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INFLUENCE OF THE EVENTS OF FEBRUARY 1917 ON IDEAS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES ABOUT THE STATE SYSTEM OF CAUCASUS PEOPLES

ABSTRACT

The article studies the development of ideas of Caucasus communities as regards their status and position in Russia in 1917. With the reference to memoirs of contemporaries and participants of the events it is claimed that the overthrow of Russian monarchy became, on the one hand, impetus for activity in the regions as political and intellectual elite sought to prepare and form a part of Russian federative state as autonomy. On the other hand, as the Interim government grew weak centrifugal forces intensified. The unity of Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus in their political and social development during February-October 1917 is revealed.

Keywords: Big Caucasus, the 1917 Revolution, the Interim government, Special Transcaucasia Committee, Highland Peoples Union.

By analogy with the Balkans the Caucasus is not without a reason called “the soft underbelly” of Russia or “the solar plexus of Eurasia”. The Caucasus region was always in the focus of attention on the part of Russian authorities and served as a foreign policy object for world players. It is unique not only in its geopolitical relevance but in its diversity and unity of sociocultural worlds at the same time. Today the term “the Big Caucasus” (Transcaucasia¹ and the North Caucasus) as well as the concept “the Big Middle East” is often referred to by specialists in the Humanities². The researchers identify the macroregion not purely geographically but as a unified sociocultural space in the present and the historical past. Early in the XX c. the Caucasus being a part of the Russian Empire came in for its full share of all the challenges of the country.

The 1917 Revolution starting from the February uprising and finishing with the October coup varied in its manifestation depending on the location of developments. The impulses produced in Petersburg were tuned in line with the specific character of the location as they came to the outlying districts. The revolutionary waves

reached the Caucasus as well. The Caucasus ridge was not only the natural barrier but the civilizational one as different processes of community development were in progress astride.

At the same time the interdependency was clearly evident. The Caucasus unity was reflected by regional public leaders. Thus, Gaidar Bammatov, kumyk by birth, said that the Caucasus was a unified economic area: “The variety of climatic and geographic features made it possible to produce all kinds of agriculture goods which supplemented each other and formed indissoluble connections between different parts of the region. Baku-Batumi pipeline connected one of the richest oil centers in the world located in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Batum-Tiflis-Baku is the railway that connects The Black and the Caspian Seas and crosses the territory of the North Caucasus as it passes through Petrovsk and Grozny, another oil-producing region of world importance”³.

Historiography of the 1917 Revolution and the events which followed it is studied in a wide variety of works featuring the processes in particular parts of the Caucasus macroregion up to the formation of the USSR with the reference to internal and external factors⁴. We assume it is relevant to track the evolution of views in the region after 1917 at a macroregional scale. It is obvious that the mismatch between the active position of local communities and the passivity of the Interim government resulted in subsequent attempts to found independent states, failure to do it and the severity in establishing the Soviet power.

Right after the downfall of autocracy in Transcaucasia the Caucasus governor-general ruling was replaced by Special Transcaucasia Committee (Ozakom)⁵ comprising the 4th State Duma deputies. It was headquartered in governor-general's palace in Tiflis.

It consisted of five members headed by cadet V. Kharlamov. Apparently his power did not extend to the North Caucasus due to the national composition of the population. A.I. Khatsov, the then head of the city in Tiflis, said that Ozakom was welcomed by the community enthusiastically⁶ still it failed to live up to expectations of peoples in Transcaucasia.

Since the beginning the Committee provoked contradictory feelings with contemporaries. The member of the National Council in Baku B.L. Baikov was skeptical about the body as it did not enjoy authority with the public and was overloaded with applications⁷. Apparently, the activity of Oznakom was inefficient. Moreover, that authoritative body did not consolidate but estranged peoples. The Armenians submitted their applications to M.I. Papajanov, the Georgians – to K.G. Abashidze or A.I. Chkhenkeli, and the Azerbaijanians – to M.Yu. Jufarov⁸. A.I. Khatsov noted that as compared with two latest governor-generals, I.I. Vorontsov-Dashkov and the grand duke Nikolay Nikolayevich, Jr., they failed to manage the business. The Chairman V. Kharlamov could not tune the cooperation within his committee as each member backed “a special people with special demands”⁹. For that reason, another authoritative body was

established in Tiflis – the Executive committee of the working deputies Council which was headed by N. Zhordania¹⁰.

