QUESTIONING
POST-SOVIET

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FROZEN FRAGMENTS, SIMMERING SPACES: The Post-Soviet De Facto States

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The collapse of the Soviet Union was an event of global significance–all the more so because the process did not trigger an interstate war. The continent-spanning superpower with a terrifying arsenal of nuclear weapons dissolved, and fifteen successor states emerged and soon projected all the signs and accouterments of functioning states: centers of sovereignty, state bureaucracies, and official symbols of nation-state identity. The process, however, was not smooth; in many places, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was far from peaceful. In the Baltic and Black Sea/Caucasus regions, the territorial order created over decades by the Soviet Union had already fallen apart. As an empire, albeit one that thought of itself as anti-imperialist, the Soviet Union was a product of conquest by the Red Army as well as decades of population transfers and cartographic tinkering by a small Bolshevik elite. While the territorial order was not solely created by the Communists (it built upon Tsarist spatial legacies and historical forms), the official borders of the Soviet Union when it was dissolved in late 1991 were in many regions "Bolshevik borders." In many places, that was already a problem and it would become more so as former Soviet Republics laid claim to the "territorial integrity" of the new sovereign states on the basis of the legal principle *uti possidetis* (as you possess).

In this chapter we examine the fragments of Soviet territorial arrangements that came apart, spaces designated as the homelands of "titular" groups that were recognized as autonomous entities within the Soviet Union and claimed exclusively by their official "parent" republics. Even before the fifteen successor republics gained their independence, key questions emerged about the status and spaces of titular nations. We examine three of them (Karabakhi/Armenian, Ossetian, and Abkhaz), and how they sought to secede from their parent states (Azerbaijan and Georgia), along

with a fourth–a former autonomous entity in Transnistria within Moldova (see Figure 1). We then present research on political attitudes in these four territories today.

Figure 1: Locations and territorial extent of the four de facto states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorny Karabakh, and Transnistria) in the Black Sea and Caucasus region.

Making and Breaking the Soviet Fragments

The problem of the Soviet territorial order first became manifest as the ethno-territories[1] created to manage the socio-spatial diversity of regions across the Soviet Union's vast expanse started to test the boundaries of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. These political units were overseen by local administrative institutions responsible for the integration of contested spaces that saw conflict and violence during the period of revolution and civil war from 1917 to 1922. For example, on October 31, 1921, the Caucasian Bureau, the highest Bolshevik decision-making committee in the Caucasus, authorized the creation of a South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (SOAO) within Soviet Georgia. The decision came in the wake of violence and invasion. In February 1918 and again in April 1920, South Ossetian villagers rose up against the Menshevik government in Georgia. The 1920 revolt, initially successful, was brutally crushed, and the Georgian government expelled thousands of Ossetians from the region.[2] In February 1921, the Soviet Red Army invaded and brought an end to the Democratic Republic of Georgia. South Ossetian Bolsheviks, denied the

goal of joining North Ossetia, appealed for autonomy within Soviet Georgia, something Georgian Bolsheviks opposed. The creation of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was a compromise measure, its borders delimited after much negotiation. Nevertheless, the SOAO remained controversial with Georgian nationalists who reasoned that, absent the Red Army's invasion, South Ossetia would not exist. The creation of the Nagorny-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) as a majority Armenian enclave within Soviet Azerbaijan was a similar attempt to appease two competing centers of power.[3]

Abkhazia was different. It was initially proclaimed as a Soviet Republic within the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic and only later saw its status diminished and subordinated to Soviet Georgia. Transnistria, at the time (1924), was created as an autonomous oblast within the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), then part of Soviet Ukraine.[4] After the Soviet Union seized Bessarabia in 1940, following a secret additional protocol to the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939, Transnistria became part of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. This new entity was quickly overrun by anti-Soviet forces in June 1941, but retaken in 1944.

The nested forms of territorial governance across the Soviet Union required active management by the federal center to broker disputes between local and republican levels of government. For the most part, the process worked because the federal center was the ultimate decision-making authority, and because, when necessary, it was prepared to use force. During and after the Great Patriotic War, Stalin's government used brutal methods to create the socio-demographic spaces it wanted. A series of small nations were collectively punished by forced displacement to Siberia and Central Asia for alleged collaboration with the Nazis, among them Crimean Tatars and Chechens. When the power of the federal center began to falter in the 1980s, and its use of force proved inept, the territorial order of the Soviet Union began to disintegrate.[5]

It was in the South Caucasus that the first visible fraying occurred. In August 1987, Karabakhi activists sent a petition to the Central Committee in Moscow calling for the administration of the NKAO to be transferred to Armenia. When the petition was rejected in February 1988, a Karabakhi campaign of civil disobedience stoked fear among local Azerbaijanis. On February 21, an outbreak of ethnic violence against Karabakh Armenians that left two dead

catapulted the issue of Nagorny-Karabakh's status to the forefront of politics in the region and beyond. A deadly cycle of violence gathered momentum as pogrom fed pogrom.[6] At the time, nationalist forces controlled neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan. The emergence of a rivalry between the two Soviet Republics over Karabakh, however, created a conflict that swept nationalist forces to power in both republics. The Soviet center tried to intervene, but in an inept way that alienated both Armenia and Azerbaijan. From a small, largely mountainous region in the South Caucasus, a territory never before considered core to the homeland envisioned by either Soviet Republic, violence and bitter ethnic cleansing erupted as both sides fought to secure the maximum possible territory.

