

# Politics within de Facto States

**Journal Issue****Author(s):**

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**Publication date:**

2017-04-28

**Permanent link:**

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000169909>

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**Originally published in:**

Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD) 94



## POLITICS WITHIN DE FACTO STATES

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*This publication has been produced within the Initial Training Network 'Post-Soviet Tensions', which has received funding from the EU FP7/2007-2013 under grant agreement No. 316825. This publication reflects only the authors' views. The funding body is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.*

## Introduction by the Special Editor

In a global order composed of recognised states, which enjoy membership of international organisations such as the United Nations, *de facto* (or unrecognised) states are pariahs that have proven surprisingly durable. Though the unrecognised states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh have existed for almost a quarter-century, their internal dynamics remain largely unexplored. While most countries may not accept their legitimacy, these *de facto* states nonetheless persist and have now developed identifiable regime types and means of governance. Unrecognised states are particularly numerous in the wider post-Soviet Black Sea region.

*De facto* states are primarily identified by their lack of UN membership but there are various levels of non-recognition. At the bottom of the hierarchy are those cases of non-UN member states not recognised by any state, such as Somaliland on the horn of Africa. Then there are those non-UN member states recognised only by other non-UN members, such as the post-Soviet examples of Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. In a different category again are those *de facto* states recognised by at least one UN member state but by less than ten. Two of the cases examined here—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—fall into this category, and there is also the long-standing example of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Finally, there are non-UN member states recognised by at least ten UN members, what we might call partially recognised states, such as Kosovo, Taiwan and Palestine.<sup>1</sup>

Though almost inevitably the product of war, unrecognised states are not merely disputed conflict zones. They usually have declared, fought for, and obtained some measure of independence from the ‘parent’ or ‘base’ state from which they have seceded. Despite their persistence, *de facto* states have attracted relatively little scholarly interest. Historical cases suggest that they are transient, either being forcibly absorbed into the base state (e.g. Katanga, Biafra and Chechnya) a staging house before independence (Eritrea) or settling for negotiated autonomy (e.g. Gagauzia). There is also no consensus on what to call these *de facto* or unrecognised states.<sup>2</sup> Other terms that have been employed include shadow states, states-within-states, phantom states, insurgent states, para-states, quasi-states, and pseudo-states. Scholars focussing on their status as arenas of conflict sometimes use the term ‘contested states’. The Georgian and Azerbaijani governments prefer descriptions such as ‘separatist states’, ‘breakaway regions’, ‘puppet state’, and ‘proxy regime’ to highlight their claims to territorial integrity and/or the role of external forces in supporting the secessionist territories.

*De facto* states have been a consistent feature of the post-Soviet political landscape and, despite early prophecies of their fragility and transience, they show few signs of vanishing. These unrecognised states are usually examined in the realm of conflictology, international relations or geopolitics and their domestic politics have received comparatively little treatment. This special issue attempts to put the focus on politics within the *de facto* states, placing these unrecognised polities at the centre rather than the periphery. It does this by providing an introduction to the dynamics of electoral politics within Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh followed by an examination of how these regimes interact with the outside world. Finally, we look at public opinion within these three cases to try and understand the views and outlooks of people living there.

*Donnacha Ó Beacháin*  
*Dublin, April 2017*

1 Taiwan is a ‘de-recognised’ state that still manages to have formal diplomatic relations with 20 members of the United Nations.

2 While ‘*de facto* states’ is a popular term, all states that function, irrespective of recognition, exist *de facto*. The description ‘unrecognised states’ has enjoyed increasing popularity in recent years.

## Electoral Politics in the De Facto States of the South Caucasus

By Donnacha Ó Beacháin (Dublin City University)

### Abstract

This article charts the development of electoral politics in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). It provides an overview of the political systems in these three de facto states, primarily by examining presidential and parliamentary elections. Particular attention is given to the level of competition during these election campaigns and to the level of participation of women and ethnic minorities.

### Distinctive Features of South Caucasian De Facto States

The three de facto states in the South Caucasus share many similarities, such as a common Soviet heritage and an absence of UN membership. Without exception, they are small regions that have tried, with varying degrees of success, to establish regimes that can deliver basic services to their citizens. They range from Abkhazia, which enjoys ample agricultural resources and tourist potential, to South Ossetia, whose economy barely registers a heartbeat. All three economies depend on heavy subsidies from their patron; the NKR, for example, derives 60% of its budget from Armenia.

Dependence on the patron state is symbolised by the use of the Russian rouble as the currency of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the Armenian dram in Nagorno-Karabakh. A lack of recognition has inhibited foreign trade and interaction with other states, which in turn has created and reinforced an economically dependent relationship on their external sponsor.

War has forged all three de facto states, and the legacy of conflict remains visible, despite attempts at reconstruction. Each territory has also been the site of large-scale population displacements. Home to 42,871 Azerbaijanis at the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, who constituted 22.5% of the population, Nagorno-Karabakh is now almost homogeneously Armenian. Abkhazia's population today is less than half of what it was in 1989, mainly as a result of the 1992–1993 war, which forced approximately 200,000 Georgians to permanently flee the territory.

While these expulsions have left South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh ethnically homogeneous, Abkhazia remains heterogeneous; the Abkhaz constitute at most half of the population and co-exist with large minorities of Armenians and Georgians and smaller communities of Russians and Greeks. These societies are militarised, and the standing army numbers are exceptionally high, considering the diminutive populations. Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Armenia provides a substantial portion of the military in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding region.

All three states have put in place detailed constitutions and have declared independence following refer-

enda. Freedom House ranks Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh to be 'partly free', but South Ossetia is ranked 'not free'. Each state has a presidential system, a choice influenced by the Soviet heritage, regional norms and the exigencies of wars, during which centralisation of power was considered essential for survival. The NKR, for example, initially opted for a parliamentary system but quickly switched to a more centralised form of governance. Within six months of the first Supreme Council's election, the Azerbaijani military controlled half of Nagorno-Karabakh; 11 of the legislature's 81 members (14% of all elected deputies) were killed during the 1992–1994 conflict.

### Presidential Dominance

During the first decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, notions of fostering a domestic opposition within the de facto states proved alien to many residents. Fear of renewed conflict with external foes meant that a high premium was placed on national unity, a sentiment that could be exploited by an incumbent regime that was reluctant to share or give up power.

This feature has been most pronounced in the NKR, which has never witnessed a change of power between government and opposition. Opposition forces (which often prefer to be labelled 'alternative') have been either small or illusory. The first few presidential elections in Karabakh (1996, 1997, 2002) were stage-managed to endorse a candidate chosen by the Armenian political elite in Yerevan and local power brokers in Stepanakert.

This practice was disrupted, though not reversed, in 2007 by the candidacy of the then-deputy foreign minister, Masis Mayilan, and again in 2012, when incumbent Bako Sahakyan warded off a spirited challenge from former deputy defence minister Vitaly Balasanyan, who took almost a third of the vote. The 2010 NKR parliamentary elections failed to produce a single opposition MP among the 33 elected to the national assembly, and the 2015 contest produced only three legislators opposed to the government. The 2017 constitutional referendum sanctioned increased presidential powers, abolished the post of prime minister, and postponed elections until 2020 for incumbent leader Bako Sahakyan, who should

have stepped down in July 2017 after having completed two full terms of office.<sup>1</sup> Opponents of the referendum described it as a ‘constitutional coup’.

Most presidential elections in South Ossetia have required a second ballot, and despite the tiny electorate, there has never been a shortage of candidates or political parties (nine parties contested the 2014 parliamentary elections). Incumbent presidents have lost to rivals twice: in November 2001 and April 2017. The presidential election of November 2011 at one time looked as though it might include thirty candidates, but a combination of some of the candidates withdrawing and the CEC refusing to register others reduced the number on the final ballot paper to eleven. During the winter of 2011 and spring of 2012, no fewer than four rounds of presidential elections had to be held to overcome a very divisive and controversial series of campaigns that brought large demonstrations into the streets of the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali.

The first president of Abkhazia, war-hero Vladislav Ardzinba, enjoyed early popularity, although the later years of his presidency were first marked by increasing authoritarianism and later by very poor health. For the last decade and a half, there have been acute divisions within Abkhazia’s political elite sometimes attributed in journalistic shorthand to ‘clans’. Disenchantment during the final years of ailing president Ardzinba’s rule resulted in the electoral defeat in 2004 of his anointed successor and Kremlin-favourite, Raul Khadjimba. The elections, which produced widespread civil unrest, including the occupation of Parliament, eventually produced a victory for Sergey Bagapsh, who would go on to win a second term in 2009 against four competitors, including Khadjimba.

Bagapsh’s untimely death two years later led to a three-way fight between Khadjimba, veteran foreign minister Sergei Shamba and former vice-president Alexander Ankvab. Despite a comprehensive election victory in the first round, Ankvab quickly acquired a reputation as an authoritarian figure. Moreover, critics charged him with misallocating Russian aid and illegally distributing Abkhaz passports to Georgians living in Abkhazia. An alliance of influential opposition figures and groups organised protests in the capital, Sukhumi, prompting Ankvab to flee Abkhazia on 1 June 2014 and the call for early elections.

Effectively benefiting from a *coup d’état*, Khadjimba and his supporters won a narrow election victory, but they did so only after changing the electoral register and

trying to take over the state news agency and Central Election Commission. On his fourth try, Raul Khadjimba finally became Abkhazia’s president. However, his political victory came with the heavy price of disenchanting a large section of Abkhazian society and further alienating the Georgian population of Gali. Abkhazia had been long accustomed to being denied international recognition, but Khadjimba risked depriving the Abkhaz political system of legitimacy within Abkhazia.

