16
UNRECOGNISED
STATEHOOD?
The de facto states of the South
Caucasus

Laurence Broers

Introduction
The ethno-territorial wars won by secessionists in the Caucasus in the 1990s resulted in the
establishment of several unrecognised republics, most of which survive to this day. Together
with Transnistria, which seceded from Moldova in 1990, the unrecognised republics of the
South Caucasus have been studied as post-Soviet examples of *de facto states* (Broers 2013).
De facto states comprise entities as diverse as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus,
Somaliland and more arguably, Taiwan and Kosovo (Caspersen 2012), yet can all be broadly
defined as ‘entities that fulfil the Montevideo criteria for statehood but lack international
recognition’ (Toomla 2016: 331). De facto states control territory, provide governance,
enjoy local legitimacy and survive for extended periods of time, but are not recognised as
states by other states, or only by a very small number of them.

The conceptual and empirical applicability of the term de facto state to post-Soviet
examples remains vigorously debated. This is only in part due to the highly politicised nature
of the debate, with the opponents of secession emphasising the lack of international recogni-
tion to denote these entities as ‘breakaway regions’ or ‘occupied territories’. The debate also
revolves around a questionable fit with the emphasis on indigenous capability in Scott Pegg’s
original definition of the de facto state (1998: 26). Although crucial to their foundation, indi-
genous capacity has receded as de facto states in post-Soviet Eurasia have become increasingly
dependent on the support of their patrons: Russia and, for the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh
Republic (NKR),1 Armenia. The appearance in 2015 of new secessionist entities in eastern
Ukraine, with Russia’s overt support, has further complicated the debate. This ambiguity is
reflected in recent work emphasising dependency over statehood. Giorgio Comai, for
example, reconceptualises post-Soviet de facto states as ‘small dependent jurisdictions’, where
pooled or associated sovereignty with a patron – rather than separate statehood – is the driving
animus of secession (Comai 2017a). Acknowledging these debates, this chapter nevertheless
retains the term ‘de facto state’ as the most widely used as of this writing.
Contra the depiction of de facto states as geopolitical pawns, dependency does not mean a lack of agency in either internal or external political dimensions. Internally, de facto states feature active nation- and state-building processes, the achievement of internal sovereignty, and levels of political contestation that are surprising given the insecurity that surrounds them, and which indicate limits to outside influence. Externally, the geopolitics of de facto statehood plays out at a first layer in the dynamics between the de facto state, the ‘parent state’ from which it has seceded and the ‘patron state’ supporting it to do so. At a second layer, parent states pursue counter-recognition strategies with third-party states and multilateral organisations; patron states seek the normalisation of their protégés and sometimes procure their recognition by third states; and to variable extents de facto states pursue foreign policies of their own. Meanwhile, multilateral actors, notably the European Union (EU), struggle to formulate policy responses to a phenomenon that until as recently as a decade ago was widely assumed to be transient.

This chapter proceeds first by introducing the three de facto states of the South Caucasus. It then examines their internal politics, before turning to their external relations with patron states and third parties. Finally, it considers the troubled relations with their parent states, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and the prospects for conflict resolution.

Introducing Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh

Smallness is a defining trait of the post-Soviet de facto states that emerged from territorial conflicts in the 1990s. South Ossetia is the smallest of all, comprising an area of less than 4,000 square kilometres physically separated from the north by the Caucasus mountains. Surrounded to the south by Georgia, it is only connected to a non-Georgian outside world via the Roki tunnel traversing the Caucasus range. Abkhazia enjoys a more favourable location, covering some 8,700 square kilometres along the Black Sea littoral and endowed with spectacular natural beauty. Historically, this made Abkhazia a richly storied, cosmopolitan site in Soviet lore as the ‘Red Riviera’. Nagorny Karabakh, as the NKR’s anthem recalls, is an ‘impregnable stronghold’ comprising the far eastern reaches of the wider plateau covering eastern Anatolia and Armenia. In its Soviet configuration, Nagorny Karabakh covered some 4,400 square kilometres of highland area. Military conquest in 1992–94 dramatically increased its size to more than 11,000 square kilometres, including swathes of lowland areas to the south-east.

The demography of de facto states is hotly contested (see Table 16.1). These entities are populated by residual populations depleted by war casualties, the forced displacement of communities belonging to the parent-state nationality, and post-war migration due to economic hardship and insecurity. Local population statistics are typically inflated to advertise viability, while parent states generate diminutive estimates underscoring demographic flight and unsustainability. Even if the local statistics of de facto authorities are accepted at face value, demographic decline has been dramatic (see Table 16.1). Abkhazia and South Ossetia have lost at least half of their pre-war populations, Nagorny Karabakh a quarter. Most of this loss is due to the expulsion of communities belonging to the parent-state nationality. Up to 240,000 Georgians (a small minority among whom were later able to return to Abkhazia’s southernmost Gali district – known as Gal in Abkhaz sources) in Abkhazia and more than 40,000 Azerbaijanis from Nagorny Karabakh were displaced during the 1990s wars. A further 550,000 Azerbaijanis were expelled from the territories occupied by Armenian forces in 1992–94. In 1989 South Ossetia had a Georgian population of 28,500: a few thousand were displaced in 1990–92, but the majority, some 20,000, were expelled in 2008 and their villages destroyed. Rebellious minorities have been the demographic beneficiaries
of forced displacement, achieving or cementing coveted majorities in the de facto states they claim as their own. The legacies of forced displacement, a breach of peremptory norms of international law (jus cogens), further politicise the image of the de facto states as transgressive entities founded on ethnic cleansing. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan have effectively foregrounded the plight of their internally displaced populations to depict forced displacement as a parent-state issue.

