŠSA PA, f. 14, op. 1, d. 605, l. 16.
72 Stalin to the ZKK, 15 octobre 1925, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 3335, l. 1.
73 Ordžonikidze, Orachelasvili and Eliava to Stalin, ŠŠSA PA, f. 14, op. 1, d. 605, l. 34.
menia and Armenian Communist Azatian led a commission to Abkhazia. The Transcaucasian Party Control Commission and Worker’s and Peasant’s Inspectorate also played a central role in this effort by organizing numerous cross-republic inspections and seeing to the harmonization of legal and administrative practices. The importance of self-regulation and practical concerns in the morphology of republics brings us to a conclusion similar to what Arne Haugen has argued about Central Asia, that Union republics were not conceived as divisive, but cohesive, since they brought some semblance of unity to highly heterogeneous and conflict-prone local contexts.

Self-regulation and autonomy enabled Transcaucasian leaders to maintain a high profile during the 1920s. The prestige of the Federation attracted foreign consuls, eager to learn more about Soviet policies in “Oriental republics”. The special status of Transcaucasia was illustrated in March 1925, when a special session of the All-Union CIK convened in Tbilisi, in the Great Theater House. Although this session had to review problematic aspects of Soviet power in the region, Ordžonikidze managed to transform it into a power display and an exaltation of his achievements at the head of the Transcaucasian Federation. He insisted that foreign journalists be invited to the event, as well as diplomats. Due to the particular position of the ZSFSR at the interface between the USSR and the Middle East, observers from Turkey and Iran were particularly attentive to what they perceived as possible hints to new directions in Soviet diplomacy. Although part of the Soviet Union, Transcaucasia could still enjoy a measure of international profile through such opportunities which regional leaders tried to perpetuate, notably in regional policies toward the “East”. The following year, similar comments could be made about the role they played in the organization of the Turcological Congress held in February 1926 in Baku, with a view to influencing the entire Middle East.

75 Report of the inquiry commission headed by Cimšiašvili, 3 May 1925, SŠSA PA, f. 13, op. 3, d. 314, l. 1; Blauvelt “From Words to Action!”, pp. 243–244.
77 Haugen The Establishment of National Republics, p. 90.
79 NKID to the NKID plenipotentiary in ZSFSR, 25 February 1925, RGASPI, f. 157, op. 1s, d. 15, l. 58.
80 Report of the Turkish consul-general in Tbilisi, 6 March 1925, BCA, 30.10.0.0/247.672.1.
82 Frings Playing Moscow off Against Kazan, pp. 249–266; Frings Sowjetische Schriftpolitik; 1926 Bakû türkoloji kongresinin 70. yıl dönümü; Altstadt The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan pp. 72–77.
The Intricacies of Embedded Federalism

In spite of indisputable achievements, the Transcaucasian Federation was not an entirely successful creation. The main problem had to do with the frailty of the arrangements described above: personal politics and concrete relations of power were central to the functioning of Soviet federalism, and constitutional norms could be adapted to new contexts by permanently “remaking the rules”.

This was directly expressed in the Transcaucasian case by Ordžonikidze’s departure, in summer 1926, to North Caucasus and later to Moscow, as head of the All-Union Party Control Commission and Workers’ and Peasant’s Inspectorate. In a letter to Stalin, his close associates Orachelašvili and Kachiani argued that Sergo was a key part in ensuring common Transcaucasian interests against factional trends.

At the beginning of the 1920s, Macharadze had prophesied in a letter to the Russian Central Committee that Ordžonikidze’s brutality during the creation of the Federation would foster in reaction hostility to the federalist idea itself, and 1926 confirmed this idea. Orachelašvili who succeeded Ordžonikidze as head of the Party Regional Committee did not enjoy the same personal authority or ruthlessness, and centrifugal opinions progressively gained ground. After Kirov’s departure from Azerbajdžan, the Caspian republic entered a phase of internecine fights between its leaders that the new First Secretary, Levon Mirzojan, was unable to resolve.

The first expression of this crisis was the multiplication of conflicts between the Republics and Transcaucasian institutions. The distinction between planning and executive tasks, supposed to delimit the respective fields of the ZSFSR and the Republics, was in practice quite hard to draw. Jašvili, the Transcaucasian Commissar for Labor, thus complained to the Party Regional Committee in January 1928 that Republican commissariats “adopted their own legislation without consultation with the Transcaucasian Commissariat, and often violated the laws in force in the ZSFSR”.