The national flows gradually shaped and after October 1917 they fostered the idea of independence from Russia as it can be judged by the results of city дума elections. After 17-year service in Tiflis A.I. Khatsov left the position of the head of the city and was replaced by Eliava¹¹. But then he was elected as the head of Armenian Alexandropol in August 1917¹². The all-Russia Armenian convention was held in Tiflis in September 1917, and it gave Kerensky government a vote of confidence.

The independence was out of the question as Armenians set their hopes on Russia as regards Turkish Armenia issue and the autonomous status as well. Georgian community also shared the idea of being a part of Russia on federative basis. At the same time, it set indispensable condition of Georgian church autocephalia and establishing Zemstvo elective bodies¹³. It should be noted that the community was extremely skeptical about Zemstvo elective bodies in the North Caucasus though their necessity was admitted as a precondition for prospective autonomy.

Azerbaijan Turkic peoples expected changes in state-territory status and the position of Muslim community. The idea of independence came into being in that group in the beginning of the war. Thus, in February 1915 Aslan Khan Khoysky (the relation of a well-known politician, 2nd State Duma deputy Fatali Khan Khoysky) visited Enver-pasha in Erzurum and negotiated the idea of establishing the Azerbaijan Republic including Baku, Elizabetpolsk and Yerevan provinces, as well as Dagestan and Terek¹⁴.

There were appeals for federal structure in Azerbaijan community as well. In 1917 the claims to territorial autonomy were put in by M. Rasuladze (at the I Convention of Turkic democratic federative party “Musavat” (October, 1917). He claimed that Russia had to be a federative democratic republic. A well-known statesman A.M. Topchibashev also upheld federal structure principle at the Caucasus and All-Russia Muslim convention.

Till October 1917 the reflection of Caucasus communities on their future as a part of Russia predominated and they generally shared the idea of constituent assembly. With the development of revolutionary process, the national mood was getting more evident, mutual hostility was growing and the territorial issues became more sensitive. For example, in national regions the corps of officials was intensified in a national way: in Batum the number of Georgian officials increased, in Baku the same concerned Azerbaijan ones¹⁵. It was in fall 1917 when in the Caucasus they started to speak openly about the opportunity to acquire national territories in the nearest future.

As it was mentioned above the connection between the center and the regions grew weak as the revolution began. The elimination of the Russian monarchy as an arbiter who smoothed over contradictions and discontent by a compulsory decision served as the call to self-organization. Overthrow of the monarchy was something

unexpected in the North Caucasus. Governor-generals were replaced by commissar of the Interim government: M.A. Karaulov in Tersky region, K.L. Bardige in Kuban region, D.D. Starlychanov in Stavropol province. Special commissariat was established in Dagestan. It was obvious for many contemporaries that management of “the two Caucasuses” was poorly organized, and the division soon resulted in unbalance in the region. Georgian diplomat Z. Avalov wrote in his memoirs: “The Interim government hardly took any interest in reflecting on the relations between the Caucasus and Russia”. The attempts to establish the position of superior commissar were only at the stage of discussions at informal meetings¹⁶. Thus, poorly organized structures were criticized by local communities and were not treated with due regard. The lack of regulations for their work and transparent system of governing bodies added to uncertainty as regards the fortunes of Caucasus peoples.

Highland intelligentsia raised the issue of establishing national-state communities in the North Caucasus. The first attempt was made in March 1917 in Vladikavkaz when the most active representatives of Caucasus communities arranged the establishment of United Highland Peoples Union and the convocation. I Convention of Caucasus Highland Peoples began its work on May 1, 1917. Judging by its materials one can note certain embarrassment and indetermination as regards setting guidelines for the future: “We, highland peoples of the Caucasus, should sort out what is going on and take a particular stand in contemporary historical epoch”¹⁷. Intellectual and career development of highland intelligentsia took place in tsarist Russia, so it did not separate itself mentally from the Russian state. Moreover, they gave Russian people the credit for the overthrow of tsarism. Highland delegates underlined solidarity with Russian brotherhood in every possible way. Still the following situation indicates that the center-region connection grew weak. The center was represented at the convention by two members of the State Duma: M.A. Karaulov and N.N. Nikolayev. The former was elected to the parliament in Tersky region, the latter represented non-Cossack population in Black sea province and Kuban and Tersky regions. M. Karaulov¹⁸ in his welcoming speech wished successful work on the part of the Interim government and the Cossacks at the same time. Both politicians played no role as representatives of the governing center. More exactly they were representatives of local communities. Formally they called to fruitful work and claimed the willingness of Cossacks to cooperate within the framework of Constituent assembly. So, N. Nikolayev underlined that he had a lot of work but he spared some time to congratulate highland peoples on the first convention¹⁹, thus indicating his position as an observer rather than an active participant. Being the delegates of the new rule they could not and did not try to influence the situation; they were marked as invitees in the minutes of the convention on May 1²⁰.