The bane of forced exile is nevertheless more equally shared than this would suggest. All groups experienced significant degrees of forced displacement during 1990s wars. Ossetians overall have suffered significantly more than Georgians in terms of forced displacement arising from successive rounds of violence in South Ossetia. Their community within the territory has declined by a quarter, while the Ossetian population beyond it in Georgia had declined from nearly 100,000 in 1989 to 14,400 in 2014. Nagorny Karabakh’s static population growth obscures the fact that a significant proportion of its populace comprises Armenians expelled from other parts of Azerbaijan in 1988–90. Demographic consolidation, meanwhile, is hardly unique to de facto states. Georgians experienced a 17 per cent increase in their share of Georgia’s population for 1989–2014, while Azerbaijanis increased their share of Azerbaijan’s population by 9 per cent for 1989–2009. Reflecting the existential urgency attached to issues of demography in Abkhazia, it is the ethnic Abkhaz that stand out as demographic ‘winners’. They parse this demographic reversal as a restoration of their nineteenth-century majority, citing a history of forced population movements under Russian imperial and Soviet rule depleting their numbers.

Less contentious is the fact that large numbers of people in the residual populations of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh have been personally affected by violence. O’Loughlin, Kolossov and Toal (2014: 22) report that more than 60 per cent of ethnic Abkhaz, Ossetian and Armenian respondents in a series of surveys conducted in each territory had witnessed, or had close family who had witnessed, violent death or injury. The sense of threat has never gone away, moreover, as previously quiet and even porous ceasefire lines have become increasingly fortified frontlines. In Nagorny Karabakh, the heavily fortified Line of Contact with Azerbaijani forces has since 2008 become the site of growing

| De facto state demography in the South Caucasus, 1989–2015 |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Abkhazia                        | 525,061        | 243,936        | 17.8           | 51.2           | 33.8           |
| South Ossetia                   | 98,527         | 53,532         | 66.2           | 89.9           | -26.2%         |
| Nagorny Karabakh                | 189,085        | 146,100        | 76.9           | 99.7           | 0.1            |

Sources:
a CSEIGSS (1991), Saparov (2015);
b RYOUGS (2016), UGSRA (2016), National Statistical Service of NKR (2017);
c These date from various years after 2010, as discussed for South Ossetia in Toal and O’Loughlin (2013: 9–10); estimates for Nagorny Karabakh derived from author’s conversations with analysts and residents in Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh 2014–15.
ceasefire violations and skirmishes, culminating in April 2016’s ‘four-day war’ that claimed in excess of 200 lives. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia transit and informal contacts across ceasefire lines remained relatively uninhibited until the mid-2000s. Since the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, however, de facto state populations are increasingly locked in within ‘borderized’ space (Toal and Merabishvili 2019). Siege mentalities and high levels of mistrust towards parent states characterise each de facto state.

These bolster already strong tendencies to ethno-nationalist ideologies. Abkhaz, Ossetians and Karabakh Armenians narrate the wars of the 1990s as wars of independence, fought in the name of their self-determining nation. In each case ideological projects in nation-building marshal supportive evidence of centuries-long traditions of distinct cultural identity and experience of sovereignty. Abkhazia claims a pre-history in successive kingdoms and principalities dating back to the eighth century. Ossetians claim an unbroken lineage to the tenth-century kingdom of Alania in the North Caucasus. The Armenians of Karabakh likewise trace a continuous genealogy back to the province of Artsakh, claimed as part of the ancient Artaxiad Armenian kingdom in the second century BC (see Chapters 4 and 6). These narratives are hardly different in essence from those of parent states similarly claiming ancient lineages and states as their own. Yet in each de facto state there are tensions between a nationalist emphasis on cultural unity and homogeneity and a state-building project to establish separate, sovereign polities.