The cohabitation between Transcaucasian and Georgian institutions, which often shared premises, was particularly sensitive. A conflict re-erupted in 1927 between the Transcaucasian and the Georgian GPU and Zalman Argov, head of the secret department of the Transcaucasian GPU, wrote in spring 1928 to complain about Lavrentij Berija, head of the Georgian GPU. The Regional Committee had to create a special commission in May-June 1928 to demar-
cate the prerogatives of the two institutions.\textsuperscript{91} Novruz Rizaev, head of the Azeri GPU in 1927–1929, was also accused by Tbilisi of creating a vast system of corruption based on smuggling operations along the border with Iran.\textsuperscript{92} In these different conflicts, however, the absence of an arbiter able to pass lasting compromises was felt, a fact allowing for a prolongation of tensions.

Many conflicts revolved around the very way the region had been organized since the beginning of the 1920s. The relative vacuum of power, and the intensification of political struggle in the Soviet Union as a whole in 1927–1928, created some room to criticize the ZSFSR. In October 1927, Qəzənfər Musabayov, an associate of Orachelašvili and Ordžonikidze, rebuked Vagarşak Ter-Vahanian, a Trotsky partisan, who wanted a “review of the federalist experiment” in Transcaucasia.\textsuperscript{93} In the Republics, voices rose to attack the power of the federation over the Republics. In early 1928, a member of the Yerevan communist youth, Katanjan, attacked the head of the Armenian Gosplan, Pogosjan, for having nationalist opinions in economic planning against the Federation. Similar views could find a public expression in Georgian newspapers and journals.\textsuperscript{94} Significantly, the Republics regained several prerogatives, such as the right to have again separate finance commissariats. More symbolically, 1927 saw the adoption of a new Constitution in Azerbajdžan that imitated the Georgian Constitution and proclaimed the right of secession of the Azeri Republic from the ZSFSR, in contradiction with the Transcaucasian Constitution of 1925.\textsuperscript{95} Stating that Azerbajdžan was a “sovereign state”, the Constitution played on the ambiguous status of the three South Caucasian Republics, which were neither Union Republics, nor merely autonomous ones.\textsuperscript{96} In April 1927, Armenia followed suit, demonstrating the way the idiosyncrasy of the ZSFSR could beget a serious constitutional problem when faced with a weak leadership.

Such conflicts between Republics and Transcaucasian organs were obviously a major threat to the definition of Transcaucasian interests. The Republics were more and more tempted to maintain direct contacts with Moscow. In September 1928, the Secretary of the Azerbajdžani Central Executive Committee alerted the Party Regional Committee about the conflicts between special envoys of Republics he had witnessed during a trip to Moscow. Each Republic tried to negotiate directly with Moscow on industry financing, while “the voices of the Transcaucasian government and planning committee cannot be heard”.\textsuperscript{97} The multilayered nature of the Federation was frequently mentioned as the rea-

\textsuperscript{91} Protocol of the special ZKK commission on delimiting the competences of the Transcaucasian and Georgian GPUs, 19 June 1928, SŠSA PA, f. 13, op. 6, d. 10, l. 143.
\textsuperscript{92} Alliluev Alliluev-Stalin, pp. 91–93.
\textsuperscript{93} Musabekov Izbrannye stat'i, pp. 154–158.
\textsuperscript{94} Katanjan to the editorial committee of the Zarja Vostoka and Ruben, 12 March 1928, HAA, f. 1, op. 8, d. 27, ll. 114–119; for a case involving the Ekonomist Gruzii in spring 1928, see Jakubovskaja Razvitie SSSR, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{95} Skripilev (ed.): Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo, p. 163.
\textsuperscript{96} Kotljarevskij Pravovaja priroda Zakavkazskich respublik, pp. 17–24; Aliev Konstucionnnoe razvitie, pp. 56–57.
\textsuperscript{97} Qarayev to the ZKK, 4 September 1928, SŠSA PA, f. 13, op. 6, d. 20, ll. 62–63.
son for these attempts to bypass cumbersome hierarchies and limit red tape. The Permanent Representation complained about such initiatives, which went counter to its role as unifying voice for negotiations with Moscow. The new representative Mamulia insisted that the role of the Representation, trapped between All-Union institutions who wanted a better control on the implementation of central decisions in Transcaucasia and Transcaucasian institutions unwilling to cooperate, found it increasingly difficult to fulfill its tasks. A series of conflicts erupted between republic and Transcaucasian organs on direct contacts with Moscow: the head of the Transcaucasian Water Administration, former Chekist and future Azeri leader Mircəfər Bağırov, battled in 1927–1928 against his Republic counterparts who tried to negotiate directly with Moscow and Leningrad to hire Russian water experts. The Federation, as mediating field between Moscow and the Republics, therefore experienced a predicament during these years, demonstrating the necessity of combining both constitutional mechanisms and political leadership to make the ZSFSR work.