### Parties and Parliamentarians

Lawmakers in all three jurisdictions serve a five-year term, but there has been a divergence in how parliamentarians are elected. Abkhazia employs a majoritarian system in single-mandate constituencies, whereas South Ossetia uses a party-list system of proportional representation. This has resulted in very different compositions within the legislatures. Whereas the vast majority of Abkhazia’s MPs (currently 88.5%) are, as they have always been, ‘independents’, their counterparts in South Ossetia, without exception, represent political parties.<sup>2</sup>

As is common in post-Soviet presidential systems, political parties are weak. All evidence suggests that a party banner in Abkhazia is a burden rather than a bonus for a prospective office-holder. Only four of the eight parties eligible to nominate candidates in the March 2017 parliamentary elections did so, and party nominees constituted less than a fifth of all candidates (24 of 139). Of these, only four successfully took one of the Assembly’s 35 seats.<sup>3</sup> In South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, most parties do not represent significant social cleavages and are merely vehicles for driving their leaders to power.

With each parliamentary election in the NKR since 2005, the electoral system progressively moved away from the single-mandate majoritarian system of voting towards a proportional party-list system. This process was completed on 20 February 2017 with the approval by referendum of a new constitutional framework and is expected to influence voters to focus less on individual personalities and more on political parties, although it remains to be seen if this will indeed prove to be the case.

Parliamentary elections in Abkhazia have been highly competitive. In March 2017, most of the seats in the National Assembly required a second round of vot-

1 The authorities also took the trouble of including in the omnibus referendum a new constitutional provision effectively outlawing same-sex marriage, a *bête noire* for most post-Soviet governments.

2 In 2014, the United Ossetia party, which is committed to unity with North Ossetia within the Russian Federation and is led by Anatoly Bibilov, won 20 of the 34 available seats.

3 Only one party representative managed to win a seat in the first round, and the assembly elected in 2017 contained just three members of Raul Khadjimba’s Forum for the National Unity of Abkhazia (FNUA) and one candidate from the opposition Ainar party.

ing to determine the winner. As in the 2007 and 2012 contests, the majority of incumbent legislators participating in the 2017 elections to the national assembly proved unable to defend their seats.

Possessing a war record is of inestimable value when running for office, and veterans have generally taken the lion's share of seats in the legislatures in Abkhazia and the NKR. It is also important to note that an entire generation has grown up since the independence struggles of the early 1990s. During the 2017 parliamentary elections in Abkhazia, for example, at least 40% of candidates were too young to have fought in the 1992–1993 war against the Georgians. However, there has not yet been a generational power shift in any of the de facto states, and power remains in the hands of those politically initiated during the Soviet period.

Although the executive eclipses Parliament, the legislature can be a useful recruiting agent for the politically talented and ambitious, and has on occasion been used as a base from which to challenge the president, most notably by Raul Khadjimba in Abkhazia and Anatoliy Bibilov in South Ossetia. Most parliamentarians, however, do not entertain realistic presidential ambitions. Local government is generally not a route to national political institutions, but it rather seems to be an end in itself. Only 5.7% of the candidates running in Abkhazia's parliamentary elections in 2017, for example, had previous experience of politics at the city or regional level.

### Women in Politics

Within the three de facto states, the political participation of women has been derisory. There has never been a female presidential candidate in Abkhazia or the NKR. When Alla Jioyeva put herself forward in South Ossetia, outgoing president Eduard Kokoity, who had only recently completed his second and final term, dismissed the possibility of a woman taking office by saying that 'the Caucasus is the Caucasus'.<sup>4</sup> After preliminary data from the CEC indicated that Jioyeva was leading Anatoliy Bibilov by a substantial margin, the Kokoity-appointed Supreme Court annulled the second round and prohibited Jioyeva from contesting the re-run, in which Leonid Tibilov emerged victorious in a narrow, second-round victory over David Sanakoyev.

Abkhazia has never produced many female parliamentarians. Representation peaked at four MPs in 1996 and again in 2008, when Emma Gamsonia won a by-election, but it has lessened since then, to the point where the 2017 parliamentary elections produced a solitary

female MP, which is hardly surprising when little more than one in twenty candidates is a woman.

In the NKR, which for many years operated a mixed electoral system, women fared better in the proportional list system than in majoritarian seats. In October 2014, the National Assembly adopted a new electoral code, which included the provision that neither gender could have more than 80% representation on a party list (Article 106, Section 2). Consequently, 20% of the candidates on each party list (one in every five places, to prevent parties 'dumping' women at the bottom of the list) must be female.

The legislation had an immediate effect, and during the 2015 parliamentary elections, women constituted 25% of candidates (41 of 164), although it was significant that none headed any of the party lists. Testifying to the efficacy of the gender quota for party lists, four of the 22 proportional seats were taken by women, whereas only five women contested the 11 majoritarian seats, constituting a mere 9.5% of the 42 candidates, of whom only one was successful. All available seats in the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2020, will be contested using the party list system, and we might expect to see an unprecedented number of women elected to the Assembly as a result.

### The Ethnic Character of Politics

All three de facto states are 'nationalising states'<sup>5</sup> that, while (rhetorically at least) offering 'respect' for ethnic minorities, seek to elevate the position of the titular nation. The NKR constitution passed by referendum in 2017 makes extensive references to the elevated position of the Armenians. The preamble claims to be 'inspired by the firm determination of the Motherland Armenia and Armenians worldwide' to support Karabakh, while the Holy Apostolic Church of Armenia is recognised as Karabakh's 'national church', with 'the exclusive mission ... in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, in the development of their national culture, and preservation of their national identity' (Article 18). Armenian is declared to be the state language (Article 20), and there is a commitment to strengthening relations with Armenia, the Armenian Diaspora and 'preserving Armenianness' (Article 19).<sup>6</sup>

Given the homogeneity of the populations in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, it is inconceivable that a candidate from a non-titular ethnicity would ever become president, but the situation is far more complex

4 Kokoity: 'Woman President Ruled Out', *Civil.ge*, 14 November 2011. Available at <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24140>>

5 See Rogers Brubaker. 'Nationalising states in the old 'New Europe'—and the new', *Ethnic and Racial studies* 19.2 (1996): 411–437.

6 These provisions were present, with variations in wording, in the previous constitution introduced in 2006.



in heterogeneous Abkhazia, where elections have been used to maintain Abkhaz political and cultural supremacy. Demographic vulnerability is at the heart of the Abkhaz determination to govern with little input from the other peoples inhabiting Abkhazia. The Abkhaz view such favouritism as a form of affirmative action to remedy and reverse the historical persecution of their people, which contributed to their demise as Abkhazia's dominant population.

Candidates for the presidency of Abkhazia, for example, are constitutionally required not only to be fluent speakers of Abkhaz—a language that is almost exclusively the preserve of the titular nation and that only a minority of citizens speak—but they must also be ethnically Abkhaz. Similarly, the Abkhaz enjoy a clear numerical ascendancy in the national assembly, and other nationalities, most notably Armenians and Georgians, have been consistently under-represented. Of the 139 candidates contesting the 2017 parliamentary elections, 130 (93.5%) were Abkhaz, a mere 8 were Armenian; there was a solitary Russian and not a single Georgian. Not surprisingly, the National Assembly is overwhelmingly (88.5%) composed of ethnic Abkhaz.

The most recent and far-reaching effort to disenfranchise ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia occurred after Raul Khadjimba and his supporters seized power in June 2014.<sup>7</sup> In advance of snap elections in August 2014, nearly 23,000 Georgians—constituting 15% of Abkhazia's voters—were struck off the electoral register. Ostensibly barred because they held Georgian passports in addition to their Abkhaz documents, it was clear that Khadjimba wanted to deny a voice to a large section of the community that was unlikely to vote for him.<sup>8</sup> Another law rushed through Parliament established polling stations in Turkey and Russia to enfranchise members of the Abkhaz diaspora, some of whom had never been to Abkhazia.<sup>9</sup> The disenfranchisement of these Georgians has meant that the number of parliamentary seats allocated to the Gali region has been

reduced from three to one, with only 603 of the region's 30,247 adults allowed to vote in the 2017 parliamentary elections, a mere 2% of Gali's electorate.

Further evidence of the increasingly ethnic character of the de facto states is the recent trend in changing the official name of the country. On 20 February 2017, voters in Karabakh agreed to change the name of the republic to *Artsakh* (the name for the region in Armenian). On 9 April 2017, over three quarters of voters in South Ossetia opted by referendum to change their homeland's name to 'Republic of South Ossetia — the State of Alania' (*Alania* being the name for the region in Ossetian). Parliamentarians from Abkhazia who observed the NKR referendum were reported to have been impressed by the initiative and mused that there might be something to be said for replacing 'Abkhazia' with the Abkhaz-language name *Apsny*.

## Conclusion

In new states, particularly those forged by war, there is frequently a close alignment between electoral politics and nation-building. The de facto states of the South Caucasus have proved no exception in this respect. Ethnic under-representation within political structures remains a key feature of politics within Abkhazia, and its absence in South Ossetia and the NKR is explained only by the expulsion of ethnic minorities.