In the NKR and South Ossetia this is because unification, rather than separate statehood, is the animus driving separation from the parent state. The founding leitmotif of the Karabakh movement was miatsam (‘unification’ in Armenian) rather than the founding of a separate entity. In South Ossetia, unification, or at least a more intimate relationship, with North Ossetia in the Russian North Caucasus (and hence with Russia) has been the dominant geopolitical vision. Changes in these de facto states’ official names reflect this ethos. In February 2017, the population in Nagorny Karabakh voted to change their republic’s name from the ‘Nagorno-Karabakh Republic’ to the ‘Republic of Artsakh’. This rid its official title of the ideologically awkward Turco-Persian compound ‘Karabakh’ (meaning ‘black garden’) and asserted the entity’s Armenian identity by signifying historical membership of a wider Armenian ethno-space. Later that year in April, South Ossetia voted to change its name to the ‘Republic of South Ossetia – State of Alania’, mirroring the full name of North Ossetia, which also refers to itself as the State of Alania (see Tamkin 2017). These name changes underscore the fact that Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia are de facto states in spite of themselves: their preferred status would be union with their patron state. Seen in this light, the ‘outsourcing’ of basic state functions to Armenia and Russia is unsurprising. Unification, albeit with some kind of special status, rather than self-sufficiency is the goal of these de facto states. The idea that they must self-determine is an artefact of sovereigntist thinking (Comai 2017b: 69). By contrast, there is no unification project driving Abkhazia’s impulse to separate from Georgia. For the vast majority of the Abkhaz, national independence remains the primary goal. Rather, as Table 16.1 shows, the problem in Abkhazia is the founding of a de facto state on the self-determination claim of a minority group, a theme to which I return below.

Until the mid-2000s assumptions that the post-Soviet de facto states would ‘sooner or later disappear’ were common (Kolstø 2006: 735). These assessments did not take account, however, of the local legitimacy that these entities enjoy, despite despoliation by war, exclusion from legitimate international relations, and persisting insecurity. Loyalty to foundational national myths alone cannot account for this, which needs also to be understood as a result of the internal sovereignty that these entities have attained.
Domestic institutions and contested politics

Secessionists face a critical threshold when they pursue the building of a de facto state after war. Having often relied on private entrepreneurs of violence, they must rein in warlords and competing factions to stabilise civilian rule (Caspersen 2012: 77–83). If they cannot demonstrate that the military campaign has been waged in order to improve the material and physical security of citizens, their claims to statehood will not resonate with local populations, let alone external actors. (The reasons for the eventual failure of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria lie precisely in uncontrolled factionalism and its radicalisation – see Chapters 15 and 18). By the mid-2000s the South Caucasus de facto states demonstrated variable progress towards crossing this threshold (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008). At the ‘harder’ end of institutionalisation – capacities for defence, border control, and post-war economic reconstruction – the NKR appeared to be the most advanced, and also the most militarised. Abkhazia continued to be plagued by widespread criminality and lawlessness, and a substantial part of the territory claimed for the republic (in the Kodori Gorge) remained beyond Sukhum/i’s control. South Ossetia was the least coherent of the three, constituting a patchwork of de facto South Ossetian and de jure Georgian jurisdictions, with people moving fairly freely between them.

At the ‘softer’ end of institutionalisation – participation, governance and rights – all of the de facto states introduced presidential systems and nominally pluralistic, multiparty politics contested in regular elections. Despite commonplace accusations of political choreography, the three de facto states have differed in terms of their adoption of democratic institutions and practices. Freedom House’s Freedom in the World index began to include Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh regularly from the early 2000s; South Ossetia was included from 2008. The index scores polities along a seven-point scale; states at 5.5 or above on this scale are deemed ‘not free’. Polities between 5.0 and 3.5 are ‘partly free’; states below 3.0 are ‘free’. By Freedom House’s criteria, Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh have stabilised as ‘partly free’, indicating a degree of political competition and fulfilment of civil and political rights (see Figure 16.1). In contrast South Ossetia has flatlined in the ‘unfree’ category with no change for a decade. It is certainly the case that de facto states have advertised, and at times exaggerated, their democratic credentials as part of their case for recognition. This is particularly true for the NKR, where ‘partly free’ status is highly coveted as a symbol of vital difference from ‘unfree’ Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the differences between the kinds of contested politics found in the de facto states are substantive.

Abkhazia has witnessed the most vivid contested politics, conditioned by the republic’s multi-ethnicity, location and, comparatively speaking, limited threat perception. For most of Abkhazia’s citizenry, there exists a competitive political system. Power has transferred from government to opposition, and the results of elections have not been a foregone conclusion. Two presidential elections in particular have been vigorously contested. In 2004 Moscow-endorsed candidate and former KGB officer RaulKhajimba was narrowly defeated by Sergey Bagapsh. Khajimba and his supporters refused to accept the result, leading to mass mobilisation in the streets of Sukhum/i to defend it (Ó Beacháin 2012). A power-sharing compromise with a joint ticket giving Khajimba the role of vice-president was the result. After winning re-election in 2009, Bagapsh died in May 2011, leading to another fiercely contested election won by Alexander Ankvab. Having apparently learned from its experience in 2004, Moscow withheld from endorsing any candidate. Ankvab’s presidency was nevertheless unravelled by a range of opposition tactics, forcing him to resign in June 2014. While Khajimba won the subsequent election, he was obliged to accept members of the
opposition into his administration. While hardly free of characteristically ‘dirty’ post-Soviet tactics, this record indicates that politics in Abkhazia is contested and oppositions matter.