The Great Turn and the Pitfalls of Internal Competition

This first crisis of the Federation is a central factor to understanding what became, in the following year, a condensed process by which the ZSFSR was successively revived and dismantled. The key years correspond with the period of Stalin’s Great Turn of 1929–1931, when Transcaucasia experienced a brief revival due to the imperatives of the Five-Year-Plan. Debates about economic centralization and territorial organization in 1928–1929 brought a welcome boost to the federation, by recognizing Transcaucasia as one self-sufficient planning unit. Stalin resolutely supported this idea and demanded in a letter to Molotov, in August 1929, that Transcaucasian leadership over the region be strengthened, in order to successfully launch industrialization. Great plans for electric industry, water works, railways and agriculture meant a renewed emphasis on regional integration. This was translated into a decision of the Politburo, on 30 October 1929, that considerably increased the power of Transcaucasian organs. Their financial and economic competences were widened: the ZSFSR Gosplan was entrusted with the planning for regional electrification and irrigation, the Transcaucasian Statistical Administration

98 Report of the Party Control Commission and Worker’s and Peasant’s Inspectorate on nationality policy in Transcaucasia, 6 July 1929, GARF, f. R374, op. 27, d. 1483, l. 48.
99 Activity report of the permanent representation for October-November 1927, SUICA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 124–126.
100 Bağırov to the Transcaucasian SNK, 1st July 1927, SUICA, f. 616, op. 1, d. 1, l. 424, and protocol of the Armenian SNK, 22 October 1927, l. 441.
102 Stalin to Molotov, 21 August 1929, in: Koseleva [et al.] (eds.): Pis’ma I. V. Stalina, p. 146.
103 Direktiva CK VKP o dal’nejšej rabote Zaktrakjoma, 30 octobre 1929, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 765, l. 16; decree of the Transcaucasian CIK, 29 November 1929, Sistemičeskoe sobranie zakonov ZSFSR, pp. 119–121.
was now submitted to the federal Commissariat of Finance and got supervisory powers. More significantly, a new Transcaucasian Commissariat for Agriculture was established in a decision that caused long discussions among regional leaders. This was indisputably a comeback of the federal level, duly noted by foreign observers.

Federal institutions stood at the forefront of the decision adopted in December 1929 to implement full collectivization in many districts of the region. As the Georgian historian Lomašvili remarked, Transcaucasia was never a priority for central leaders during the first collectivizing campaign. In November 1929, the Kaminskij commission set a target of collectivizing 80% of Transcaucasian households only by 1933, which was modest in comparison with other republics. Federal leaders inflated these targets to enhance the importance of their region in Moscow’s eyes and to put under pressure Republic leaders who reacted by raising the targets even higher. After a series of meetings and public statements, the Regional Committee adopted very high collectivization targets in a decision taken on December 15, 1929. This is not the place to present a general picture of the disasters produced by collectivization in Transcaucasia. We can confine ourselves to mentioning that widespread revolts shook Soviet power in the region and necessitated numerous military operations over more than two years to be crushed. Episodes of outright rebellion in frontier areas such as the Talyš Mountains, Ajara and along the Turco-Armenian border alternated with simmering discontent and the mass flight of peasants into the mountains, the forests and toward Iran and Turkey.

What is relevant here is the fact that collectivization and discontent with it quickly re-vived the debate surrounding the Federation. After March 1930, in an attempt to excul-pate themselves for these failures, Republican leaders tried to put the blame on the Transcaucasian leadership, a version of events reiterated in GPU reports sent directly to Moscow. The simultaneous difficulties of industrialization, which pit republican rulers against each other for more funds, only added oil to the fire. Disagreement was publicly expressed in 1930, when the new Transcaucasian leader, Beso Lominadze, tried to reestablish the credentials of the Federation. Although he had personally been skeptical of collectivization, he now had to produce a compromise and acknowledge a few errors. A letter he sent to all Party cells in the region met with strong opposition in Azerbajdžan.