The process of territorial fragmentation and accompanying cycles of violence was different elsewhere in the Caucasus. In Soviet Georgia, political liberalization revived nationalist aspirations for a whole and free nation with Georgians as the supreme people; ethnic Abkhaz (only 17.89% of Abkhazia's population in the 1989 census) revived the ideal of a more independent and autonomous Abkhazia. The Soviet Army's botched attempt to repress a Georgian nationalist protest in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989, provoked by an Abkhaz rally for independence, radicalized politics and contributed to the nationalist demagogue Zviad Gamsakhurdia's rise to power in October 1990.[7] Gamsakhurdia had led a protest caravan of Georgian nationalists against South Ossetia in November 1989 (the month the Berlin Wall fell) that resulted in the first ethnic violence in the area in recent times. To Gamsakhurdia and his supporters, Georgia had been under Soviet occupation since 1921, and the ethnoterritorial entities created during Soviet rule were imperial encumbrances on the Georgian body politic. As radical Georgian nationalists sought to repeal the Soviet constitution, the ethnoterritorial structures created by the Soviets became institutional vehicles for Abkhaz leaders in Sukhum (Sokhumi) and Ossetians in Tskhinval(i) to break away from the territorial order being rearranged by the new government in Tbilisi. Under pressure in multiple locations from forces moving in opposing directions, the Soviet territorial order shattered.

The structural pattern in Georgia and its autonomous areas, where extremists pursuing ethno-nationalist visions provoked countermobilization and secessionism, looked similar in Moldova, but with two important differences. First, unlike Georgia, there was no standing institutional vehicle to push secessionism by the Russophone population on the left bank of the Dniester

River (the MASSR disappeared in 1941). Rather, the territory had a distinctive identity because its history and political economy, especially its industrial character, were different from right-bank Moldova (Bessarabia). Second, unlike the Georgian case, the rhetoric of countermobilization against the Moldovan nationalism that was temporarily ascendant in Chişinău/Kishinev was not ethnic but Soviet. It drew upon longstanding, moralized dichotomies from the Great Patriotic War, in which a united, multiethnic people fight against fascists from the West. In this script, all nationalism is innately fascist; only the Soviet Union/Russia stands for the "friendship of peoples." Revisionist attitudes in the Baltic states and elsewhere toward the Great Patriotic War (including criticism of Moscow for ignoring the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939), and policies privileging one nation's language and culture above all others were purported evidence of "fascistic" nationalism. Moves by the democratically elected Popular Front of Moldova in the fall of 1989 to legislatively enshrine the Moldovan language, the Latin script, and special relations with Romania within the still-Soviet Republic provoked the creation of a Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic centered in Transnistria in September 1990. This became the foundation of Transnistria, which fought a brief war from March to July 1992 to secure "independence" from the successor Moldovan state that had been recognized by the international community after the Soviet Union's collapse.

Questioning Post–Soviet De Facto States

A de facto state is a political entity that has proclaimed itself the sovereign ruler of a specified territory and has managed to survive for two years or more controlling all or part of that territory.[8] While they may possess domestic or "internal sovereignty" by virtue of this control, their failure to acquire international legal sovereignty, sometimes termed "external sovereignty," by the existing community of states means they are unrecognized de facto, not de jure, states.

The collapse of the Soviet Union saw the emergence of a series of de facto states in troubled territories. One that emerged on the territory of the Russian Federation, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, achieved recognition for a few years but was subsequently extinguished in the Second Chechen War.[9] Other potentially troublesome territories with large ethnic Russian populations, like Crimea and the Donbas in Ukraine, as well as northern

Kazakhstan, saw rising tensions and secessionist sentiment but no emerging de facto states. In total, four post-Soviet de facto states have endured over the last quarter century: the republics of Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, and the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR, a.k.a. Transnistria). (Figure 1 indicates their locations by the extent of their current territorial control). Each is distinctive, and glibly homogenizing them or viewing them largely as post-Soviet phenomena can miss a great deal. Four points help illustrate why this is so.

Post-Soviet de facto states express and prolong pre-Soviet and Soviet era territorial conflicts.

As explained above, these post-Soviet de facto states are located in places with long histories of territorial rivalry between competing nationalizing projects. Efforts to organize diverse multiethnic Tsarist spaces into homogeneous nation-states were short-circuited by the triumph of the Bolsheviks. While the Soviet Union helped create the territorial templates of contemporary states, it complicated this by recognizing ethnoterritories within these spaces and/or adding neighboring spaces for geopolitical reasons. The transfer of Crimea from Soviet Russia to Soviet Ukraine in 1954 created a disjuncture between the imagined nation space of Russian nationalists (based on Tsarist and later Great Patriotic War visions) and the actual borders of Soviet Russia. This would prove to be a source of resentment and irredentist aspirations as Ukraine and Russia became successor states of the USSR. Within parts of Ukraine, especially Crimea, and to a lesser extent the Donbas, pro-Russia forces did aspire to break away and join Russia.[10] These sentiments, encouraged by some in Russia, were never seriously pursued by the Yeltsin administration after the election of Leonid Kuchma as president of Ukraine in July 1994.

Post-Soviet de facto states are simmering, not frozen, conflicts.