Despite relatively inhospitable conditions—in terms of political neighbourhood, a lack of international recognition, a legacy of war and, until recently, the threat of military attack—the de facto states of the South Caucasus have endured for over two decades. They have proven to be capable of holding competitive and unpredictable elections in which real opposition candidates participate and enjoy prospects of success. There have, however, been some noticeable reversals in recent years.

In Abkhazia, the achievement of competitive presidential elections in 2004, 2009 and 2011 was undermined in 2014, when Alexander Ankvab's forced departure<sup>10</sup> was followed by a deeply flawed election. Raul Khadjimba and his supporters dealt multiple blows to Abkhazia's claims to being evaluated on the merits of its electoral politics rather than dismissed because of its lack of international recognition.

Backsliding of a different kind was recently witnessed in Nagorno-Karabakh with the passing of a new constitution that further empowered the incumbent president while prolonging his time in office. In this respect, the NKR followed a regional trend that has seen presidents in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and

7 Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'What Happens When an Unrecognized Country Experiences a Revolution?', *The Global Observatory*, 13 June 2014. Available at <<http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/06/what-happens-when-unrecognized-country-experiences-revolution/>>

8 Only Abkhazian–Russian dual citizenship is permitted in Abkhazia, and this law was conceived primarily to disadvantage Georgians. The Abkhaz authorities had always known that Georgians in Abkhazia possessed Georgian passports and understood why, but they had pragmatically decided not to pursue 'offenders'. Khadjimba's decision marked a sharp reversal in this practice.

9 Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Dubious Election Produces a Divisive New President in Abkhazia', *The Global Observatory*, 3 September 2014. Available at <<http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/09/dubious-election-divisive-new-president-abkhazia/>>

10 To the surprise of many, Ankvab returned to Abkhazia in 2017 to successfully contest a parliamentary seat.

much of Central Asia propose changes to the constitution to enhance or extend their powers and/or time in office.<sup>11</sup> Tailoring the constitution to accommodate the incumbent on the grounds of national security or simply because of their alleged indispensability is a depressingly familiar tale in the post-Soviet space.

Women have traditionally been greatly under-represented in every South Caucasian state, regardless of whether the state is afforded international recognition.<sup>12</sup> The NKR was the first de facto state to attempt to legis-

lately address this imbalance by introducing a provision that guarantees that at least one-fifth of parliamentary candidates must be women, albeit in the context of a strong presidential system that has proven to be allergic to female aspirants. Gender quotas have proven to work in recognised states. Time will tell whether they can help erode deeply embedded patriarchal assumptions or whether, to paraphrase Eduard Kokoity, the Caucasus will remain the Caucasus.

#### *About the Author*

Donnacha Ó Beacháin is director of research at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, where he lectures on post-Soviet studies and has produced a popular module on unrecognised states. During 2011–12, he was tasked by Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs Conflict Resolution Unit to research the role of the OSCE and EU in the post-Soviet protracted conflicts. This major research project was designed to assist the Irish Government as it chaired the OSCE in 2012 and hosted the EU Presidency in 2013. In January 2012, Dr Ó Beacháin also received an additional commission from the Irish Research Council/Department of Foreign Affairs to conduct field research in Abkhazia and Transnistria and write additional reports evaluating electoral politics in these unrecognised states. Dr Ó Beacháin is a lead researcher in the €3.6m FP7/Marie Curie Initial Training Network in Post-Soviet Tensions (2013–2017) and in the €3.8m Horizon2020 project on the Caspian region (2015–2019).

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11 See Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan. 'Imagined democracy? Nation-building and elections in Central Asia', *Nationalities Papers* 43.3 (2015): 495–513. The NKR constitutional change bore a striking resemblance to President Erdogan's proposal to enhance and extend his powers, ultimately accepted by a majority of the Turkish electorate in a referendum held on 16 April 2017.

12 See Caucasus Analytical Digest No. 71, 'Women in Politics' (30 March 2015). Available at <<http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-71.pdf>>



## The External Relations of De Facto States in the South Caucasus

By Giorgio Comai (Dublin City University)

### Abstract

Post-Soviet de facto states are small-sized jurisdictions with limited domestic resources. They need credible military support from a patron to ensure their continued existence, and substantial financial support to provide public goods, services, and a degree of welfare to their resident population. Their unrecognised status limits their access to international trade and prevents them from joining international organisations; however, both local residents and de facto authorities find ways to interact with the outside world.

### The Key Role of the Patron

Since Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, its role as the main partner and sponsor of these territories has increased substantially. Indeed, Russia serves not only as a guarantor of their security but also as the main sponsor of their state budget and pension system. More than 50 per cent Abkhazia's budget, and approximately 90 per cent of South Ossetia's budget, officially comes from Russia's aid, with a significant part of other incomes dependent on either aid flows or trade with Russia [see Figure 1 on p. 11].

Having a Russian passport, as most residents of these two territories do, allows freedom of movement, even if travel to Western Europe might otherwise be effectively limited by the reluctance of some embassies to grant them a visa due to their place of residence. Perhaps more importantly, at least for the elderly and their families, is the fact that residents who are Russian citizens are entitled to receive a Russian pension. As of 2016, the average pension for Abkhazian residents who are Russian pension-holders was approximately 120 USD and—according to the local statistical office—is on par with the average salaries (the average pension in South Ossetia is approximately 100 USD). Financial support from Russia is all the more important in a context where a large share of residents with registered monetary incomes (more than 80 per cent) receive that income from either the local budget or the Russian pension fund [see Figures 2 and 3 on p. 12].

In Nagorno-Karabakh, its patron (Armenia) provides finances for more than 50 per cent of its budget. However, Armenian diaspora also plays a key role in sponsoring infrastructure development. For example, the yearly telethon hosted by the "Armenia Fund" received 15 million USD in donations in 2016; a review of their records shows that these resources finance activities that would otherwise have to be financed by the budget (or remain unfunded), such as building roads and social housing, as well as the construction and renovation of education and health facilities.<sup>1</sup>

1 "Armenia Fund's Completed Projects", *Armenia Fund Official website*, retrieved on 28 February 2017, <<https://www.armeniafund.org/projects/completed/>>

In all of these territories, the patron also provides technical support and sponsors capacity-building initiatives aimed at local institutions. However, no matter how strong the support from the patron, the external relations of de facto states in the South Caucasus include interactions beyond the patron at multiple levels, from conflict negotiations and diplomatic missions, to trade, migration and cross-border activities.

### MFAs, Beyond International Recognition

Achieving international recognition remains, at least formally, a key foreign policy goal of the MFAs of post-Soviet de facto states. Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia both understand that their chances of achieving widespread international recognition are limited; however, they strive to widen and strengthen their network of support around the world through their limited means. Even in the case of South Ossetia, where this goal may exist only on paper because a large share of the resident population and the ruling elite strive towards joining the Russian Federation, there are observable efforts aimed at reaching out to the outside world.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia have dispatched an ambassador to Venezuela, which offers occasions for emissaries of these governments to be treated on a par with those of internationally recognised countries in one of the few places where this is possible.<sup>2</sup> Representatives of Abkhazia's MFA have established formal ties with several Italian municipalities, and its representatives have taken part in tourism fairs in different European locations. South Ossetia has opened its own representation office in Rome.<sup>3</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh has secured formal

2 Beyond Russia, only Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. No UN member states recognise the independence of Nagorno Karabakh.  
3 The Italian MFA immediately declared that it did not recognise its legitimacy, see Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release regarding the opening of the self-proclaimed representative office of the so-called 'Republic of South Ossetia' in Rome", 1 April 2016, <<http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2016/04/comunicato-della-farnesina-sull.html>>

support for its right of self-determination from multiple US states, the Basque Parliament, and a number of municipalities elsewhere.

Such activities do not bring immediate tangible results. However, authorities in de facto states seem to believe that establishing a network of international support at this level may help provide contrast to the narrative promoted by their parent state and possibly help them obtain support in time of crisis.

While Nagorno-Karabakh is officially excluded from conflict negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, representatives of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's MFA take part in the "Geneva international discussions." However, the 38 rounds of negotiations that occurred between 2008 and December 2016 have achieved few results, their main function being that of keeping a line of communication open between the de facto authorities, Tbilisi and the co-chairs (OSCE, EU and UN) as well as preventing further tensions. Officials from Abkhazia also interact with the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), which despite a yearly budget of approximately 18 million EUR and more than 200 officers on the field has only modest achievements to show and remains in place largely as a symbol of EU's political commitment to remain engaged in conflict resolution initiatives in Georgia.

Beyond official activities, one of the key roles of authorities of de facto states is to enhance their international standing in the online world. This includes, for example, highlighting their point of view and perspectives through a variety of tools. These tools range from bureaucratic communications on official websites, to less formal messages on social media, including English language posts on Twitter and videos published on Facebook.

The official communication outputs of the MFAs of de facto states in the South Caucasus differ substantially from that of MFAs of recognised states in the region. For example, they talk less about economy and trade than their recognised peers and frequently reference their independence [see Figure 4 on p. 13]. The limited number of countries that are mentioned with any regularity in their press releases reflects their limited capacity to effectively conduct formal interactions at the international level. Their small size as well as the modest resources they can dedicate to such activities, however, impacts their outreach capacity equally as much as their non-recognition [see Figure 5 on p. 14].

