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Inside the post-Soviet de facto states: a comparison of attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria

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In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013–2014, renewed attention has been given to the earlier so-called “frozen conflicts” of the successor states of the Soviet Union. In Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan, national conflicts of the early 1990s resulted in establishment of four breakaway regions, the de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorny Karabakh. While the first three are supported by Russia, the latter is supported by Armenia. Such support as well as growing internal legitimacy has enabled these republics to retain separate status for almost 25 years. Though appearing quite similar from an external perspective, the populations of the de facto states are quite diverse in composition, geopolitical preferences, and support for political institutions and persons. Large representative public opinion surveys conducted by the authors in 2010–2011 in the four de facto states allow a deeper comprehension of internal political and social dynamics. Three main dimensions of their current status and orientation (relations with Russia, support for local institutions, and possibilities of post-war reconciliation) are examined using nine key comparative questions. Nationality is the main predictor of divergent opinions within the republics, and results are reported along this dimension. Close relations with the external patron, support for the legitimacy and identity of the respective de facto republics, and little interest in returning to the parent state testify to the longevity and successful promotion of state and nation in the de facto republics in the Caucasus-Black Sea Region.

Keywords: public opinion; Georgia; Moldova; Azerbaijan; geopolitics

Introduction

The Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its subsequent sponsorship of two new aspirant de facto states in eastern Ukraine (the Donetsk Peoples' Republic and the Luhansk Peoples' Republic, jointly the Federal State of Novorossiia) greatly intensified the international spotlight on the four existing post-Soviet de facto states and Russia's relationship with them. The Kremlin recognized two of the existing separatist entities as independent states in August 2008 following the short Russo-Georgian war: the Republic of South Ossetia and the Republic of Abkhazia, both on the internationally recognized territory of Georgia. The third, the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), commonly known as Transnistria to English-speakers, remains for now unrecognized by Moscow, as does the fourth, the Nagorny Karabakh Republic (NKR), a

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predominantly ethnic Armenian territory formerly within the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Since South Ossetia and Abkhazia have garnered little international recognition as independent states, all four remain effectively *de facto* states. The nomenclature “*de facto*” is now the consensus term for political entities that have achieved enduring “internal sovereignty” – in this article, on a portion of the territory of the recognized post-Soviet states of Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan – but lack widespread “external sovereignty” in the international system. Termed in the past “pseudo-states” or “quasi-states,”¹ a *de facto* state has, for a period of two years or greater, established territorial control in a distinct geographic region and proclaimed itself an independent sovereign polity but failed to acquire widespread international recognition and legitimacy as such in the international system (Kolosov and O’Loughlin 1999; Kolstø 2006).

De facto states are distinct from regions that seek autonomy or show little aspiration for independence. Some argue that all *de facto* states are inevitably secessionist, but this characterization is disputed (Caspersen 2011; Caspersen and Stansfield 2011). In the post-Cold War period, *de facto* states aspire to international legitimacy on the basis of self-organized referenda of their residents who are sometimes residual populations after episodes of forced population displacement. They share all the characteristics of recognized state institutions and practices and, while not officially recognized, some of the estimated 21 *de facto* states created since World War II have proven enduring entities on the world political map (Caspersen and Stansfield 2011, 4).² Given that they are often hotly contested geopolitical objects, speculated about more than they are known or understood, the populations and polities of these places deserve serious engagement and scholarly study (Lynch 2004). While academic work on *de facto* states is growing, to date it has been disjointed and disappointingly small, with some work driven by regional antipathies and personal political penchants.

In 2008, we began a *De Facto State Research Project* to study public attitudes and internal dynamics within the post-Soviet *de facto* states in the wake of the “Kosovo precedent.” While we suspected at the time that this precedent would have ripple effects in the post-Soviet space, we had little idea how central the subject would be to the unraveling of the post-Cold War settlement and to contemporary revisionist geopolitics (Deudney and Ikenberry 2009; Ikenberry 2014; Mead 2014). In his address on Crimea to the Duma on March 18, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin described Kosovo as “a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands ... when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country’s central authorities (Putin 2014).” Kosovo, of course, did not subsequently become annexed by a larger political unit as Crimea was to become. While neither Russia, nor indeed Ukraine, recognize Kosovo as a state, Kosovo’s sponsored independence and widespread recognition by many Euro – Atlantic states is viewed cynically by Russia’s leadership. From their perspective, the unilateral changing of borders in post-Cold War Europe began with Kosovo, not Crimea.

That small places, at certain key junctures, become central to Eurasian geopolitics should not surprise us given European history over the last century and international crises over places like Sarajevo in 1914 and Sudetenland in 1938. But amidst the competing narratives striving to cast Russia’s behavior as either classic *realpolitik* and, thus, understandable and not blameworthy (Mearsheimer 2014) or as those of an expansionist imperial power (a classic Cold War narrative that never went away and finds regular expression from figures like US Senator John McCain), it is important that we gain grounded geographical knowledge of the common and distinctive features of the four post-Soviet *de facto* states today.

The will to homogenize these de facto states is pervasive and is evident in debate and reporting. Recent accounts of the situation on the ground in eastern Ukraine describe rebel leaders there as busily “building the sort of neo-Soviet states that have cropped up in other pro-Russian enclaves in the former Soviet Union: in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both on the border between Russia and Georgia, and in Transnistria” (Kramer 2014). Critical accounts of Russian actions categorize de facto regions as geopolitical objects used by Putin to manufacture pervasive fear, thus constituting “a new form of post-Soviet liminality that challenges international law, humanitarian intervention, and the rules of the international system” (Dunn and Bobick 2014, 406). As a counter to such acts of geopolitical homogenization, we present aggregate comparative results of our De Facto State Research Project in this article.

Our research over the last six years involved invaluable cooperation from Russian scholars, local academics, and survey partners. We traveled to Transnistria and Moldova in June 2009, to Abkhazia in May and November 2009, South Ossetia in March–April 2010, and the NKR in June–July 2011. As well as conducting elite interviews, we also contracted for public opinion surveys to be conducted following established and rigorous social science standards in each location. Social scientific research faces significant logistical, political, and ethical challenges in de facto states (Toal and O’Loughlin 2012). Despite limitations due to lack of recent reliable censuses, we were able to organize representative public opinion surveys of the current resident populations in all four de facto entities. While each survey was tailored to the specifics of the region under research, about 85 percent of the content of the survey questions is common to all questionnaires. Table 1 outlines the surveys and indicates how and when they were conducted.

Heretofore, we have published papers reporting local opinions on key questions especially relevant in each of the de facto states (Kolossoff 2010, 2011a, 2011b; O’Loughlin, Kolossoff, and Toal 2011; O’Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creanga 2013; Toal and O’Loughlin 2012, 2013). Details on the precise conduct and circumstances of these surveys are available from these individual papers. In this article, we present an analysis of the aggregate findings of our De Facto State Research Project across the four research sites.

Table 1. The de facto state project opinion surveys 2010–2011.

Country	Date	Survey partner	Language	Number	Response rate (%)
Nagorny Karabakh	November 2011	Gevork Poghosyan, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Yerevan	Armenian	800	93
Transnistria (TMR)	June 2010	Elena Bobkova, Transnistrian State University and Novyi Vek company, Tiraspol	Russian	975	84
Abkhazia	March 2010	Victoria Remmler/Alexei Grazhdankin, Levada Center, Krasnodar and Moscow	Russian, some Georgian	1000	68
South Ossetia	November 2010	Khazan Dzutsev, North Ossetian Center of Social Studies of the Institute of Socio-Political Studies of Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladikavkaz	Russian, Ossetian	506	62

De facto states in the international system

Over a decade ago, Lynch (2002, 832) lamented the absence of comparative research on post-Soviet de facto states. "Much analysis," he wrote,

has been devoted to individual cases of conflict in the former Soviet Union; however, there has been virtually no comparative study of the separatist states. A critical gap has emerged in our understanding of security developments in the former Soviet Union.

It is useful to consider briefly how the four de facto states compare to each other for their common legal status since tabloid geopolitical representations often obscure their dissimilarities.

Table 2 presents a brief portrait of the four de facto states in the post-Soviet space along with a former de facto state, Kosovo, that can reasonably be said to have made the transition from unrecognized to recognized state with currently (2014) over 100 state recognitions, though its status remains controversial for many states in the Eurasian region and beyond.³

The four de facto states considered here are consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union. While this process avoided some potential catastrophic scenarios of major nationalist conflict as occurred in the former Yugoslavia, it was nevertheless marked by regional violence from the outset. Arguably, the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union originated in early 1988 in the autonomous oblast of Nagorny Karabakh (NKAO) (Beissinger 2002; De Waal 2013; Kaufman 2001; Melik-Shakhnazarov 2009). The intensity and scope of the violence unleashed by the conflict between ordinary Armenians and Azeris over the NKAO took non-localized elites by surprise and lit the fuse of ethno-nationalism in the South Caucasus and beyond. In the North Caucasus of Russia, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria made a bid for independence, as did local elites in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. The crucial difference for the Chechen Republic was that their bid was from within the territory of the Russian Federation and thus vociferously opposed, and not aided and abetted, by the Russian defense and security establishment (Lieven 1998). In 1992, a ceasefire was enforced by Russia in the Georgian-Ossetian and Moldovan-Transnistrian conflicts. In 1993, ceasefires were agreed to and held in the Georgia-Abkhazia case, and in 1994, over Nagorny Karabakh.

Table 2. Summary data on the Eurasian de facto states.

De facto state	Size, km ²	Population estimate	Estimated change since 1989 (%)	Parent state	Patron state	Recognition in late 2014
Nagorny Karabakh	4400 NKAO; 11,432 under NKR control	120,000	-38	USSR – Azerbaijan	Republic of Armenia	0 states
Transnistria (TMR)	4163	505,000	-31	USSR – Moldova	Russian Federation	0 states
Abkhazia	8432	240,100	-55	USSR – Georgia	Russian Federation	5 states
South Ossetia	3900	30,000	-70	USSR – Georgia	Russian Federation	4 states
Kosovo	10,908	1815,000	-1 (1991)	SFRY – Serbia	US	108 states

In December 1994, after several months of political uncertainty in Chechnya, federal authorities tried to resolve the crisis by sending troops. After an ignominious war for Moscow, a ceasefire deal was signed in 1996 that held until 1999, after which the Russian state renewed a costly and bloody war against Chechen separatists. The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria 1991–1999 thus joined other failed *de facto* states from this time, the Republic of Serbian Krajina in Croatia 1991–1995, and, to a lesser extent, the Republika Srpska 1991–1995, which was subsequently incorporated into Bosnia-Herzegovina as a separate entity within a unitary state after the Dayton Accords were signed.

Three journalistic commonplaces circulate in most considerations of post-Soviet *de facto* states: (1) that they are the geopolitical creations of a Russian state bent on retaining influence in its “near abroad,” and that they have no solid local foundations; (2) that they are “geopolitical black holes,” dangerous sites of illegality in the international system; and (3) that the territorial dimensions of these conflicts are “frozen.” All these commonplaces are misleading as comprehensive descriptions of the post-Soviet *de facto* states, but they are not wholly incorrect (though the last one comes closest to being so).

