

Developing a New Research Agenda on Post-Soviet De Facto States

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Abstract The scholarship on post-Soviet de facto states has structurally focused on issues related to their contested status, and has long assumed that these entities are transient phenomena. In this article I propose a path towards a new research agenda on post-Soviet de facto states based on two main arguments. Firstly, scholars researching post-Soviet de facto states should start from the working assumption that these entities will continue to exist in the current configuration for the foreseeable future, and proceed in their integration with the patron. Secondly, they should seek new terms of comparison beyond contested territories and conflict regions, and they should apply the same terminology to these entities and ask at least some of the same research questions as they would do when studying uncontested territories.

Summary 1 De Facto States are not Transient Phenomena. – 2 Terms of Comparison. – 3 De Facto States and Other Small Dependent Jurisdictions. – 4 Russian Assistance. – 5 Conclusions.

Keywords De facto states. Post-soviet. Conflicts. Small dependent jurisdictions. Caucasus.

Since the concept of ‘de facto state’ has first been formalised in its contemporary understanding by Scott Pegg (1998), there has been a growing literature on de facto states in general, and post-Soviet de facto states in particular, which has effectively developed into a diverse yet distinct sub-field (Pegg 2017). There is a broad agreement on what a de facto state is: in line with the minimalistic definition proposed by Ó Beacháin, Comai, and Tsurtsunia-Zurabashvili (2016, 442), de facto states can be understood as “entities that have achieved and maintained internal sovereignty over an area for an extended period, with a degree of internal legitimacy but only limited formal recognition at the international level, or none at all”. Even the apparently endless terminological debate on how to call them is eventually coming to an end, with only ‘de facto state’ and ‘unrecognized state’ effectively in widespread use.¹ There is a growing number of researchers working on this subject who are producing a diverse range of outputs, yet

1 For an extended debate of alternative definitions of the concept, see Toomla 2014, 33-58.

most research on de facto states still focuses on issues related to conflict and non-recognition. This trend is structural, since after all there is a meaningful interest in international academic and policy-making circles towards a place such as South Ossetia and not, for example, towards the Georgian region of Imereti, largely because of the contested status of the former.

However, exclusive focus on conflict and recognition issues risks being a distraction from prevalent dynamics on the ground. As I will argue, to overcome these limitations it is necessary to broaden the research focus to include non-conflict dynamics by acknowledging that these entities are not transient, and by finding alternative terms of reference beyond other unrecognized states or conflict regions. In this context, I will mostly refer to established cases of post-Soviet de facto states (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh), and will not explicitly discuss the contested ‘people’s republics’ in Donetsk and Lugansk. As of this writing, they should indeed be considered de facto states, but due to the fact that prevalent political and economic dynamics there have not yet stabilised some of the arguments advanced in this article do not (yet) fully apply to them.

1 De Facto States are not Transient Phenomena

Especially in earlier years of studies on de facto states, a widespread conviction that de facto states are transient phenomena has led scholars to focus on various avenues for surpassing the status issue by looking at some form or another of integration with the parent state. Analysing the literature on de facto states, Broers (2013, 65) suggested that starting from the early 2000s it was becoming increasingly clear that these entities were not ephemeral phenomena. Acknowledging this fact has indeed led scholars to research what it was that enabled their continued existence (King 2001; Lynch 2004), yet it did not change the core assumption that they would not last long. As of 2006, one of the main experts on these territories would still argue that a “federal settlement [...] must be regarded as the most likely end to most unrecognized quasi-states” (Kolstø 2006, 738), which was the established wisdom at the time (Coppieters, Darchiashvili, Akaba 2000; Potier 2001; Coppieters et al. 2004).² In his 2009 book on de facto states, Geldenhuys (2009, 45) would still matter-of-factly write that “although all of today’s contested states have been in existence for well over ten years and many could survive several more years, they are all ultimately transient phenomena expected to disappear”. Even an edited book on the subject that aimed to allow “such entities to be viewed as, if

2 As of 2000, even Vyacheslav Chirikba, who would later become minister of foreign affairs of Abkhazia, was still openly reasoning on constitutional arrangements that would see Abkhazia and Georgia within a common state (Chirikba 2000).

not ‘regular’ features of the international system, at least ones of a more perennial rather than anomalous nature” (Caspersen, Stansfield 2011, 20), concludes with a chapter that focuses on options for reintegration with the parent state and explicitly refuses to take in consideration prolonged existence in their current status or further integration with the patron as plausible options (Anderson 2011, 195).