### International Organisations and Civil Society

In the case of Abkhazia, where various international organisations sponsor or implement projects, the MFA is

also in charge of serving as a point of reference and contact person between donors and local authorities. UN agencies (UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP, UNFPA), the European Union, the International Red Cross, the Danish Refugee Council, World Vision, and Action Against Hunger are among those who still sponsor or directly implement projects in Abkhazia, accounting for more than 10 million USD per year, and thus interact with de facto authorities. International projects supported by these organisations provide key inputs to the local health and education sectors, support economic development (especially in the Gali district), and provide opportunities for local civil society organisations to increase their network of contacts at the international level.

The situation is quite different in South Ossetia, where such interactions have diminished substantially after 2008. Due to strong opposition from Azerbaijan, the funding of projects in Nagorno Karabakh are also severely limited, as few governments or organisations unaffiliated with the Armenian diaspora finance activities in Nagorno-Karabakh. USAID has traditionally been willing to sponsor projects in Nagorno-Karabakh, but the projects must occur within the boundaries of Soviet-time NKAO;<sup>4</sup> this condition makes USAID funding unavailable for a substantial part of the remaining landmine clearance work that UK-based Halo Trust has been implementing in Nagorno-Karabakh since 2000.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2010, the European Union has been sponsoring the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), a multi-million peace-building programme aimed at promoting dialogue across the conflict line and at enhancing the capacities of civil society organisations and media that are willing to join such initiatives. While activities sponsored by the diaspora obtain high visibility in the local and Armenian media, peace-building initiatives such as EPNK receive much less attention on both sides of the de facto border, partly because they challenge the dominating nationalist rhetoric. Scant visibility of international projects is however not peculiar to Nagorno-Karabakh. In Abkhazia, projects supported by international governmental and non-governmental organisations struggle to enter the domestic mainstream media space even when they focus on issues that are not necessarily related to peace building initiatives.

4 NKAO, or 'Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast', is the administrative unit that delimited Nagorno Karabakh in Soviet times. Since the conflict in the early 1990s, Armenian forces control a substantially larger territory.

5 "Our role in Nagorno Karabakh", *The Halo Trust*, retrieved on 28 February 2017. <<https://www.halotrust.org/minefreenk/our-role-in-nagorno-karabakh/>>

Concerned that increased visibility may politicise their presence and thus threaten the viability of their activities, international donors are generally content to keep a low profile, not engaging, for example, in high visibility advocacy campaigns that may characterise their presence elsewhere.

### Life Across the De Facto Borders

The de facto border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan is highly militarised: clashes and sniper fire resulting in casualties are not rare, even after phases of recrudescence of conflict, such as the one that occurred in April 2016. In contrast, the line separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from mainland Georgia used to be porous, but in recent years, border crossings have become more difficult even for local residents. Barbed wire now seals large segments of South Ossetia's southern border. The number of crossing points along the Inguri river have been significantly reduced, further complicating the life of the ethnic Georgian community that for personal, economic or health reasons needs to go back and forth between Abkhazia and neighbouring Samegrelo.<sup>6</sup>

It is mostly ethnic Georgians who are involved in the informal economy across the de facto borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, trading hazelnuts, fruit and vegetables. Because there is no customs office, trade through check points occurs either through people carrying individual luggage (up to 50 kg per person is allowed), or through other means likely to involve corruption. Authorities in South Ossetia estimate that up to 200 tonnes of vegetable and fruits from Georgia cross the de facto border to the mainly Georgian-inhabited Akhgori district and are then traded further to Tskhinvali and Russia.<sup>7</sup> The figure, which is difficult to verify, ignited a debate in early 2017 in South Ossetia on the possibility of formalising trade with Georgia by opening a customs office.

In recent years, the issue of receiving health services across the de facto border has also become a matter of debate, particularly in Abkhazia. Despite substantial Russian support, Abkhazia's health system is not able to offer satisfactory care for some chronic diseases or health issues that have become increasingly common in contemporary Abkhazia, such as car accidents and drug abuse. In 2012, the Georgian government started a programme that allowed Abkhazian residents to obtain

free healthcare in Georgia without demanding them to acquire any Georgian document. The programme proved to be successful, and as of 2016, hundreds of Abkhazians have crossed the Inguri to obtain free access to healthcare in various Georgian cities, including Tbilisi. Apparently, as a response, an agreement reached between Abkhazia's and Russia's health ministries in January 2017 will provide free access to healthcare for Abkhazian residents with a Russian passport, a move that may limit the success of Georgia's "medical diplomacy".<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusions

Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh are small, internationally unrecognised jurisdictions that are strongly dependent on a patron. External support is not only fundamental in ensuring their continued existence from a military point of view but also for enhancing the capacity of the de facto authorities to deliver services and a degree of welfare to their resident populations. Given the high ratio of state employees and pensioners in these territories, financial support from the patron is directly determinant for maintaining the livelihood of most resident households. Supporting trade and attracting investment are routinely mentioned among the priorities of the de facto MFAs, but they remain relatively less important issues than for their recognised counterparts. Obtaining international recognition remains a key goal but one that is pragmatically operationalised as an effort to improve their image and promote their perspective through online communication and offline networks of support.

Lack of external legitimacy combined with a strong dependency on a patron raise old questions about the internal legitimacy of de facto states in the region. On the one hand, the patron is a key enabler of security and public goods, without which no state authority would be considered fully as such. On the other hand, as a consequence, authorities in de facto states must not only respond to their citizens but also to those who effectively hold the purse strings. Thus, negotiating domestic demands and patron's preferences is a key challenge for authorities in de facto states. However, political, social and human needs push both authorities and individuals in these territories to complement this dominant relationship with various activities that cross de facto and de jure borders.

*See overleaf for information about the author and further reading.*

6 As of February 2017, only two ABL crossings remain open, see Civil.ge, "Gali Residents Protest Crossing Point Closure", 27 January 2017. <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29810>>

7 Murat Gukemukhov, "Borba s kontrabandom po-osetinski", *Ekho Kavkaza*, 16 January 2017. <<http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28237685.html>>

8 Vitaly Shariya, "V Rossiyu, po strakhovke", *Ekho Kavkaza*, 25 January 2017. <<http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28259412.html>>

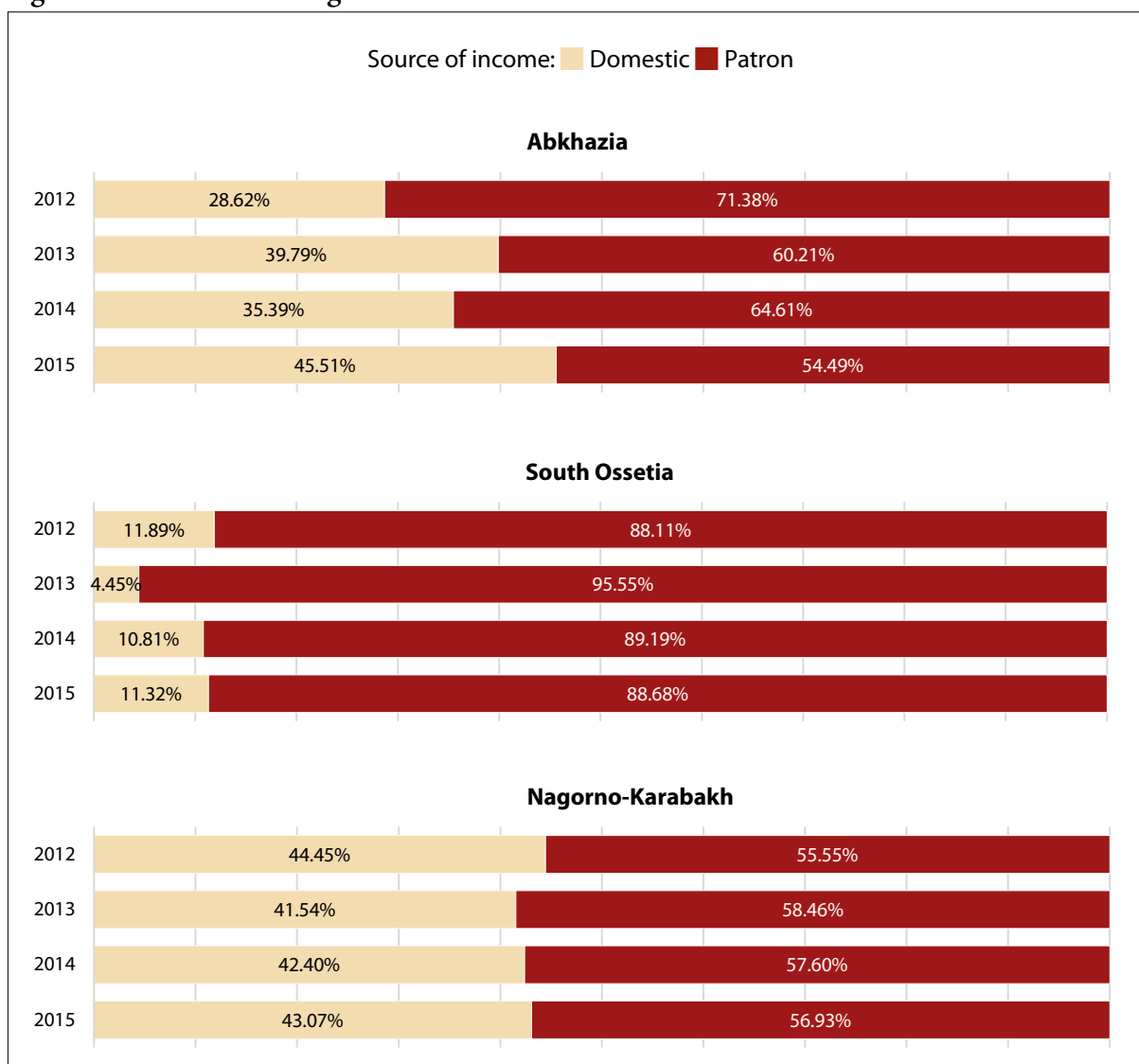
### About the Author

Giorgio Comai is a doctoral researcher at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University and a member of the Marie Curie ITN network “Post-Soviet Tensions”. His PhD thesis focuses on the external relations of de facto states in the former USSR. He has an MA in East European Studies and holds a degree in political science from the University of Bologna. From 2009 to 2013, he was a regional editor and researcher at *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*. Mr Comai has carried out research for the Institute for Central-Eastern and Balkan Europe at Bologna University and he is a member of the board of directors of ASIAC, Italy’s academic association for the study of Central Asia and the Caucasus. His research has focused on youth policies in Russia and on de facto states in the post-Soviet space.