Russia and the de facto states

Russian influence and intervention, as well as the relations between Russia and the West, certainly conditioned the outcome of the two Georgian secessionist conflicts as well as the one in Moldova. Russian troops are on the ground in all three of these regions today (but not in Nagorny Karabakh), and Russian financial support is vital to their survival. However, the local elites in these regions are not fully compliant instruments of Russian influence. Kremlin-backed candidates for elections in these regions have not always been successful, and instability and backlash have sometimes resulted from too manifest a “Kremlin hand” in local politics. The geopolitical dynamics for all three conflicts in the Caucasus can by no means be reduced to the opposition between Russia and the West or to manipulations of Russian authorities pursuing their objectives. These have roots in the deep history of relations between titular peoples, violent conflicts in the past, collective historical memory, and opposed narratives. Particularly important is intransigent competition over territory historically shared by two or more ethnic or cultural groups and considered by all of them as the cradle of their identities. In the Soviet period, hostilities between titular peoples were sublimated but kept alive by genuine and imagined injustices on the part of the dominant group (respectively, Georgians and Azerbaijanis) and by the creation of territorial autonomies within Union republics; measures resented as compromising the territory and sovereignty of the dominant group. The conflict in Transnistria is also based not only on spirals of polarization and violence unleashed by the crisis in Soviet authority structures and the emergence of republican-level sovereignty claims, but also on the important historical differences in settlement and economic and political development (Kolossoff 2001, 2010).

Geopolitical black holes: prone to criminality

It would be a mistake to assume that *de facto* states are no more than criminal zones. The political economy in these regions is not unlike that in the surrounding

neighborhood and parent states. Markets operate under rules and regulations that are subject to political influence and entrenched clientelistic structures. However, de facto territories have in many instances been implicated in schemes of questionable legality and provenance: contraband arms trafficking in Transnistria, uranium smuggling and counterfeiting in South Ossetia, and contraband commerce in Abkhazia (Bronner 2008; Dawisha, 2014, 340–350; Glenny 2009). Illegal or unrecognized regions in the international system are subject to various forms of economic warfare and sanctions. The struggle for survival is a factor pushing de facto states to ignore commonly accepted international norms and rules. In the first years of their emergence, all the post-Soviet de facto states proved to be permissive arenas for the development of criminal enterprise in the international system (King 2001; Lynch 2004). While state building efforts in the years since have sought to obscure this aspect of their founding and functioning, de facto states still are blamed for occluded practices (Kukhianidze 2009). Corruption scandals, political plots and coups also mark the recent history of the parent states.

The relatively well-endowed resources and capacities of Abkhazia and Transnistria are tied into transnational networks centered on Russia (Bobick 2011). Both regions are distinctive in having enough local capacities to inspire the notion that independence could be viable and sustainable. South Ossetia, by contrast, is largely impoverished and manifestly a dependency of Russia, with close links to its “sister” republic of North Ossetia to its immediate north. Nagorny Karabakh has some primary agriculture and mining and tertiary tourism sector activity but is closer to South Ossetia than Abkhazia and Transnistria in terms of economic vitality and viability. It does, however, enjoy strong links with a relatively affluent Armenian diaspora in Europe and North America. In strict economic sustainability terms, of course, all these de facto states are unviable, but this precarious status is no more or no less than many recognized states on the world political map.

Not so “frozen” states

In contrast to the prevailing narrative, de facto state conflicts are dynamic and smoldering rather than frozen. There are ongoing active campaigns by the parent states to reclaim these territories. After the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the government of President Mikhail Saakashvili made numerous attempts to reclaim these territories. His government successfully re-integrated Adjara, formerly the Adzhar ASSR (Adjarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) after Moscow aided his efforts in driving out the local despot. Flushed with success, Saakashvili launched a crackdown against smuggling in South Ossetia in the summer of 2004 that backfired. Thereafter, with relations with Moscow deteriorating, he pursued territorial restoration in tandem with an outreach to NATO. With tensions rising after Kosovo’s sponsored independence, Saakashvili made a bid to seize South Ossetia outright in early August 2008 (Ó Tuathail 2008). The latter move sparked a five-days war that resulted in the Georgian Government losing control over ethnic Georgian villages within South Ossetia; the area controlled by South Ossetian and Russian forces expanded to the administrative boundary line established in 1925 to delimit the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast as a special status territory within Soviet Georgia (Saparov 2010). Recently, South Ossetian and Russian forces have explicitly demarcated this 400-plus kilometer boundary with barbed wire fences, a process the Georgian Government terms “borderization” (ICG 2010). The Azerbaijani Government has invested billions in rebuilding its military and regularly threatens to

take back its occupied territories by force (see, for instance, Kavkaz 2010; Minasyan 2014). Only the Moldovan Government has pursued, by necessity, a largely de-militarized approach, though tensions periodically erupt between it and Transnistria – that often serve the domestic needs of politicians on both sides.

Furthermore, the geopolitical context within which the de facto states find themselves is a dynamic one. Growing estrangement between the Bush and Putin administrations from 2005, culminating in open disagreements in 2008 over US plans for anti-ballistic missile defense and for Kosovo, redounded to the benefit of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After the August 2008 war, the Russian Federation leadership took the unprecedented step of recognizing both breakaway entities as independent states. Georgia's contemporary push for a membership action plan leading to eventual membership in NATO will most likely only further deepen the divide between it and its breakaway regions. Ironically, the greatest supporters of Georgia's membership in NATO may be the de facto regimes themselves, since this would likely underscore their importance to Russia as steadfast outposts against further NATO expansionism.

The internal political scene within the de facto states has also evolved over the last 20 years. The initial years saw these entities seek to consolidate their control over the territory they claimed and struggle to reestablish local institutional structures (Matsuzato 2008). These institutions are described as the “hard” aspects of state construction as, gradually, the de facto regimes moved from consolidating their territorial separatism to the process of nation-building, the “softer” aspects of state consolidation (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008).

All de facto states now have functioning political systems with regular elections and a press that has varying levels of freedom over time. Nearly all de facto states have relatively new presidents, indicating a noteworthy turnover in leadership at the top (Table 3). In its current classification of the level of democracy in these areas, Freedom House has deemed Abkhazia “partly free” and South Ossetia and PMR “not free.” It is noteworthy that Nagorny Karabakh is ranked “partially free,” whereas its claimant parent state, Azerbaijan, is classified as “not free.” (all rankings are from *freedomhouse.org*; accessed October 23, 2014).

The de facto states as geopolitical entities

Even before the current crisis of European security about Crimea and eastern Ukraine, there were many enduring reasons why the post-Soviet de facto states matter today in international politics. One is related to the growing role of the Black Sea region as a result of the discovery of new rich oil and gas deposits on the shelf of the Caspian Sea in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. The Black Sea basin and particularly the Caucasus has become the main corridor for the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian and even from the Asian-Pacific region to Europe and elsewhere. Globalization has provoked a large involvement of non-regional players in the affairs of the Black Sea area and undercuts its borders, thus contributing to the creation of the single Black Sea-Caspian region. For the countries of the South Caucasus, the transit of hydrocarbons via various pipeline projects, most recently from Central Asia, is presently one of the main sources of hard currency and income and the driving force of economic development, including the diversification of communications and the import of new technologies. Western countries are interested in securitizing the extraction and the transit of oil and gas, and by extension, in political stability contingent upon the settlement of conflicts around de facto states. The US actively supports the eventual membership of Georgia and Ukraine

Table 3. Political situation 2014 within Eurasian de facto states.

De facto state official name	President and tenure (date when first elected)	Border regime with the parent state	Russian troops	Political structure	Diplomatic process	Freedom House classification 2014	Minority and/or problem regions within de facto state
NKR	Bako Sahakyan, September 2007	Fortified and militarized – almost impossible to cross	No	Mono-ethnic polity	Minsk Group discussions	Partly free	Lachin Corridor and Kelbajar
PMR	Yeygeny Shevchuk, December 2011	Soft; easy to cross by Moldovan citizens and most others	Yes	Multi-ethnic polity	5 + 2 process	Not free	
Republic of Abkhazia	Raul Khadjimba, September 2014	Partly restricted; locals can cross	Yes	Largely Abkhaz ethnicity in a multi-ethnic polity	Geneva talks	Partly free	Gal(i) district
Republic of South Ossetia	Leonid Tibilov, April 2012	Highly restricted; difficult to cross	Yes	Monoethnic polity, with a small Georgian minority	Geneva talks	Not free	Akhalgori (Leningor)
Republic of Kosovo	Atifete Jahjaga, April 2011	Restricted	No	Albanian dominance in multi-ethnic polity with consociational structures	EU mediated agreement of April 2013.	Partly free	North Kosovo north of the Ibar river

in NATO, and this support is interpreted in Moscow as a major threat to Russia's national security (Kolossoff 2011a).

The *de facto* states continue to exercise a tremendous hold over domestic political life in the parent states from which they separated, and they also have symbolic meaning in the politics of patron states (the states that offer them major support). *De facto* states have outsize influence on debates about national identity, state building and the affective life of states, i.e. their feelings of loss and anger (the condition in Georgia and Azerbaijan), or achievement, greatness, and glory (the sentiment in Armenia and amongst some imperial nationalists in Russia) (Broers and Toal 2013). The unresolved status of *de facto* states contributes to determination on the part of *de facto* state authorities, on the one hand, and avoidance of “grasping the nettle of defeat” on the part of parent states (Lynch 2002, 845). Indeed, in the particular case of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the tendency has been to grasp the sword instead. The summer of 2014 saw intense fighting and more deaths along the Line of Contact – the heavily militarized 160-mile ceasefire boundary between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces – than the ceasefire agreement between them in 1994 (Melvin 2014).

The human security of the populations living within post-Soviet *de facto* states and their parent states has been compromised by legacies of wartime violence and forced displacement. Because their creation produced large communities of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in parent states (Moldova is an exception), they made existing state and nation-building challenges in these geographic regions even more acute. IDP populations have distinctive infrastructural and psychosocial needs. They have been mostly marginalized over the past two decades relative to fellow citizens in Georgia and Azerbaijan (Mitchneck, Mayorova, and Regulska 2009; World Bank 2011). The reasons for this are complex, but in both states, reluctance to adopt best practices concerning long term displaced persons – namely full integration and citizenship rights – are avoided because the authorities seek to use them as instruments of their politics with revanchist aims (Toal and Grono 2011).

Meanwhile, the residual minority populations in *de facto* states are hostages to the violent circumstances of their establishment. Because the polities within which they live are suspicious about their possible transformation by the parent state into a “fifth column,” the needs of these populations are often ignored. Together with other groups, they suffer from varying forms of blockage and isolation and have limited access to international development agencies and institutions. Opportunities for advanced education and health care treatment are sharply restricted or not available. Attitudes that hold all residents of *de facto* states collectively guilty for the violence leading to their polity's creation are common in parent states. Yet, resident young adults have never known anything but their intractable geopolitical circumstances. In sum, these are generally regions with blocked borders and distorted markets (De Waal 2010).