104 Položenie o Narodnom komissariate finansov ZSFSR; FORESTIER-PEREYRAT Fighting Locusts Together, pp. 536–571.  
106 LOMAŠVILI Velikij perevorot i LOMAŠVILI Iz istorii kolchoznogo stroitel’stva, pp. 156–157.  
108 ZKK decision, 15 December 1929, ŠŠSA PA, f. 13, op. 7, d. 17, l. 18.  
109 For Soviet accounts, besides LOMAŠVILI, see GHAZACHEC’JAN Hajastani kolntresajin giughac’i-t’jan patmut’juné; BŁAUVELT Resistance and Accommodation in the Stalinist Periphery, pp. 78–108; GRANT An Average Azeri Village, pp. 705–731.  
110 Report of the GPU border guard, 18 March 1930, RGVA, f. 25873, op. 3s, d. 40, l. 107; ZKK decision, 16 June 1930, ŠŠSA PA, f. 1, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 1–4.  
111 KNIGHT Beria, Stalin’s First Lieutenant, pp. 41–43.
In October the Baku Party Committee decided to publicly criticize the letter and, after being rebuked by the Regional Committee for nationalism, appealed to Moscow. Although the Central Committee officially sided with the ZKK, its endorsement was full of reserves. A few days later, Lominadze was demoted and arrested in the context of the Syrcov-Lominadze case that revealed the existence of an opposition group around the chairman of the Russian SNK, Sergej Syrcov.

The implications of the affair were twofold. On the one hand, it brought to light the numerous tensions among regional leaders which had emerged due to the decline of Ordżonikidze’s clique. In an effort to pacify relations in the region, Kirov was sent on a special mission to Baku, Yerevan and Tiflis at the end of 1930. Structurally, the crisis revealed the limits of Transcaucasian self-regulation in situations of political and social tension. Whereas the Federation could still be praised in official publications, such as as G. N. Gabisonia’s *History of the Creation of the Transcaucasian Federation*, central leaders had growing qualms about the initial bargain that had given birth to it. In October 1931, at an Orgbiuro meeting, Stalin inveighed against the “lack of Party organization” and “ataman government [ṣaltamanshebina]” peculiar to the way the Federation was managed. The responsibilities of the Federal leadership in the failures of the Great Turn were directly mentioned in the ensuing discussion and excessive centralization in Tiflis was characterized as a distinctive leftist deviation.

A Puzzling Demise

The fact that the Transcaucasian Federation never recovered from the blow it suffered in 1930–1931 was due to the errors committed by its leaders during this period. A few years later, the project of a new Soviet Constitution that was announced in 1935 provided an opportunity to suppress the Federation without attracting too much attention. As far as the ZSFSR is concerned, though, the constitutional reform remains very enigmatic. In March 1936, Musabayov, who was then head of the Transcaucasian government, outlined the radiant future of the federation as a constituent republic in the new Stalin Constitution. A few months later, the chairman of the Transcaucasian government would be surprised to learn that the Transcaucasian Federation was abolished by the new Constitution. On 12 June 1936, a speech by Lavrentij Berija, who chaired the

112 Decision O konflikte mezhdu Zakkrajkomom i CK AKP(b), 19 October 1930, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 801, ll. 15 and 31–32; report of the German consul-general in Tiflis, 19 November 1930, PA AA, Länderabteilung IV (1920–1936), Russland, R 84153.
114 Easter Reconstructing the State, p. 87; Iskenderov S.M. Kirov v Azerbajdžane, p. 209.
115 Gabisonia K istorii obrazovanija. The book was translated in Georgian a year later, under the title Amerikavkasiis pederatsiis daarebis istoriisat’vis.
116 Speech held in an Orgbiuro meeting, 19 October 1931, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 132, l. 96.
117 Stenographic report of discussions at the Orgbiuro, 19 October 1931, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 265, ll. 75–137.
119 Musabekov Četynmadcat’ let Zakfederacii.
Transcaucasian Regional Committee of the Party since 1932, was published in all newspapers, explaining this demise as a logical consequence of Marxist dialectics, since the Federation had played its role in reestablishing peace, public order and prosperity in a region once torn apart by nationalism, ethnic strife, and imperialism.\textsuperscript{120} Actually, the first drafts of the Constitution elaborated at the end of 1935 still mentioned the Transcaucasian Federation.\textsuperscript{121} Although available archives do not provide a definitive answer on the process by which the ZSFSR was abolished, one fact can be ascertained: Berija did not fight to maintain the Federation.

The mystery that veils the last five years of the Federation is not unrelated to the riddle which still permeates Berija’s life, despite a few biographical attempts by historians. In a recent biography, Françoise Thom relies upon the memoirs of Berija’s son to claim that Berija was a Geórgian nationalist at heart, who fostered a deep distrust toward the Federation since the early 1920s.\textsuperscript{122} When becoming boss of the Regional Committee, he felt no incentive to revive a Federation he loathed and simply let it die. Berija’s inner feelings might well have been so, but this psychological explanation remains impossible to prove. It is important to keep in mind that Berija did not belong to the first generation of Caucasian Bolsheviks who had established the Federation. His activity in 1920–1922 was been partially shady and he could not claim the glory Ordžonikidze and the likes drew from this founding moment, a fact that made him closer to Stalin.\textsuperscript{123} His ascent in 1931–1932 was personally opposed by close associates of Ordžonikidze – notably Lavrentij Kartvelišvili, his predecessor as Georgian First Secretary – and Berija had many of them “exiled” to Moscow or other parts of the Union during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{124} He still polemicized with some of them, notably in 1935 when he decided to publish his account on the history of Transcaucasian organizations.\textsuperscript{125}

