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Indice

Patronalism and Political Systems of the Post-Soviet De Facto States: The Cases of Abkhazian and Transnistrian Resilience

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Abstract – What structures of the post-Soviet de facto States have enabled them to persist and develop despite international sanctions and conflicts with their parent States? Why have such entities continued to function even with a weakened patron State? Building on the concept of post-Soviet patronal politics, this article answers these questions in terms of these States' specific political systems. Through analysis and comparison of the Abkhazian and Transnistrian cases, the author argues that the political systems these entities developed in the 1990s–2010s, as much as patron State support, have given them longevity and resilience. Beyond discussing factors in these entities' durable existence, the article describes the structure of their political systems, their history and their role in international relations.

Introduction

The third wave of global democratization had many regional consequences, including the liberalization of the USSR, its dissolution, and the establishment of post-Soviet States[1] [2]. The late Soviet national-democratic movements launched the "parade of sovereignties", which culminated in the creation of 15 independent States in 1991 and their international recognition over the next several years; this "parade" also resulted in the establishment of four post-Soviet de facto States: Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnitria[3]. Since that period, these de facto

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[1] J.F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-91*, Washington, 1997, p. 7-ff.; K. Brzechczyn, *Paths to Democracy of the Post-Soviet Republics: Attempt at Conceptualization*, Berlin, 2007, p. 8-ff.

[2] I would like to express my gratitude to Timm Beichelt, Daria Isachenko, Sonja Prebius, and Gerard Toal for their feedback and comments on the first draft of this article.

[3] On these processes, see M.R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Violence and the State: Political Authority and Contentious Repertoires in the Former USSR*, "Comparative Politics", no. 30 (1998), pp. 402-4; R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed:*

States have evolved in permanent conflict with their parent States and under international sanctions, which has caused them to create specific political systems able to respond adequately to the existential challenges facing them, ensuring their endurance.

The contemporary social and political sciences know much about the functions and types of States[4]. Over the course of the long history of States and their academic study, a common understanding was achieved that a State is a political entity, structured in a political system, able to (1) defend its territory from external threat, (2) exclusively control its population, (3) provide this population with exclusive services, (4) collect resources necessary to fulfil its functions and (5) be recognized by other States as an element in international relations[5]. This functionalist definition, however, relates only to the case of the regular political entities that exist in today's world.

Beyond such entities, there are, for example, *de facto* (DF) and/ or *non- or partially recognized* (NPR) States that have only some of the above abilities. A DF State is a political entity that has seceded from its parent State and can fully or partially fulfil only the first four functions. A non-recognized State is a political entity that fulfils the core functions of a State but does not have international

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Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe. Cambridge, 1996, pp. 12-33; T. Hoch - V. Kopecek (eds), *De Facto States in Eurasia*, London, 2020, p. 7-ff.; E.W. Walker, *Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union*. New York, 2003, pp. 4-11.

[4] On these issues, see V. Epps - P.R. Williams, *What Makes a State?*, "American Society of International Law. Proceedings of the Annual Meeting", Cambridge, 2012; F. Fukuyama, *State-building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, Ithaca, 2019; P. Tikuisis *et al.*, *Typology of State Types: Persistence and Transition*, "International Interactions", no. 41(3) (2015), pp. 565-582; C. Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990*, Cambridge, 1990; A. Ghani - C. Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Structured World*, Oxford, 2008; B. Stanislawski, *Para-States, Quasi-States, and Black Spots: Perhaps Not States, But Not 'Ungoverned Territories,' Either*, "International Studies Review", no. 10 (2008), pp. 366-396; S. Ziaja *et al.*, *Constellations of Fragility: An Empirical Typology of States*, "Studies in Comparative International Development", no. 54 (2019), pp. 299-321.

[5] On the functions of the State and international recognition, see the discussion in V. Epps - P.R. Williams, *What Makes a State?...*, cit., p. 445-ff.; A. Ghani - C. Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*, cit., pp. 7-14; T. Vu, *Studying the State Through State Formation*, "World Politics", no. 62(1) (2010), pp. 150-161.

recognition. If recognized by some States, such an entity is a partially recognized State. Usually, a DF/NPR State is contrasted with *fully recognized States* (those fulfilling all five conditions), *as-if-States* (recognized political entities that for some time do not fulfil the first four conditions) and "*black spots*" (breakaway regions with no regular governance)[6].

DF/NPR States are tied to the dynamics of their relations with *parent State* and *patron State*. A parent State is a State from which a DF State has seceded, occupying part of its internationally recognized territory. A patron State is a State that supports a DF State in implementing its core functions and represents some of its interests in the international arena[7].

There is a solid body of research on contemporary DF/NPR States, their history, economy, ideologies and role in international relations[8]. A separate branch of this research area is dedicated to the phenomenon of the post-Soviet DF/NPR States, which include Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria as well as the more recent cases of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics[9]. The first four of these post-Soviet DF/NPR States have demonstrated rather astonishing abilities to survive and develop

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[6] On the core state features and functions as well as the types of States, see A. Ghani - C. Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*, cit., p. 12-ff.; B. Stanislawski, *Para-States*, cit., p. 367; K. Pelczynska-Nalecz *et al.*, *Para-States in the Post-Soviet Area from 1991 to 2007*, "International Studies Review", no. 10 (2008), p. 371; T. Hoch - V. Kopecek, *De Facto States*, cit., pp. 2-4.

[7] On these definitions, see T. Hoch - V. Kopecek, *De Facto States*, cit., pp. 2-5; M. Minakov, *The World-system and Post-Soviet De Facto States*, in M. Minakov *et al.* (eds), *Post-Soviet Secessionism: Nation-building and State Failure After Communism*, Stuttgart, 2021, pp. 66-72; J. O'Loughlin *et al.*, *Inside the Post-Soviet De Facto States: A Comparison of Attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics", no. 55(5) (2014), pp. 423-425.

[8] See T. Bahcheli *et al.*, *De Facto States. Quest for Sovereignty*, New York, 2004; M. Dembinska - A. Campana, *Frozen Conflicts and Internal Dynamics of De Facto States: Perspectives and Directions for Research*, "International Studies Review", no. 19(2) (2017), pp. 254-278; S. Pegg, *De Facto States in the International System*, Vancouver, 1998.

[9] Hereinafter I use the term "DF/NPR State" as well as the proper names of such entities without quotation marks to facilitate reading, but this should not to be understood as a way of giving these political entities any form of legitimacy. For more on the issue of involuntary legitimation of the DF/NPR States in political studies, see O. Lennon - G. Adams, *All is Quiet on the Russian Front: Ceasefires*

despite all sanctions and conflicts. In this article, I want to focus on two interrelated questions: which characteristics of these entities' political systems have enabled them to exist and develop despite international sanctions and permanent conflict with their parent States? Why have they continued to function even with a weakened patron State, such as Russia since 2022?