### Further Reading

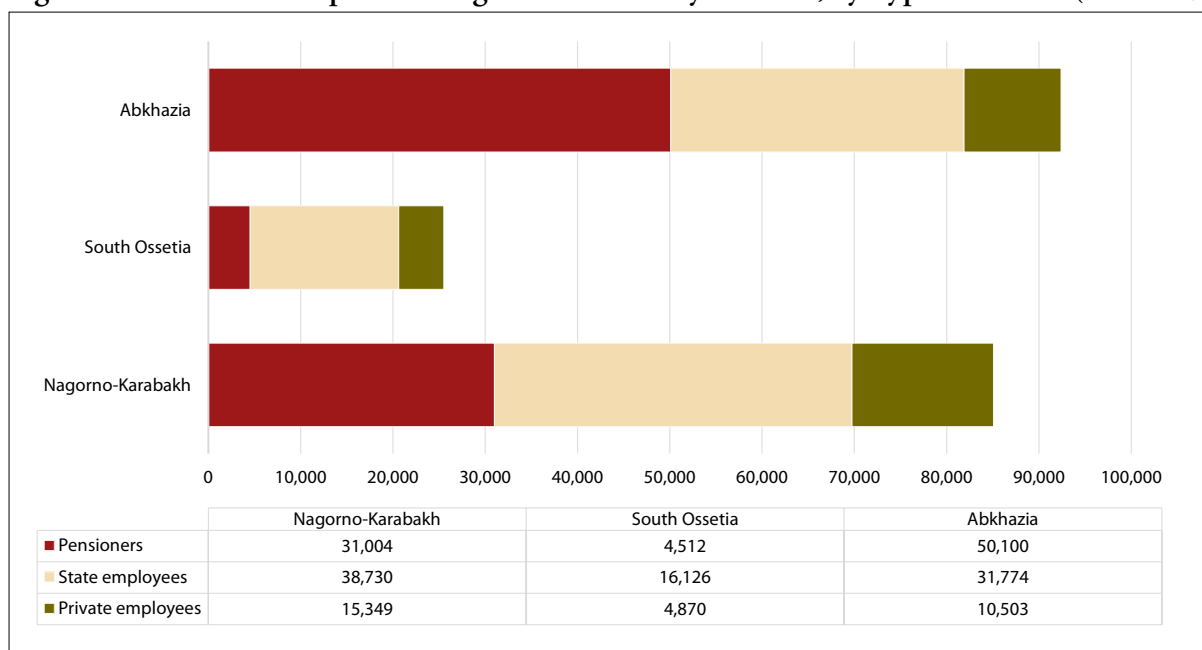
- Ó Beacháin, Donnacha, Giorgio Comai and Ann Tsurtsunia-Zurabashvili, ‘The secret lives of unrecognised states: Internal dynamics, external relations, and counter-recognition strategies’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27.3 (2016): 440–466
- Comai, Giorgio, ‘Post-Soviet de Facto States Online’ in William Schreiber and Marcin Kosienkowski (eds.), *Digital Eastern Europe*, The Jan Nowak Jezioranski College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław, 2015.

**Figure 1: Share of the Budget from Domestic Incomes and Aid in Post-Soviet De Facto States**



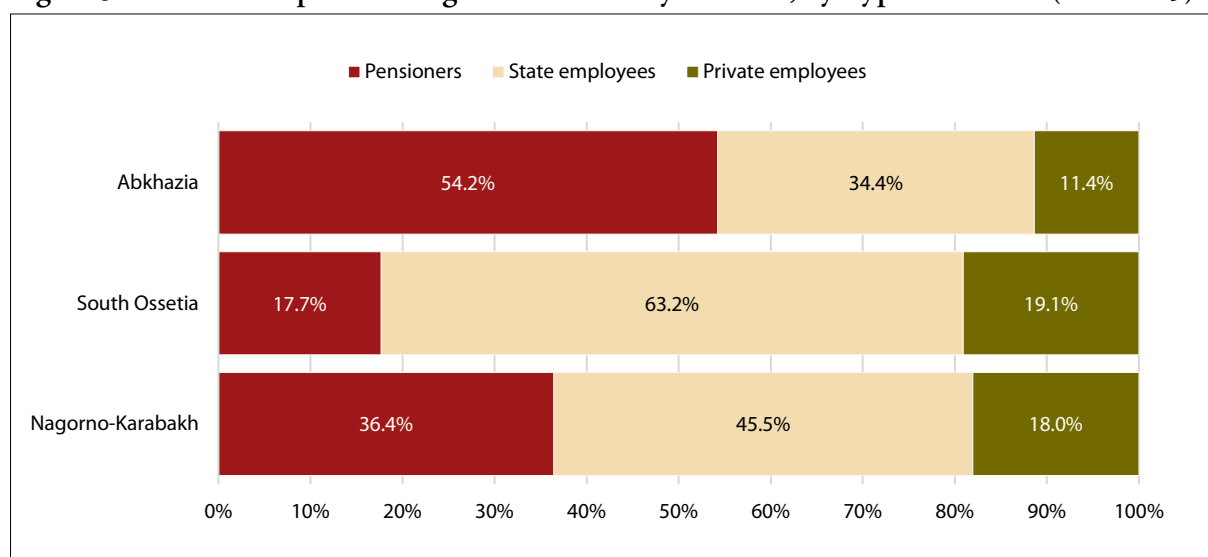
Source: Statistical yearbooks of Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh; aggregated official and media sources for South Ossetia

Figure 2: Number of People with Registered Monetary Incomes, by Type of Income (as of 2015)



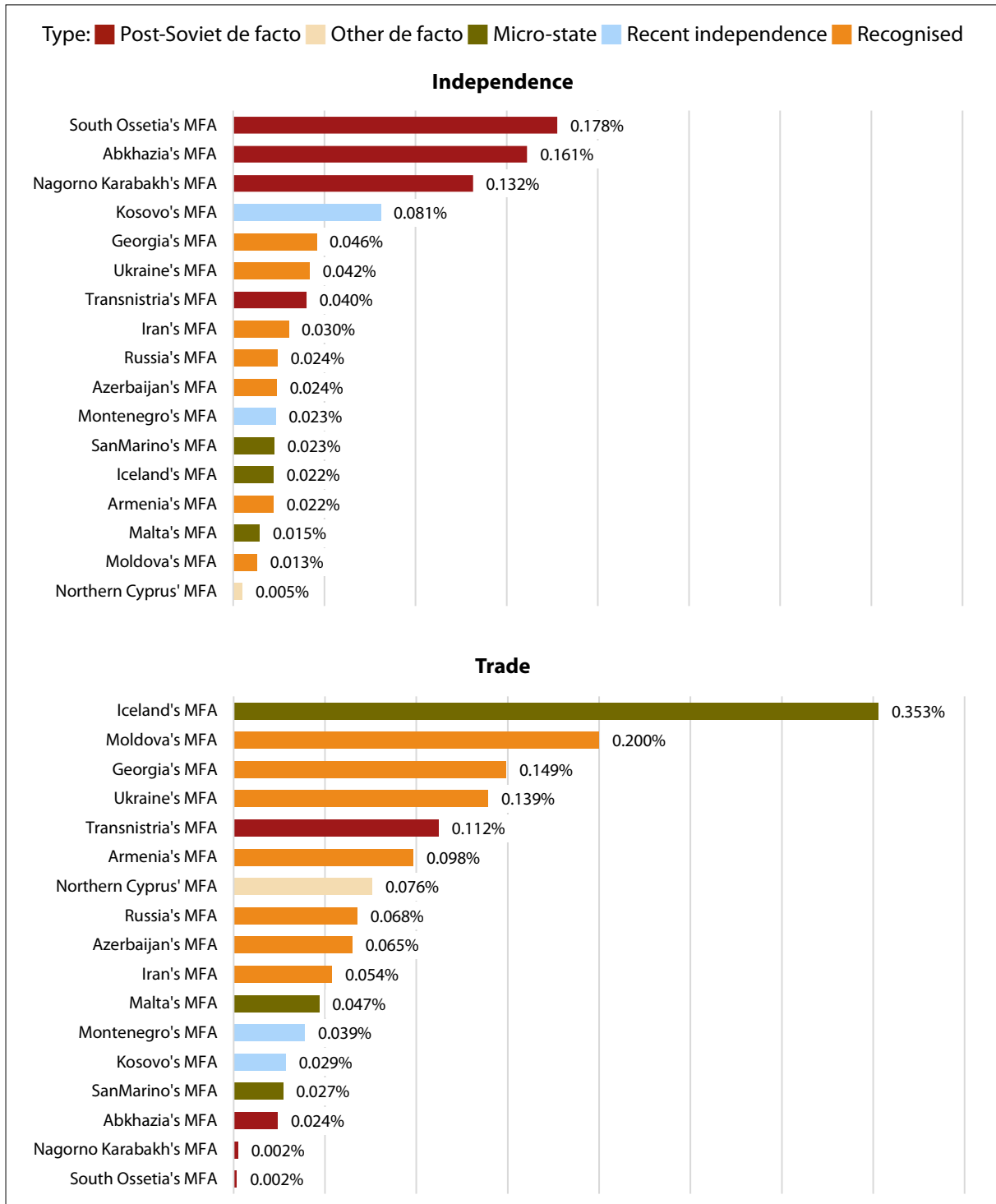
Aggregated data from relevant offices in de facto states and Russia