Little has changed to revise Lynch's (2002, 843) observation over a decade ago that “Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan have not become magnets sufficiently attractive to induce the separatist areas to compromise in order to benefit from the restoration of political and economic relations.” There have long been potential opportunities for development projects supporting localized initiatives in these areas, some of which may foster cross-boundary connections that support confidence building and non-violent peace building between the conflicting parties (Huseynov 2012; Mirimanova and Pentikainen 2011; Saferworld 2012). These opportunities, however, remain unrealized; for instance, the restoration of railway service between Russia and Armenia via Abkhazia and Georgia.

Finally, de facto states have drifted to the center of a growing crisis in the norms of international law and state sovereignty across Eurasia. Ryngaert and Sobrie (2011) trace this crisis to the breakup of Yugoslavia and the development of a new set of “moral norms” used to determine whether or not an entity deserves recognition by the international community of states. Ostensibly, the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States (1934) in describing a state in article 1 as a “person of international law” with a permanent population, defined territory, government, and the ability to enter into inter-state relations, made state recognition an empirical matter of entities demonstrating effectiveness to the international community, and thereby achieving recognition as states. But there are no widely adapted criteria of “effectiveness.” Moreover, a number of unrecognized states match such criteria much better than some “failed” states that have not fully controlled their territory for decades but are legitimate subjects of international law. The great difficulty with these criteria is that they could, and in many instances, did clash with emerging doctrines of preemptory international law, also known as *jus cogens*. Here, it was held that states had a moral obligation not to recognize certain entities as states if they came into being through the violation of other principles of international law, like the waging of war for territorial expansion or genocide, which became significant after World War II. This norm has its modern origins in the refusal by the US Government in 1931 to recognize the Japanese satellite state of Manchukuo in the territory of what is now the People’s Republic of China. Ryngaert and Sobrie (2011) argue that the increasing emphasis on normative international law requirements and standards to determine recognition of states has created a contemporary condition of uncertainty and political gamesmanship around recognitions. Russian anger at the Euro-Atlantic orchestrated recognition of Kosovo fed into Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. What is playing out today in Ukraine, thus, is the latest round of a growing conflict between great powers over the normative criteria that are most appropriate for the recognition of secessionist regions as independent states. While there is no shortage of pontification on the continental and global scale about these matters, there is a dearth of analysis of the political attitudes and normative dispositions of residents of de facto states. This is where we believe our research can make a contribution.

Our comparative analysis of the four post-Soviet de facto states concentrated on three overarching research questions regarding geopolitical orientation, internal legitimacy, and attitudinal legacies from violence and conflict. The first is explored by examining the attitude of the local populations to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an event now almost a quarter century old, and part of the immediate experience of an older demographic cohort. The extent to which there is a national divide on this issue as there is elsewhere in post-Soviet space is an open question. The repetitive citation of Putin’s remark about this event being a “major geopolitical catastrophe” of the twentieth century and the suggestion by some commentators that this attitude is the root of opposing mentalities or geopolitical divides between East and West makes this an important question.

Related to this is the degree to which residents in these areas express their trust in the leadership of the Russian Federation. At the time of these surveys, Vladimir Putin was Russian Prime Minister and Dmitri Medvedev was Russian President. We also surveyed residents about their attitudes towards the Russian troops on the territory of their entity (this question was not applicable in Nagorny Karabakh where Armenia is the dominant patron state, though its patron state, in turn, is the Russian Federation).

To approach the various dimensions of internal legitimacy, a concept we have argued elsewhere deserves disaggregation into state, regime, and institutional legitimacy (Bakke et al. 2014), we isolated three indicative questions on the attitudes of residents towards conditions in their entity: whether their state is going in the right or wrong direction, whether they trust their president or not, and what the best political system would be for their state. Finally, we provide a picture of the comparative legacy of violence in the post-Soviet de facto states by displaying results on personal experience with violent events, self-perceptions of forgiveness for violence, and current attitudes towards the parent state.

Post-Soviet geopolitical orientation and relations with Russia

Central to the family lives of most respondents in our surveys was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Not only was the change a political break with the past, from communism to capitalism, it was also a major upheaval in the nature of daily economic, social, and religious life. While about 15 percent of the total number of respondents found it hard to give an opinion on the question of whether the end of the Soviet Union was positive or negative, since for many younger people the collapse brought both benefit and costs, almost all of the respondents were either directly affected or heard enough about the differences between the Soviet and other political systems to be able to form an opinion. We present the various answers to the survey questions by the respective nationalities of the four de facto states. South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh are now near mono-ethnic, and gaining representative and reliable data for the small minority populations proved very difficult, so we report the results only for the titular populations. For Transnistria and Abkhazia, we report the results for the respective main nationalities.

Attitudes towards the collapse of the Soviet Union

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was non-violent in most of the 15 republics. Where difficulties arose were in republics with built-in ethnoterritorial polities and hierarchies. The disintegration of the Moscow vertical of power created opportunities for republic-level elites but also for autonomous republic and even autonomous oblast elites to renegotiate new positions between competing power verticals. A “war of laws” between nested Soviet governance structures spiraled into protests and counter-protests, ethnic mobilization and conflict for exclusive territorial control, and subsequent forced population displacement during and after the wars (see Beissinger 2002; Gorenburg 2006; Zubov 2009 among many other accounts of how these events transpired and how local forces motivated them).

South Ossetia’s population fell from 98,527 in 1989 to an estimated 40,000 today (some estimates are lower). Abkhazia had 525,061 people in the 1989 Soviet census, almost half (45 percent) of who were ethnic Georgians. This population was largely driven from their homes in the wake of the brutal civil war of 1992–1994, with the partial exception of the southern Gal(i) District to which many returned after the ceasefire. A great number of Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and others left the republic. The 2011 census in Abkhazia recorded its population as around 240,000, an estimate that has been challenged as too high by Georgian authorities. Violence was briefest in Moldova, with the PMR establishing itself largely but not exclusively on the eastern bank of the

Dniester (Nistru) River. Its latest census records places its population at over 555,000, down from about 730,000, though more recent estimates are around or below 500,000. It remains a multiethnic population made up of (self-identifying) ethnic Moldovans, Russians, Ukrainians, and others (especially Bulgarians), all predominantly Russophone living in a Russified cultural sphere.

As mentioned earlier, in the Azerbaijani republic, conflict between Armenians and Azeris had already started before the end of the Soviet Union in 1988 with the ethnic violence in Baku and vicinity resulting in the flight of large numbers of Armenians to the neighboring republic of Armenia and beyond (Melik-Shakhnazarov 2009); at the same time, most all Azerbaijanis were forced to leave Armenia. Ironically, though such regions as Abkhazia and Transnistria were relatively prosperous within the Soviet Union, they saw some of the worse inter-ethnic violence. While the specific causes of each conflict can be explained in terms of local circumstances matched by a general collapse of state and central policing authority, the ethnic-based violence certainly signified the end of the socialist model of “friendship between peoples” in a civic union.

Though the rate of intermarriage, a common measure of the state of inter-ethnic relations, varied from the higher values in the Orthodox communities of the PMR to lower values among different religious, as well as ethnic groups in the Caucasus, earlier clashes and memorialization of divisions were officially suppressed by the Soviet authorities in the belief that such historical memories would raise ethnic tensions. Three of four post-Soviet de facto states in the Caucasus profited from the territorial autonomy in the Soviet era offered to their titular people (respectively, Abkhaz, Ossetians, and Armenians). This contributed to the preservation of the local/ethnic political elite and intelligentsia, the main bearer of identity, and stimulated the diffusion of alternative historical narratives and the struggle for control over territory along ethnic lines (Chinn and Kaiser 1996). Much of Transnistria also had historical memory of territorial distinctness as an autonomous republic (the Moldavian ASSR) in Soviet Ukraine. Large numbers of the populations in what became the de facto states rejected the re-discovered nationalistic rhetoric and policies in the republic capitals (Baku, Chişinău/Kishinev, and Tbilisi) and declared their own authority on parts of the respective republics. It is therefore little surprise in our surveys that a strong majority of most ethnicities (except ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia while Karabakhis are evenly divided) consider the dissolution of the Soviet Union a “wrong step” as they lost the economic security and political stability of that regime (Figure 1). The two decades since the local wars have been characterized by political uncertainty, economic isolation, recurrent violence (in Georgia and along the Armenian-Azerbaijani ceasefire line) and widespread poverty.

Nostalgia for the Soviet Union is marked still by large ratios in Russia where over half the population bemoan its end (Levada Center 2014) and by admiration for the achievements of Stalin as indicated by pluralities in Georgia, Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Lipman, Gudkov, and Bakradze 2013). There is, expectedly, a significant difference across the age groups, with older respondents retaining fond memories. One of the best predictors of material status in the post-Soviet states is age; people under 30 have higher average incomes than those over 60. An additional factor to bear in mind is that those who have Russian passports receive Russian pensions that are higher than in the parent states.

In general, the differences among the republics and between the nationalities regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union in the de facto states are highly correlated with political and economic prospects. Majorities in all three groups (Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians) in the PMR and those in South Ossetia agree that the collapse of the

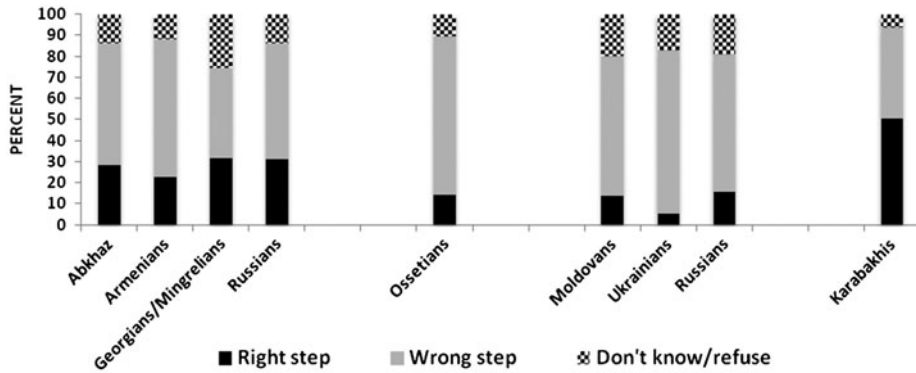


Figure 1. Attitude of the nationalities of de facto states to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The question asked, was it a right or a wrong step?