Many researchers explain the DF States' efficiency and longevity by external factors arising from an interplay between patron States, parent States and other elements of the global inter-state system[10]. In this paper, I would like to argue that – in addition to political and economic external factors – these DF States also owe their durable existence in part to the efficacy of their political systems. To that end, I will analyse and compare the political systems of Abkhazia and of Transnistria, two ideal exemplars of this type of States that have gone through all the stages of post-Soviet history to date. Each represents a different kind of post-Soviet DF State: Abkhazia was born of an ethnic conflict and has achieved partial recognition, while Transnistria originated in a civic conflict and has not attained any recognition. The elements of both political systems can be seen in the systems of the DPR, the LPR, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia.

Usually, a political system is understood as a "set of institutions concerned with formulating and implementing the collective goals of a society or of groups within it"[11]. More specifically, such institutions are constitutionally divided branches of power – including, for example, Presidents and Parliaments, influential civil-society organizations, mass media and informal power networks – that together enable the functionality of a State and the power

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and the Pursuit of Legitimacy by Self-proclaimed 'Republics' in Ukraine, "Eurasian Geography and Economics", no. 60(6) (2019), pp. 669-681.

[10] For example, see the arguments of E. Berg - K. Vits, *Quest for Survival and Recognition: Insights into the Foreign Policy Endeavours of the Post-Soviet De Facto States*, "Ethnopolitics", no. 17(4) (2018), pp. 390-392; A. Florea, *De Facto States: Survival and Disappearance (1945-2011)*, "International Studies Quarterly", no. 61(2) (2017), pp. 337-338; V. Kopeček, *Factors of De Facto States' Sustainability*, in T. Hoch - V. Kopecek (eds), *De Facto States in Eurasia*, London, 2020, pp. 159-161.

[11] G.A. Almond *et al.*, *Comparative Politics: A Theoretical Framework*, New York, 1996, p. 29.

structure[12]. All post-Soviet States are relatively new entities whose systems and regimes are based, as convincingly conceptualized by Henry Hale, on patronal networks, which unite formal and informal institutions in either single or competitive power structures coined as the "pyramid systems"[13]. The combination of the functionalist and power-structure approaches in this paper allows for realistic analysis of the relations between different elements of the post-Soviet political systems. Applying this combined model in a comparative analysis, it is possible to see how formal and informal elements of the Abkhazian and Transnistrian political systems cooperate in providing both entities with resilience and longevity. This way I would fill in the gap in existing literature in the history of IR and political science studying de facto States and their lifecycles.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section is dedicated to a short review of the post-Soviet DF/NPR States' history, explaining why external factors are regarded as important for their existence. The second section proposes a description, analysis and comparison of the Abkhazian and Transnistrian political systems that developed in response to their external and internal challenges. In the third, concluding, section, I will summarize the findings and demonstrate key elements of these political systems necessary for their resilience.

The post-Soviet de facto States in historical perspective

The USSR's dissolution and the six evolutionary phases of the post-Soviet de facto States

The history of the post-Soviet de facto States starts in the second half of the 1980s, when the third wave of democratization had reached and engulfed the Soviet Union in the form of Perestroika-style

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[12] See H.E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*, New York, 2015, p. 19-39; G. Helmke - S. Levitsky, *Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda*, "Perspectives on Politics", no. 2 (2004), pp. 725-730; S. Priebus - T. Beichelt, *Die Analyse politischer Systeme im östlichen Europa: Theoretisch-konzeptionelle Annäherung*, in S. Priebus - T. Beichelt (eds), *Die politischen Systeme im östlichen Europa*, Wiesbaden, 2024 (forthcoming), pp. 4-8.

[13] H. Hale, *Patronal Politics*, cit., pp. 39-94.

liberalization. Among many other effects, the USSR's liberalization opened a space for national movements, which demanded more autonomy for their Republics and/or smaller ethnonational regions along with the new Union Treaty. In 1989-1990, the 15 USSR member-Republics and some national autonomous regions within these Republics approved declarations of their sovereignty. Most did so to strengthen their positions in the preparation of the new Union Treaty, while others prepared for secession. Although the August 1991 anti-Gorbachev putsch failed, it ruined the preparations for the sign-off of this Treaty and for the continued life of the Soviet Union[14]. The Belavezha Accords and Almaty Protocols effectively dissolved the USSR in December 1991, preparing the grounds for international recognition of the 15 member-Republics' independence.

However, the parade of sovereignties also took place in the regions of the newly independent Republics. In Azerbaijan, the ethnic conflict between Azerbaijani and Armenian communities had grown into war and the creation of the self-proclaimed, Armenia-supported republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. In Georgia, the conflict between the central government and regional administrations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia turned into military conflict, resulting in the creation of two DF States supported by Russia. In Moldova, the conflict between the republican government and the Russia-leaning eastern region led to the secession of Transnistria. The governments of Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan also had to deal with rebellious regions, such as Crimea, Chechnya and Qaraqalpaqstan. By the end of the 1990s, when the results of the USSR's dissolution were clear, only four DF States had succeeded in leveraging their declarations of independence to establish themselves as entities that would prove able to survive international sanctions and their conflicts with their parent States: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria[15].

These four entities were established in the early 1990s, during or soon after the USSR's dissolution. As breakaway territories, they were in constant conflict with their parent States, while their

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[14] E.D. Walker, *Dissolution*, cit., pp. 12-46; T. Hoch - V. Kopecek, *De Facto States in Eurasia*, cit., pp. 2-6.
[15] E.W. Walker, *Dissolution*, cit., p. 101; M. Minakov, *The World-System*, cit., pp. 72-100.

authorities were internationally seen as illegitimate. Accordingly, all four post-Soviet DF States were subjected to international sanctions and a regime of non-recognition. For these reasons, they needed patron States that would provide them with support in the areas of security, international relations and their economies.

Following this initial stage, the second period began in 1993-95 with the freezing of the military conflicts, the introduction of peacekeeping forces and the imposition of sanctions – international and those of the Commonwealth of Independent States/Russia – against the self-proclaimed entities in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova. During this period new political, legal and socioeconomic institutions were established in the successive DF States to provide the local populations with the necessities of security and survival. Simultaneously, Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan started suppressing the secessionist groups in their own lands.

The third period began around 2001. The Russian government, which had largely resolved its own separatist issues, changed its policy towards the DF States, openly stopped fulfilling the sanctions and started cooperating with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. At this stage, the Russian Federation and the DF States created a set of formal and informal structures to ensure Russian patronage in exchange for Moscow's political control over its clients. The DF States also developed an institutional network with each other ensuring mutual political, social, cultural and economic cooperation.

The fourth period started in 2008. The Russian-Georgian war and the recognition of Kosova created incentives for Moscow and some of its allies to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Later, after a political crisis in Tiraspol in 2009-10, state-building activities intensified in Transnistria as well. In this period, ties between Russia and the DF States strengthened into a functional network. Concurrently, the relations between the Russian Federation, Georgia and Moldova were steadily worsening.

The fifth period started when the anti-Euromaidan movement, after losing its case in Ukraine in February 2014, accepted radical secessionist and irredentist agendas. Russia illegally annexed Crimea and provided military, political and financial support for the separatist governments of the self-proclaimed Republics of

Donetsk and Luhansk (the DPR and LPR). At the same time, Russia and the authorities in the rebellious regions came under international and the US sanctions. The Donbas war between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists continued for eight years, during which the DPR and LPR developed their own political and military institutions.