Because the fragmentation of the post-Soviet republics of Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan was locked in place by a variety of cease-fire settlements in the early to mid-1990s, the term "frozen conflicts" became a journalistic cliché. The legacies of violence in each case are very different. At one end of the scale is Nagorny Karabakh. At the time of the cease-fire in May 1994, an estimated 750,000 Azerbaijanis were driven from their homes, the vast majority not from the NKAO but from surrounding provinces seized by Ar-

menian forces as well as from Armenia proper. More than 300,000 ethnic Armenians inside Azerbaijan also were forcefully displaced. It is estimated that around 35,000 died in the conflict.

Next comes Abkhazia. At the time of the cease-fire in September 1993, well over half a million Georgians had been forcefully displaced. Estimates of wartime deaths also range as high as 35,000, the vast majority Georgian civilians. South Ossetia's conflict, which broke out in January 1991, ended with the Sochi agreement of June 1992. Approximately two thousand people died. While there was forced displacement, it was less extensive than in Abkhazia. Moreover, Georgia retained a presence in South Ossetia until August 2008. The fighting in Moldova in 1992 was largely concentrated in the period from March to July. A few hundred people were killed on either side. The intervention of the Soviet/Russian Fourteenth Army established a peace that has lasted to this day.

This is not the case elsewhere. In August 2008, Russia and Georgia fought a brief war over a Georgian attempt to take back South Ossetia. Georgia was defeated and approximately 15,000 Georgian residents of South Ossetia were unable to return to their destroyed homes. Two weeks after the cease-fire agreement, the Russian Federation broke its policy of not recognizing secessionist movements and their de facto states. On August 26, 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a move only a few other states followed. Russia continued to not recognize Transnistria or Nagorny Karabakh. In April 2016, a "four-day" war broke out between Nagorny Karabakh and Azerbaijan, which managed to seize some territory before the fighting was brought to an end. Casualties are believed to have been in the low hundreds.

The post–Soviet de facto states are not simply fragments of empire.

It is worth grasping how the different de facto states relate to the Soviet Union. For the Republic of Nagorny Karabakh, the Soviet Union was the overarching power structure that prevented it from joining Armenia and securing the territory for the Armenian majority in the face of perceived Azerbaijani encroachment and repression. For South Ossetia, the Soviet Union created the autonomous oblast and institutionalized ethnic links with North Ossetia. For ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia, the legacy is mixed. On one hand,

the Soviet Union became a vehicle for downgrading the status of Abkhazia and allowing "Georgians in the Kremlin" to pursue what they viewed as the "Georgianization" of Abkhazian territory, rendering the titular Abkhaz a small minority by 1991.[11] On the other, the Soviet Union in its heyday brought unprecedented prosperity to the region.

More than the other three post-Soviet de facto states, Transnistria came to be seen as a frozen fragment of the USSR. Its first post-Soviet president, Igor Smirnov, was a Communist Party stalwart and former factory manager from Kamchatka. Transnistria's Soviet aura, however, was deceptive. Businesses based in the region secured the right to export to the European Union. But as in Russia, Soviet iconography and adapted state practices served to entrench a political economy that was organized around state-sanctioned oligarchic capitalism. In 2011, a politician with ties to competing factions within Transnistria's oligarchy, Yevgeny Shevchuk, defeated both long-entrenched Smirnov and a Kremlin-backed candidate in the presidential election.

Russia's policies toward the de facto states are constantly evolving.

Russia's relationship with the post-Soviet de facto states has transformed over the last quarter century from ambivalence to active support. Moscow had a decisive role in creating Transnistria and, to a lesser and more debatable extent, in the formation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But it also refused to recognize the de facto states created there and maintained comprehensive economic sanctions (passed by the CIS in January 1996) against Abkhazia until Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in 2000, when they were somewhat eased. The sanctions, however, were not fully abrogated until March 2008. Thereafter, Moscow moved to shore up its relations with de facto state elites and use them as "levers" to serve Russia's national interests in regions immediately beyond its borders. The policy became more explicit in the wake of the 2008 war with Georgia.[12] Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its initial clandestine support for separatism across southeast Ukraine at the same time represents an intensification of Moscow's territorial revanchism. Some Western analysts see a consistent geopolitical formula at work: use troubled territories and compatriots in neighboring states to stop integration with Western institutions. Others see the longstanding logic of Russian imperialism.[13]

The trouble with such interpretations is that they tend to discount the power of emotive ties between people in these troubled territories and Russia. Moscow's geopolitical strategy would not be possible if it were not for the fact that minorities in these troubled territories often fear the nationalizing project of the core nation and look to Russia as their geopolitical protector. This protector-victim relationship is particularly powerful; it underwrites the considerable subsidies Russia provides to the de facto states in Georgia and Moldova, and emergent ones in the Donbas.[14] The Karabakh case is different, but even here Russia is an indirect protector in that it has a military alliance with Armenia, Karabakh's primary protector and patron, which commits Russia to intervene should Armenia come under attack.

In sum, there is no denying that Russia is the preponderant patron of the post-Soviet de facto states. Parent states like Georgia, Moldova, and now Ukraine (with respect to the Donbas separatist republics and Crimea) charge that these are "occupied territories" fueled by Russian money and run by Russian-appointed officials and even Russian citizens. But this rhetoric is problematic. Occupation suggests military control against the consent of the resident population. It also implicitly suggests a highly contentious claim to original ownership. Georgian nationalists may view the whole Soviet period as an occupation; indeed Georgia, following Latvia and Estonia, opened a Soviet occupation museum in May 2006 that provoked the ire of Putin.[15] The implication of this contention, however, is that Georgia's ethnic minorities who secured ethnoterritorial regions during the Soviet period are instruments of that occupation, a contention that ultimately serves the interests of Russia as it provides no appealing space for Abkhaz and Ossetians within Georgia.