Figure 3: Share of People with Registered Monetary Incomes, by Type of Income (as of 2015)



Aggregated data from relevant offices in de facto states and Russia

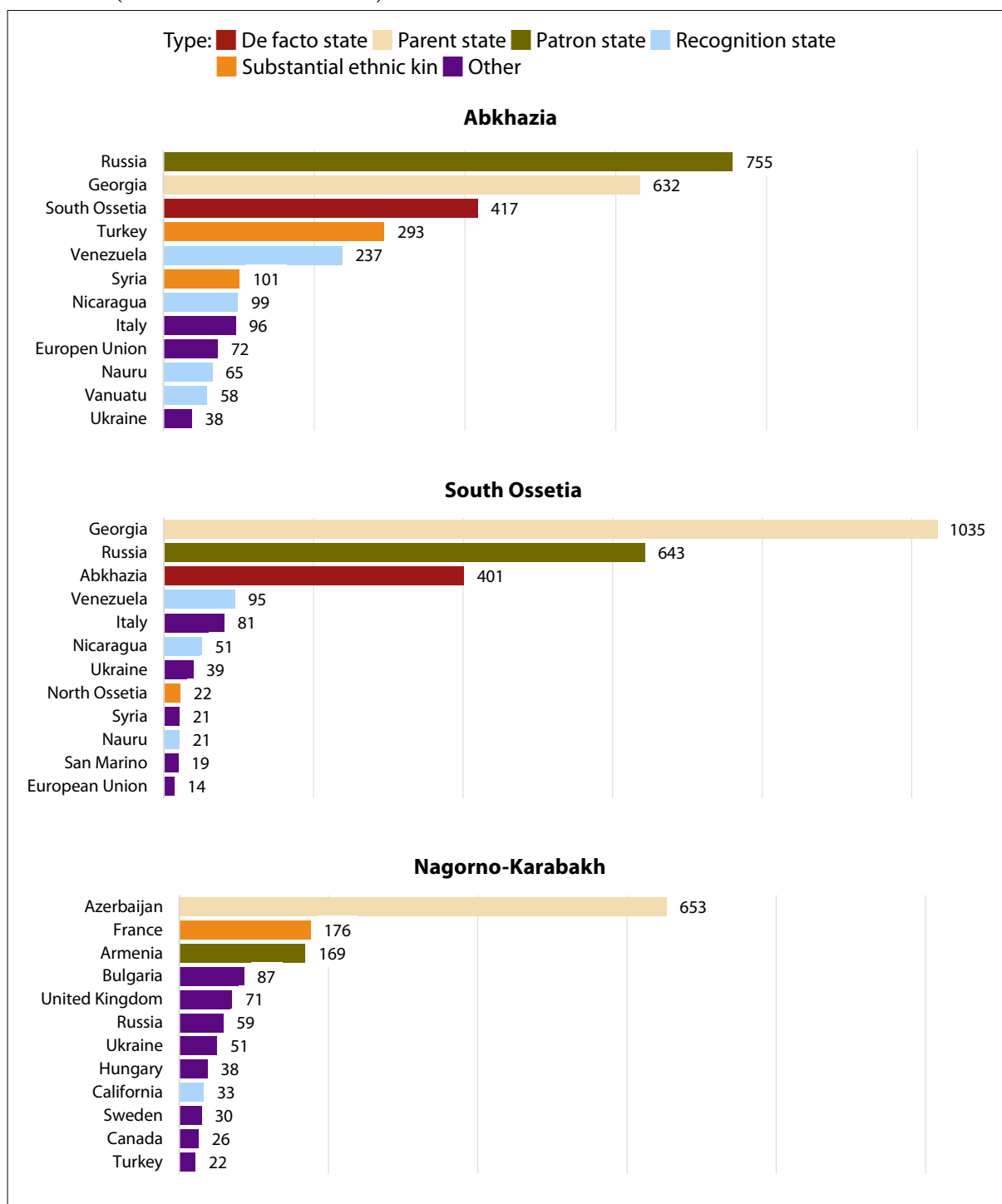
Figure 4: Frequency of 'Independence' and 'Trade' in Publications of Selected MFAs  
(Frequency of Term as % of All Words)



Word frequency of 'trade' and 'independence/independent' in the items published on the websites of selected MFAs between 1 July 2013 and 30 June 2016 (N = 16,584). The analysis includes MFAs of: post-Soviet de facto states (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh), other de facto states in Europe (Northern Cyprus), countries of recent independence in Europe (Montenegro and Kosovo), micro-states in Europe whose MFA has an own website (Iceland, San Marino, and Malta), parent states (Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan), other countries with which post-Soviet de facto states share a border (Ukraine, Russia, and Iran).



**Figure 5: Countries and Entities Mentioned Most Often by MFAs of Post-Soviet De Facto States (Number of Occurrences)**



Number of mentions of internationally recognised countries and other selected jurisdictions on the websites of MFAs of de facto states in the South Caucasus. This analysis includes all publications available on the respective websites as of 1 January 2017. Abkhazia's MFA: 829 publications, starting with April 2012. South Ossetia's MFA: 396 publications, starting with April 2010; Nagorno Karabakh: 522 publications, starting with November 2008. It should be highlighted that in the case of Nagorno Karabakh references to Bulgaria, United Kingdom and Hungary are almost exclusively related to the nationality of members of the OSCE monitoring team, and accordingly do not relate to any substantive relationship between Nagorno Karabakh's MFA and those countries.

## Public Opinion in the Eurasian De Facto States

By Gerard Toal (Virginia Tech, Alexandria, VA) and John O'Loughlin (University of Colorado Boulder)

### Abstract

Developing reliable social scientific knowledge about public opinion in de facto states is a challenging exercise. Since 2008 we cooperated with a variety of research partners to organize a series of social scientific surveys in all four de facto states in the post-Soviet region, organizing an initial round of surveys in 2010–2011 and a follow-up round in December 2014. In this contribution we summarize the responses by declared nationality to two questions asked in 2010–11 and then again in 2013–2014: preferred future status and trust in the president. We show the results for nationalities because these values tend to be most distinctive and indicate some of the key divides in the de facto states.

### Introduction

Over the last decade and a half social science research on Eurasia's de facto states has deepened our knowledge of these enduring yet isolated and unacknowledged political entities. In 2001 Charles King described these aspiring countries as "information black holes". Since that time researchers have engaged and documented in some detail the political dynamics of de facto states, particularly electoral events.

Developing reliable social scientific knowledge about public opinion in de facto states, however, is a challenging exercise. Firstly, researchers face the same problems that trouble public opinion research in many countries. Census data may be outdated and accurate population distributions and numbers require inference and estimating from other sources. Permission to conduct research can sometimes be difficult to obtain from governing authorities. Respondents, especially minorities, are sometimes cagey about sharing their opinions, especially about political leaders and the state of affairs in their country.

Secondly, de facto states pose unique problems for public opinion research. Laws by parent states against unapproved travel to de facto states complicate outsiders' access to the research site. Policies designed to isolate and de-legitimize de facto states by parent states (e.g. Georgia for Abkhazia and South Ossetia), can effectively criminalize research in these regions, irrespective of its intellectual merits and news impact. Research results that simply present the views of residents, and complicate or contradict parent state narratives can elicit hostility and denunciation from these governments. De facto state authorities exhibit similar political sensitivities. Research by foreign academics can be viewed with considerable suspicion and queries about the motives for the work can quickly become conspiratorial. Inevitably the unresolved and ongoing dynamics of conflicts affect the research itself though registering this tension through the questions asked of respondents is part of the value of such research. A further complica-

tion is that inter-ethnic tensions, and translation issues, in certain locations can pose significant challenges to the research gathering process.

In 2008 we were awarded a research grant from the US National Science Foundation to study the contemporary dynamics of post-Soviet de facto states in light of the independence of Kosovo. We received another grant in April 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea that extended the geographic range of the surveys to the contested regions of south-east Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula. We received this research funding in an open academic process involving peer review ranking of competing social scientific research proposals using international scholarly standards. Since 2008 we cooperated with a variety of research partners to organize a series of social scientific surveys in all four de facto states (Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh), organizing an initial round of surveys in 2010–2011 and a follow-up round in December 2014 (we did not survey in Karabakh in 2014; we draw upon a survey by our colleague Kristin Bakke conducted in 2013 for comparative purposes).