In these five stages prior to 2019, the network of post-Soviet DF States grew in number (from four entities in the 1990s to six since 2014), population (from around one million in the 1990s to over four million in 2019) and recognition (from no entities recognized in the 1990s to two partially recognized since 2008)[16]. However, since 2020, the network of post-Soviet DF States has begun declining. This sixth period started when the DF States' network started declining. This began when Azerbaijan held several successful military operations against Nagorno-Karabakh and re-established its control over the region by October 2023. The period continued during the war against Ukraine when the Russian government illegally annexed Ukrainian territories controlled by the DPR and LPR on September 30, 2022. In this period, both patron States – Armenia and Russia – were sufficiently weakened[17] that they could not provide their clientele with the necessary security assurances.

So, as of 2023, the post-Soviet DF States have been through the phases of establishment, stabilization, proliferation, crisis and, possibly, decline. Along this path, the political systems of these States have been shaped by ongoing political and frozen military conflicts with their parent States as well as reliance on their patron States' support. From the outside, this condition has defined the structure and dynamics of their political systems and, equally, the limits on their participation in international relations.

If we look closer into our two country cases, we can see that the political systems of both, the Republic of Abkhazia (hereinafter, RA or Abkhazia) and the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (hereinafter, the PMR or Transnistria), were established in the

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[16] M. Minakov, *The World-System*, cit., pp. 73-74.

[17] Armenia was weakened by post-revolutionary internal political struggle and tensions with the Kremlin since 2018, while Russia was seemingly weakened by two waves of international sanctions (since 2014 and 2022) and the exhausting war of attrition against Ukraine (since 2022).

course of conflict with their respective parent States, Georgia and Moldova. These conflicts, in going through a *political* stage, a *military* stage and finally a *frozen conflict* stage, have equally influenced the formation of the parent States and the self-proclaimed Republics.

The establishment and evolution of the RA and the PMR

Georgian and Abkhazian state-building grew from the 1989-91 political dispute between the Georgian government, which was pursuing its own aims of independence, and the administration of the autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. In August 1992, after the USSR's dissolution and in the course of the Georgian civil war (1991-94), the dispute between governmental bodies and political groups transformed into an armed interethnic conflict. It ended in September 1993, when Abkhaz forces established control over the entire autonomous territory, while ethnic Georgians – around 250,000 persons, or 46% of the region's population – were forced to leave for the government-controlled territories[18]. The armistice agreement was signed in May 1994, and it formally lasted until 2008.

The RA came under sanctions beginning in 1993, when the UN Security Council approved Resolution 876, preventing the supply of any weapons or munitions to Abkhazia. In response, the Georgian government immediately introduced a full blockade of the region and stopped any official economic cooperation. In 1994, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) introduced its collective (de facto Russian) peacekeeping forces on the dividing line between Georgian-controlled territories and Abkhazia. The CIS, Turkey and other Black Sea countries imposed strict economic sanctions against Abkhazia in 1996[19]. However, informal

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[18] L. Broers, *After the 'Revolution': Civil Society and the Challenges of Consolidating Democracy in Georgia*, "Central Asian Survey", no. 24 (2005), p. 334; C. Dale, *Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Dynamics of the Conflicts*, in P. Baev - O. Berthelsen (eds), *Conflicts in the Caucasus*, Oslo, 1996, pp. 14-16.

[19] C. Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, Brussels, 2011, pp. 43-52; A. Gegeshidze, *The Isolation of Abkhazia: A Failed Policy or an Opportunity*, "Conciliation Resources", no. 19 (2008), p. 2.

trade in goods and weapons with Georgia, Russia and Turkey never stopped[20].

Between 1993 and 2008, the dialogue between Tbilisi and Sukhumi was minimal if any, while the front line became the de facto border, with only one official crossing point for travellers. The armistice was broken several times (in 1998, 2001, 2006 and 2008) but always re-established. Simultaneously, Tbilisi created a "government-in-exile" of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, which operates on the government-controlled territory.

Russian political and economic support for Abkhazia was informally re-established in 2001-02, followed by growing economic ties, the return of cross-border transportation and the distribution of Russian citizenship among Abkhazians[21]. In that period, the informal political institutions, e.g. the Russian *kurators*, were also developed to a level allowing for permanent coordination between Moscow and Sukhumi. *Kurators* (Russian for curator) are the special envoys appointed by the Russian government to coordinate and control relations between patron and DF States. They manage official governmental functions and relations between the informal (personal, business and clan) interests of those in Russia, the RA and/or the PMR to ensure exchange of resources and responsibilities among the ruling groups[22].

In 2008, the Russian-Georgian war changed the situation in the region tremendously. After a short battle on the border, Russian forces entered Western Georgia from Abkhazia on August 11, 2008. The armistice agreement between Moscow and Tbilisi was developed by Western leaders, but its final draft was also endorsed by Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities, demonstrating their increasing legitimacy. Right after the war ended, after some debate in Moscow, on August 26, 2008, the Russian government

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[20] A. Kukhianidze *et al.*, *Smuggling in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region in 2003-2004*, in L. Shelley *et al.* (eds), *Organized Crime and Corruption in Georgia*, London, 2007, pp. 70-72.

[21] T. Nagashima, *Russia's Passportization Policy Toward Unrecognized Republics: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria*, "Problems of Post-Communism", no. 66 (2019), p. 190.

[22] D. Isachenko, *Coordination and Control in Russia's Foreign Policy: Travails of Putin's Curators in the Near Abroad*, "Third World Quarterly", no. 40 (2019), p. 1484; G. Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, Oxford, 2017, pp. 247-249.

recognized the independence of the two Republics. Even though this decision was condemned by the Council of Europe (CE) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Russian recognition changed the status of Abkhazia from that of a non- to that of a partially recognized State. Later, the RA received recognition from four additional recognized States and four DF States (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Syria; the DPR, Nagorno-Karabakh, the PMR and South Ossetia)[23]. The Russian Federation signed several inter-state agreements with the RA, including the Agreement on the Protection of State Borders (2009), the Agreement on Trade (2012) and the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership (2014).

Even though Russian–Abkhazian relations have been formalized since 2008, the informal structures have remained important. The roles of Vladislav Surkov and Dmitry Kozak as the Kremlin's 2003-2018 *kurators* of the region were arguably as – if not more – important than the roles overseen by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)[24].

Today, Georgian–Abkhazian relations are still defined as an ongoing political and frozen military conflict influencing the political development of both entities. The RA, even with its status as partially recognized, is not a member of inter-state relations; its economy and security depend on the Russian Federation; and its southern border is a frozen front line. At the same time, the existence of partially-recognized Abkhazia inflicts permanent damage on Georgia's sovereignty, defines its complex relations with Russia and is a source of ongoing security and political challenges for the Georgian government. Georgia's hard policy of non-cooperation with Abkhazia excludes any possible reconciliation with the authorities of the breakaway region.