Soviet Union was a mistake; all of these groups have seen a dramatic drop in living standards and huge outmigration. Karabakhis are the most skeptical (even split on this question) about the Soviet era during which they lived in an autonomous oblast within Soviet Azerbaijan in which they felt that they were a discriminated minority. About one-half of them think that the disintegration of the USSR was a positive event while “only” 42 percent believe the opposite. In Abkhazia, a majority of Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians share the perception that the Soviet Union’s disappearance was a wrong step. The opinions of Georgians/Mingrelians are similarly divided: 42 percent of them regret the end of the Soviet era when they were the dominant group in all of Georgia, since they feel that they then lived better. But 31 percent approve of the disintegration of the USSR (about 26 percent of respondents refused or could not answer, which is much higher than among other groups). Despite the fact that the Abkhaz are effectively in control of the republic’s political structures, and a majority of this group prefer independence as the best option for the future, the dislocation of shifting from the centrally planned economy to the free market and the search for reliable export markets continues to pose a major challenge. Such opinions are common to a large part of the post-Soviet space: though respondents in public opinion polls are well aware of the brutality of the regime, they simultaneously see the benefits of economic security in the Soviet era (Lipman, Gudkov, and Bakradze 2013).

Overall level of trust in the leadership of the Russian Federation

In general, the respondents have higher levels of trust for the Russian leadership than for the respective leaders of their de facto states and only derisory amounts for the leaderships of the parent states from which they separated.⁴ The question did not specify a name but instead asked about “the leadership in the Russian Federation.” As a result of Russia’s recent involvement in the war against Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s sovereignty, the overwhelming majority of respondents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia trust the leaders of Russia (Figure 2). The inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia recognize the massive economic assistance from Russia, realizing that their states’ budgets and social policy totally depend from Russian aid. Tourists from Russia to the resorts in the northern part of Abkhazia provide one of its major sources of income (Kolossoff and O’Loughlin 2011). The one exception to this high level of

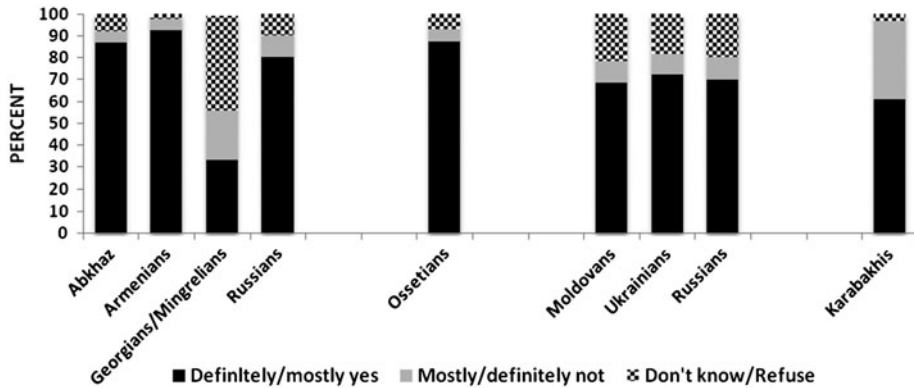


Figure 2. Trust in the Russian leadership by the nationalities of the de facto states. The question asked, do you trust or not trust the Russian leadership? (binary answer).

trust of respondents from the three de facto states most connected to Russia is for Georgians/Mingrelians in Abkhazia, with only 22 percent trust (and a large abstention rate of 42 percent on what many respondents, mostly in the Gal(i) district, undoubtedly saw as a sensitive topic).

The respective political opponents in both separatist republics in Georgia recognize the crucial role of economic cooperation with Russia but dispute its use, modalities, instruments, and its “price.” For example, the compromise between Russia and Georgia about Russian entrance into the World Trade Organization shocked Abkhazian public opinion because Moscow did not consult its de facto allies, nor did it inform them about the results of negotiations.⁵ Abkhazians worry about the growing penetration of capital from major Russian firms, though such investment is officially restricted by Abkhazian legislation. For both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, corruption and the inefficient use of Russian aid destined for the renovation of housing and infrastructure remains a significant issue (Kolossoff and O’Loughlin 2011). The extent to which the republics should tighten their relations with Russia or pursue a more independent path was the key issue in recent presidential campaigns (South Ossetia, autumn 2011; Abkhazia, summer 2014).

In Abkhazia, Russian assistance highlights the fundamental problem of sovereignty. A part of its political elite hopes that they will continue to get everything from Russia and are satisfied by a role of an economic annex with the façade of an independent state. An opposing view perceives independence as a historical responsibility that requires the building of a political nation based on an identity shared by all citizens (Inal-Ipa and Shakryl 2011). Nevertheless, the last presidential elections in August 2014 resulted in the victory of former vice-president and prime-minister Raul Khadjimba, who played on the apprehensions of Moscow’s tough control over the republic’s life and the fear that the Abkhaz would lose power if the large Georgian minority received electoral rights. At the same time, about 23,000 Georgian residents were disenfranchised. Though Russia continues to provide vitally necessary financial and economic aid, the ensuing domestic debate resulted in a vivid discussion of some points in the draft of the Treaty of Friendship proposed by the Kremlin. Finally, the sides found a compromise, and the Treaty that includes Russian help for modernizing the Abkhazian military was signed on 24 November 2014. In the South Ossetia election, the candidate

openly supported by Moscow failed, but the Central Electoral Commission did not recognize the result and another politician approved by the Kremlin won at the new election few months later. This episode indicates that though South Ossetians express trust in Russia's leadership it does not always do what they want. Even in the smallest and most dependent of all post-Soviet unrecognized republics, there are sometimes limits to Moscow's influence.

The three major ethnic groups in Transnistria (Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians) trust the Russian leadership at the same rate of about two-thirds. The hope that Russia will protect the interests of Transnistria in the face of an eventual reunification of Moldova and Romania obviously depends on Russia's highest officials. Transnistrians also realize that their republic has survived only due to constant economic assistance of Russia. In 2011, the deficit of the Transnistrian budget was about 70 percent, and its debt to Russia exceeded US\$2 billion (Gamova 2012a).⁶ In a referendum in 2006, over 90 percent of voters supported independence for Transnistria and its subsequent voluntary annexation to the Russian Federation. Unity with Russia and economic modernization were the main slogans of all candidates in the recent elections. Russia made the wrong choice in openly supporting the losing candidate in the presidential elections of 2011 over his challenger, Shevchuk, who promised political reforms, the renewal of the ruling team, and economic modernization. The possible unification of Moldova and Romania is considered a major threat in Transnistria, thus justifying the continued Russian military presence. Over 150,000 Transnistrians are Russian citizens, and most of them voted for Vladimir Putin in Russia's March 2012 Presidential Elections.

Even in Nagorny Karabakh, more distant from Russia's boundaries and much more heavily dependent on Armenia than on Russia, the figure for trust of the Kremlin is 60 percent of respondents. While Russia maintains a military base in Armenia, and Armenia was one of only 11 countries that voted against a UN resolution condemning Russia for its annexation of Crimea in spring 2014, Russia's role in the Azerbaijani-Karabakhi contest has been more conciliatory than elsewhere. Moscow has proffered its services as a broker for continued peace along the tense Azerbaijani-Karabakh front line. Russia's economic interests in Azerbaijan help to color its stance, and its geo-political interests revolve around peace building rather than in taking overt sides in the contest.

The high level of trust of ordinary citizens in the Kremlin remains the main geopolitical resource that Russia has in the unrecognized republics. From Russia's perspective, the principal question is how this capital should be spent, whether it should be continually renewed through economic and military aid, and how to maintain this popular support against the background of wider geopolitical relations with the EU and the US.

Attitudes towards the continued presence of Russian troops

Not surprisingly, having had long experience with countless local clashes, regional wars, and a perceived military threat from Georgia, the overwhelming majority of Abkhazian and South Ossetian citizens strongly approve of the Russian military presence in their territories. Moreover, as there are no signs that the position of Georgia is changing, the overwhelming majority of them (except for Georgian/Mingrelians) believe that Russian troops should stay permanently. If one adds those who think that Russian troops should leave when the situation improves, it means that the practically unanimous opinion of South Ossetians (95 percent) and of three main ethnic groups in Abkhazia – Abkhaz (95 percent), Armenians (97 percent) and Russians (99 percent) want the troops to stay

(Figure 3). Almost no one claimed that Russia should withdraw its soldiers immediately. If Georgia considers the secession of both republics only as a result of Russian plotting and treats them as objects of Russian manipulation, this situation will hardly change.

About 35 percent of Georgians/Mingrelians refused to answer the sensitive question about Russian troop presence. However, 20 percent of them believe that they should stay forever and 41 percent responded that they should leave when the situation improves, suggesting that about half of this minority see Russian troop presence as offering a measure of local security. For years, the southern Abkhazian district of Gal(i) has been the site of almost daily incidents – shootings, kidnappings, terrorist attacks, etc. Local inhabitants, mostly Georgians/Mingrelians, are obviously interested in stabilization and security, which may explain their apparently positive attitude toward Russian military presence.

The opposition in both republics does not challenge the Russian military presence, seeing no alternative to the geopolitical alliance with Russia. Besides a strategic role, Russian military bases are also economically important in providing a considerable number of jobs for the local population. (In most cases, the Russian military simply went back to earlier Soviet /Russian bases.) In Abkhazia, the political opposition is wary of the price of the strategic cooperation with Russia. In the agreement “About the United Russian Military Base on the Territory of the Republic of Abkhazia,” they point out clauses that contradict national legislation. According to this agreement, which can be automatically extended for further 15 year periods, the base presence is guaranteed for 49 years (Markedonov 2012).

In Transnistria, most respondents are also in favor of the continued Russian military presence. The Russian battalion of the joint peacekeeping forces is located there according to the agreement “On the Principles of the Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Transdnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova,” signed in 1992 by the Presidents of Russia and Moldova in the presence of then Transnistrian leader, Igor Smirnov. Its support does not vary much by the main ethnic groups, with over half of each supporting the continued presence of Russian troops, and thus corresponds to the official state position. However, about 30 percent of each group wants immediate withdrawal, thus sharing the position of the Moldovan Government. In July 2012, then-president Nikolae Timofti of Moldova declared to the OSCE Secretary General that Russian peacekeepers

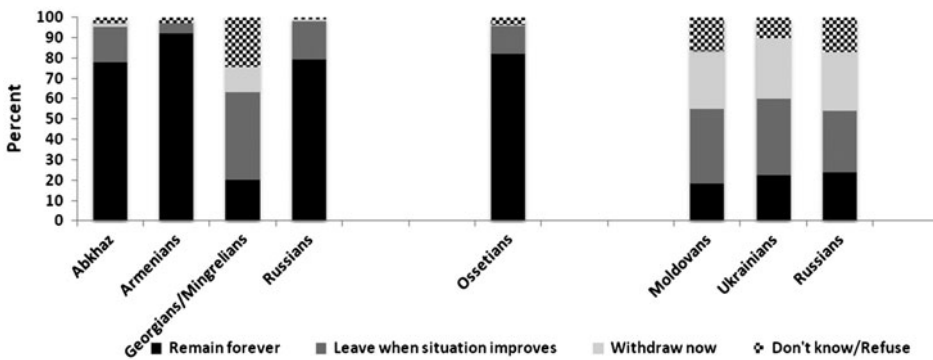


Figure 3. Support for the presence of Russian troops. The question asked in the respective territories, how long should Russian troops remain? The question was not asked in Nagorny Karabakh, since there is no Russian base there.

have been for a long time “useless and even dangerous” (Gamova 2012b). This position is supported by the EU, the US, Ukraine, and Romania. “We are decisively against the withdrawal of peacekeeping forces and change in the peacekeeping operation format,” declared President Shevchuk. Moreover, in July 2012 the Transnistrian Government suggested to Russia that it replace its peace-keeping mission with a military base and use the airport of the former 14th army in exchange of economic assistance (Gamova 2012b).