The De Facto Research Project in Post–Soviet Space

In 2008, we began a De Facto State Research Project to study public attitudes and internal dynamics within the post-Soviet de facto states in the wake of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) on February 17, 2008, and its subsequent recognition by many countries, including the United States, Germany, and France. At the time there was considerable speculation about a "Kosovo precedent" in the Caucasus. The issue was politically contentious. The U.S. wished to portray the Kosovo case as *sui generis*, without any precedent. Vladimir Putin saw this as a clear case of double standards. Speaking to Western reporters in the summer prior to Kosovo's UDI Putin

said, "there are no arguments in favor of a position that the Kosovo case differs from the situations in South Ossetia, Abkhazia or Transnistria."[16] After Kosovo's UDI, Putin declared that "to support a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo is amoral and against the law. Territorial integrity is one of the fundamental principles of international law…. Here in this region we have Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Trans-Dniester that exist as independent states. We are always being told that Kosovo is a special case. This is all lies. There is nothing so special about Kosovo and everyone knows this full well."[17]

Kosovo's UDI was followed by the Bucharest Declaration on April 3, 2008, which stated that Georgia and Ukraine would one day become members of NATO. A few months later Georgia and Russia were at war over South Ossetia. As noted, on August 26, 2008, Russia broke with its longstanding policy of supporting state territorial integrity and recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as states.

We began our project with an emphasis on public attitudes and internal dynamics in the republics, since this seemed to be a major gap in academic and public understanding of the issues surrounding the independence declarations. Dov Lynch wrote in 2002 that "there has been virtually no comparative study of the separatist states. A critical gap has emerged in our understanding of security developments in the former Soviet Union."[18] This is still generally the case. The goal of our project was to shed light on the hopes, wishes, attitudes, worries, and post-conflict experiences of the people who live in these small territories.[19] Inevitably this goal clashed with the geopolitical objectification of these territories by Western commentators as "geopolitical black holes," regional "pawns," or "kleptocratic zones." Our purpose was not to advocate for the people in these regions but to present what they believed about their condition, the parent/patron states, and the world more generally.

Conducting social science research in these areas is challenging but we have managed to compile an archive of survey information that helps us understand these regions as never before. Here we summarize comparative results across the republics from representative surveys repeated about three-to-four years apart. Key questions taken from among 120 in a long questionnaire include relations with Russia, current and future political arrangements, and the contemporary situation within the republics.

Though these are not panel data, the repeated questions in the same communities with similar ethnic compositions between samples allow a high degree of confidence that they measure ongoing and consistent concerns of local populations.

We compare data from Abkhazia (surveys March 2010 and December 2014), South Ossetia (November 2010 and December 2014), Transnistria (July 2010 and December 2014), and partially for Nagorny Karabakh (November 2011 and August 2013).[20] We have elaborated on the difficulties of survey research in these areas elsewhere.[21] Despite these difficulties, the data remain the best available for these republics.

Among the primary similarities over the short three-to-five year gap and across republics are the clear ethnic differences in Abkhazia, and to some extent in Transnistria; the strong support for closer ties to Russia across all four republics, including support for a military presence that is tied to a needed sense of security; the consistency of results over time even after the major geopolitical and security changes in the region consequent to the Ukraine crisis of 2014-2015; the general regret about the end of the Soviet Union; and the pervasive lack of interest in Western-style democracy. Though we could examine the data by other demographic categories, we focus on differences between the nationalities in and between the republics since the ethnoterritorial dimension remains pervasive even in an age of new geopolitical realities.

Post–Soviet geopolitical orientation and relations with Russia

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 is still strongly felt in the de facto states, arguably even more than in the fifteen successor republics because of the vulnerability of these small economies and polities. We have consistently found in surveys in the former Soviet Union over the past twenty years that the answer to the simple, but probing, question of whether "the end of the Soviet Union was positive or negative" reliably predicts a person's beliefs about a wide range of geopolitical developments, ethnic reconciliation attitudes, and domestic political preferences. On the graphs below, there are only single bars for post-conflict South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh, which are now virtually mono-ethnic, while for Transnistria and Abkhazia, we report the results for the main nationalities.
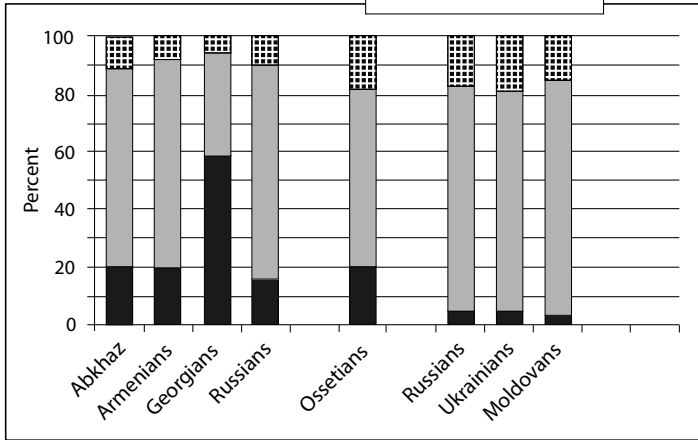
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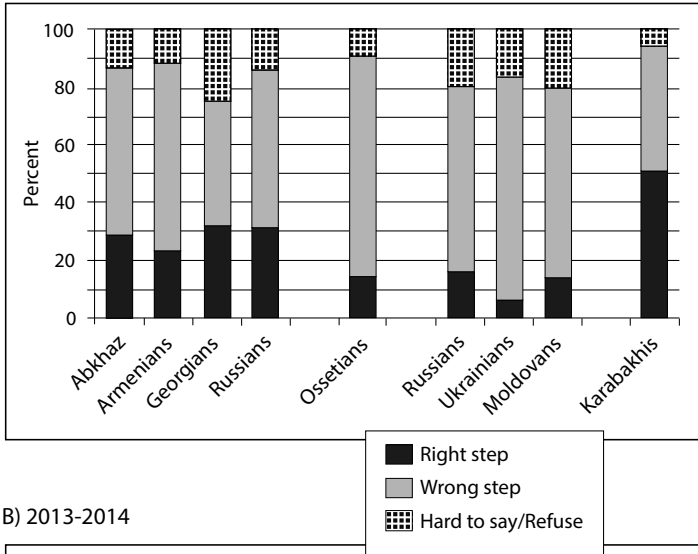
B) 2013-2014