The political stage of the Transnistrian conflict began in 1989, when the Moldovan national/pro-Romanian movement grew in Chisinau, while the communities in the Transnistrian region increasingly leaned towards Moscow. The political split deepened when Moldova seceded from the USSR in 1991 and escalated into

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[23] M. Fabry, *The Contemporary Practice of State Recognition: Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Their Aftermath*, "Nationalities Papers", no. 40 (2012), pp. 662-664.

[24] D. Isachenko, *Coordination and Control*, cit., p. 1480.

armed conflict in March–July 1992. The military phase ended around August 1992 with the enforcement of a peaceful settlement agreement between Moldova and Russia (also endorsed by the Transnistrian secessionists). As in Abkhazia, Russian peacekeeping forces were introduced into the breakaway region to tame hostilities, and the conflict remains frozen to this day[25]. Any attempt by the Moldovan government and the OSCE consulting group to withdraw Russian troops and take control of the breakaway region ended in failure.

The Transnistrian frozen conflict risked "melting" several times, especially in 2001 and 2003. After several diplomatic attempts, a draft agreement – the Draft Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State in Moldova (or the "Kozak memorandum") – was reached in November 2003. The document was promoted by Dmitry Kozak, an aide of the Russian President. The document envisaged the establishment of a united asymmetric federal Moldovan State with special rights for the PMR and a small regiment of Russian peacekeepers during a transitional period. This draft agreement was not accepted by the Moldovan and US governments. As of that moment, OSCE-led talks have not resulted in any settlement[26].

In the absence of an international settlement, the Moldovan government tested the model of "soft reintegration" with the breakaway region. Chisinau made provisions for individual citizens, as well as private and civic organizations from Transnistria, to register and act on the Chisinau-controlled territory. This approach to the seceded population was reluctantly accepted by the PMR, structuring a case very different from that of Georgian–Abkhazian relations[27].

In 2014, with the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea, the establishment of the DPR and LPR and the start of the Donbas war, the Moldovan government received stronger support from

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[25] N. Popescu - L. Litra, *Transnistria: A Bottom-up Solution*, "European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, October 2012, (accessed July 16, 2023) https://rb.gy/mfl0rp, pp. 2-4.

[26] B. Potter, *Unrecognized Republic, Recognizable Consequences: Russian Troops in 'Frozen' Transnistria*, "Journal of Advanced Military Studies", no. 13 (2022), pp. 169-171.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 180.

Ukraine, the US and the EU in its demand that the Russian troops leave Transnistria. At the same time, the Transnistrian authorities were inspired by the DPR and LPR revolts and tried to restart the process of joining Russia. Despite emerging tensions, the "5+2" OSCE format, which included representatives of Moldova, the PMR, the OSCE, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the EU and the US, has been able to keep the conflict frozen up until 2023[28].

As these two cases show, the post-Soviet DF States developed under external conditions requiring them to develop political systems that could give them the resources to withstand the attempts of their parent States to regain control over the breakaway regions.

The Abkhazian and Transnistrian institutional responses to external challenges

This article is focused on the internal elements of the DF States' political systems. However, it is important to mention that these systems have each developed institutions in response to the need to deal with other States and inter-state agencies while themselves being non-recognized and under sanctions. These institutions were established to support cooperation (1) between each DF State and a patron State, and (2) among the DF States themselves.

Institutions of the first type arose mainly between the presidential administrations (PA) of the DF States and Russia. In a nutshell, the post-Soviet PA is an organization at the top of a President-run patronal pyramid that combines the functions of the President's office with supervision of the executive, the legislature, the judiciary and local governments while also controlling communication with informal powers like heads of police, security and military organizations, oligarchic clans, criminal networks, civil society and mass media[29]. The Russian PA was, since the early

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[28] See 2022-23 OSCE press releases at: *Press Releases and Statements Related to the 5+2 Negotiations on the Transdniestrian Settlement Process*, on "Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) official website" (accessed November 16, 2023), https://rb.gy/cervfe.

[29] H. Hale, *Patronal Politics*, cit., p. 30, pp. 120-127; M. Minakov, *A Decisive Turn? Risks for Ukrainian Democracy After the Euromaidan*, "Carnegie Regional Insight", February 3, 2016 (accessed November 16, 2023), https://rb.gy/ewsn0p, Section 3.

2000s, actively involved in the coordination and control of relations with the post-Soviet DF States, which also followed the PA model.

The *kurators* were an important element of such relations between the PAs. Being part of the Russian PA staff, they were responsible for coordination between patron and DF States' ruling groups, and each one had offices within the premises of the PA buildings in Moscow, Sukhumi and Tiraspol. They also demanded that the DF State authorities develop *formal* agencies to ensure effective and transparent use of Russia-provided resources[30].

The permanent conflicts between the RA and Georgia and between the PMR and Moldova limited the development of both the DF States and their parent States. By supporting secessionist/irredentist movements, Russia limited Georgian and Moldovan integration with the EU and NATO. Moscow's patron role was thus an important element of its West containment policy in the post-Soviet region.

The second type of institution aimed to manage cooperation among the DF States. In 2000, the four self-proclaimed Republics founded the Commonwealth of Non-Recognized States (CNRS). The CNRS formalized cooperation not only among the self-proclaimed authorities but also between their civil society organizations, business communities and universities. Russian involvement in this project was officially recognized in 2006, when President Putin demanded that the Russian MFA cooperate with that Commonwealth. In the 2010s, especially after the launch of the DPR and LPR, the post-Soviet DF States supported each other in their attempts to join the Union State of Belarus and Russia and cooperate with Russia-leaning secessionist movements in Europe and Eurasia[31]. This cooperation also signalled lack of interest in negotiation talks with parent States, and increasing interest in international recognition.

Thus, the recent history and international context created a challenging environment for the post-Soviet DF States, to which their political systems had to adapt. The persistent political and frozen military conflicts, the sanctions regime and non-recognition,

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[30] D. Isachenko, *Coordination and Control*, cit., pp. 1488-9.

[31] A. Pacher, *The Diplomacy of Post-Soviet De Facto States: Ontological Security Under Stigma*, "International Relations", no. 33 (2019), pp. 563-566.

the dependency on Russia, and Russia's relations with Georgia, Moldova and the Western powers preconditioned the specific character of these political systems. The researchers who noted the impact of these sorts of factors on the post-Soviet DF States' longevity are correct: these external issues were indeed formative. However, to survive, the DF States would need their political systems to have equally strong internal elements.

The Abkhazian and Transnistrian political systems in comparative perspective

In this section, I compare the political systems of the RA and the PMR as they had crystallized by the early 2020s. This comparison will encompass five major elements of their internal structure: (1) the constitutional division of power, (2) the President, (3) the executive, (4) the legislature, and (5) civil society and the mass media.

The constitutions and the formal division of powers

The constitutions of Abkhazia and Transnistria are the fundamental legal acts that define each one's formal source of legitimacy and separation of powers. These acts are structured around norms from the Soviet normative legacy, the early post-Soviet democratization and later war and post-war needs.

The Constitution of Abkhazia was adopted by the RA Supreme Council several months after the end of the war with Georgia, on November 26, 1994. Five years later, in October 1999, it was approved by popular referendum with some amendments. Reflecting security needs and the norms of the Constitution, Abkhazia evolved as a presidential republic whose Parliament had some leverage over the executive. The Constitution of Abkhazia was amended in 2014 and 2016, with no change to the balance of powers set in the 1990s.