Widespread reluctance to posit that *de facto* states are here to stay is likely due to the fact that they have predominantly been analysed as conflicts to be solved, possibly in a way that is compatible with prevalent international norms, rather than as a type of jurisdiction that could well remain part of the international system for decades to come. However, as the experience of violent conflict has largely disappeared from the daily life of local residents and the vast majority of domestic political debates bears no direct relationship to either conflict or the parent state, seeking to explain prevalent political and economic dynamics primarily through the prism of conflict becomes increasingly problematic. Even if the situation is far from static – they are “Not frozen!” as the title of a recent publication emphatically highlighted (Fischer 2016) – dynamics have somewhat stabilised in comparison to the early post-war years. Fundamentally, residents, *de facto* authorities, as well as their patron, have started to think for the long-term, thus marking a change from strictly conflict-related dynamics that largely characterised the 1990s. Even in the case of Nagorno Karabakh, where the possibility of full-scale war looms large, the process of state building continues unabated and both local actors and external supporters are planning for the long term.

Indeed, in recent years some publications have dealt in more detail with the dynamics taking place in these entities without building their arguments around the conflict issue, for example analysing domestic electoral processes (Ó Beacháin 2012, 2015; Stefanczak, Connolly 2015) or the legislative framework introduced by *de facto* authorities (Comai, Venturi 2015). It is in this context that I argue that research on *de facto* states should be based on the assumption that current arrangements will last for the foreseeable future. Since neither widespread internationally recognised independence or reintegration with the parent state is in sight, studies aimed at understanding and explaining – rather than changing – the object of research should focus on the current configuration of these territories, based on *de facto* statehood and strong (and possibly increasing) integration with their patron.³

3 Of course, research that is explicitly oriented at policy-making or conflict-resolution may well take a different perspective.

2 Terms of Comparison

Scholars who have published research on post-Soviet de facto states, while often with a discernible area studies background, have ventured with comparisons including unrecognized states in other world regions to gain new insights and favour theory development. Caspersen's (2012) volume is a case in point and at the time of this writing clearly represents an essential point of reference for students of de facto states. From their side, scholars who worked on de facto states in other world regions, such as Somaliland (Richards, Smith 2015) and Iraqi Kurdistan (Voller 2012), made reference to research on the post-Soviet cases, since the existence of a cluster of cases favoured a fruitful scholarly debate on key concepts.

However, even when the focus of research was not limited to a specific world region, terms of comparison have mostly been conflict regions and separatist territories, including in large-scale longitudinal studies such as the one proposed by Florea (2014, 2017), who created a dataset with yearly data starting in 1945 with figures and indicators for various aspects of all entities that fit his definition of de facto state. While approaching the study of post-Soviet de facto states, to the traditional question 'what is it a case of?', most scholars have (implicitly or explicitly) answered that they are primarily contested territories, either in a class of their own with other unrecognized states, or to be compared with (post-)conflict regions.⁴

This has been identified as one of the issues hindering further development of the scholarship on de facto states. Seymour (Closson et al. 2013, 679-80), for example, argued that "the study of de facto states needs to move beyond the narrow focus on a heterogeneous set of unrecognized states", partly because comparing, for example, Taiwan and Nagorno Karabakh may not be really useful to gain a better understanding of prevalent dynamics in these territories. Basing case selection on international recognition (or rather, lack thereof) has clear benefits for scholars specifically interested in the status issue or international diplomacy, but as the focus of the research shifts to other aspects, its limits become more apparent. Pegg (2017, 21-2) similarly argued that there is a need for more comparative work, including not only de facto states but also "other adjacent phenomena".

Post-Soviet de facto states are by all accounts contested territories, by definition lacking widespread international recognition. They are also post-Soviet, largely dependent on a patron, as well as of very small in size: all of them would fall under the most established definition of micro-states,

4 Berg and Kuusk's (2010) article on degrees of sovereignty is a partial exception, since they include in their index, along de facto states, also dependent territories, autonomous regions, governments in exile and de jure states. Isachenko and Schlichte's (2007) working paper comparing dynamics in Transnistria and Uganda focusing in particular on tax collection is by all accounts an exception, even if limited in scope.