There is, however, a darker ethnocratic aspect to Abkhazian politics. Even if, as undoubtedly exaggerated census data indicate, the Abkhaz have achieved a demographic majority, it is extremely small, and the continued buy-in of the republic’s substantial non-Abkhaz minorities remains crucial. Yet this confronts the near-total domination of the republic’s power structures by ethnic Abkhaz, in addition to constitutional provisions requiring the president to be an ethnic Abkhaz and fluent Abkhaz-speaker. Armenian and Russian minorities appear to accept this state of affairs, affirming in opinion polls that they believe Abkhazia is moving in the right direction. Abkhazia’s largest ethnic minority, however, is composed of some 44,000 Georgians (c. 18 per cent), most of whom are returnees inhabiting the southernmost district of Gal/i. Through a variety of mechanisms, Georgians have been excluded from the Abkhazian body politic as citizens, as voters, and even as ethnic Georgians, as some Abkhaz politicians have sought to emphasise their Mingrelian, rather than Georgian, identity (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010: 85–87). This suggests qualifications to Freedom House’s perhaps schematic ratings: while Abkhazia may be partly free for most of its citizens, it is not free for its Georgian minority. It is an irony of Abkhazia’s contested democracy that this group’s electoral weight drives illiberal strategies to exclude it.

While the NKR has upheld a procedural notion of democracy, it has no comparable experience of the transfer of power. Opposition presidential candidates have been able to run largely without hindrance, and have garnered significant support, such as Vitaly Balasanyan’s securing of 31.5 per cent of the vote in 2012. But a victory in municipal elections in Stepanakert (known as Khankendi to Azerbaijanis) in 2004 represents the high watermark of
oppositional electoral success. Two factors have imposed serious constraints on the domestic political scene in the NKR. The first is the inseparability of local politics from patron state dynamics in Armenia. Armenia and the NKR were until 2018 ruled by a bifurcated but cohesive elite with common roots in the Armenian–Azerbaijani war. Over the 1998–2018 period Armenia’s political stagnation under Presidents Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsyan (both Karabakh natives) had a stultifying effect on the NKR’s politics. The second factor is growing militarisation and incidents along the Line of Contact with Azerbaijan, driving a tendency in the NKR towards being a ‘garrison state’ preoccupied with danger and national security. The ‘four-day war’ with Azerbaijani forces in April 2016 strengthened this tendency, with a referendum in February 2017 introducing a fully presidential system and allowing for President Bako Sahakyan, a former minister of the interior and head of the NKR’s national security service, to continue in office for another three years after the end of his second term. Armenia’s ‘Velvet Revolution’ in April 2018 overturned the first of these inhibiting factors, however, auguring the possibility of more genuinely contested politics in the NKR – if security conditions allow.

Isolated, demographically depleted, and ravaged by recent war, South Ossetia trails significantly in terms of possibilities for contested politics. This is further compounded by the absence of any real aspiration to form a separate political society. Nevertheless, with the perceived threat from Georgia removed after 2008, public disapproval of the corrupt elite associated with President Eduard Kokoity was openly expressed. This led to political crisis in the republic and a contested election in November 2011. The crisis was resolved through the intimidation and hospitalisation of opposition candidate Alla Dzhiyoeva, although she was later brought into the government. The crisis, and continuing intrusions of political violence in the forms of assassinations and bomb blasts, are indicative of weak institutionalisation and inability to contain contested politics beyond the narrowest of parameters. Subsequent exposés of leaked emails detailing the extent to which senior Kremlin officials strive to micro-manage the daily affairs of the republic (and to a lesser extent Abkhazia) pose fundamental questions about the utility of the de facto state moniker after Russia’s recognition. This raises the issues of patron states, the external backing of secession, and the prospects for external sovereignty.

External engagement: patron states and the foreign policy of secession

One of the ironies of de facto statehood is that external dependence on a patron state is the fundamental enabling condition of separation from a parent state. Very few de facto states survive without a patron: Somaliland is perhaps the only example in the world today, made possible by the prolonged collapse of its parent state, Somalia. There is consequently a broad consensus on the importance of geopolitics in the trajectory of de facto statehood. Where opinions diverge is on the extent of local agency in de facto states, and the consistency and coherence of external support. South Caucasus de facto states are all contiguous to their patron state and present extreme examples of dependence. In the cases of South Ossetia and the NKR this is in part, as we have seen, because unification with the patron state rather than a separate political society is the desired endgame. The motives of patron states, and of different policy centres within them, are nevertheless contextual and variable over time.