We were able to surmount the considerable challenges to research in the following ways. First, we worked with local academic researchers to identify and interview potential survey research firms. We subsequently met with representatives of these firms and explained our survey project. Because of our prior experience with survey research in the North Caucasus through the Levada Center (Moscow), we had established relationships that we were able to use to help us achieve our aims. The Levada Center, an independent Russian survey company, ended up supervising our research efforts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria (in 2014). In Karabakh, we used a reputable firm based in Yerevan.

Second, we visited all four locations and conducted elite interviews with local authorities as well as NGOs. We stressed the open scientific nature of our work and shared parts of our sample questionnaire. We made one concession in our survey instrument in some localities;

we did not ask respondents directly about the trustworthiness of the serving local president. Instead, we asked this question without naming the politician.

Third, through work with local academics, we were able to devise reliable estimates of populations and developed appropriate sample designs. The process of data collection was not always smooth. Because of our visits, authorities were generally aware of our research projects in 2010–11. By 2014, however, the political situation was much tenser after the conflict in Ukraine and we chose, on the advice of our partners, to adopt a lower profile in conducting the research. It is regrettable but over the course of the last decade, public opinion research in de facto states has become more difficult to conduct.

We have detailed the results of our research on de facto states in a series of publications over the last number of years (see “further readings” at the end of this text). More details on the survey methodology and designs of the samples are available there. In this contribution we summarize the responses by declared nationality to two questions asked in 2010–11 and then again in 2013–2014: preferred future status and trust in the president. We show the results for nationalities because these values tend to be most distinctive and indicate some of the key divides in the de facto states.

### Attitudes Towards Future Status of the De Facto Republics

Figure 1 on p. 18 summarizes in generic language the choices we presented to respondents in the four de facto states over the last number of years. In the individual surveys these choices were stated in explicit language. Thus, respondents in Abkhazia, Transnistria and South Ossetia were asked if they preferred unity with Russia (patron) whereas Karabakh residents were asked about Armenia in 2011 and 2013 (by Kristin Bakke in a survey that repeated many of our 2011 questions). As Figure 1 reveals, the results are broadly consistent over the two periods of the surveys, despite the geopolitical upheaval in nearby Ukraine.

The situation in Abkhazia is the most complex. A multi-ethnic territory where the titular nation has, in effect, established an ethnocratic polity, Abkhazia is riven by different status aspirations amongst its constituent ethnicities. Officially (2011 census data, which enumerated just over 240,000 people) ethnic Abkhaz make up slightly over half of the population of Abkhazia, with Armenians and Georgians both approaching a fifth and ethnic Russians a tenth of all residents. A clear majority of ethnic Abkhaz prefer the current political system, which is an independent Abkhazian state where they predominate. Ethnic Armenians and Russians, by contrast, are much more ambivalent about the current system

in Abkhazia. A majority of Armenians preferred unity with Russia in 2010, more than even ethnic Russians living in Abkhazia at that time. By 2014, the desire for unity with Russia among Armenians had dipped a little while it had risen considerably amongst ethnic Russians. A good indication of the sensitivity of the question for Georgians living in Abkhazia is the high ‘hard to say/refuse’ response in 2010, a response that diminished in 2014 when more felt able to declare that their aspiration was for Abkhazia to join Georgia (again). Prior to the December 2014 survey, Abkhazia had experienced political turmoil and the election of a new president Raul Khajimba. In November 2014 he and President Putin signed a new security treaty that deepened military and economic ties between their states, a move unpopular with some ethnic Abkhaz political figures (not to mention the Georgian state authorities).

The situations in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh are more straightforward. Both spaces are now overwhelmingly ethnically homogeneous, a consequence of war and forced displacement in the early 1990s and in 2008. In South Ossetia, the residual population aspires to unification with fellow Ossetians in the Russian Federation. There are still a few ethnic Georgians living in Ossetia but they tend to be elderly and mostly in the rayon of Akhagori (Leningor). We were unable to obtain a representative sample of this population and we thus do not show them here. In April 2017, voters in South Ossetia approved changing the name of their entity from “Republic of South Ossetia” to “Republic of South Ossetia—the State of Alania” (“South Ossetia–Alania” for short), a deliberate gesture asserting symmetry with the Russian Federation’s North Caucasian ethnic republic, North Ossetia–Alania.

Transnistria is also a multi-ethnic polity but one with less fraught legacies of violence and displacement. In 2010 most residents preferred unity with Russia over their own political system or re-unification with Moldova. By 2014, that sentiment had deepened—a function of many factors. Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the wake of the August 2008 war, Transnistria never received recognition of its de facto statehood by the Russian Federation. In 2014, as Crimea was annexed and activists sought to have the Donbas join Russia, the Transnistrian Soviet requested that Moscow consider its application to join Russia, too. This appeal went nowhere but the sentiment, nevertheless, remained strong on the ground.

### Attitudes Towards the Presidents in the De Facto Republics

As part of a suite of questions about trust in local governmental institutions and in foreign leaders, we repeated

a question in both time periods and for all four de facto republics on trust in the local presidential leader (all have presidential political systems). We did not specify the leader's name but simply asked respondents to scale their trust on a "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" scale in 2013–14 and to give a simple yes-no answer in 2010–11. The results are shown in Figure 2 on p. 19 and by combining the agree (strongly and mostly) and disagree (strongly and mostly) for 2013–14, we can compare the results over time. What changed of course is the leadership in all the republics, except in Nagorno-Karabakh where Bako Sakhayan remained in power. Thus, the results show both a general distrust-trust in the institution as well as a rating of the respective presidents. For that reason, generalizations across the samples are difficult to make.

Important differences between the republics over time are evident in the graphs. The change in leadership in Abkhazia from Sergey Bagapsh in 2010 to Raul Khajimba in 2014 was accompanied by a large drop in trust by all ethnic groups in the republic, with Georgians and Russians showing more distrust than trust in the new leader as political uncertainty continued about the nature of relations with Russia and the distribution of power. South Ossetia demonstrated the most consistent level of trust in the President with a majority showing trust in both Eduoard Kokoity (2010) and Leonid Tibilov (2014). Similarly, Nagorno-Karabakh shows a strong and consistent level of trust for President Sakhayan over the period 2011–13 at over 80%.

Transnistria has the most dramatic change. Our 2011 survey was completed in the last months of the unpopular Presidency of Igor Smirnov. His successor, Yevgeny Shevchuk, gained a much higher level of trust among the three main nationalities in December 2014 at a time of increased dependence on Russia and when the Transnistrian government was trying to become more integrated into that country. Partly as a consequence of the ongoing economic crisis in the republic and support for his opponent by the powerful Sheriff conglomerate, Shevchuk was defeated in December 2016 by Vadim Krasnoselsky.

### Conclusions

The results of our surveys in the de facto republics show many differences concerning political preferences and trust in state institutions. These preferences are influenced by both regional changes in economic linkages that have domestic implications and in geopolitical developments especially with respect to Russia's military actions and foreign policy decisions such as recognition of statehood in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. What can be stated is that the building of legitimacy of state institutions remains among the key prerequisites for political leaders in the de facto republics. They can rely on a general level of support in the face of perceived external threats but their own tenure requires more than predictable opposition to parent states. In short, they must also deliver as politicians on local terms to their constituents.

#### *About the Authors*

*Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail)* is Professor of Government and International Affairs in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech's campus in the metro Washington region. He received a Ph.D. in geography from Syracuse University (1989). Besides numerous research articles and chapters, he is the author of *Critical Geopolitics* (Routledge, 1996) and co-author of *Bosnia Remade: Ethnic Cleansing and its Reversal* (Oxford University Press, 2011). His latest book is *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest for Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

*John O'Loughlin* is College Professor of Distinction and Professor of Geography at the University of Colorado-Boulder, USA. His research interests are in the geography of conflict, including the Caucasus-Black Sea region and the relationship between climate change and conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa.

#### *Further Reading*

- O'Loughlin, John, Vladimir Kolosov and Gerard Toal (2014): 'Inside the post-Soviet de facto states: A comparison of attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55.5: 423–456.
- O'Loughlin, John, Gerard Toal and Vladimir Kolosov (2016): 'Who identifies with the "Russian world": Geopolitical attitudes in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57.6: 745–778.