if they were internationally recognised. Their being post-Soviet has been structurally kept in consideration in most analyses, in particular those by area studies specialists. Dependence has also been variously debated, even if mostly as a proxy to establish to what extent these should be considered *de facto* independent, rather than puppet states (Caspersen 2008; Berg, Kamilova 2012), or to highlight a situation that has been characterised as paradoxical, i.e. the observation that “in their fight for independence, the secessionist entities are quickly ‘outsourcing’ this independence to another state” (Popescu 2006, 8).⁵ But is this situation so unusual? As I will argue in the next section, not at all: it is on the contrary very common for small jurisdictions to be dependent on external support from a patron, and to seek further integration with it rather than struggle to achieve more independence. So what seems paradoxical at first sight becomes unsurprising as soon as post-Soviet *de facto* states are conceptualised as small dependent jurisdictions, rather than secessionist entities.

3 De Facto States and Other Small Dependent Jurisdictions

I have argued at length elsewhere the merits of conceptualising post-Soviet *de facto* states primarily as small dependent jurisdictions in order to deal with a number of potential research questions (Comai 2018b, 193). Such an approach – it is worth highlighting – does not imply discounting the impact of lack of recognition or the (post-)conflict dimension, as this conceptualisation should not be understood as exclusive, but rather as complementary to established characterisations. Small dependent jurisdictions are located in different world regions, and have seemingly very little in common with post-Soviet *de facto* states. Indeed, both sovereign and non-sovereign territories as different as Greenland and the Marshall Islands would fit the definition:

entities with a substantial degree of self-government, a population of less than one million, and structural assistance that routinely covers for more than one-third of public expenditure without leaving a residue of debt can be considered small dependent jurisdictions. (Comai 2018b, 183)⁶

⁵ Caspersen (2009, 49) also made reference to “the paradoxical situation that external dependence is necessary for *de facto* independence (from the *de jure* parent state) to be maintained”.

⁶ For reference, see also the partly overlapping definition of “partially independent territories” proposed by Rezvani (2016, 271): “PITs can be defined (and distinguished from other forms) by their nationalistically distinct populations, their constitutionally unincorporated status, and their entrenched powers that they divide and share with a sovereign

In spite of the evident differences, a number of dynamics in these two sets of entities follow similar patterns. For example, the treaties of alliance between Russia on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other, (Kremlin.ru 2014, 2015; Ambrosio, Lange 2016) resemble closely the Compacts of Association between the United States of America and Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau (e.g. Shuster 2009). The Compacts include a defence agreement (these countries do not have an own army, and offer exclusive basing rights to the US), financial assistance covering for most of budget expenditure, a requirement for foreign policy to be coordinated with the patron, freedom of movement to the US, and a number of other measures aimed at providing technical assistance for strengthening local institutions and capacity building. Financial support is planned for the long term, and military cooperation, technical assistance, and overall support are expected to continue indefinitely. In brief, the core components of these agreements broadly correspond with those at the centre of the Russia-sponsored treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

While the treaties themselves are revealing, the dependent relationship they create has far-reaching consequences on the political economy of these places. In an important theoretical article, Broers (2015) discussed at length the impact of external assistance on the political economy and, as a consequence, on the nature of the political regimes of post-Soviet de facto states: dynamics related to aid ultimately shape the political system and the citizen-power relationship. After Russia's recognition in 2008, Abkhazia turned from a subsistent political economy, to a political economy largely based on rents coming in the form of assistance from Russia. In this context, "the ruling elite operates as a 'monopoly mediator', controlling the interface between exogenous resource opportunities and local society" (Broers 2015, 275). While export-led (or tourism-led) development remains in principle possible for post-Soviet de facto states (as they do for other small dependent jurisdictions), the predominant role of the patron in enabling such opportunities reinforces their dependence and fundamentally shapes how local elites struggle for legitimacy.

This is true, for example, also in Transnistria, where there is a relatively strong industrial sector that exports most of its goods not towards Russia, but rather towards Moldova and EU economies. Indeed, local factories can produce competitive goods largely because of the structural subsidies they receive from Russia, including gas and electricity at subsidised prices. In Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, the budget of de facto authorities, as well as the pension system, is largely sponsored by Russia: Russian assistance is effectively the main driver of the local economy. In these

(core) state. They also possess most powers over their domestic affairs, some powers over foreign policy, but no powers over the external use of the military".

territories, the flow of remittances that fundamentally contributes to the incomes of an important share of households (in particular in Transnistria) also comes mainly from Russia. In the case of Nagorno Karabakh, more than 50 per cent of the budget of de facto authorities is directly (and officially) sponsored by Yerevan, and assistance from diaspora organisations fundamentally contributes to the building and maintenance of infrastructure and social services.⁷ As appears from this brief characterisation, all post-Soviet de facto states fit to some extent the MIRAB model introduced by Bertram and Watters (1985; Bertram 1999) to characterise Pacific islands whose economy is based on the one hand on migration and remittances, and on the other on aid and bureaucracy (i.e. an unusually high share of residents working for the state apparatus).