The RA Constitution was open to amendments in a way rather usual for post-Soviet constitutional systems. In such systems, an initiative to amend the Constitution must come from the Parliament (at least one-third of the MPs), the President and/or at least 10,000 citizens (representing all seven districts of Abkhazia).

An important formal limitation on amendments stems from the common post-Soviet understanding of the Soviet totalitarian experience: no constitutional amendment or revision may decrease civil rights or freedoms[32]. The amendment process is meant to be based on consensus among the branches of power and the different parties since it can be fulfilled only within six months over three readings[33].

The RA Constitution prescribes only the formal aspect of the real distribution of power in Abkhazia. Relations with the patron and parent States, clan roles and other important elements of the Abkhazian political system are obviously outside the constitutional text but are part of an unwritten "patronal constitution". During the several political crises (e.g. in 2004 or 2020), the formal principles, informal agreements and facilitation by the Russian *kurators* assisted the RA power elites in finding informally effective and formally legal solutions[34].

The Constitution of Transnistria has gone through more amendments than that of Abkhazia. The first version of the PMR Constitution was approved in 1991 by the Congress of the deputies of all councils in the region. The approved document was rather vague, while the legitimacy of that Congress was highly doubtful. A new PMR Constitution was prepared by the Parliament and approved by popular referendum in 1995. This document envisaged a presidential republic with a bicameral Parliament. In 2009, President Smirnov (1991-2011) attempted to formalize the further concentration of power in his hands. Parliament and several groups of younger politicians resisted, leading to a constitutional and political crisis. This was resolved in 2009-10 with the Parliament's approving a new version of the Constitution that envisaged strong presidential powers while also introducing a clear differentiation of the powers of the President, Cabinet, and unicameral Parliament. Smaller constitutional amendments followed in 2000, 2005, 2006, 2017, 2018 and 2019. These amendments

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[32] *Constitution of Abkhazia* [in Russian], in "Official Website of the President of Abkhazia", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://rb.gy/tydwgu, Art. 83, 85.

[33] *Ibid.*, Art. 84.

[34] P. Kolstø - H. Blakkisrud, *Russian Neighborhood Policy and its Eurasian Client States: No Autocracy Export*, "Russia in Global Affairs", no. 19 (2021), pp. 45-47.

stemmed from the need for stronger formalization of social relations but did not change the balance of power achieved in 2010[35].

The process of amending the PMR Constitution is not unlike its RA analogue. Revision of the Constitution can be initiated by the PMR Parliament (by one-third of the MPs), the President and/or at least 15,000 citizens. Articles related to civil rights, however, can be amended, but through referendum only[36]. The amendment process is limited to an even shorter period: there must be three readings in the Parliament within a three-month period, with two-thirds of the Parliament voting for the last reading, which is possible only with the agreement of all elite groups and the general population[37].

The PMR Constitution also provides principles and rules for the formal aspect of a much more complex division of power. As with the RA, the Constitution and *kurators* have allowed the PMR politicians to resolve several political crises quite peacefully and legally[38].

As we can see, both constitutions include norms arising from the Soviet and early post-Soviet political processes. For example, both introductory clauses claim that the respective republics are democracies based on the rule of law, which is a norm characteristic of the early 1990s. Simultaneously, they assign strong social responsibility to the government and impose limitations on land-property, characteristics of the Soviet normative legacy. The substantial presidential authority is a response to the need for security in the face of external threats.

Another common feature is that both constitutions were approved by popular vote in referenda. This can be explained as an internal response to the deficit of external recognition. These referenda were imagined as foundational acts of local populations fulfilling their right to self-definition. For comparison, the constitutions of Georgia and Moldova, the parent States enjoying

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[35] *Constitution of Transnistria* [in Russian], in "Official Website of the PMR Ministry of Foreign Relations", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://rb.gy/egxbkb, Preamble.

[36] *Ibid.*, Art. 101, 102.

[37] *Ibid.*, Art. 103-105.

[38] P. Kolstø - H. Blakkisrud, *Russian Neighborhood Policy*, cit., pp. 50-53.

full international recognition, were approved by their Parliaments without referenda[39].

Despite many similarities, the two constitutions differ in how each understands the source of the entity's statehood. The RA Constitution provides that Abkhazia is "the State, which was historically established by the right of a people to free self-determination"[40]. Here, the term "people" has a clear ethnonational tone. The PMR Constitution contrasts with this Abkhazian norm in the stipulation that its source of legitimacy is "the multinational people of the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic, united by a common destiny in our land; ... that honours the memory of our ancestors, who passed down to us their love and respect for the Fatherland"[41]. Here, the people have a civic definition and a vocal identification with the Soviet legacy of "Fatherland". Furthermore, the RA Constitution established the Abkhazian language as the first "State language", while Russian is described as "also State language" and the Georgian language is not mentioned at all[42]. In addition, only an ethnic Abkhaz can be President[43]. The PMR Constitution has a much stronger civic accent and provides equal official status to the Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian languages.

Both constitutions are fundamental acts that only partially prescribe the real division of power in their respective republics. The constitutions regulate the formal democratic façade, which is attached to a strong informal non-democratic backstage structured by the complex relations among the DF States and their patron and parent States, central and local governments, various clans, actors in the security and economic sectors, and more.

Formal and informal roles of the Presidents

Abkhazia and Transnistria are presidential republics. Given their chronic multilateral conflict with their parent States, these DF States' political systems and regimes have been formed under the

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[39] However, the constitutional amendments regarding the diminishment of the number of parliamentary members were approved through referenda in Georgia (2003) and Moldova (2019).
[40] *Constitution of Abkhazia*, cit., Chapter 1.
[41] *Constitution of Transnistria*, cit., Preamble.
[42] *Constitution of Abkhazia*, cit., Chapter 6.
[43] *Ibid.*, Art. 49.

conditions of a constant state of emergency and dependence on their patron States. For these reasons, their Presidents unite two types of functions: formally, they are heads of State and chief commanders who control the executive and influence the legislature and judiciary and who manage relations with the Russian security organizations; informally, they head local patronal pyramids among whose elements they facilitate relations while also coordinating with the *kurators* and Russian informal power groups.

As Head of State, the RA President is directly elected by citizens for a five-year term and can be re-elected once[44]. So far, there have been seven presidential elections, bringing five persons into office: Vladislav Ardzinba (1994-2005, two terms), Sergei Bagapsh (2005-2011, two terms), Aleksander Ankvab (2011-14), Raul Khajinba (2014-20) and Aslan Bzhania (2020–present).

As commander in chief and guardian of the constitution, the RA President holds the strongest post in the political system. Formally, however, there is some parliamentary oversight: the President may be removed from office by a vote of at least two-thirds of the Parliament based on a conclusion by the Supreme Court that the President has violated RA legislation[45]. Actually, this clause has never been enforced, even during the political crisis of 2019, when incumbent Raul Khajinba won a doubtful victory in the presidential elections. Instead, the crisis was resolved through an informal agreement between his rival Aslan Bzhania (along with other leaders of a mass protest movement), the incumbent and his group, and Russian Security Council Secretary Rashid Nurgaliev. This agreement was sanctioned by the Supreme Court decision cancelling the results of the 2019 presidential elections[46].