Economically, all three de facto states are highly or completely dependent on their patrons, and particularly in the cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia since 2008, this dependency is increasing over time (see Comai 2017b: Chapter 4). This has not always been a uniform pattern, however, as an alternative ‘subsistent’ model of political economy appeared to be within reach at least for Abkhazia in the early 2000s (Broers 2015).
Recognition by Russia has flooded both Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Russian subsidies, accounting for around two-thirds of the former’s budget and 90 per cent of the latter’s (Comai 2017b: 101). In the case of the NKR, an ‘interstate credit’ from Armenia has stabilised at accounting for some 55 per cent of expenditures which, when combined with incoming funds from the Armenian diaspora, has enabled this de facto state to maintain a comparatively high GDP per capita ($3,227 according to its own data for 2016), despite a diminutive economy.

Russia has not been a consistent patron state. In the early 1990s Moscow was still in shock after the Soviet collapse, stunned by Chechen mobilisation against its rule, fearful and paranoid about the entry of Euro-Atlantic powers in the post-Soviet space, and divided between multiple policy actors. There was no single Kremlin viewpoint as the Ministry of Defence was leading on ‘near abroad’ issues, and competing with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs still lacking expertise on what had previously been parts of the same state. By the mid-1990s there was some consolidation, as Moscow sought stakes and leverage in conflict resolution efforts through peacekeeping deployments in Soviet successor states. Russia acceded to the international blockade of Abkhazia in 1994–99 but its position shifted in the 2000s, as it quelled its own secessionist challenge in Chechnya. Beginning in 2002 Russia began to widely distribute Russian passports in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, laying discursive claim to a substantial part of Georgia’s de jure population (Artman 2013). This claim would be activated on 7 August 2008, when a complex causal conjuncture led Georgia’s aspirations to territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic membership, Russian anger at Western recognition of Kosovo and plans for NATO expansion, and a set of emotive geopolitical ‘rescue fantasies’ to meet on the ground in South Ossetia (Toal 2017). In a seemingly impulsive move Moscow recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states three weeks later.

After recognition, Russian linkages in both territories expanded exponentially, culminating in an ‘Alliance and Strategic Partnership Agreement’ signed with Abkhazia on 24 November 2014 and an ‘Alliance and Integration Agreement’ signed with South Ossetia on 18 March 2015. The degrees of integration in territorial, customs, security, economic and legislative domains foreseen in these agreements undermine definitions of statehood according to the Montevideo criteria. Yet rhetorical dismissal of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as ‘puppets’ or ‘pawns’ also fails to capture significant nuances. The final agreements on partnership and integration signed in 2014–15 were not the original drafts proposed by Moscow. By one assessment, Abkhazia and South Ossetia demonstrated ‘a tangible degree of agency’ during the negotiation of these agreements (Ambrosio and Lange 2016: 688). Abkhazia in particular sought to insert a number of restrictions protecting local interests (such as on the right of Russian citizens to acquire Abkhaz citizenship and consequently property rights).

Moreover, variation in the degree of contested politics also indicates that even after a decade of recognition, extensive Russian support does not translate into effective or uniform Russian control. Indeed, it can be argued that with no prospect of de facto state ‘defection’ to alternative geopolitical alignment, Russia is largely indifferent to the types of regime developing within them. Beyond these considerations is the question of whether normatively loaded expectations about statehood, or about how a de facto state should define itself vis-à-vis its parent state, obscure more than they clarify. The experience of micro-states in the Pacific shows that even in uncontested contexts, small jurisdictions can choose to contract out substantial parts of their sovereignty to larger patrons (Comai 2017b). Sovereignty is in fact divisible, and there is a spectrum of statehood. Seen in this light, de facto states are but one location on this spectrum, self-determining in form but not necessarily self-sustaining in practice.
Armenia’s role as the NKR’s patron state is underwritten by the hegemonic vision of ‘augmented Armenia’, comprising both spaces, in Armenian geopolitical culture (Broers and Toal 2013). This is the idea upon which the post-Soviet Armenian state was founded and formal steps towards unification, for instance in terms of budgeting, were taken already in 1989–90. Since the end of hostilities Armenia has supplied the NKR consistently with an ‘interstate credit’ stably covering more than half of the latter’s budget. Although the armed forces of the two spaces are formally separate, the self-styled ‘Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army’ is heavily dependent on Armenia in every way. Informal unification was cemented by a single leadership structure over the 1998–2018 period, when different branches of the same networked elite ruled both spaces. Locked in an asymmetric rivalry with Azerbaijan, however, Armenia has paid a higher price for its support of secessionism than Russia. Questioning this price has been a subdued current in Armenian political discourse, largely contained by the growing insecurity along the frontline in Nagorny Karabakh in the 2008–17 period.

One measure of the agency of de facto states is the extent to which they pursue foreign policies as separate entities. Beyond the relationship with the patron state, which is the primary foreign policy relationship for all de facto states, the international landscape is hostile. Although many among their number started out in life in the same way, few sins are regarded as intolerable in the international society of states as unilateral secession. Once inside the club, moreover, newcomers also submit to this basic axiom of realpolitik: Kosovo, for example, does not recognise any of the post-Soviet de facto states. Geographic location, resource profiles, diaspora communities and patron state interest – as well as their own degree of commitment to separateness – shape the capacities of de facto states to overcome this hostility.