According to the territorial principle which is referred to in political anthropology, political activity evolves within certain borders which determine the division between “the internal” and “the external”²¹. As the revolution unfolded

the activists in the Caucasus tended to view Russia as “external” space and political process grew narrow to a macroregional scale, though the support of the Interim government was proclaimed.

Georgian and Azerbaijan representatives also took part in the convention. Georgian delegates called for support of the Interim government²² and promoted the social aspect of cooperation with emphasis on consolidation of peoples oppressed by monarchy.

One of the most powerful political factors in the Caucasus was Islam, so Stavropol Turkmens and Nogaytsy were also addressed to in order to reinforce the Union. For that very reason Baku representative H. Agayev laid special stress on Muslim identity²³. Tambiev on behalf of Baku intellectual Muslim community also claimed that Islam served the ground for consolidation and freedom of highland peoples²⁴. The tendency was getting more and more evident among highland peoples in the North Caucasus. It can be illustrated by proposal of Kumyk public leader Rashid Kaplanov who set the goal for Highland Peoples Union to become a part of All-Caucasus Muslim Union²⁵.

The Second Convention of Caucasus Highland Peoples took place on September 21, 1917. Transcaucasia representatives took part in it too. Just in the same way as they did in the first convention. By that time the Abkhaz people had joined the union and the consolidation of highland peoples was completed. Abdul Medgid (Tapa) Chermoyev, Chechen oil industry businessman, was chosen as the chairman of the Union Central Committee. The proceedings of the convention reveal the shift to radical ideas in North Caucasus communities over the past months. For example, national languages became the working languages at the meetings, and the translators were appointed at the first meeting. It is very likely that it could be caused by the presence of the Cossacks as special ethno-confessional identity was demonstrated to them. A significant factor at the convention was the presence of “Wild division” colonels Sultan Krym-Girey and Hadji-Murat which backed up the Interim government as before. Sultan Krym-Girey explicitly claimed the support of Kerensky government in his speech. In spring local elite and intelligentsia still hoped to tackle a number of challenges which had been neglected by the Russian Empire for many decades. Unfortunately, liberal-minded representatives of the Caucasus committed the same blunder as the Interim government officials did – they substituted political will for endless talks. The speeches had mostly welcoming character and the speakers did not come up with any decisions. Among the most painful issues were the territorial problem and the relations between highland peoples and Cossacks.

Gradually the religious issue became a priority as many North Caucasus and Transcaucasia representatives touched the Muslim topic. It served the basis for further consolidation of participants. The resolution which was adopted at the convention stipulated for establishment of Highland religious Board headed by Najmudin Gotsynsky, Avar and the son of one of the assistant serving imam Shamil.

Muslim clergy was a considerable political power for North Caucasus peoples. Muslim leaders announced the reconstitution of imamate in Chechnya and Dagestan. Sharia movement headed by Najmudin Gotsynsky came into being. As the central power was growing weak they focused on Ottoman Empire. It follows that the weakening of internal unity, i.e. the central power, provoked the growth of the foreign-policy influence. A number of powerful sheikhs did not back up Gotsynsky's candidacy, still in August he was elected as North Caucasus imam with direct assistance of Turkish envoys²⁶. Strengthening of religious identity smoothed over contradictions between different ethnic groups, rallied with Transcaucasia Muslims. At the same time the desire to introduce "Sharia system"²⁷ estranged the Caucasus from Russia and decreased the power of its legal framework, no matter how weak it was.

Thus, February 1917 gave hope to all Caucasus peoples that land issues, national and territorial challenges could be tackled, as well as the autonomy obtained. The Caucasus felt itself a united specific body and a part of Russia at the same time. In 1917 the activity of local political and intellectual elite aimed at organizing autonomy and the establishment of institutions within the framework of federation served the ground for independence pursuit. By 1918 both institutionally and mentally the Caucasus was ready for separation. During Batum negotiations in May 1918 Russia seemed a distant country²⁸.

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