The PMR President is also the Head of State, commander in chief and guarantor of the constitution. He, too, is directly elected by citizens for a five-year term and can be re-elected once[47]. So far, three Presidents have been elected in seven elections (held in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021). Before 2011, there was no limit on presidential re-election, which allowed Igor Smirnov (1991-2011) to be elected four times. Due to the political crisis of

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[44] *Constitution of Abkhazia*, cit., Art. 48.
[45] *Ibid.*, Art. 53, 64.
[46] P. Kolstø - H. Blakkisrud, *Russian Neighborhood Policy*, cit., pp. 50-54.
[47] *Constitution of Transnistria*, cit., Art. 59, 60.

2009-10, the Constitution was amended to limit each President to two terms. The subsequent Presidents, Yevgeniy Shevchuk (2011-16) and Vadim Krasnoselsky (2016–present, elected twice), have followed this norm so far.

In the first 20 years, the PMR President was head simultaneously of the State and the executive. Since 2011, the President has remained the Head of State, but a new post has been introduced – that of Head of the Cabinet, who is also chief of the executive. Still, presidentialism has remained strong as it is the President who appoints the Head of the Cabinet, pending approval of the Parliament[48]. In addition, the PMR Presidents have retained control of the executive through their formal right to appoint or dismiss the Head and members of the Cabinet and their informal power to ensure, via the parliamentary pro-presidential majority, that only loyal figures occupy key executive positions.

In both cases, the Presidents are supreme political and security figures who oversee all major decisions regarding defence and international relations, the directions of political and economic development, and the balance of power in formal public institutions and informal power groups. The RA and PMR Presidents traditionally come from the cadres of the Soviet/Russian security services or army. Ardzinba and Smirnov, the first Presidents of Abkhazia and Transnistria respectively, came from the Communist Party and KGB networks. The current Presidents, Aslan Bzhania and Vadim Krasnoselsky, have their roots in the post-Soviet *siloviki* ranks: the former started his career in the KGB and continued it in Abkhazia's security services; the latter made his career in the Transnistrian police[49].

The careers of the heads of both de facto States have depended on their long-term cooperation initially with Soviet Union authorities, then with Russian ones. When their loyalty to Russia is in

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[48] *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

[49] D. Ó Beacháin, *Elections Without Recognition: Presidential and Parliamentary Contests in Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh*, "Caucasus Survey", no. 3 (2015), pp. 255-257; P. Kolstø, *Authoritarian Diffusion, or the Geopolitics of Self-Interest? Evidence From Russia's Patron–Client Relations with Eurasia's De Facto States*, "Europe–Asia Studies", no. 73 (2021), pp. 890-912; A. Osipov - H. Vasilevich, *Transnistrian Nation-Building: A Case of Effective Diversity Policies?*, "Nationalities Papers", no. 47 (2019), pp. 989-998.

question or they associate with a Russian clan that loses power in Moscow, their career may end, as in the case of Igor Smirnov. In 2010-11, he participated in the presidential elections against the Kremlin's will and lost. His successor, President Shevchuk, whose young age, anti-Smirnov stance and close ties with the Russian Ministry of the Interior allowed him to win in 2011, participated in the 2016 presidential elections against the Kremlin's will. Not only did he, like his predecessor, fail in the elections, but he even had to flee the region for his safety[50].

Still, the Russian government does not have absolute control of the DF States' leadership: the leaders constantly bargain among themselves and with representatives of the formal institutions and informal groups from both countries. A good example of such bargaining can be seen in the Abkhazian political crisis of 2019-20. Here, both candidates – Khajinba and Bzhania – were loyal to Russia; however, this did not prevent them from competing with each other and disagreeing with the Kremlin's initial decision to support Khajinba in the elections. In fact, Bzhania used his ties in Moscow and mass protests in Sukhumi to force the Kremlin to accept him as Abkhazia's leader[51].

Such political crises, however, never undermine presidential power or the informal pyramid beneath it. Together, the formal and informal institutions are arranged as patronal pyramids, which – in the form of a single patronal pyramid each – define the structure of Abkhazia's and Transnistria's political systems and the dynamics of their regimes[52]. Both republics' patronal pyramids include in their hierarchies the formal government institutions, security and defence staff, parliamentary factions, the courts, local administrations, oligarchic clans, the mass media, private companies, civic organizations and criminal groups[53]. These pyramids are

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[50] P. Kolstø - H. Blakkisrud, *Russian Neighborhood Policy*, cit., pp. 50-61.

[51] P. Kolstø, *Biting the Hand that Feeds Them? Abkhazia–Russia Client–Patron Relations*, "Post-Soviet Affairs", no. 36 (2020), pp. 140-142. The same pattern can be seen in the 2004 Abkhazian political crisis, in Transnistria in 2016, and in other NPR States, as discussed in H. Hale, *Patronal Politics*, cit., pp. 12-20; P. Kolstø - H. Blakkisrud, *Russian Neighborhood Policy*, cit., pp. 45-50.

[52] See Hale, *Patronal Politics*, 10, 199, 220, 350.

[53] On the specifics of the nexus between each NPR State's formal and informal institutions, see Isachenko, "Coordination and Control", pp. 1489-1494; Kopeček, "Political Institutions", 73-77.

usually coordinated by the presidential administration with the participation of the *kurators*.

A well-studied example of the formal–informal nexus is the Transnistrian network that includes the *Sheriff* Corporation, the *Obnovlenie* party and the Presidents. Created in the early 1990s by two entrepreneurs with ties to the Soviet security services and the criminal communities of Moldova and Ukraine, the *Sheriff* Corporation grew into one of the largest holdings, encompassing all sorts of profitable private businesses, mass media, the *Obnovlenie* political party, civic organizations and a football club. Since 2005, the corporation has managed to gain a parliamentary majority for its party that serves the interests of the Presidents and various groups from Putin's entourage. For at least 15 years, the *Sheriff* corporate network has been an organizational core of the Transnistrian patronal pyramid[54].

Since both Abkhazia and Transnistria arose from military conflicts, their presidential offices initially included Vice Presidents who could ensure continuity of rule in case the President was killed or could not fulfil his/her duties. Today, the Vice President's post remains in a more militarized Abkhazia. In Transnistria, whose relations with its parent State have long been less hostile, the post of Vice President was dropped during the 2011 reform. Vice Presidents were present in many post-Soviet political systems in the early 1990s, but this post has subsequently been dropped since Vice Presidents often competed with their chiefs for influence in the pyramid, as occurred in Russia in 1993 or Transnistria in 2009.

The presidential administrations in Abkhazia and Transnistria represent classic post-Soviet hybrid institutions able to control and coordinate formal and informal power relations within their patronal networks. The constitutions and Parliaments do not have influence over the PA cadres or structures. In both Republics, the Russian *kurators* have generally shared their office locations with the PA.