The politics of formal recognition has to date proven largely chimerical. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have secured a handful of recognitions by United Nations member states (see Figure 16.1). This means that in a technical sense, Abkhazia and South Ossetia can now claim to comply with the constitutive school of state formation, which stipulates recognition by other states as the key factor in the formation of new states, as opposed to just the declaratory school that relies on empirical criteria alone. Legalistic nuances aside, however, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been recruited into an axis of states within which several members are regarded as international pariahs. Their recognitions are the fruit of geopolitical point-scoring and a combination of Russian lobbying and ‘chequebook diplomacy’ utterly removed from the quality of their state-building efforts (or lack thereof). Furthermore, with the exception of Syria and Russia itself, these have all been distant states with little to offer in terms of potential bilateral relations. The NKR by contrast has not been recognised by any UN member-state, nor are there plausible scenarios for this to happen without Armenia recognising it first. Between them the South Caucasus de facto states have only one embassy in a United Nations state other than Russia: Abkhazia’s embassy in Venezuela, founded in 2009 and upgraded to embassy status in 2010. Abkhazia and the NKR nevertheless field a much larger number of honorary consuls and plenipotentiary representatives in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, as well as some Russian federal regions (see Table 16.2).

Informal relations, transnational networks and ‘sub-state diplomacy’ offer alternative avenues for the pursuit of de facto state foreign policy. These strategies do not aim at formal recognition by other states as such, but at the incremental normalisation of secession and of the de facto state as a distinct political actor on the international stage. This has been described as ‘Taiwanisation’, referring to the experience of Taiwan as an unrecognised state whose existence has nevertheless come to be largely accepted as normal and unremarkable by outside actors (Ker-Lindsay 2012: 15–16), although Taiwan has never been accepted by
its parent state, which has increasingly asserted a ‘One China’ policy. For Abkhazia, a sense of kinship with the Circassian diaspora was a significant lifeline during the republic’s isolation in the 1990s. Organisations such as the Caucasian-Abkhazian Solidarity Committee have played both humanitarian and political go-between roles facilitating informal contacts between Abkhazia and Turkey (Frear 2014: 96). Abkhazia has also effectively instrumented international sporting and cultural events where the strictures against the participation of unrecognised states are more relaxed. In a unanimous vote among the International Domino Federation’s 25 members, Sukhum/i was selected as the site for the 2011 World Domino Championships. According to local journalist Ruslan Tarba, the significance of the tournament lay in the fact that ‘People are going to come here and be able to see that we

| Table 16.2 South Caucasus de facto states: recognition and counter-recognition strategies |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Recognition (UN states) | Retracted recognitions (UN states) | Favourable resolutions (sub-state level) | Selected resolutions affirming parent state territorial integrity |
| Abkhazia | Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Syria | Vanuatu, Tuvalu | UNSC Resolutions 876, 896, 906, 937, 971, 993, 1036, 1065, 1077, 1096, 1124, 1150, 1187, 1225, 1287, 1462, 1494, 1524, 1554, 1582, 1615, 1716, 1752, 1781, 1808; Annual UNGA Resolutions, e.g. GA/11785, GA/11919; PACE Resolutions 1633, 1647, 1683; US Congress Resolution 660 |
| South Ossetia | Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Syria | Tuvalu | UNSC Resolutions 822, 853, 874, 884; UNGA Resolution GA/10693; PACE Resolution 1416; US: Arizona, New Mexico |
| Nagorno Karabakh | US: Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, Louisiana, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Michigan, Colorado; Australia: New South Wales; Spain: Basque Country | | | 

* United Nations resolutions often reaffirm previous resolutions, so that all such resolutions on Georgia, for example, can be taken as re-affirming its territorial integrity through the use of language such as ‘a settlement of the political status of Abkhazia within the State of Georgia’. Only those explicitly affirming territorial integrity are listed here.
are not wild men climbing in palm trees, carrying automatic weapons’ (quoted in Schwirtz 2011). In 2016, Abkhazia hosted (and won) the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (CONIFA) cup; the tournament revisited the Caucasus in 2019, being hosted by the NKR in 2019. Such exercises in soft legitimacy are inconsequential for the realpolitik of state recognition, but they generate friendly coverage of ‘normal’, even banal, events.

Owing to the capacities of the Armenian diaspora, it is the NKR that has most successfully pursued sub-state diplomacy. Despite remaining unrecognised by any United Nations member, the NKR can claim strides towards a ‘Taiwanisation’ of its situation through a succession of favourable resolutions by sub-state legislatures in major Western states (see Table 16.2). These are not ‘recognitions’ as such, but appeals to the federal state government in each case to favourably consider the NKR’s claim to self-determination and independence. They emulate the considerable lobbying and advocacy experience of the Armenian diaspora in seeking recognition of the Armenian genocide. As in the latter’s case, official state positions are unlikely to be altered by sub-state diplomacy alone. Yet they function effectively as an incremental legitimisation of the NKR as a distinct political entity.