The internal legitimacy of Eurasian de facto states

The legitimacy of the de facto states in the eyes of their residents is more immediately gauged by the functioning of local political institutions and the effectiveness of state service delivery. Our surveys consistently indicate more interest in and concern about local issues than the wider international geopolitical frameworks in which the unsettled status of the de facto states are discussed. We present the results of three questions that probe residents’ opinions about their republic, their trust of their leaders, and the general political preference for different kinds of political arrangements. The “right-wrong” question about the direction of the state is the best and most internationally widely used general metric of the state of a nation; analysis of the differences in the respective ratios by republic and nationality provides significant insights about the underlying sentiment that guides other indices of state legitimacy. Therefore, we provide more extended discussion of this response and the other two measures of legitimacy (trust of the president and preference for a political system) offer complementary measures of the popular support for the current regimes.

“Right or wrong direction” of the de facto republics

As in Western countries, the best predictor of answers to the direction of the state (right-wrong) is the nature of economic prospects and the level of economic optimism that pervades the society. In Abkhazia, the overwhelming majority of the population believes that the republic is moving in the right direction, with Abkhaz and Armenians showing slightly higher values than Russians (Figure 4). For the first time in their modern history, the Abkhaz restored their statehood after the war with Georgia in the early 1990s and certified its continuance in 2008 with Russian help. The Abkhaz show the highest level of pride in belonging to their ethnic group among the groups in this study. The post-2008 securitization of Abkhazia and the hopes embedded in the perspectives of the peaceful building of the independent state explain such optimism among Armenians, Abkhaz, and Russians. The ratio of Abkhaz who are fully satisfied with their material conditions remains much higher than amongst those in Russia, including neighboring regions of the North Caucasus. Such a high ratio may seem puzzling in an area that still appears devastated by war as evident in housing and infrastructural damage, even if the economic situation is improving. Moreover, most residents of Abkhazia believe that the economic situation in their republic is better than in Georgia and thus, feel no economic motivation for reintegration with the parent state as indicated in answers to another question. Because of their dominance in the political system, ethnic Abkhaz show the highest approval with the current arrangements, though Armenians and Russians are also satisfied with them (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011).

As with other sensitive questions in Abkhazia, there was a dramatic gap in the perceptions between Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians, on the one hand, and Georgians/

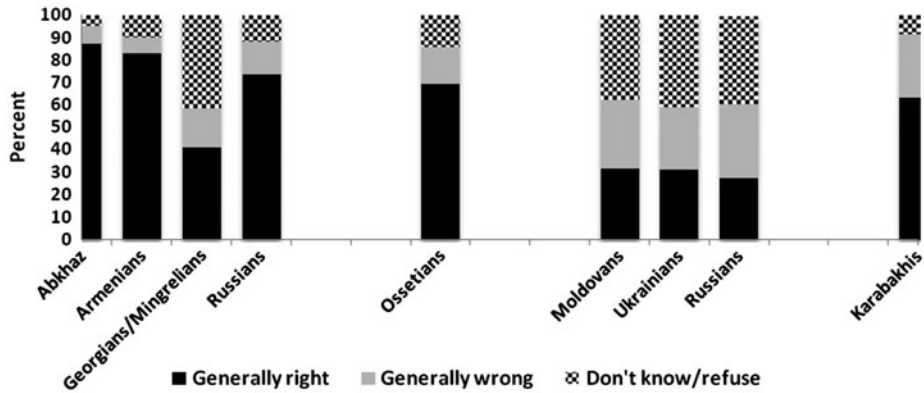


Figure 4. Ratios for the nationalities for direction of the de facto republic. The question asked, is the state generally going in the right or in the wrong direction?

Mingrelians, on the other hand. Armenians and Russians generally feel welcomed in Abkhazia, but a large number of Georgians perceive themselves a discriminated minority that was on the losing side in the war. As is characteristic of such sensitivities, more than 40 percent of Georgians/Mingrelians refused to give an answer to the question whether Abkhazia is moving in a right or wrong direction, and another 18 percent gave an answer suggesting a negative opinion about the republic's direction. The legitimacy of the Abkhazian state in the eyes of its Georgian/Mingrelian population is at least three times weaker than for other nationalities and is consistent with their answers to other questions in the survey. They are much less satisfied with their material conditions. Only 57 percent of them selected the options "I can afford everything I need" and "We can purchase everything we need, except for durables," which is considerably lower than among Abkhaz (82 percent), Armenians (73 percent) or Russians (72 percent). About half of Georgians/Mingrelians believe that the economic situation is worse in Abkhazia than in Georgia, and they think that the Abkhazian Government fails to provide them with sufficient public services. In the ruined subsistence economy of Abkhazia heavily reliant on external aid from Russia, incomes are strongly dependent on salaries in the state sector (public services including pensions, education, health care, and law enforcement). Gal(i) *rayon* in the south where most of this minority now live is peripheral not only in geographic but also now in economic terms. The highest incomes in Abkhazia are generated by tourist activities in the northern part of the republic (Gagra *rayon*) and by different government institutions, retail trade, and services in the capital. Besides, before 2008, the Abkhazian Government feared making any investments in Gal(i) because of a very unstable political and military situation and the overt hostility of many inhabitants. The Abkhazian leadership was only partly successful in building a common political (national) identity shared by all major ethnic groups living on its territory. The administrative boundary between Gal(i) and the rest of Abkhazia represents not just an ethnic but also economic and social divide.

In practically mono-ethnic South Ossetia, the picture is similar to the ethnic Abkhaz, with the ratio of those who think that the republic is moving in the right direction at 70 percent. When the survey was held there at the end of 2010, many people were disappointed with the misuse of Russian post-war aid, corruption, and the delay in the restoration of housing in Tskhinval(i), the principal city in South Ossetia. Still, the results of

the poll revealed much optimism among the South Ossetian population as they continued to recover from the damaging 2008 war with Georgia. Though recognized by Russia as an independent state, the majority of the residents of South Ossetia wish to be annexed to Russia, a firmer guarantee of economic and political security than the current arrangements (Toal and O'Loughlin 2012).

From the survey in Nagorny Karabakh, where more than 60 percent of respondents believe that their republic is moving in the right direction, a sizable minority (30 percent) are less optimistic about the direction of their republic's development. This split can be explained by the increasing tension at the cease fire line with Azerbaijan, as other responses in the survey show that many do not see any resolution of the conflict. Recent years have seen a decrease in political pluralism in the republic that used to be the most democratic among the four post-Soviet unrecognized states: the competition between the authorities and the opposition in the most recent elections was relatively weak.

Among the four republics, Transnistria stands out because majorities of each of its nationalities show little belief in the government's performance, which has repeatedly and recently asked for annexation to Russia. While the ratings of the state direction are about the same in Transnistria as in Moldova (respectively, 30 and 29 percent), many Transnistrians could not or did not want to answer this question (about 38–40 percent for all ethnic groups). The low ratings for state performance can be understood from the answers to the key question about whether the "lack of democracy was a problem": 43 percent of Transnistrians think that it was a "big" or "a very big" problem. Unlike most Abkhazians, both Transnistrians and Moldovans are not satisfied with the existing political system and also have a strong nostalgia for the Soviet period. The main political institutions (president, parliament, police, and courts) on both banks of the Dniester (Nistru) are trusted by only 30–35 percent of citizens, and few citizens rate their material circumstances favorably (Transnistria at 34 and Moldova at 29 percent). When the survey was conducted in July 2010, the Smirnov Government had temporarily triumphed over Shevchuk in a power struggle, but was losing support rapidly, as became evident in his defeat in 2011 when he received only 24 percent of the overall vote. Compared with the situation in 2001 (Kolossoff 2001; O'Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creanga 2013), the people evaluated their prospects more skeptically and the ratings of the president and parliament fell. Not only does the process of state-building factor into the relative stability of unrecognized republics, but their standing vis-à-vis the successes and failures of their parent states matters a lot. In this regard, the Transnistrian regime benefits from the poor scores of Moldova.

Trust in the presidents of the de facto republics

A more personalized measure of the legitimacy of the government of a state is the level of trust in its highest executive office. Asking about trust in the respective presidents accomplishes this goal. Abkhaz and Armenians express the highest trust among the various nationalities in Abkhazia, though President Sergei Bagapsh of Abkhazia is also trusted by 80 percent of Russians and more than 70 percent of Georgians/Mingrelians (Figure 5). These high ratings are attributable to Bagapsh's long career in Abkhazia dating back to Soviet times. After serving as the first secretary of Ochamchira district Communist party committee, he worked in the Abkhazian Government, and during the war years 1992–1993, had main responsibility for supplies of weapons, ammunition, and food stuffs. In the 2004 presidential elections, Bagapsh defeated former KGB officer Raul Khadjimba (later elected in summer 2014), who was backed by the outgoing

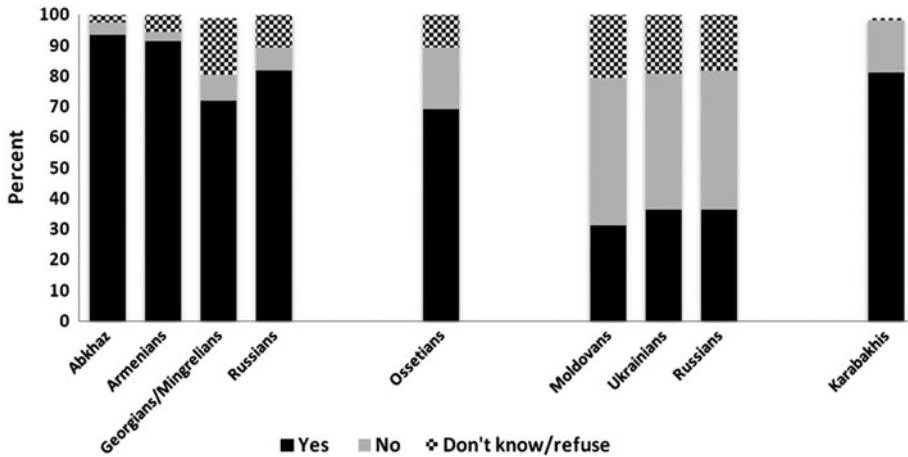


Figure 5. Ratios of trust of the presidents of the respective de facto states. The question asked, without naming the president, do you trust the president of the republic? (binary answer).

president and the founder of independent Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, as well as by the Kremlin. This alliance feared Bagapsh's potential sympathies with Georgia because he worked for years in Tbilisi, was married to a Georgian, campaigned under an anti-authoritarian slogan, and proposed to gradually offer Abkhazian citizenship and electoral rights to Georgian/Mingrelian residents in the republic. Since the beginning of his mandate, Bagapsh demonstrated the ability to reconcile different clans of the Abkhazian elite. During his presidency, Abkhazia was recognized by Russia, and Bagapsh signed a number of agreements with the Kremlin, which opened opportunities for restoration of the Abkhazian economy, a move generally welcomed locally.