The fact that Berija remained First Secretary of the Georgian Party after he became First Secretary of the Party Regional Committee is in itself telling.\textsuperscript{126} In 1931–1932 he had virulently protected the competences of his Republic against the Federation and infuriated Orachelašvili who denounced the nationalist policies implemented by Berija to Ordžonikidze. Mentioning a Georgian embargo on the export of wood to Armenia, Orachelašvili noted that “this sounded like 1922, not 1932”, a reference to the economic travails the federation had helped overcome in its first phase.\textsuperscript{127} As soon as he became head

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Berija} Novaja Konstitucija SSSR, pp. 14–15.
\textsuperscript{121} Protocol of the Akulov subcommittee on “Central and local organs of state power”, 8 October 1935, GARF, f. R3316, op. 40, d. 27, ll. 94–95 and 152–153.
\textsuperscript{122} Thom Beria, le Janus du Kremlin, pp. 100–101; Beria Beria, mon père, pp. 37–38.
\textsuperscript{123} See the interesting remarks made by Orachelašvili as reviewer of two dissertations on the Transcaucasian Federation, in 1934, defended at the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, where he emphasizes the importance of memory to consolidate the Federation. RGASPI, f. 298, op. 1, d. 30 and d. 31; Khlevniuk In Stalin’s Shadow, pp. 36–39.
\textsuperscript{125} Report of the Polish consul-general in Tiflis, 6 February 1934, AAN, f. 322, sygn. 12.
\textsuperscript{126} Politburo protocol, 16 October 1932, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 903, l. 8.
\textsuperscript{127} Orachelašvili to Ordžonikidze, 1 Aug. 1932, RGASPI, f. 85, op. 29, d. 472, ll. 1–2; see also Mgaloblišvili, Georgian SNK chairman, to Berija, 8 Sep. 1932, ŠSSA PA, f. 14, op. 7, d. 17, l. 13.
of the regional Committee, Berija hastened to suppress two institutions which had tried to implement stronger control over the Republics, the Transcaucasian Supreme Court and the Prosecutor’s Office. Berija’s policy was successful because it appealed to two structural evolutions that affected Soviet power in the region. The first had to do with the fact that he behaved as a *primus inter pares* among Republic leaders, more than as a Transcaucasian ruler. Although he did not use the concept at the time, he acted as a defender of “Republican rights”, a role he would play again during his brief struggle for power in 1953. His networks, a close associate remarked at the time of his fall, were personal more than institutional, and were not linked to the Federation the way Ordžonikidze’s networks had been. Moreover, since the Syrcov-Lominadze affair, the Federation had been associated with shady political undertones, and some distance from it could even benefit the new leader of the region.

Additionally, one has to study the structural dimension of a crisis that had to do with fundamental imbalances. Whereas the Federation was a rational construction in the early 1920s as a way to bring together regional elites around the Bolshevik project, a new form of rationality now criticized what was perceived as its excessive cost. The First Five-Year Plan was the heyday of the so-called rationalization movement in the industry and administration, after a long genesis in the 1920s. The disasters of the Plan in the Caucasus made the Federation vulnerable to attacks on the ground of efficiency. The political cost of Transcaucasian federalism and its voluntary institutional redundancies were now greater and more difficult to advocate as money was scarce and investments were to be driven above all by the rising economic targets of the Plan. As soon as July 1929, Musjaboyev conceded the “costliness of the apparatus” in the Federation. An October 1931 report by the Moscow Central Committee pointed to administrative costs of 18% in ZSFSR against 16% in Russia, 15% in Ukraine and 12% in Belorussia. Although the difference cannot be considered excessive, a special commission was established in November to trim administrative expenditures in the Federation. As Berija took over regional leadership, this trend evolved toward a full-fledged dismantlement of Transcaucasian institutions.