Figure 2: Responses (%) of the nationalities in the four de facto states to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The question asked: "Was it a right or a wrong step?"

It is no surprise that a strong majority of people of all ethnicities (except the ethnic Georgian Mingrelians in Abkhazia) consider the dissolution of the Soviet Union a "wrong step" (Figure 2). The years since the local wars of the late 1980s/early 1990s have been characterized by political uncertainty, economic isolation, recurrent violence (in Georgia and along the Armenian-Azerbaijani cease-fire line), and widespread poverty. Nostalgia for a past that was peaceful and relatively prosperous is understandable and not confined to these

regions. Positive memory of the Soviet Union remains strong across successor republics, especially among segments of the population–usually poor and elderly–that suffered significant material losses from its collapse.

In all four de facto republics, views about the collapse of the Soviet Union are highly correlated with the political and economic prospects of the respective regions and nationalities. In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, strong majorities among the Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians living in Transnistria, as well as South Ossetians, believe that the collapse of the USSR was a mistake; all of these groups have seen a dramatic drop in living standards and huge outmigration. In Abkhazia, similarly, a growing majority of Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians believe that the end of the Soviet Union was a "wrong step," as the republic continues to remain poor and isolated. Georgians show a trend that is the reverse of other groups; in December 2014, a majority (58%) believed that it was right to dismantle the Soviet Union. Respondents in Nagorny Karabakh are as equally divided on that question as they are on another key issue–their political future.

The question about the direction of the de facto republic (right or wrong) is an important measure of overall satisfaction with contemporary domestic developments (Figure 3). These right direction scores are much higher than either in the United States (about 25-30% in 2016) or Russia (45%, down 20 points from a year earlier). This measure is strongly affected by immediate economic trends and, in the case of these small vulnerable political units, by current geopolitical tensions and prospects of more violence. A certain "rally round the flag" element appears in the most dangerous times (noted in Transnistria especially) and local leaders can "legitimate" their foreign and domestic actions to generate more support for their positions. Over the four-to-five years of the survey intervals, the ratios saying that the directions were right have risen in the three republics closest to Russia, with majorities of all groups holding this position in December 2014. The question was asked in Nagorny Karabakh before the Ukrainian crisis; this republic's tension with Azerbaijan distinguishes it from the other three republics. The biggest change is seen in Transnistria, where Yevgeni Shevchuk gave a fresh face to local politics after the long, unpopular rule of Igor Smirnov. Shevchuk advocated strongly for integration into Russia and heightened concerns about Ukrainian intentions in the wake of the Maidan revolution and tensions on the now-militarized border.