Our surveys show that most respondents from South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh trust their leaders, Eduard Kokoity and Bako Sahakyan respectively, partly because they are still perceived as offering strong leadership in the face of parent state hostility. However, as succeeding events clearly showed, the Kokoity clan in power in South Ossetia was losing support as Russian and local media reported about corruption in the use of the massive Russian aid and slow restoration of housing destroyed by the Georgian attack (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2011). Because of protests, Kokoity was forced to step down in December 2011, before the end of his second term, bowing to Moscow's bidding in not trying to change the Constitution for election for the third time. Sahakyan was comfortably re-elected in 2012 in Nagorny Karabakh with 65 percent of the vote.

Transnistria is again distinctive amongst the four de facto states in its display of low trust in the president of the republic, Igor Smirnov, at the time of the survey. As noted, trust in political leaders is generally correlated with more generic measures of state legitimacy; Transnistria conforms to this expectation. Other de facto presidents received more than 70 percent trust ratings from their constituents of all nationalities, more than double the average value for Transnistrians. As Smirnov adhered to the same intransigent discourse about Moldova after 1992, the Constitution of the TMR was changed to allow him to run in an unlimited number of presidential elections. Elected four times, Smirnov was blamed by the opposition for placing family members in comfortable and lucrative positions. His son was head of the Transnistrian customs authority and was

wanted in Russia for misuse of Russian economic aid. The Russian presidential administration did not “recommend” that Smirnov run for his fifth elections but he did not follow this “advice,” and lost.

The “best political system” for the de facto republics

Only Karabakhis and majorities of Abkhaz and Armenians in Abkhazia picked their current political system. Overall, Western democracy had little support, not a surprising result since these territories have no experience with this form of governance and though widely discussed in the media, its actual implementation and its operation in practice is not easily visualized. The choice of political system seems to be predicated on its perceived benefits; people in poorer republics, Transnistria and South Ossetia, tend to be more nostalgic about the Soviet Union and its state services, work guarantees, and pension pledges. Abkhaz benefit politically and some Armenians economically from the arrangements in Abkhazia. The marginal position and lack of integration into Abkhazian society of Georgians/Mingrelians is again evident by the very low ratio (only 10 percent) of support for the current political system in Abkhazia (Figure 6). A plurality (33 percent) chose Western democracy, the highest percentage for this option in the samples, or hesitated to answer.

In Abkhazia, the Soviet model is still preferred by about one-third of all nationalities who remember when this Black Sea coastal republic was a prosperous and popular tourist zone, with low unemployment and few social problems, no uncertainty about the future, no internal restricted political borders, and frozen but generally peaceful ethnic relations: 30 (Abkhaz) to 40 percent of respondents (Armenians) believe that the Soviet regime is the best political system.

Though South Ossetians feel no less discriminated in Georgia than do Karabakhis in Azerbaijan, they are incomparably more nostalgic about the “good Soviet times” than Armenians in Karabakh. At the time of the survey (autumn 2010), the situation in South

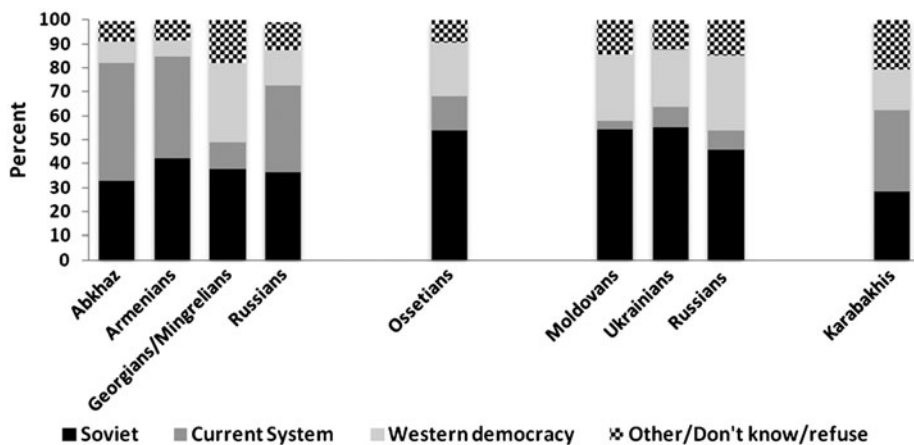


Figure 6. Preferences for the “Best Political System” in the respective de facto states. The question asked, what would be the best political system for your republic? There were three options: the Soviet system, the current system in the republic, or western democracy, but it also offered the option of “other,” allowing the respondent to specify another political system.

Ossetia had only recently stabilized; compared to almost twenty years of economic blockade from Georgia and significant local violence: life in the Soviet Union seemed like a stable and prosperous contrast.

The end of the Soviet Union allowed Nagorny Karabakh to separate from Azerbaijan through military victory. Living in Azerbaijan, Karabakhis for a long time had the strong sense of being a discriminated minority. In Nagorny Karabakh, despite regular ceasefire violations on the border with Azerbaijan since 1994, the situation in 2011 was relatively stable politically and economically. As already noted, Karabakhis are the most skeptical about the Soviet era, when their autonomous oblast was a part of Azerbaijan in which they felt a discriminated minority. About one-half of them think that the disintegration of the USSR was a positive event, as it allowed Nagorny Karabakh to separate from Azerbaijan through military victory.

Similarly in Transnistria, with economic uncertainties amidst job losses and high unemployment coupled with a perception of political stagnation, the Soviet model of security offered a strong nostalgic contrast to the inadequacies of the existing system or the uncertainties and dislocations of Western-style democracy. The strong pull of Soviet nostalgia tends to wane during better economic times but rises again in periods of crisis and negative economic tendencies.

Legacies of violence and reconciliation in the de facto states

The level of violence varied significantly from a conflict of several days of warfare in Transnistria in June 1992 with casualties of less than 1000 to multiple years in the other states with casualties in the tens of thousands. South Ossetia, where hostilities continued until the Russian/Ossetian versus Georgia five-day war in August 2008, the total number of victims is very high in proportionate terms. Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh experienced wars of 3–4 years duration up to 1993–1994, and casualties still occur (2014) along the Karabakh-Azerbaijani ceasefire line with regularity. In Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, and South Ossetia, material damages to property and infrastructure along with proportionately large population displacement caused by the wars were much more significant than in Transnistria, where damage and population change were minimal. In South Ossetia, the psychological wounds resulting from further deaths due to shelling and from building damage in the 2008 war were fresh at the time of the 2010 survey and thus, strongly affect the respondents who were very suspicious of Georgian Government motives.

Not surprisingly, the majority (more than 60 percent) of ethnic Abkhaz, Ossetian, and Karabakhi respondents report that their close family members or they themselves witnessed violence-caused injury or death. While Georgians/Mingrelians and Russians in Abkhazia were also personally affected by the war (more than 40 percent answered positively to the question), the lower rate shows that they had more opportunities to find refuge in their respective neighboring titular countries. While the numbers for Transnistria are lower at about 25 percent, selective memories and memorialization is critical to building a new or remaking an older identity. As in the Baltic states where about one in ten people was a victim of deportation and repression after incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1941, these experiences are still vividly remembered many decades later and were widely used in the period of identity- and nation-mobilization in the late 1980s.

Even if these self-reports of experiences of violence are possibly exaggerated, it remains the case that large ratios of current residents in three of the de facto states retain distinct legacies of victimization that are reinforced by the many memorials and highly visible building destruction even 20 years after the major conflict. Strictly controlled borders and frequent incidences along the ceasefire lines (except for Transnistria) demarcate the “us” and “them” mentality that is central to the building of the de facto state identity. During our interviews with residents of de facto states, we heard many highly emotive stories about atrocities, and our interlocutors certified the need for durable and strong protection, including assistance from Russia in military, financial, and material terms.

Forgiveness of violence

In Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorny Karabakh, there remains deep-rooted organic mistrust of the opposite side of the conflict, while by contrast, in Transnistria, there is no equivalent hostility to Moldovans. In the breakaway regions of the Caucasus, relations between the Abkhaz and Ossetians with Georgians, and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis have been characterized by an almost complete breakdown dating back to Soviet times and earlier; a breakdown that promoted ethnically targeted displacements. These legacies certify the memories of the early 1990s wars in reducing the numbers who believe that the groups can live peaceably together, and this adds to the view that the respective groups' ambitions are irreconcilable, especially about sharing the same space.

Though there are no remaining refugee issues in Transnistria, for Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorny Karabakh the return of Georgian and Azeri refugees (respectively) remains a fundamental question for the ethnic balance and the ethnic/national identity of the republics and strongly influences perspectives on international recognition of their status. Transnistria does not currently have a similar internal territorial concentration of minorities as Abkhazia has with Georgians in the Gal(i) district or South Ossetia has with the isolated eastern Leningor/Akhalgori district. Nagorny Karabakh has now effectively a homogeneous Armenian population.

Unlike Transnistria, which has a transparent boundary with Moldova, the boundaries of the other de facto republics with their “parent” states persist as conflict front lines. Economic interactions across these borders are almost completely frozen, perpetuating mistrust and existential fears. On-and-off negotiations between the local parties under the aegis of international actors (US, EU, and Russia) cannot lead to settlement of conflicts as long as this mutual intolerance and suspicion continues.

The level of forgiveness, as measured indirectly by asking respondents if they agreed with the statement that “some people say that they cannot forgive those of the other group for the violence that they committed,” is lowest in Nagorny Karabakh (about 30 percent disagreed with the statement) and is almost as low in South Ossetia (34 percent) and Abkhazia (43 percent). In Abkhazia, Armenians and Russians and especially Georgians/Mingrelians are much more ready to forgive the opposite side as measured by this question. However, like other sensitive questions, the level of refusal to answer or “don't knows” among the Georgians/Mingrelians is over one-third of respondents, suggesting that the reality of forgiveness is probably lower for this minority in Abkhazia (Figure 7). In Transnistria, where violence was restricted and ethnic relations are generally better than in the other four states, a higher than expected ratio of all groups (Russians 24 percent, Moldovans 20 percent, and Ukrainians 27 percent) are not ready yet to forgive the Moldovan side for what they consider its military aggression in June 1992.