Crucial though diasporas have been to the networking and fundraising capacities of Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh, efforts to draw on diasporas in a more tangible way to repopulate de facto states have met with limited success. Up to 4,000 repatriates are thought to have settled in Abkhazia, but with uncertain long-term prospects. In Nagorny Karabakh significant numbers of diasporans have arrived only as a result of extraneous events, such as Armenians fleeing the Syrian civil war. In comparison, South Ossetia lacks a diaspora, networking capacity and will to perform separate sovereignty: its foreign policy, so to speak, appears to be limited to negotiating the parameters of association with Russia.

**Parent states: between counter-recognition strategies and peace processes**

Much of the literature on de facto states questions a normative preoccupation with their relationship with their parent state. It nevertheless remains the case that parent states retain significant veto power over the trajectories that de facto states can follow. Parent states have the odds stacked in their favour due to the innate aversion of the international state system to unilateral secession. Moreover, Georgia and Azerbaijan can cite ethnic cleansing as additional grounds for the South Caucasus de facto states to be deemed illegitimate. It is the duty, and not prerogative, of states not to recognise entities violating *jus cogens* peremptory norms. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan have also pursued counter-recognition strategies, aimed at maintaining a collective front against the recognition of their ‘breakaway regions’.

At a practical level, this has involved substantial investment in diplomatic representation abroad, building capacity of national delegations to the United Nations General Assembly, and the lobbying of major states and multilateral blocs to publicly affirm the principle of territorial integrity. The financial inducements of chequebook diplomacy have also been deployed with smaller states. These efforts have been broadly successful, although their role in the diminutive number of actual recognitions is hard to specify. Georgia has succeeded in securing plentiful United Nations resolutions affirming its territorial integrity and European resolutions characterising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as territories illegally occupied by Russia. Georgia also appeared to score a diplomatic coup in 2014 by persuading South Pacific micro-states Vanuatu and Tuvalu to retract their recognitions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia respectively. In Vanuatu’s case ambiguity, and a discernible element of
diplomatic farce, accompanied claim and counter-claim that relations were being pursued with both Georgia and Abkhazia (Bullough 2014).

With Armenia rather than Russia in the role of adversarial patron-state, Azerbaijan has never found the same unequivocal support for its territorial integrity. In 2008 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 62/243, entitled ‘The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan’, was to Baku’s dismay opposed by France, Russia and the United States, three United Nations Security Council members and the three co-Chairs of the Minsk Group within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan; another 100 states abstained. Yet Azerbaijan did secure a significant win in a June 2015 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Relating to a case brought by six Azerbaijani Kurds displaced as a result of the conflict, the ECtHR deemed that owing to the degree of support to the NKR, Armenia exercised ‘effective control’ over it, and thereby extra-territorial jurisdiction (ECtHR 2015).

Notwithstanding Syria’s addition in May 2018 to the short list of states recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and overt involvement in eastern Ukraine from 2014 powerfully reinforced the wider non-recognition trend. Where the success of counter-recognition strategies is more debatable is in their effectiveness against the creeping legitimisation of de facto states. Discursively, Georgian and Azerbaijani counter-recognition strategies have converged on the promotion of a singular hegemonic narrative depicting de facto states as ‘occupied territories’ annexed by a foreign power. In the aftermath of the 2008 war, President Saakashvili introduced a Law on Occupied Territories criminalising any activity that was not strictly humanitarian in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Azerbaijan similarly depicts the situation in Nagorny Karabakh as occupation and annexation by Armenia, submerging any distinction between the former oblast’ originally disputed with Armenians and territories occupied by Armenian forces in 1992–94. It has invested considerable funds to ‘de-Taiwanise’ the NKR through the pursuit of sub-state resolutions re-affirming its territorial integrity and recognising the massacre of several hundred Azerbaijani civilians that took place in February 1992 near the town of Khojaly in Nagorny Karabakh as an act of genocide. As of the end of 2018, 33 sub-state legislatures had passed acts commemorating the Khojaly massacre, including 19 in the US (Justice for Khojaly 2018). Azerbaijan also maintains a black list of visitors to Nagorny Karabakh that it deems to be unauthorised and who are regarded as persona non grata. This is a prominent mechanism in its counter-recognition strategy and means to articulate an ongoing claim to the territory.

Analytically, the validity of ‘occupation’ as a description of the situation in de facto states can be debated. Normatively, however, it restricts the scope of any external policy engaging with contested territories (Coppieters 2018). By exclusively framing them as occupied territories, parent states can effectively isolate de facto states. But without generating alternative modes of engaging the populations within them, parent-state claims to be committed to peaceful resolution of conflict lose plausibility. The prospects for a negotiated peace are, however, deeply mired in the politics of legitimacy for parent-state leaders and intractable international mediation. Since 2008 the Geneva International Discussions (GID) have brought Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia to the table, and provide a platform for limited tactical cooperation and information exchange. There is no strategic vision, however, for the resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the Armenian–Azerbaijani case, there has been a strategic vision contained within the Basic (‘Madrid’) Principles negotiated between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan under the auspices of the OSCE’s Minsk Group since 2004. This involves the conferring of interim status on Nagorny

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Karabakh, pending a legally binding popular vote on the territory’s final status. This vision is all but invisible in public discourse across the conflict, however, which continues to propagate incompatible visions of renewed autonomy in Nagorny Karabakh (in Azerbaijan) and its self-determination as a separate entity (in Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh). Karabakh Armenians do not participate in the formal peace talks; their contacts with Azerbaijanis are limited to a small number of Track-II peacebuilding initiatives.