Facing elections at the end of 2016, his government recently declared that it was time to enact the results of the 2006 referendum, in which 97 percent of the region's residents voted to join Russia.[22]
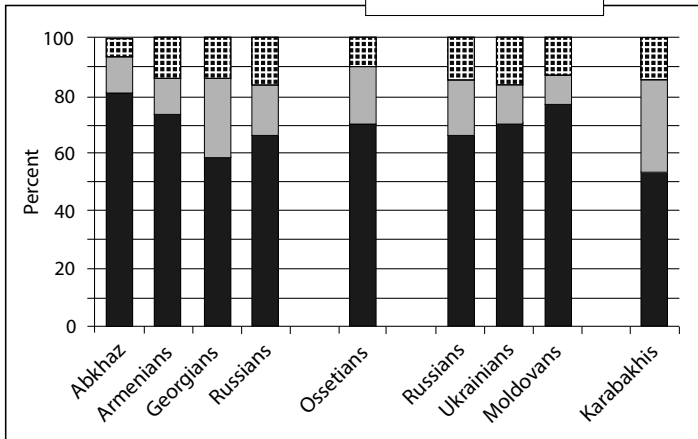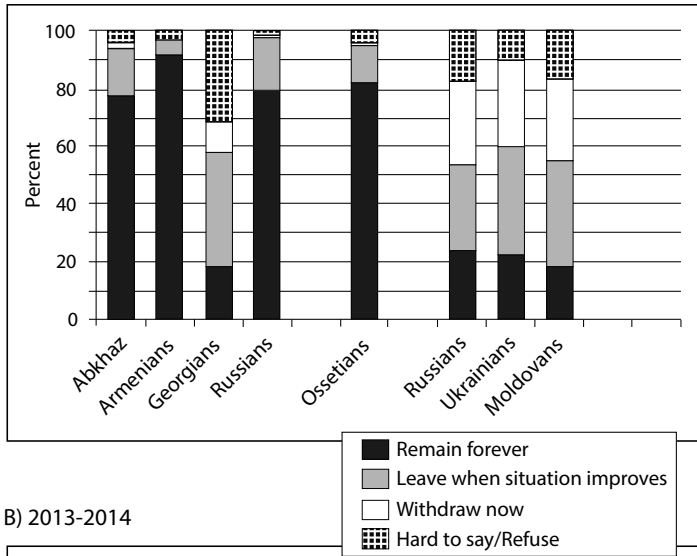
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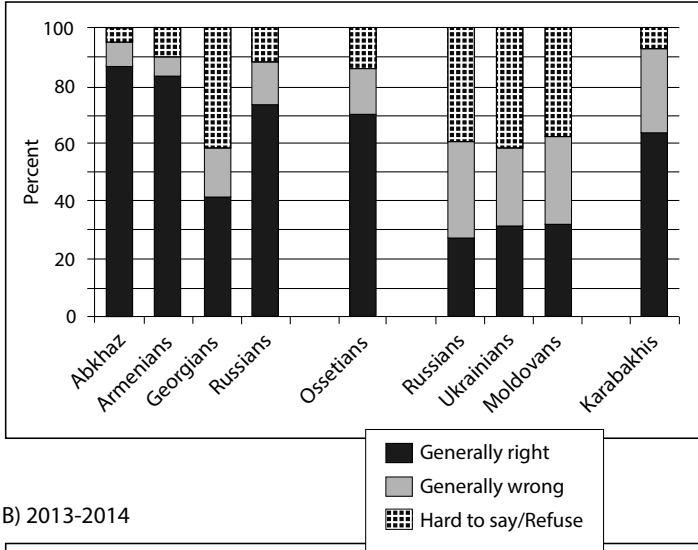
B) 2013-2014

Figure 3: Responses (%) of the nationalities in the four de facto states for the question: "Is the state generally going in the right or in the wrong direction?"
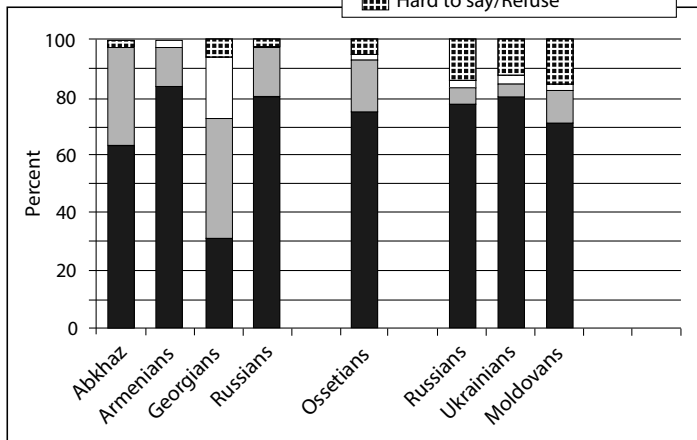
A) 2010-2011

B) 2013-2014

Figure 4: Responses (%) of the nationalities in the four de facto states to the question on the presence of Russian Troops. The question: "How long should Russian troops remain?" in the respective territories. The question was not posed in Nagorny Karabakh since there is no Russian base there.

Key to the future status of the de facto republics is the security guarantee offered by the Russian Federation and the presence of Russian troops, bases and equipment. We probed local opinions about this alliance, though not in Nagorny Karabakh, where, as noted, Russia's presence is indirect through its alliance with Armenia. No Russian troops are in the Karabakh republic. The effects of the Ukrainian crisis are visible in Transnistria in Figure

4. Elsewhere the ratios for the nationalities do not change much, with Georgians in Abkhazia most skeptical about Russian troop presence (less than one-third want them to stay permanently).

The clear sentiment of most residents in these regions toward Russia challenges rhetorical claims that these regions are "under Russian occupation." One of our Abkhaz interlocutors told us in Sukhum (Sokhumi) in November 2009, "We can now sleep at night since the border is guarded by Russian forces." That belief is widely shared; strong majorities in all groups, except for Georgians, want Russian forces to be the ultimate guarantor of their security by offering a tripwire against any possible attack and further military aid in the event of a conflict, as happened in South Ossetia in 2008. Borders with the parent states now have stricter controls than at any time since the wars of the early 1990s, making it difficult for locals with property and families on both sides of the border to cross the line. This is especially true for the sizable Georgian minority in the Gal(i) region of southern Abkhazia. Rhetoric about Russian occupation continues, but it is inevitably caught up in an ethnicized interpretation of original ownership of the contested territories. "De-occupation," in effect, would mean expelling not only Russian troops but also all local residents who view them as allies.

While two de facto states are unrecognized and two have an insignificant amount of international recognition, all have Russian backing. However, we found elsewhere in the survey that nearly half of their residents believe that their republic is a card in international games. This belief suggests that the respondents are not all that confident of Russian support should Moscow's geopolitical interests change; what if, for example, Russian interest in an agreement with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to block proposed NATO expansion trumped its alliance with these small territories?