Such dynamics inevitably have consequences on the practices needed by a given ruling group in de facto states to ensure their political survival. As in recent years (with the exception of Nagorno Karabakh) security threats appear less imminent, local elites must demonstrate to their electorate their capability to deliver public goods and services in order to ensure domestic legitimacy. Given the fact that in the post-2008 context this capability is largely dependent on external assistance from Russia, they must also make sure to be on good terms with their main patron. Indeed, the claim of being best suited to ensure continued assistance from the patron is inevitably a key component of electoral competition, as appeared most evidently in the 2016 presidential elections in Transnistria (Kolstø, Blakisrud 2017).

Again, this situation is not unique to post-Soviet de facto states, but rather one they have in common with small dependent jurisdictions around the globe. In some instances, local elites actively seek further integration with the patron and loudly declare their readiness to give up local self-government in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the metropolitan power (this is the case of South Ossetia, as well as - for example - France's Mayotte). In others, such as Abkhazia, the political leadership must walk a tightrope: on the one hand they must demonstrate their loyalty to the patron to ensure flows of assistance, on the other, they must demonstrate to their domestic constituents that they are not renouncing independence and that they are standing firm on certain issues.⁸ The structural tensions

7 For a brief outline of external assistance to post-Soviet de facto states, see in particular Comai 2017a. On Armenian diaspora assistance to Nagorno Karabakh, see in particular Adriaans 2017.

8 The public debate in Abkhazia on the right to buy land for non-citizens of Abkhazia (including Russians), for example, highlights this structural tension. Scientific surveys of public opinion have been conducted in post-Soviet de facto states and remain a key point of reference for gauging public attitudes in these territories (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, Toal 2011; Toal, O'Loughlin 2016, 2017).

between different types of legitimacy, including the contrast between internal and external legitimacy (by definition, *de facto* states have a degree of the former and lack the latter), have previously been discussed in the literature on *de facto* states,⁹ yet again without pointing at the fact that domestic struggles for legitimacy follow similar logics in other dependent jurisdictions on both sides of the sovereignty divide.

Among non-sovereign jurisdictions, a geographically closer and relevant set of terms of comparison is that of sub-state entities in the Russian federation. Along the key set of indicators that characterise the above-mentioned MIRAB model, republics in the Northern Caucasus apparently present remarkable similarities with post-Soviet *de facto* states. Besides, a significant part of budget expenditure in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is determined jointly by the local authorities in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, and the Russian Ministry for North Caucasus. On the whole, the considerable similarities among these two sets of jurisdictions could serve to highlight some of the aspects that are actually peculiar to unrecognized states.

4 Russian Assistance

Previous research has acknowledged the high level of dependence of post-Soviet *de facto* states on their patron, yet it has not approached some of the questions that routinely appear in studies dealing with external assistance. For example, is this assistance effective? Does it lead to economic growth (e.g. Doucouliagos, Paldam 2009)? What are the risks of aid volatility in this context (e.g. Iulai 2014)? Does large-scale, sustained aid lead to the 'resource curse' phenomenon and crowd out other economic sectors, slowing potential growth outside the aid-dependent booming public sector (Fraenkel 2006)? And does financial and technical assistance effectively contribute to state building, or does it contribute to corruption and other destabilizing dynamics? These latter questions are often at the core also of studies on international assistance in post-conflict contexts, including for example Afghanistan (e.g. Zürcher 2012) and, perhaps more relevantly for the analysis of assistance to *de facto* states, Kosovo (e.g. Lemay-Hébert, Murshed 2016). Yet such questions – prominent in other contexts – barely appear in the literature on post-Soviet *de facto* states.