Beyond the intractable frameworks of formal peace processes, efforts to articulate a ‘peace offer’ by engaging de facto states face a triple bottle-neck (Comai 2017c). They must be simultaneously acceptable to (1) parent states fearful of creeping legitimation or support to illicit state-building; (2) de facto states fearful of creeping reintegration and renewed subordination; (3) international organisations typically predisposed to see only activities within conflict resolution rubrics as legitimate. These dynamics have been visible in Abkhazia, the only South Caucasus de facto state where any serious energy has been dedicated to elaborating strategies of engagement (de Waal 2018: 19–33). In 2009 EU Special Representative Peter Semneby elaborated what was termed a Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) (Fischer 2010). The policy envisaged support to local civil society, active information campaigns about the EU, education and economic exchanges and travel facilitation. The policy was effectively drowned out, however, by the massive inpouring of Russian subsidies and infrastructure, and by Georgia’s promotion of its own policy in 2010, entitled the State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation. This covered similar if narrower ground to the NREP, but with various strings attached such as the requirement that status-neutral travel documents would still be produced (and collected) in Georgia. A new iteration of the policy in 2018, entitled A Step to a Better Future, offered residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia a range of opportunities and services. These initiatives are nevertheless perceived by their target audiences as being aimed in practice at channelling interactions into a bilateral dynamic with Georgia, rather than a widening set of horizons with other actors. Even the presence of a Georgian country code in otherwise neutral travel documents is ‘an unacceptable deference to Georgian dominance for most Abkhaz’ (Anshba 2018).

**Conclusion**

The de facto states of the South Caucasus have survived for the best part of 30 years, that is to say, almost half as long as the 70-year period in which they existed as autonomous units within or associated with their parent states in the Soviet Union. There is little to suggest that they will not continue to exist for many more years. This is because on the one hand, the international state system is unlikely to accommodate them in any configuration other than as de facto states. On the other hand, parent states appear unlikely to develop capacities to either make peace with de facto states, or to coerce them into submission. The only certainty seems to be that the normalisation of de facto states is a necessary threshold for their transformation to another status, whatever that status may be. Parent states can effectively marginalise de facto states, prevent their recognition by other states and cultivate insecurity, isolation and siege mentalities within them. Yet strategies completely bypassing or punishing the populations of de facto states also expose parent state pledges of autonomy or renewed constitutional settlements as baseless rhetoric. Integration with the patron state becomes the only viable alternative to isolation, even for those de facto states where separate sovereignty – rather than unification – is the ideology driving secession. In short, counter-recognition strategies have not developed into effective counter-secession strategies.
Dismissals of the de facto states of the South Caucasus as epiphenomena of contemporary geopolitics ignore the fact that they materialise aspirations to status and sovereignty that go back at least a century. Viewed in a framework of the *longue durée* of Caucasian history, they represent the latest iteration of highly localised forms of political organisation – a counterpoint to distant suzerains and aspiring sovereigns and resistant to incorporation by either – stretching back many more. The forms that de facto statehood will take will continue to be constrained, driving robust debate over whether statehood is indeed the appropriate framework for understanding these entities. Such debates are likely to remain inconclusive in the legal sphere, while holding rich potential to expand and refine our understanding of some of the most elementary and compelling questions in political science, such as the nature of states, and the reasons for their rise and fall. As noted by Alexander Iskandaryan, ‘The very existence of unrecognised states on the modern political map opens up a whole new avenue to the review of these classical questions’ (Iskandaryan 2015: 18). Far from such debates, a prosaic attitude often encountered on the ground in de facto states suggests that ‘whether the outside world recognises us or not, we exist and will continue to do so’.

Notes

1 Nagorny Karabakh denotes a geographic space, while NKR denotes a political one, if unrecognised.
2 In South Ossetia’s case, a large number of South Ossetian migrants live in North Ossetia as a result of the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict in the early 1990s (see Chapter 15), adding to the sense of cross-border kinship.
3 Place-names are contested. Outsiders have little choice but to use messy formulas acknowledging distinct traditions, in this case Abkhazian place-names with and without the distinctive Georgian marker – i.
4 Mingrelians, speaking a distinct vernacular language and with strong regional traditions, are widely seen in Georgia as one among many regional identities making up the Georgian nation.
5 All of the post-Soviet de facto states recognise each other, but in practice have little to offer one another apart from symbolic affirmation.

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