The Presidents are commanders in chief of the DF States' armies. Even though Abkhazia and Transnistria rely on Russian

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[54] M. Necsutu, *Crypto and Caviar: The Empire Behind Footballing Giant Slayer 'Sheriff'*, "BalkanInsight", October 11, 2021 (accessed November 16, 2023), https://rb.gy/wghysp.

military support, each has its own army, where Russian military specialists train the local military staff and participate in general staff planning. Currently, the RA army has 3,000 officers, soldiers and sailors, while the PMR armed forces have 5,000 officers and soldiers[55].

Role of the Cabinet and the executive

In both Republics, the Cabinets of Ministers and Ministries are the highest formal executive institutions, governing and administering all elements of the executive branch.

The RA Cabinet of Ministers is the highest collective body of the executive, accountable to the President. The Parliament can call for the President to dismiss individual Ministers, but that decision is made only by the President[56]. Currently, the Cabinet consists of a Prime Minister, several Vice Prime Ministers, the Head of the PA, 14 Ministers, and the Heads of seven State Committees. Since 1992, Abkhazia has had 22 Prime Ministers.

In Transnistria, the Cabinet (*Pravitelstvo*) is the collective organ at the top of the executive that reports to the President, while the Parliament's control is minimal[57]. Since 2011, the Cabinet was formally placed under the guidance of the Head of Government appointed by the President pending approval of the Parliament. The President has the right to dismiss the Head of Government and the Cabinet in general without the Parliament's approval[58]. The Cabinet includes its Head (the Head of Government), a first Vice-Head and several Vice-Heads, 13 Ministers, the Heads of six State Committees, and seven Governors of the PMR regions. The Head of the Cabinet, who usually stays in office for two years, is responsible for the fulfilment of core executive functions. There have been five Heads of the Cabinet since 2011.

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[55] Data from the PMR Ministry of Defence and the RA Ministry of Defence. See: *PMR Ministry of Defence*, "Official website of the Pridnestrovian Ministry of Defence", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://mopmr.org/; *RA Ministry of Defence*, "Official website of the Abkhazian Ministry of Defence", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://rb.gy/s0jkzm.

[56] *Constitution of Abkhazia*, cit., Art. 56-58.

[57] *Constitution of Transnistria*, cit., Chapter 3.

[58] *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

Each entity's Cabinet began as a weak collective executive body – although formally the highest one – complementing the powers of the President and translating presidential decisions into public administration. The Cabinets do not have strong informal power, but their control of the State budget provides them with relative importance in their respective political systems.

Role of the Parliament

Despite the fact that Abkhazia and Transnistria are presidential republics, the Parliaments play an important role in both political systems. For one thing, each is the only legislative body; for another, they represent constituencies from which members may be called to arms at any moment. Since the post-Soviet DF States have both civil and military aspects, their Parliaments are influential as platforms for national dialogue and internal unity.

After a transitional period in 1990-94, the RA People's Assembly was established as a unicameral Parliament with 35 members. So far, the Assembly has been elected eight times (in 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2008, 2012, 2017 and 2022). The RA deputies are elected for five years in direct voting by secret ballot. MPs have strong formal immunity and are not bound by an imperative mandate. The RA Parliament establishes laws, approves the annual State budget, controls its implementation, ratifies international agreements and, upon presidential submission, approves the general prosecutor, the head of the national bank and other senior officials. The Parliament can also render a vote of no confidence in individual Ministers and even bring charges against the RA President to launch an impeachment process[59].

The current Parliament has nine permanent committees. Although there are over 10 functioning parties, the current Parliament consists of 30 nonpartisan MPs, four members of the *Amtsakhara* (Ancestral Lights) Party and one member of the *Aytayra* (Rebirth) Party[60]. The majoritarian electoral system ties the MPs to constituencies rather than to political organizations. The

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[59] *Constitution of Abkhazia*, cit., Chapter 3.
[60] Data from the RA Parliament. See: *RA Parliament*, "The Abkhazian National Assembly [site in Russian]", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://parlamentra.org/.

political parties, which span the spectrum from the radical left to the far right, are less important than informal power and/or regional groups.

The PMR Supreme Council was first created in September 1990 and, since that time, has been elected seven times (in 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020). The current Supreme Council consists of one chamber, eight permanent committees and commissions and 33 MPs elected for five-year terms with rather strong personal immunity. Although institutionally much weaker than the President, the Parliament is decisive on matters of taxes, economic policies and ratification of agreements. It also can revise and amend the Constitution and approve presidential decrees on the introduction of martial law or a state of emergency[61]. In the current Parliament, 29 MPs are *Obnovlenie* Party members; the other four are formally independent[62].

Both Parliaments are in a weaker position in the system of power distribution than the Presidents. Still, they can limit presidential authority through bargaining during the high officials' appointments and budget distribution. Meanwhile, the Presidents use informal ties with the MPs to control the Parliaments.

Civil society and mass media

Like other elements of the political system, the Abkhazian and Transnistrian civil societies and mass media sectors stem from the democratic tendencies of the late 1980s–early 1990s and the military conflicts of the 1990s. These sectors have gone through periods of (1) formation (early 1990s), (2) involvement in political processes (late 1990s–early 2000s) and (3) inclusion in informal power structures (approximately the past 15-20 years)[63].

Abkhazia has about 300 registered civil society organizations (CSOs), but only a few of them are active. The CSOs that receive funding from foreign governments or international organizations

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[61] *Constitution of Transnistria*, Art. 67-73; see also data from the PMR Parliament.

[62] Data from the CEC of Transnistria.

[63] For more on this, see T. Komm *et al.*, *Under the Spotlight: A Close Look Into the Established and Emerging Civil Society Actors in Moldova and the South Caucasus*, "People in Need", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://rb.gy/bqqs-rx, pp. 42-46.

are under growing pressure from the government; however, a Russian-style law on "foreign agents" has so far not been introduced. Trade unions exist, but even the biggest of them have very limited influence on decision-making[64].

The biggest Abkhazian media company is the Abkhaz State Television and Radio Company (AGTRK), which owns the national TV channel, a newspaper and a news agency. The AGTRK is under full government control, and its editorial policy depends on the PA agenda. However, it is the Russian TV channels that have the biggest audience in Abkhazia. The residents of the Gali region also have access to Georgian broadcasting[65].

About 50% of the Abkhazian population actively use online news and social networks. Though censorship of the traditional mass media is rather strong, the social media platforms enjoy less restricted freedom of expression and discussion[66].

As the mass protests of 2004, 2008, 2011 and 2020 demonstrated, freedom of assembly and expression of opinions different from those in power are largely respected, and opposition and civil-society organizations can regularly organize public manifestations. The CSOs are significantly influenced by conservative social mores, post-war patriotism and widespread disapproval of "non-traditional" sexual orientations[67].

In general, Abkhazian civil society and mass media emerged as a result of social needs driven by the war and postwar situations. This fidelity to local needs rather than foreign-donor developmental agendas is the source of the sector's strength and the strong support for these CSOs within Abkhazian society[68].

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[64] Data from: *Freedom in the World Report – Abkhazia*, "Freedom House", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://freedomhouse.org/country/abkhazia/freedom–world/2022.

[65] *Ibid*.