Figure 1: Attitudes Towards Future Status of the De Facto Republics

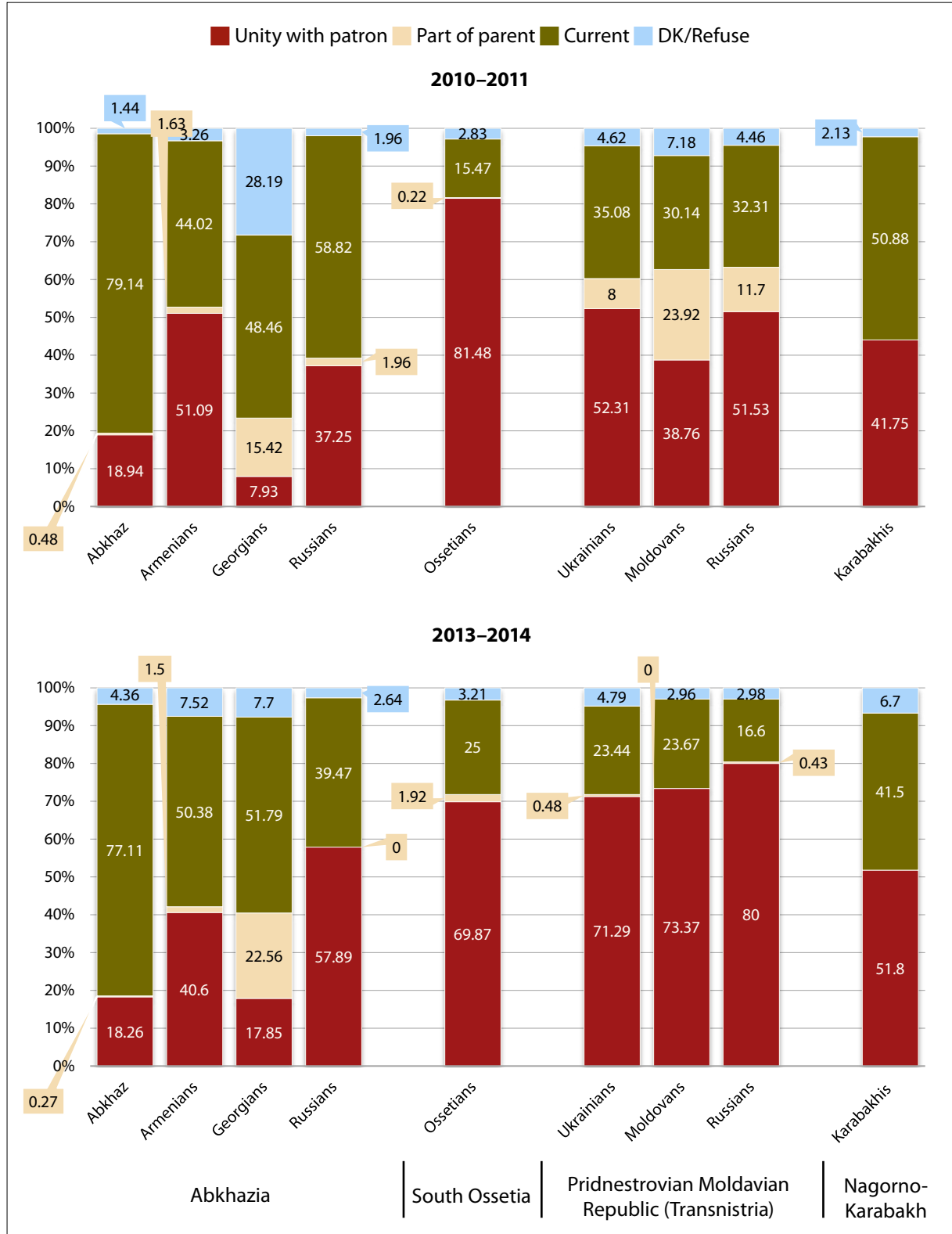
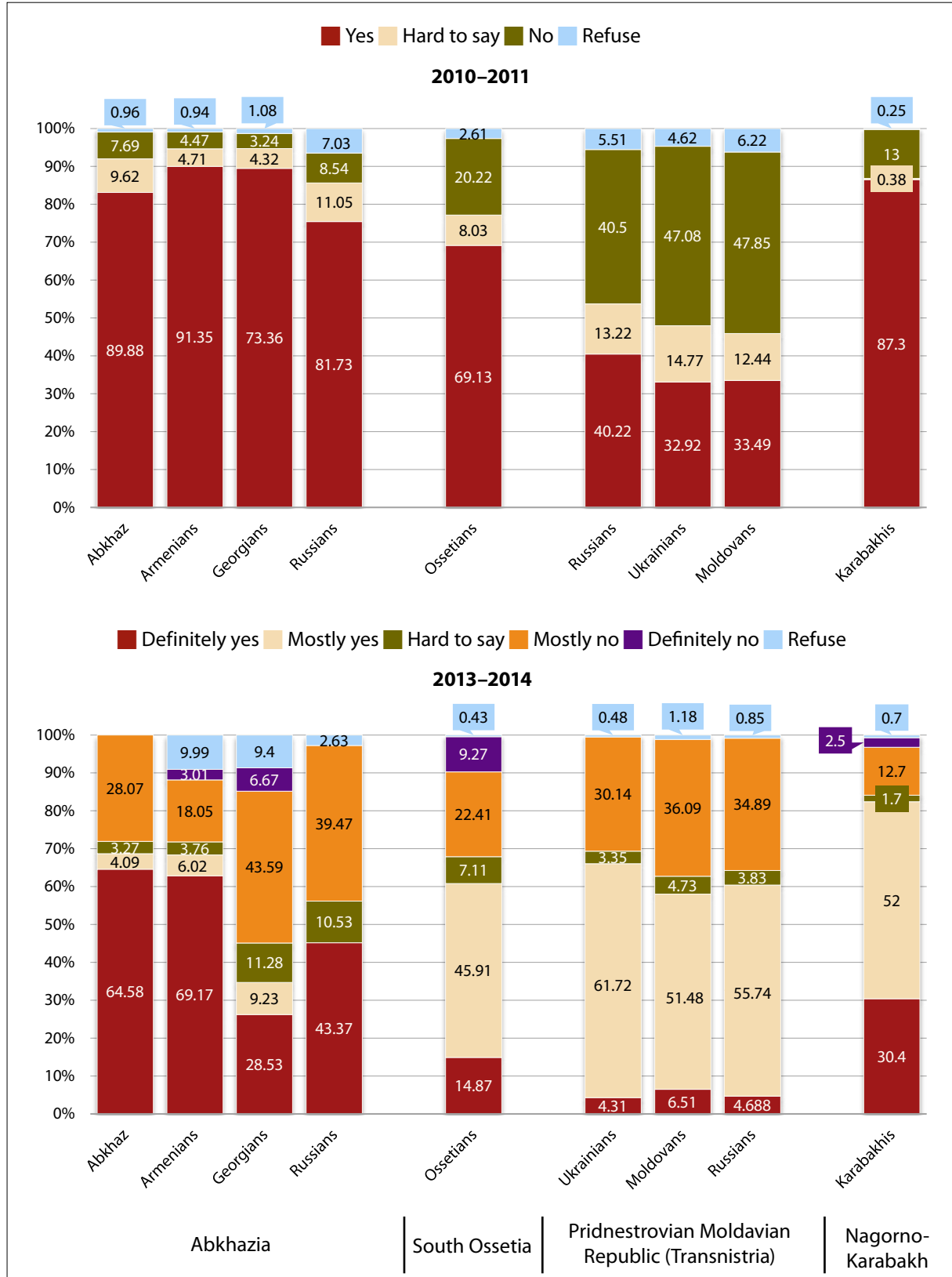


Figure 2: Trust in the President





## DOCUMENTATION

## Basic Data and Political Systems of South Caucasus De Facto States

Table 1: Basic Data Regarding South Caucasus De Facto States

	Abkhazia	Nagorno-Karabakh	South Ossetia
Size	8,660 km <sup>2</sup>	4,400 km <sup>2*</sup>	3,900 km <sup>2</sup>
Population**	240,000	150,000	35,000–50,000
Ethnic Composition	50% Abkhaz 20% Armenian 20% Georgian	99% Armenian	90% Ossetian
Patron State	Russia	Armenia	Russia
Base State	Georgia	Azerbaijan	Georgia
Recognition from UN member states	Russia Nicaragua Venezuela Nauru	None	Russia Nicaragua Venezuela Nauru
Withdrawn recognition from UN member states	Tuvalu Vanuatu	None	Tuvalu
Currency	Russian Ruble	Armenian Dram	Russian Ruble
Products	Fruit Tourism Wine Nuts	Copper and gold mining, Agriculture, Alcohol (Wine, Vodka, Cognac)	Subsistence and heavily subsidised economy

\* Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh had a territory of about 4,400 km<sup>2</sup>. Since the war in the early 1990s, however, Armenian forces control about 11,500 km<sup>2</sup> of territory that is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, including most of Nagorno-Karabakh.

\*\* The demographics of unrecognised states are often contested. In particular, the ethnic balance within Abkhazia is hotly debated, and the actual number of inhabitants in each of these territories may be significantly lower than local population statistics suggest due to long-term or seasonal migration. Figures based on census carried in Abkhazia (2011) and South Ossetia (2015). The only post-Soviet census conducted in Nagorno-Karabakh took place in 2005 but the NKR's National Statistical Service provides detailed and regular data regarding the population.

Table 2: Political and Electoral Systems in South Caucasus De Facto States

	Abkhazia	Nagorno-Karabakh	South Ossetia
Political System	Presidential	Presidential	Presidential
Presidential Electoral System	Second Ballot	Second Ballot	Second Ballot
Parliamentary Electoral System	100% majoritarian single-mandate constituencies (35 seats)	Party-list PR (33 seats)*	Party-list PR system with 7% threshold. (34 seats)**
Peaceful transfer of power from incumbent president to rival	Yes	No	Yes
Two term limit for presidents	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender Quota	No	Yes	No
Willingness to join patron state	No	Yes	Yes
Freedom House Ranking	Partly Free	Partly Free	Not Free

\* A completely majoritarian system was initially employed but this was changed in 2005 to a system whereby a third of MPs were elected by party list. In 2010, 17 seats were elected by party list and 16 in single mandate districts, while in 2015 only one third of seats were majoritarian and the remainder were elected via party lists.

\*\* Voter turnout must be 50% plus one, and at least two parties must win seats. Otherwise, a repeat election is required four months later.

**ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST****Editors**

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Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, and Michael Clemens

ISSN 1867 9323 © 2017 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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