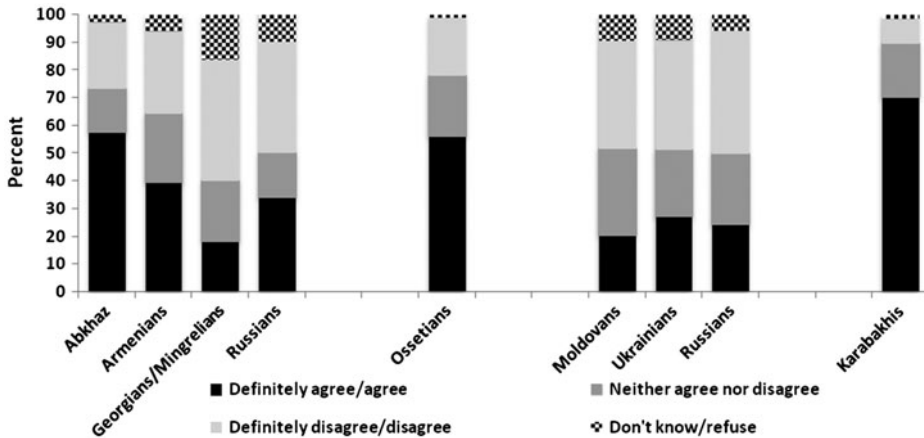


Figure 7. Ability to forgive the perpetrators of violence. The question was posed in an indirect way due to its sensitivity. Respondents were asked whether they agreed with “those who say that they can never forgive members of the other group for the violence they committed.” For ease of display, the responses “definitely agree” and “agree” are combined in the graph, as are the answers “definitely disagree” and “disagree”.

Of all the questions in the survey, this one about forgiveness offers the most pessimistic predictor for a negotiated settlement of the de facto situation in the post-Soviet states. The regimes currently in power must be responsive to the prevailing sentiment of the voters, and as is typical in Western democracies, there are few plaudits or political points to be won by adopting a position that could be viewed by a large segment of the voters as appeasement to a still-threatening foe. While we have no temporal data that might indicate trends over the past two decades, it is probable that the brief upsurge in violence between Georgia and its two de facto territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in 2008 contributed to the high values in those samples from 2010 to 2011. Ongoing sporadic shootings and explosions on the front line between Nagorny Karabakh and Azerbaijan and a constantly high level of military readiness is undoubtedly responsible for the very low levels of reconciliation seen in the NK republic.

Attitudes towards parent state populations

The level of forgiveness indicated by each nationality is closely related to their feelings about the titular populations of the parent states. In Figure 8, we show the response to a general question that asked respondents to indicate their feelings about various populations (Russians, Americans as well as other local populations) on a scale from “very good” to “very poor.” We report here the data for attitudes of the populations of the de facto states toward their respective neighboring (parent) states. From the graphs, it is evident that South Ossetians and Karabakhis have strongly negative views of Georgians and Azeris, respectively, due to the recent and continuing conflict; combined with the willingness to forgive data, these two warzones now rank as the least interested in reconciliation. Both territories are now effectively homogenous after the displacement, though there is a small isolated Georgian population in Leningor (Akhhalgori) *rayon*. Prospects for any accommodation in the absence of either inter-ethnic context or cross-border interaction are very small.

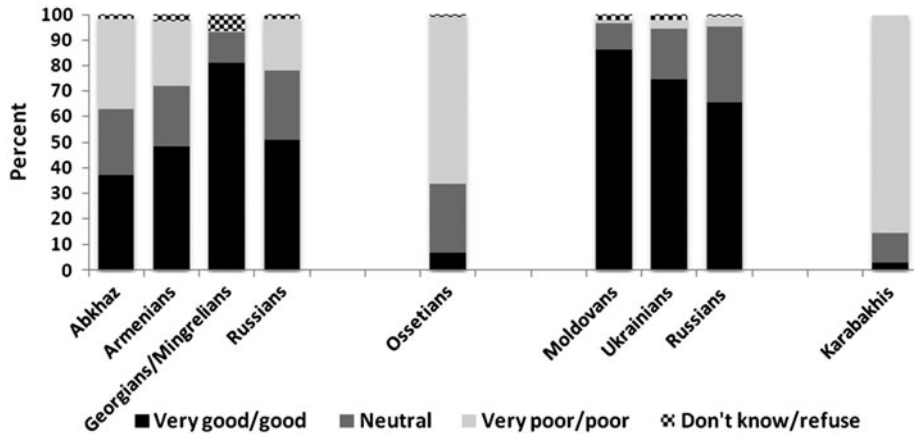


Figure 8. Perceptions of the populations of the respective parent states. The question asked, what are the feelings that the respondent had towards the populations of the parent states – Georgia for respondents in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moldova for Transnistrians and Azerbaijan for residents of Nagorny Karabakh.

The ethnically mixed territories, Abkhazia and Transnistria, are in general more favorably disposed towards members of the other side in the wars of the 1990s (Georgians and Moldovans, respectively). Georgians, who were the majority in Abkhazia before 1992, now remain in much reduced numbers concentrated in the southern district of Gal(i). While Georgians/Mingrelians in Abkhazia have positive feelings for their fellow ethnics over the border in Georgia (over 80 percent), the positive feeling ratios for Russians, Armenians, and Abkhaz fall below 50 percent. Georgians in Gal(i) have shifting levels of difficulty crossing the border to Georgia proper, but large proportions of the territory have been emptied of the Georgian population. Georgians who remain in Abkhazia are geographically isolated, poor, suspected of acting as a “fifth column” within the republic, and have relatively little interaction with the other groups. The upsurge of conflict in 2008 did not help ethnic relations nor did the high level of enmity between the Sukhum (Sokhomi) and Tbilisi Governments thereafter. Georgians are absent from the economic and political structures, and there is little prospect of change on these fronts anytime soon. The Abkhaz remain the least conciliatory of the four populations in Abkhazia, and only 37 percent have “good” or “very good” feelings to the Georgians in the parent state. The timing of the survey was shortly after the 2008 conflict in Abkhazia that certified the security of the republic’s borders with Russian assistance and while Mikhail Saakashvili was Georgian president. Widely vilified in Abkhazia, he was blamed for the continued hostility to Abkhazia’s aspirations and for instigating renewed fighting.

Karabakhis have the least conciliatory views towards their former (and current) opponents in Azerbaijan. This de facto state experiences the highest rate of continued casualties and carefully watches the higher military spending in the parent state. The displacement of the Azeri minority from Karabakh and the belligerent rhetoric directed by both sides at their opponents do not lend themselves to better feelings and a reduction in hostilities. Positions are as entrenched and enmity is as implacable as 20 years ago when the ceasefire was signed.

As noted earlier, the conflict in the PMR was brief in comparison to the other three conflicts, and the population of the republic remains ethnically balanced with about

one-third each Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Russian. In theory, the republic is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual with the constitution and official documents promulgated in the three official languages. However, even in comparison with the Moldovans across the river Dniester (Nistru), Moldovans in the PMR feel themselves to be better off (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creanga 2013) and any mobilization to draw attention to their grievances is well-monitored and sporadic. All three ethnicities in the PMR are strongly positive (well above 60 percent) about Moldovans, with co-ethnics naturally showing the highest value.

Preferences for the final political status of the de facto republics

While most of the questions in our surveys asked about experiences and gauged attitudes based on past occurrences and daily life in a former conflict, a key question probed preferences for eventual political outcomes. A hypothetically wide range of options could be considered, but practically, there are only about three to five realistic choices. We listed three choices on the questionnaire, and respondents could list other options, though very few did. The results in Figure 9 are dramatic as they reveal very little support for reintegration or reunification with the parent state, with only the Moldovan minority in Transnistria indicating a level of support for this option that exceeds 20 percent, but this option is still the weakest preference of the three proffered to the respondents. Overall, more respondents express a preference for unification with Russia than for any of the other political outcomes, though that ratio varies considerably across the republics and by nationality.

In a geopolitical sense, three of the de facto state disputes (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorny Karabakh) can be generally viewed as “stationary.” This view accepts that there is little likelihood of any kind of movement, either through bilateral talks or multi-lateral conferences like the Minsk process on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Our survey results clearly indicate that this perspective matches well the beliefs of residents in these three regions. Not only are respondents generally unwilling to forgive past

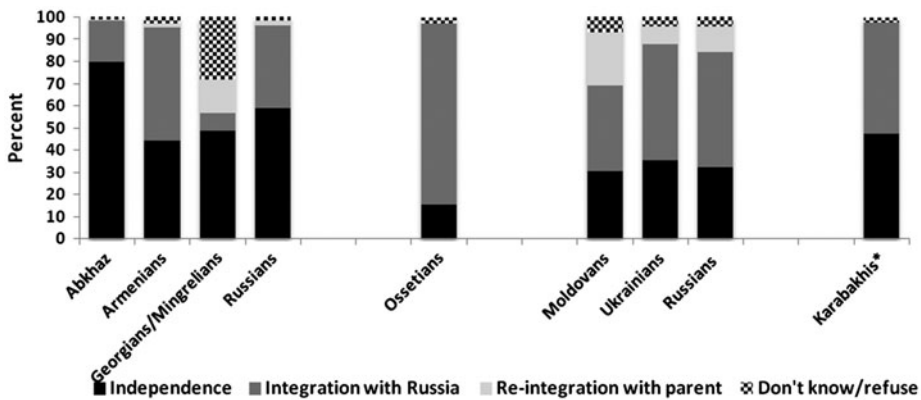


Figure 9. Political preferences for final status of the respective de facto states. The question asked, what is your preference for the political outcome of your republic? *For respondents in Nagorny Karabakh, the option “Integration with Russia” was replaced with “Integration with Armenia.”

transgressions and generally have a low opinion of the populations of the states with which they would be expected to re-engage, they also show only a very small ratio (less than 5 percent overall) of support of any unification with the parents.

Abkhazia has the most energetic and politically sensitive debate on the nature of its relations with Russia. No Abkhazian politician doubts the need for close relations with the patron that provides more than two-thirds of the income for the republic's budget; about 95 percent of tourists that go to Abkhazia are Russian citizens. At the same time, for most Abkhazians, particularly for ethnic Abkhaz, national sovereignty is a supreme value. Independence is the firm choice of ethnic Abkhaz (80 percent) but also the first choice of Russians (59 percent) and of Georgians/Mingrelians (48 percent, although, once again, 28 percent of them did not answer). Armenians (44 percent) show the lowest support for independence, and a majority of that group remains in favor of unification with Russia. Given that the Abkhaz dominate the political life in the republic, while Russians and Armenians are relatively more prominent in economic life, these ratios indicate that the respective nationalities recognize which political option more likely serves their self-interests. Of course, it is possible to be both independent and have close relations with Russia; for most Abkhazians, this option would be preferred, but fears of Russian dominance remain strong.