[66] Data sources are:. *Digital 2023: Abkhazia*, "Datareportal", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://datareportal.com/reports/digital–2023–abkhazia; *Freedom in the World Report – Transnistria*, "Freedom House", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://freedomhouse.org/country/transnistria/freedom–world/2022.

[67] Data from *Freedom in the World Report – Abkhazia*.

[68] V. Kopeček, *Inside a De Facto State: Forming and Sustaining the Abkhazian and Nagorno-Karabakh Republic Polities*, in T. Hoch - V. Kopecek (eds), *De Facto States in Eurasia*, London, 2020, pp. 244-245.

The Transnistrian CSOs were initially organized around veterans' groups and the postwar humanitarian needs of the 1990s. Later, in the early 2000s, the CSOs addressed many more needs, and their sociopolitical role grew. The power elites showed their recognition of this by repressing too-influential activists[69]. In the past two decades, the number of organizations has grown to over 200 registered entities. However, the PMR legislation is much more restrictive of CSOs than is Abkhazia's[70]. With almost no autonomy, such third-sector organizations often join the informal power networks and cooperate with the local authorities. As a result, CSOs that work on politically sensitive topics – human rights, corruption, freedom of speech, transparency of elections – are very few[71]. Moreover, the trade union system has not been reformed since the 1980s and is in the hands of the PMR leadership, while "independent labour activism is not tolerated"[72].

Practices of the State Registration and Notary Service and the law on the activities of CSOs (2018), which allegedly copied the Russian "foreign agent" law, make it impossible for third-sector organizations with funding from abroad to engage in any civil-rights protection activities. In addition, Transnistrian civil-society activities are limited by restrictive practices in the courts, lack of local funding, pressure from the local security services, and emigration of CSO leaders in recent years[73].

The PMR authorities closely monitor and control the public media through formal and informal channels. In 2016, new legislation enabled officials to easily appoint editorial staff and manage their activities. The *Sheriff* Corporation promotes its private and political interests through TSV – the biggest local TV channel – and some other private media outlets. The Russian broadcasters have the largest audience, although the Moldovan channels are also accessible[74].

Transnistria imposes legal restrictions on the topics of public debates. The criminal code specifically penalizes public disrespect

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[69] T. Komm *et al.*, *Under the Spotlight*, cit., p. 42.

[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 49.

[71] *Ibid.*, pp. 43-42; *Freedom in the World Report – Transnistria*.

[72] Data from *Freedom in the World Report – Transnistria*.

[73] T. Komm *et al.*, *Under the Spotlight*, cit., pp. 44-45.

[74] *Ibid.*, 45.

of the authorities or the Russian peacekeeping mission. This was manifest in the growing number of cases against social-network users who critically discussed the behaviour of politicians or the Russian military in Transnistria[75]. It is no surprise that the number of internet users and active social-network users is small: the first group is barely above 31% of the local population, and the second is about 26%[76].

Civil society has had an ambiguous role in both political systems and regimes. Together with the expected democratizing effect of citizens' associations, which add an important element to the checks and balances, there is also an antidemocratic effect of the third sector due to its acceptance of "illiberal, anti-Western and socially conservative" ideologies[77]. Many Abkhazian and Transnistrian CSOs adhere to nationalist and conservative ideologies hostile to the populations of the parent States and their Western allies.

Analysis and conclusions

Interest in the post-Soviet DF/NPR States is driven by the multi-level political and military crisis that resulted from Russian aggression against Ukraine and led to the fast-changing political order in Eastern Europe and northern Eurasia. The post-Soviet States are now adapting to the new global and regional division as well as to internal divides. In this context, some of the post-Soviet DF States are in crisis as Azerbaijan took over most parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and Russia annexed the DPR and LPR. Other DF States show more resilience, even though Russia as their patron State has been less able to support them since the attack on Ukraine. So the key question of this article aimed at identifying the internal sources of this resilience.

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[75] Data sources: *Freedom in the World Report – Transnistria*; T. Komm *et al.*, *Under the Spotlight*, cit., pp. 45-47.

[76] Data from *Digital 2023: Transnistria*, "Datareportal", (accessed November 16, 2023), https://datareportal.com/reports/digital–2023–transnistria.

[77] A. Hug, *The Rise of Illiberal Civil Society in the Former Soviet Union?*, London, 2018, pp. 3-4.

As the Abkhazian and Transnistrian cases show, the post-Soviet DF States developed under conditions that required them to be constantly ready for new military conflict with their parent States; able to survive international sanctions and the least profitable position in international trade networks; and in control of their internal political processes, avoiding the creation of political or social groups friendly to their parent States. Though detrimental to GDP growth and human development, their formation under these conditions effectively equipped the DF States for the military crises spreading around the post-Soviet region. Their patronal systems were putting Presidents at the top of pyramids not only for power and resource distribution but also as warlords able to lead the defence of their Republics against the parent States and their allies. Their societies are united around either ethnonational (as in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia) or civic neo-sovietist (as in Transnistria and the DPR and LPR) sentiment, capable of involving the populations in political support of DF authorities and resistance to the parent States' reintegration operations. Their formal power institutions are inseparable from the local informal groups organized in stable patronal networks connected with the relevant structures in Russia, which despite its weakened condition still fulfils its functions as a patron State.

Despite many common features, the RA and the PMR political systems differ. The Abkhazian patronal network has many competing groups, whose struggle produces more room for political pluralism and civic freedoms than in the much more unified Transnistria. However, Abkhazia's system is less ethnically inclusive and more socially conservative than the PMR's. According to Freedom House reports, among the post-Soviet DF States, Abkhazia is the freest, followed by Transnistria, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, with the warring Eastern Donbas (DPR & LPR) at the bottom[78]. These differences can be explained by the respective levels of development of the political systems, their connections to the local political cultures and the States of conflict (active or frozen) present in each.

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[78] See 2017-23 data at Freedom House's *Freedom Reports*; compare with the conclusions of P. Kolstø - H. Blakkisrud, *Russian Neighborhood Policy*, cit., pp. 59-60.

Each DF State examined here is intermediate in freedom status between its parent and patron States. As the Freedom Index shows, the political systems of the RA and PMR produce regimes freer than Russia's and less free than Georgia's or Moldova's[79]. The PMR has been a stable autocracy, while Russia achieved this status gradually after the 2000s and Moldova has maintained a stable status as partly free. The RA occupies the analogous position in comparison with Georgia and Russia. Unlike its patron State, the RA gradually increased civil freedoms even while remaining unfree. Georgia's oscillation through a series of political periods has remained within the poles of the partly free category.

What these comparisons show is that the DF States have a greater need than Russia to rely on and involve local populations in political and security structures. Existing with only partial (RA) or no (PMR) recognition, this specific sort of citizen involvement, organized around conflict-focused formal institutions and conservative civic organizations, is required to provide these DF States with the legitimacy and compensatory resilience to survive. So, even though Russian patronage is hugely important for the longevity of the DF/NPR entities, they need equally strong internal legitimacy that unites their democratic and antidemocratic elements. The political system's efficacy is one of the key factors in the DF State's durable existence.

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[79] See 1998-2023 data at Freedom House's *Freedom Reports*.

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