In November 1932, the ZKK commission for administrative spending cuts adopted stringent measures: it closed several institutions of the Transcaucasian apparatus and re-

128 Complaints to Stalin by Dolidze, the Transcaucasian prosecutor, remained unanswered. ZKK decision, 29 October 1932, SSSA PA, f. 13, op. 12, d. 18, l. 148; Kraskov, All-Union Prosecutor, to the All-Union CIK, 20 November 1932, GARF, f. R8131, op. 10, d. 67, ll. 5–6; Mitjukov O nekotoryx teoretičeskix aspektax, pp. 11–12.
129 Knight Beria, Stalin’s First Lieutenant, pp. 189–190.
130 See Vsevolod Merkurov’s testimony on Beria’s ruling style: Interrogation of Vsevolod Merkulov, October 1953, in Mozochin (ed.): Politbureau i delo Berija, pp. 449–463.
131 Chimovč Režim ekonomiki v SSSR, pp. 106–109; Moret From technicians to classics, pp. 173–186.
132 Report of the Party Control Commission and Worker’s and Peasant’s Inspectorate on nationality policy in Transcaucasia, 6 July 1929, GARF, f. R374, op. 27, d. 1483, l. 48.
duced many others. The secretariat of the Transcaucasian government lost 10% of its staff, the CIK 20%, and the commissariat for Labor up to 75%, while many administrations were outright abolished. Six of the most important industrial trusts of Transcaucasia were liquidated and their assets transferred to the republics. The trend continued in early 1933, when the RKI and the Transcaucasian Control Commission of the Party completed a survey of payrolls in Transcaucasian institutions: out of 764 institutions inspected in the region, 173 were closed, while the staffing and payroll of the remaining 591 was cut. Federal-level institutions were proportionally strongly affected by the campaign, many of them were left with very little means. A case in point was the Transcaucasian Commissariat for Light Industry, which lost 55 out of its 70 employees: the commissar complained that his institution was no longer able to meet its duties, but he received little support from the Transcaucasian government to which he complained. As intermediate actors, Transcaucasian administrations were now increasingly caught between central planners and the people tasked with implementing the plan in the Republics.

At this point, efficiency meant national striving for “federal immediacy” of Transcaucasian Republics: such an immediacy could at the same time be presented as nationally legitimate, and economically more efficient. The nationalist vision of the region drew legitimacy by relying on Marxist dialectics to envision the demise of the ZSFSR as the very consequence of the progress of communism and the end of interethnic strife. Politically and legally speaking, the existence of the three Transcaucasian republics as subunits of an embedded Federation was seen as less and less acceptable in a time when the full political and cultural equality of the Union republics was emphasized. Defenders of the Federation such as Orachelašvili could therefore be countered when they still tried to justify the Federation as a legacy of the Civil War: was their defense of the Federation not a way to minimize the achievements of socialism since 1917? Between 1931 and 1933, the share of the state budget in Transcaucasia that was managed by the Federation fell from 128 to 85 billion rubles, whereas the share of the Republics increased from 161

135 Protocol of the ZKK commission on reducing administrative expenditures, 15 November 1932, SSSA PA, f. 13, op. 12, d. 18, ll. 97–110.
136 CHARMANDJAN Spločenie narodov, p. 153; ŠABANOV Razvitie sovetskoj gosudarstvennosti v Azerbaidžane, p. 110.
137 Report of the ZKKK-RKI, approved on 14 January 1933, SUICA, f. 617, op. 1, d. 6792, ll. 17–19.
138 Letter of the interim commissar to the chairman of the Transcaucasian government, January 1933, SUICA, f. 617, op. 1, d. 6792, ll. 3–4.
139 BRANDENBERGER National Bolshevism, 2002; YILMAZ The Soviet Union and the Construction, pp. 511–533; GURULI/TUŠURAŠVILI (eds.): Lavrent’i Beriaš mimoe’era.
140 SLEZKINE The USSR as a Communal Apartment, pp. 446–447.
141 Orachelašvili made this point in a famous speech pronounced at the Tbilisi Party Committee, on 22 February 1932. The text was widely circulated in several languages: ORACHELAŠVILI 10 let Zakavkazskoj federacii, p. 27; ORACHELAŠVILI Amierkavkasis pederacis; a similar argument a few years later, ORACHELAŠVILI Sergo Ordžonikidze, pp. 12–18; ORACHELAŠVILI V bor’be zavedovannaja federacija, pp. 170–176.
to 292 billion rubles. The Permanent Representative to Moscow, Vašadze, lamented this indifference in October 1932 in a letter where he described the pitiful state of his institution, ever less able to ensure intermediation between Transcaucasia and central State bodies. The Representation was increasingly limited to minor tasks, such as supervising Transcaucasian students in Moscow and Leningrad.