The lack of scholarship on these issues in relation to post-Soviet *de facto* states has a number of possible explanations. Some of them are simply related to the relatively small volume of scholarship on these territories, and the fact that many researchers who dealt with them have a distinct

⁹ See in particular Caspersen 2015. For further debates on legitimacy in this context, see also Berg 2012; Krasner, Risse 2014; and Pegg, Kolstø 2015.

area studies background. Perhaps, the fact that expenses for aid to these territories are covered by the Russian taxpayer, rather than from the coffers of Western governments, makes questions about aid-effectiveness less urgent for English-language scholars.¹⁰ Broadly speaking, however, there seems to be also a reluctance to refer to Russian presence in these territories using established concepts and frameworks of analysis.

Even when Russia's implementation of certain forms of assistance is quite distant from established international practices, it may however still be useful to apply the terminology and analytical tools used in other contexts, even if only to highlight the differences. For example, a rich debate on Russian peacekeeping in its 'near abroad' in the 1990s (Baev 1994; Allison 1994; Shashenkov 1994; Baev 1999; Mackinlay, Cross 2003) has allowed gaining important insights on the peculiar dynamics sustaining Russian peacekeeping missions. By the same token, analysing Russian assistance to post-Soviet de facto states as a (possibly, but not necessarily) *sui generis* case of externally-led state building may also prove to offer valuable insights. Even applying a concept such as 'security sector reform', often associated with a democratisation agenda,¹¹ to - for example - Russia's assistance in revamping Abkhazia's police, military and customs service may contribute to shed light on the impact of Russia's 'occupation' on local governance dynamics, and Moscow's role in the region. It is worth highlighting that applying the language of 'state building' and 'security sector reform' does not imply a positive value judgement on these policies. For example, even scholars who may normatively disapprove of the US policy in Iraq, and use terms such as 'invasion' and 'occupation' to describe it, would still apply to American assistance in the region concepts such as institution building, development aid, and security sector reform, even if only to criticise how such activities have been implemented.

5 Conclusions

There are two arguments and one corollary at the core of this article. Firstly, studies focused on post-Soviet de facto states aimed at understand-

¹⁰ The European Union, international organisations such as UNHCR and UNDP, as well as a number of NGOs often sponsored by Western governments, do provide assistance to some of these entities (in particular to Abkhazia and Transnistria). The sums involved, however, are relatively small when compared to the size of financial assistance directed towards other conflict regions.

¹¹ For example, Sedra (2007, 7) pointed out how the model of security sector reform has been associated with "a normative framework featuring a holistic vision of reform that balanced the need to enhance the effectiveness of the security forces with the imperative of entrenching principles of democratic governance and the rule of law".

ing and explaining – rather than changing – the object of research should be based on the working assumption that these entities will continue to exist in their current configuration (unrecognized, dependent on external assistance, and integrating with their patron) for the foreseeable future. This understanding impacts not only research that deals with potential long-term developments in these territories, but fundamentally defines the research questions that should be considered meaningful and relevant to understand the present situation.

Secondly, the literature on post-Soviet *de facto* states has structurally focused on issues related to the contested status of these entities, and terms of comparison have been (with very few exceptions) either other unrecognized states or conflict regions. Partly as a consequence, a number of research questions that have featured prominently in the scholarship on jurisdictions that share many similarities with them (but whose status is not contested) have been substantially ignored. Introducing new terms of comparison and complementary conceptualizations of *de facto* states enables to look at them beyond the issues of contested status and conflict, and to achieve a better understanding of a whole range of dynamics that remain so far under-unexplored. Scholarly traditions largely unrelated to conflict studies may provide useful starting points for developing meaningful research questions, using established terminology, analytical tools, and concepts. Theoretical explorations drawing, for example, on the literature on post-colonialism (Broers 2015) and on small dependent jurisdictions (Comai 2018b, 2018a), should open the way for more extended empirical research. Alternative research methods – such as structured analysis of web contents (Comai 2015, 2017b) – that are increasingly common in other research fields but still uncommon in area studies could also fruitfully be applied to the study of these entities to facilitate data collection and comparison.

As pointed out at the very beginning of this article, there is a significant interest towards post-Soviet *de facto* states in policy-making and academic circles almost exclusively because of their contested status. As a consequence, it would then seem only appropriate for scholars and experts to focus exactly on these aspects. Yet, by enhancing our understanding of prevalent dynamics that characterise the economy, the struggle for legitimacy and political competition within these entities, as well as the impact of external dependence and patron-client relations, will enable finding better answers to research questions related to the status issue, as well as to point at more effective approaches to overcome the current stalemate in conflict negotiations.

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