Any Abkhazian opposition speculates about the asymmetry of relations with Russia and the abuse of its economic assistance. Characteristically, being in opposition, Khadjimba criticized his predecessors, Bagapsh and Ankvab, for excessive concessions to Russia and in particular, for offering to foreign (mostly Russian) citizens the right to buy real estate in Abkhazia; but he changed his mind when elected. The question about the asymmetry of relations with Russia, as well as the problem of the double (Georgian and Abkhazian) citizenship of Gal(i) district, was at the root of the political instability in May–June 2014. A part of Abkhazian public opinion did not accept some points from the Russian draft of the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership that was finally signed in a modified form in late November 2014. In fact, the Treaty essentially fixed the status quo. However, the term “integration” was omitted. The united group of armed forces will not incorporate the Abkhazian army but instead will be created from the units delegated from the Russian and Abkhazian armed forces, and they will be run by a “joined,” and not “united,” command. Instead of harmonization of budgeting and fiscal legislation, their rapprochement is planned. It also promised to increase salaries in the public sector and pensions in Abkhazia to the average level in Russia's Southern Federal District, to extend to Abkhazia the Russian system of health insurance, and to pay to the Abkhazian Government an annual subsidy of 4 billion rubles (in 2013 the republican budget totaled 5 billion, Markedonov 2014).

In the wider survey, the opinions of Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians rarely diverge significantly, and this question reveals rare differences on an important issue. Armenians are the second-largest group in the republic (21 percent of the population), and Russians constitute about 11 percent. Lower support for independence among these two groups as well as among Georgians/Mingrelians is another expression of fears that Abkhazia might become an ethnocracy, with control of political life by one ethnic group. Armenians and others are underrepresented in the republican parliament and government bureaucracy, despite their strong positions in the economy. On another question, 40 percent of Armenians believe that they do not have equal opportunities to gain economic opportunities with Abkhaz in the republic.

Unlike Abkhazia, the preferences of South Ossetians are clear, with 81 percent of them wanting to join the Russian Federation (through unification with the republic of

North Ossetia) and only 16 percent favoring independence. Russia recognized South Ossetia as independent after the 2008 war with Georgia. Russian leaders have consistently rejected the possibility of the unification perspective, though the issue re-emerged in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and the unification of Crimea to Russia. Russian and Ossetian leaders instead emphasize the need for greater integration of the de facto republic into the Eurasian Economic Union that now is emerging as an alternative to the European Union in the post-Soviet space. Still, integration with Russia is maintained as the preference of key political figures (RES 2012).

Like Abkhazia, opinion in Nagorny Karabakh is split, in this case evenly, on the issue of independence versus integration with Armenia. As ethnic Armenians, Karabakhis have been prominent in political and economic life in Yerevan and during the war with Azerbaijan; forces from Armenia and from the Armenian diaspora provided key assistance in gaining separation from the parent state (De Waal 2013). Large amounts of investment from Armenia and the diaspora and better connections to Yerevan means that the mountainous isolation of the NK republic has dramatically reduced over the past 20 years since the ceasefire was agreed. But the extent of Nagorny Karabakh's borders are not clearly agreed upon, as both citizens and the elites claim more territory from Azerbaijan, while part of the present de facto territory was not part of the NK autonomous district in Soviet times (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013). The internal debate about independence or unification is not as intense in the capital, Stepanakert (Khankendi), as in Sukhum (Sokhumi) due to the already integral connections to Armenia and to shared ethnicity. While Nagorny Karabakh continues officially to aspire to independence, following the declaration in 1992, its interests are represented by Armenia in international forums. The informal arrangement seems to suit both parties, both in the region and in the wider international arena.

Almost all discussions of resolution of the Transnistrian conflict suggest the transformation of the Republic of Moldova into a federation or a confederation that would include the de facto state (Devyatkov 2012). Russia and the European Union agree on this principle and have periodically promoted it. But the model presupposes negotiations between Chişinău and Tiraspol as equal partners, a perspective firmly rejected by Moldova. Moldova's Government adheres to the constitutional principle of a unitary state. In the law "On the Principal Positions of a Special Legal Status of the Settlements on the Left Bank of the Dniester (Transnistria)" (adopted July 22, 2005), Transnistria is granted "territorial autonomy" without a clear definition of its nature. This law also gives the Moldovan Government the right to change the boundary of Transnistria "on the basis of local referenda conducted according to the legislation of the Republic of Moldova." Moscow is highly unlikely to accept this approach because federalization is the only way to combine the two directions of its policy – to support the territorial integrity of Moldova and to not suffocate Transnistria. While on the surface, the conflict in Transnistria is much easier to solve than similar conflicts in the Caucasus, identity with the de facto state is strong: 51 percent of its inhabitants define themselves first of all citizens of their republic – and not as Moldovan or European or Soviet. Nearly 200,000 of them have Russian passports and another 100,000 have Ukrainian citizenship. Somewhat contradictorily, a plurality of Transnistrians (46 percent), are in favor of unification with the Russian Federation. In the 2006 referendum, 97 percent of Transnistrians supported independence and subsequent incorporation into the Russian federation. The Ukrainian crisis of spring 2014 highlighted the precarious geographic position of the republic, wedged between Ukraine, now hostile to Russia, and Moldova, firmly headed integration with the European Union. Since the government change in February

2014, Ukrainian authorities have made common cause with Moldova and Romania. More than 75 percent of Transnistrian exports now go to Moldova and the EU, and the TMR is critically dependent on the EU trade preferences valid until the end of 2015. Tiraspol is well aware that the creation of the free trade zone between Moldova and the EU can seriously worsen the situation in the republic (Gushchin 2014). The Shevchuk Government again appealed to Russia to recognize the referendum results and extend to Transnistria the same recognition that it has extended to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, though it was obvious Moscow was not ready at all to accept it (BBC News 2014). Only about 13 percent of Transnistrian respondents wish to reintegrate with Moldova, and then only as a territorial autonomy or a region with a special status. There are no significant differences in the views of Ukrainians and Russians: just over half of both communities prefer integration with Russia, while another third is in favor of the full independence. *Grosso modo*, ethnic Moldovan opinion, does not differ too much from their compatriots with preferences split three ways, 24 percent prefer reintegration with Moldova, 39 percent unification with Russia, and 30 percent for independence. In our parallel survey in Moldova, on the question of settling the Transnistrian question, more than half of Moldovans do not want any concessions to “separatists.” Such deeply ingrained attitudes are perhaps the most important obstacle on the way to a political resolution of the Transnistrian conflict. While Transnistrians do not see any economic advantage in joining Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe where the incomes are not any higher than in the de facto territory, recent EU initiatives to allow easier access for Moldovan travelers and exports may change the future calculations of Transnistrian residents. Currently, they can take advantage of the new EU rules if they have Moldovan passports.

Conclusions

Moments of significant geopolitical tension and conflict inevitably produce discourses that are deeply dichotomous and polarized. Conflict between the Russian Federation and the international community, most especially Euro-Atlantic states who accuse Russia of the forceful annexation of Crimea and sponsorship of secessionism in the Donbas, has renewed discourse about “frozen conflicts” and “de facto states” as instruments of Russian imperial designs and behavior. Part of the tabloid geopolitics of this conflict is a will to homogenize the very different circumstances of origins, creation, and maintenance of the four existing post-Soviet de facto states in with the aspirant de facto states in Donetsk and Luhansk. For example, a former Georgian Ambassador to the US described what he saw as the “twenty percent rule” operating in Russia’s “near abroad”: “to buy your freedom from their sphere of influence, you should be prepared to sacrifice 20 percent of your territory to the empire” (Yakobashvili 2014).

“Moral clarity” like this is purchased at the expense of geographic knowledge. In the face of the will to homogenize (and moralize), it is more important than ever to recognize messy geopolitical particularity – and acknowledge the views of those on the ground in contested territories. Our main motivation for the De Facto State Research Project was to gather comparative insights on the beliefs and attitudes of their residents. We believe that the lives of ordinary citizens are generally ignored in the geopolitical discussions that involve the parent and patron states, as well as major powers beyond the region. We have portrayed the major divisions along nationality lines because this is still the most important fracture within the de facto states. While there are some

significant generational differences in income, the best predictor of political and social attitudes is still the ethnic one. Though the ethnic factor is not significant internally in Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia, since both territories are completely dominated by the titular group, it remains very important in Abkhazian politics and less so in Transnistria.

The overall impression gleaned from the survey results is that most residents of the four de facto states are positively disposed towards Russia and appreciate the protection offered by its armed forces stationed on their territories. They show a high level of support of state institutions, and the governmental efforts to shape legitimacy seem to be yielding the expected results. The chances of reconciliation with the parent states' governments and people are generally low, except in Transnistria, where the level of violence was much lower at the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Eventual unification with Russia (Armenia, in the case of Karabakh) is the aspiration of more residents than other options, including the independence one, but this preference varies a lot by nationality in Abkhazia. Both security and economic motivations underlie this predilection.

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 has again brought the status of the de facto states of the Black Sea and the Caucasus to the forefront of regional security discussions and to the center of debates about the intentions of the Putin government for the region. With the further creation of "proto de facto states" in the eastern Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk in summer 2014, the experiences of the four "established de facto states" reviewed here became dramatically relevant. Like other parent states, Ukraine has refused to accept any separation and offered more autonomy to the disaffected regions. The overall status of relations between Russia and the West continues to shape the environment in which the de facto states continue to exist, and the weakness of the respective parent states suggests that their sustained presence on the world political map will remain. Academic research will thus continue to be necessary inside the de facto states to document the sense of nationhood and state legitimacy, as well as the evolving memories of their violent beginnings, despite the ongoing difficulties of access.

Notes

1. The term "quasi-state" has a different meaning in Africa. Jackson (2007) defines quasi-states as sovereign states, primarily former colonial possessions in Africa whose independence was granted and did not result from "natural" processes of state building. He stressed that such states have a "negative" sovereignty; i.e. are formally recognized by other states, but do not achieve "positive" sovereignty – the ability to fully control their own territory and to keep a monopoly on coercion. The term "de facto state" can be applied to the most successful quasi-states, which have all attributes of a legitimate and viable state but lack international recognition. Pegg (1998) defines a de facto state as a break-away political unit that assumes effective control over its territory for a protracted time, is capable of offering its population the whole spectrum of public services, and is seeking international recognition as a sovereign state. Other authors consider the aspiration to get international recognition as the main feature of de facto states (Lynch 2004; McGarry 2004).
2. In another accounting, Florea (2014) tallies 34 de facto states on the world map since 1945.
3. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is another de facto state in Europe but not considered here as it did not form part of the Soviet Union and Russia's involvement with it is small.
4. At the time of the surveys, Dmitry Medvedev was President and Vladimir Putin was Prime Minister in Russia.

5. For a long time, Georgia blocked Russian participation in this organization. As a result of long negotiations and under US pressure, Georgia agreed to establish international monitoring of goods that cross the Russian-Abkhazian and Russian-South Ossetian boundaries (the de jure Russian-Georgian boundaries) instead of creating its own national customs posts. It is not clear yet who will control the flows crossing the land boundaries of Russia and by what means.
6. Unlike the Crimean separatists, the preference expressed in the wake of the EuroMaidan protests in Kyiv in 2013–2014 by the Transnistrian Government to also join Russia have not yet been accepted by the Putin administration.

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