Despite concrete indications of the material decline of the Federation, contemporary observers did not anticipate its disappearance. Whereas official rhetoric by the summer 1936 ascribed the Transcaucasian Federation to the “transitory period” of communism and saw in it an obsolete residue of the NEP, there was no way to foresee such a turn a few months earlier. In 1934, the Institute for Soviet Construction and Law of the Communist Academy entrusted S. Abramov with a preliminary research on Transcaucasian federalism, whose first results were presented in October 1934 at a meeting of the Institute. Abramov was sent to Tbilisi for a month to conduct a field study of the Transcaucasian organs, a merit duly noted by the head of the Institute, Evgenij Pašukanis. The examination of Transcaucasian solutions to concrete problems was crucial, as they might “be extended to Central Asia”. Ironically, the participants of the session mentioned the potential creation of a Central Asian Federation at the very moment when the Politburo decided to bury the Central Asian Bureau and all hopes of such a sister Federation further in the East. The participants of the debate emphasized the apparent contradictions in the evolution of the Federation: I. D. Levin was confused about the direction taken by the ZSFSR and whether “the competences of the ZSFSR were expanding and the competences of the republics receding” or quite the contrary. Although they disagreed on numerous legal, economic and administrative problems related to the ZSFSR, all legal experts agreed that the topic should be further studied for theoretical and practical reasons.

142 KAKABADZE Edinyj gosbjudžet ZSFSR, p. 82.  
143 Report of the German consul-general in Tiflis, 17 November 1931, PA AA, Länderabteilung IV’ (1920–1936), Russland, R 84153; the only Soviet work that mentions this trend to my knowledge is BEGJAN Razvitie sovetskoj gosudarstvennosti, p. 87.  
144 Vašadze to Berija, 11 October 1932, SŠSA PA, f. 13, op. 10, d. 20, l. 59; on direct trips of republic officials to Moscow, see Berija to Akopov and Ter Gabrielian, 5 December 1934, HAA, f. 1, op. 14, d. 35, l. 10.  
145 KVARACHELJIA Kommunistićeškaia partija, p. 113; ZKK protocol, 5 February 1935, SŠSA PA, f. 13, op. 13, d. 3, ll. 44–45.  
146 DIMANŠTEJN Stalinskaja konstitutsiia, pp. 22–33.  
147 Minutes of discussion on Abramov’s report, 7 October 1934, ARAN, f. 360, op. 4, d. 343.  
148 ARAN, f. 360, op. 4, d. 343, l. 20.  
149 ARAN, f. 360, op. 4, d. 343, l. 1; ROSLIKOV Sredazbjuro TsK VKP(b), p. 349.  
150 Minutes of discussion …, ARAN, f. 360, op. 4, d. 343, l. 6.
Conclusion

The disappearance of the Transcaucasian Federation was of particular significance for the South Caucasus, since it marked an acceleration in the nationalization of the three Republics. As the dismantlement of Transcaucasian institutions gathered pace at the end of 1935, non-Georgian officials left Tbilisi to Yerevan, Baku, and Moscow. In May 1936, the Italian consul in the city noted that the end of the Federation would “develop ever more the national identity of Tbilisi, and favor the strong nationalist tendencies by eliminating non-Georgians from top political and administrative positions”\textsuperscript{151}. The demise of the ZSFSR thus completed a process of national homogenization excoriated by Stalin during the Georgian Affair, fifteen years earlier.\textsuperscript{152} Although, in the region, the Great Terror of 1936–1938 is currently overwhelmingly interpreted in terms of Russian repression against Caucasian nations, it was also a clear case of repression by each titular nation against its minorities. By proclaiming the triumph of Soviet internationalism and economic development in the ZSFSR, Soviet leaders of the late 1930s actually paved the way for a strengthened national character of each republic.

This contradiction between avowed internationalism and an underrcurrent of nationalism remained a major feature of Soviet South Caucasus, but it was not enough to entirely discard the idea of a region-based organization of Soviet republics in later years. While the ZSFSR could be taken as an example for Central Asian republics in 1934 by lawyers of the Communist Academy, it remained in ordinary peoples’ minds in the 1960s, when many citizens wrote to higher authorities to suggest the creation of three regional federations for Transcaucasia, Central Asia and the Baltics, despite continued dynamics to ‘nationalize’ the republics.\textsuperscript{153} There was, however, no revival of such a federation, even though the period witnessed attempts to recreate organs of regional coordination for clusters of republics. The Transcaucasian Party Bureau (\textit{Zakbjuro}) in existence in 1963–1964 bore little resemblance with its predecessor, being essentially focused on economic issues and lacking the support of a corresponding state apparatus.\textsuperscript{154}

Despite this ultimate evolution, the history of the Transcaucasian Federation should be considered relevant for what it says about the importance of federal mechanisms in Soviet power. We could argue in a \textit{microstoria} approach that the ZSFSR is a privileged vantage point since it is both exceptional and normal, exacerbating features that have remained unobserved in Union republics that seem to better fit the nation-state model.\textsuperscript{155} Federalism provided Soviet leaders with numerous tools they could use to strike a balance between central control and regional autonomy. As we have demonstrated, federalism was not limited to the formal existence of the Republics, since it was also practiced