Political preferences and the uncertain future of de facto states

Though the de facto states have competitive elections, the usual democratic guarantees of equal access to the media, electoral commissions without bias, and freedom of political organizations from police and government pressures are not met. In all but South Ossetia, one of the key dimensions in local politics is the extent to which the republic will maintain its political

and economic independence relative to the patron state, Russia or Armenia. Two questions about the perceptions of political systems (extant and alternatives), and the preferences for a final political structure illustrate the current political picture in the republics.
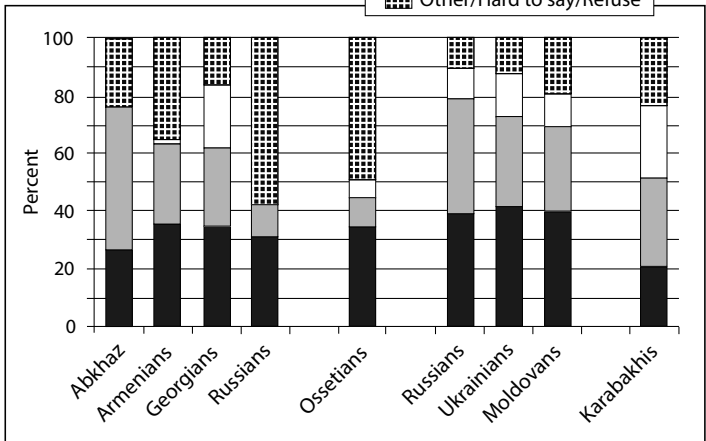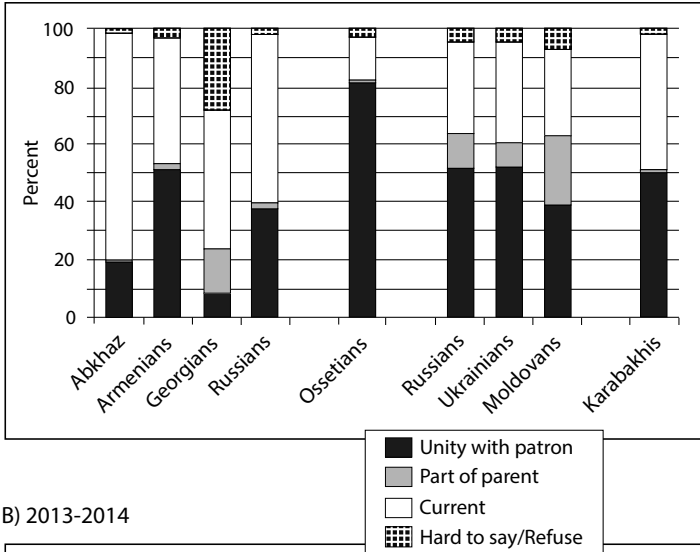
A) 2010-2011
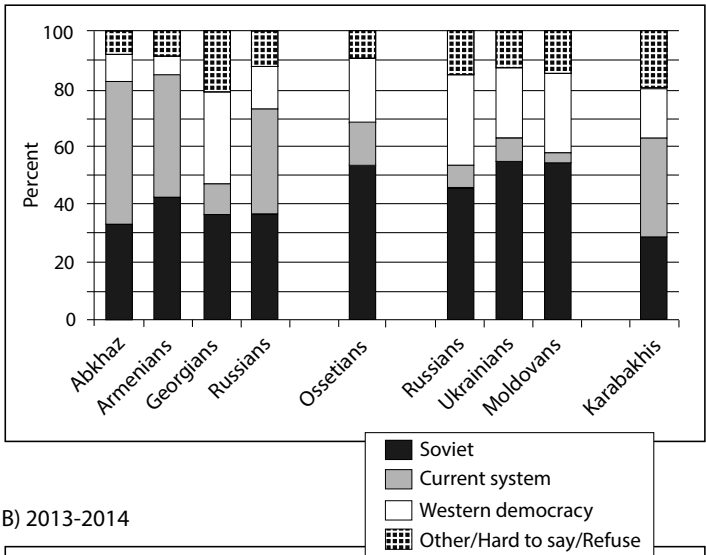
B) 2013-2014

Figure 5: Responses (%) of the nationalities in the four de facto states about preferences for the "best political system" in the respective de facto states. The question named three options, the Soviet system, the current system in the Republic, or Western democracy, but it also offered the choice of "Other," allowing the respondent to specify another political system, including the current political system in the Russian Federation.
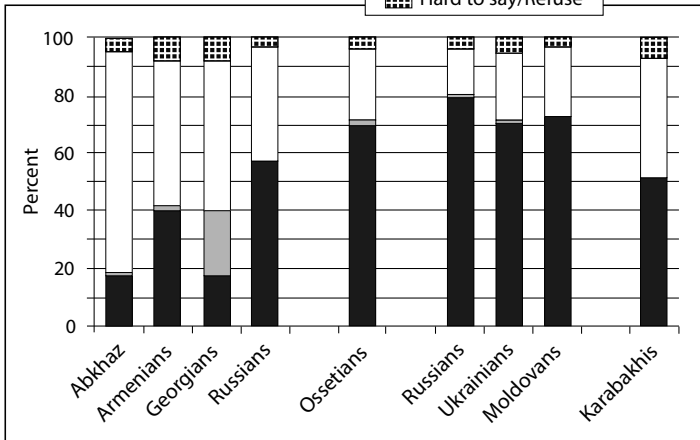
A) 2010-2011

B) 2013-2014

Figure 6: Responses (%) of the nationalities in the four de facto states about preferences for the final status of the respective de facto republic. For respondents in Nagorny Karabakh, the option about the patron "Integration with Russia" was replaced with "Integration with Armenia."