\textsuperscript{152} Slezkine The USSR as a Communal Apartment, p. 426.
\textsuperscript{154} Chotiner Khrushchev’s Party Reform, pp. 194–195; The Future of Soviet Federalism, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{155} Rosenthal Construire le macro par le micro, pp. 141–159.
on a daily basis through mechanisms allowing for republic interests, conflicts resolution and legitimacy building. On the other hand, as demonstrated by the history of the Transcaucasian federation, constitutional barriers were not that strong in the Soviet practice of federalism, and personal leadership played a key role in determining the exact power relation between institutions. Finally, the demise of the Transcaucasian federation reminds us of the tremendous part played by imperatives of economic efficiency in the remoulding of Soviet federalism during the 1930s. This feature opens new opportunities for a comparative discussion of Soviet federalism in an international context, as economic factors were precisely seen in other parts of the world as the determinant to understand the “obsolescence of federalism” or, to put it more optimistically, the “rise of a new federalism” in the Western world.156

Abbreviations

AAN Archiwum Akt Nowych (Archives of Modern Records), Warsaw
Fond 322: Ministerstwo spraw zagranicznych (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

ARAN Archiv Rossijskoj Akademi Nauk (Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences), Moscow
Fond 360: Institute of Soviet Construction and Law of the Communist Academy

ARSPIHDA Azərbaycan Respublikası Siyasi Partiyalar və İctimai Harşatlar Dövlət Arxivi (Azerbaijan State Archives of Political Parties and Social Movements), Baku (sources cited according to the literature)

ASMAE Archivio Storico Diplomatico (Archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Rome

BCA Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Republican Archives, Ankara)

CIK Central’nyj Ispolnitel’nyj Komitet (Central Executive Committee)
d. delo
f. fond

GARF Gosudarstvennyj Archiv Rossijskoj Federatsii (State Archives of the Russian Federation, Moscow)
Fond R374: Central Control Commission of the Party-Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate of the USSR
Fond R3316: Central Executive Committee of the USSR
Fond R8131: Chief Prosecutor’s Office of the USSR

GPU Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie

HAA Hajastan Azgajin Archivner (National Archives of Armenia), Erevan
Fond 1: Central Committee of the Armenian Communist Party

PA AA Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (Archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Berlin

156 To quote a famous article by Harold Laski in *The New Republic* in May 1939, LASKI/CLARK The Rise of a New Federalism.
RGASPI  Rossiijskij Gosudarstvennyj Archiv Social'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Social and Political History), Moscow  
Fond 17: Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party  
Fond 84: Anastas Mikojan  
Fond 85: Sergo Ordžonikidze  
Fond 157: Micha Cchakaja  
Fond 298: Mamia Orachelašvili  
Fond 558: Iosif Stalin

RGVA  Rossiijskij Gosudarstvennyj Voennyj Archiv (Russian State Military Archive), Moscow  
Fond 25873: Transcaucasian Military District

RKI  Raboče-Krest'janskaja Inspekcija (Peasants' and Workers' Inspectorate)

RSFSR  Rossiijskaja Sovetskaja Federativnaja Sotsialističeskaja Federacija (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic)

SNK  Sovet Narodnych Komissarov (Council of People's Commissars)

SŞSA PA  Sakartvelos Şinagan sakmeta Saminist'ros Arkivi – Politik'uri Arkivi (Archives of the Interior Ministry of Interior of Georgia – Political Archives), Tbilisi  
Fond 1: Special Folder of the Transcaucasian Regional Committee and the Georgian Central Committee  
Fond 13: Transcaucasian Regional Committee  
Fond 14: Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party  
Fond 128: Transcaucasian Communist University

SUICA  Sakartvelos Uachlesi Ist'oriis Cent'raluri Archivi (Central Archives of Modern History of Georgia), Tbilisi  
Fond 607: Central Executive Committee of the ZSFSR  
Fond 612: Federal Council of Transcaucasia  
Fond 616: Permanent Representation of the ZSFSR in Moscow  
Fond 617: Council of People's Commissars of the ZSFSR  
Fond 735: Foreign Trade Representative for Transcaucasia

VSNCh  Vyssij sovet narodnogo chozjajstva (Supreme Economic Council)

ZKK  Zakavkazskij Kraevoj Komitet (Transcaucasian Regional Committee)

ZKKK  Zakavkazskaja Kraevaja Kontrol'naja Komissija (Transcaucasian Regional Control Commission)

ZSFSR  Zakavkazskaja Sovetskaja Federativnaja Sotsialističeskaja Respublika (Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic)

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