Offered a choice of three specific models of governance–and a category "Other" that could include the system currently in place in Russia–the Soviet option is still prominent (Figure 5). More than half of respondents in Transnistria and South Ossetia preferred this system in 2010-2011, with about one in three respondents in all other surveys opting for the Soviet system. Part of this preference is undoubtedly related to the nos-

talgia described above, but there is a decidedly undemocratic element in the republics, as can be seen in low support to a different survey question about free speech. The petty party politics and messy electoral structures in place could also explain these preferences for a one-party authoritarian system.[23]

Over time, the ratios expressing more support for the local political system in place is growing, with about one-third support in Nagorny Karabakh and Transnistria. Only the Abkhaz, who dominate the local political scene completely, demonstrate majority support for the current system in their republic in both surveys. The sizable increase in the "Other" category for Ossetians as well as for Armenians and Russians in Abkhazia is related to the preference for the "Russian system," that is Putin's controlled democracy. What stands out in the graphs in Figure 5 is the weak support for a Western-style system, with only Georgians in Abkhazia showing more than 20% support for it in 2014; what support that had existed for it in Transnistria (20-30% in 2011) had shrunk dramatically by 2014 in the face of Smirnov's defeat and the initial popularity of his successor, Shevchuk.

Looking to the future of the de facto republics requires a consideration of alternatives to the relatively stable internal situation at the present. The two alternatives are reintegration with the parent states (Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Georgia), or joining Russia through some sort of referendum. Russia has shown no sign of encouraging such a move since the significant costs of supporting weak economies and strong opposition from the Western-supported regional states suggest a postponement or denial of appeals from the regimes for such a dramatic move. This has been the case for Transnistria, but it has not stopped Shevchuk from trying to revive the issue. Residents of Nagorny Karabakh are split almost equally on keeping the current arrangement or joining Armenia (Figure 6).

Elsewhere, both South Ossetia and Transnistria show overwhelming preference for joining Russia, given the geopolitical and economic vulnerability of both states. The Ukraine crisis increased the numbers to about 75% in each of the three main groups in Transnistria who express this preference as the best long-term option. For Abkhazia, the nature of local political control predicts the preference. The Abkhaz show a strong majority for the current system, from which they profit in terms of almost complete control. (Only

15% of members of the parliament are non-Abkhaz and the president is always Abkhaz).[24] Of the other groups, ethnic Russians prefer unity with the Russian Federation, while about half of Armenians and Georgians opt for the current system. For Georgians, this is their best realistic option or least bad choice, since unity with Russia would almost certainly preclude the eventual return of the republic to the parent state.

Residents of the de facto republics recognize their vulnerability to the decisions of external actors, especially the great powers, and their interest in international politics is high. However, the daily grind of making a decent living remains paramount, with unemployment and poverty ranking highest in their lists of problems facing the respective republics. While the security issue has been temporarily resolved by the Russian guarantees, high levels of migration and dependence on pensions and other Russian subsidies indicate chronic economic troubles. All except Transnistria have seen huge depopulations since the last Soviet census of 1989 due to ethnic displacements after the wars and migration motivated by unemployment. Support for the local regimes remains contingent on their legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens that is dependent on security guarantees and material well-being.[25] Russian support is thus central to their existence and future stability.

Conclusions

The Russian government today sustains a diverse geopolitical archipelago of annexed territory (Crimea), recognized de facto states, unrecognized de facto states, and emergent de facto states in its near abroad. To this list, we might add Chechnya, where the Russian government cut a deal with a local warlord that has allowed it to become an exceptional "inner abroad" territory within Russia. While Moscow keeps these diverse places afloat with federal largess, they are mostly troubled inheritances rather than full creations of the Putin regime.

Despite nearly a quarter century of existence, the four post-Soviet de facto states still sit in a gray geopolitical zone, subject to the nature of great power relations. Without Russian guarantees, they would come under severe pressure through economic blockades and even military attacks. Russian backing now precludes any significant change in the status quo of the de facto republics and current interactions with their parent states. But any

dramatic changes in Russia itself would have immediate repercussions on the small territories that depend on it. The local military forces are substantial and well-armed and undoubtedly motivated to defend their territory. It is Russian troops and bases, however, that will determine the outcome of any further conflict in three de factos (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria), just as Russian geopolitical interests strongly influence the Armenian/Karabakhi-Azerbaijani peace process. The vast majority of the residents of de facto republics prefer this uncertain but relatively secure arrangement to any other alternative.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1. We define ethnoterritories in this article as political units designated as the official homelands of certain "titular nations," though they may not make up the majority in that area.

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16. Vladimir Putin, "Interview with Newspaper Journalists from G8 Member Countries," June 4, 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24313.

17. Vladimir Putin, "Transcript of Annual Big Press Conference," February 14, 2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24835.

18. Dov Lynch, "Separatist States and Post-Soviet Conflicts," *International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (2002): 832.

19. They range in size from about 30,000 people in South Ossetia to about 475,000 in Transnistria. In area, they extend from about 16,000 square kilometers in the territory controlled by Nagorny Karabakh to 3,900 in South Ossetia. See John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, and Gerard Toal, "Inside the Post-Soviet De Facto states: A Comparison of Attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55, no. 5: (2014): 423–456.

20. For the latter date and location, we only have three comparable questions and they come from a survey by Kristin Bakke that repeated many of our earlier survey questions

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