

# **Involvement and Instruments of Patron States in Shaping State Building Processes of De Facto States**

*The Case of Russian Involvement in Abkhazia's State Building Pursuits*

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## **Abstract**

De facto states challenge basic assumptions of political and legal legitimacy, sovereignty and statehood in the international system. These largely internationally unrecognised entities are also not the likeliest candidates for successful state building, due to their limited trading opportunities and significant military pressures from their parent states. Nonetheless, some de facto states built relatively successful state structures on their contested territory. While some unrecognised entities achieved state building without the backing of a patron (i.e. Somaliland, Eritrea, Iraqi Kurdistan), others are largely dependent on the financial, political and military support of patrons to provide basic public services and goods to its citizens (i.e. South Ossetia, Northern Cyprus). Therefore, this paper aims to uncover the extent to which patron states (or the lack thereof) influence state and institution building efforts of de facto states. The study relies predominantly on statistical analyses of a data set of 34 de facto states since 1945. These findings will be complemented with a case study of Russian involvement in Abkhazia's state building pursuits since 1991. It will be argued that patron states generally support de facto states in guaranteeing minimal civilian governance. Patrons are, however, not interested in creating coherent government structures in de facto states, as this would reduce the level of de facto state dependence on the patron state. Ultimately, this would suggest that patrons not only influence de facto states through financial incentives and military support, but also through state and institution building channels. In addition, the analysis of Russian influences on Abkhazia reveals three dimensions of Russian state building involvement in the South Caucasian de facto state: financial contributions, institution sharing and legislative diffusion as well as treaties and agreements that specify state building measures.

**Keywords:** De facto states, state building, patron states, Russia, Abkhazia

## 1. Introduction

Following the discovery of offshore natural gas reserves in the Aegean Sea and renewed tensions between the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in October 2018, Turkish President Erdoğan emphasised Turkey's predominance over Northern Cyprus by declaring that "no step can be taken in Cyprus [...] at the expense of Turkey." Two months earlier, Algeria renewed its pledge to provide the Polisario Front, a national liberation movement in the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), "with the necessary financial support to carry out administrative works." In a tweet from April 2019, US National Security Advisor John Bolton confirmed the United States' commitment to the Taiwan Relations Act from 1979, that guarantees the necessary military support for Taiwanese self-defence. These three examples exemplify the predominant coverage of relationships between de facto states and their patrons, concentrating on military support, financial aid and direct interference in the domestic political affairs of the unrecognised entities. Similarly, Russian foreign policy towards its near abroad is frequently portrayed along military, economic and political dimensions and in terms of hard power instruments (Kramer 2008: 3-4).

Meanwhile, several de facto states have achieved and sustained relatively high levels of state building (de Waal 2018). However, the concrete influences and contributions of patron on the state building processes of de facto states remain unclear. This paper aims to uncover the extent to which patron states or the lack thereof influence state and institution building efforts of de facto states. More specifically, the study intends to identify the leverage and instruments available to patron states in impacting the development of governance institutions and the provision of public services and goods in de facto states

In order to assess the direct involvement of the Russian Federation on state building in Abkhazia, this paper is structured as follows: The first section measures the statistical impact of patron states on state and institution building. The second section examines Russia's role as a patron state in Abkhazia. The third section analyses specific instruments that Russia applies in Abkhazia that influence the state building process of Abkhazia. The data set used in this paper is based predominantly on the original data set from Adrian Florea's (2014) article 'De Facto States in International Politics (1945-2011): A New Data Set'. The quantitative findings will be complemented with interview data from 18 interviews that were conducted between 2017 and 2018 in Georgia, Abkhazia and Russia.

The statistical analysis of this paper shows that patron states generally support de facto states in guaranteeing minimal civilian governance. Patrons are, however, not interested in creating coherent government structures in de facto states, as this would reduce the level of de facto state dependence on the patron state. The number of governance institutions, on the other hand, tends to drop with the presence of a patron state, which this paper explains with institution sharing between patron and de facto states.

An analysis of the most common Russian instruments in Abkhazia reveals three central trends: First, Russian support is linked predominantly to infrastructural reconstruction and

not systematic change or the development of people's capacity.<sup>1</sup> This basically means, that Russia finances an institutional infrastructure that enables basic public service provision in Abkhazia and without which further state development would struggle.<sup>2</sup> Russia has passed treaties and agreements with Abkhazia that specify such state building measures. Second, Russia and Abkhazia rely heavily on institution sharing, which reduces Abkhazia's self-sustainability opportunities, because it disincentivises institutional development in Abkhazia. This is particularly visible in the security services and the economy.<sup>3</sup> Third, Russia controls relevant de facto politicians or ensures that politicians have close ties with Russia. While Russia is not necessarily interested in micromanaging politics and state building in Abkhazia, it is interested in having candidates in place that have a favourable view on Russia and can be manipulated more easily.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>2</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>3</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

## 2. The Influence of Patron States on State and Institution Building

The dependent variables of this paper are the degree of state building and the number of governance institutions in a de facto state in a given year. The dependent variables are summarised in the table below (table 1).

Table 1: Dependent variables

dfsbuild	Ordinal variable measuring degree of state building from 1 (low) to 4 (very high)
dfsbuildmod	Binary variable comparing low degrees of state building (0) with moderate, high and very high degrees of state building (1)
dfsbuildstrong	Binary variable comparing low and moderate degrees of state building (0) with high and very high degrees of state building (1)
dfsinst	Number of governance institutions in an unrecognised state in a given year

The first dependent variable (*dfsbuild*)<sup>4</sup> is an ordinal variable that represents the degree of state building in a given year in a de facto state. Florea (2016) codes the degree of state building by applying 4 categories.<sup>5</sup> As the variable *dfsbuild* is an ordered categorical variable, I decided to generate two binary variables from the original state building variable: *dfsbuildmod* and *dfsbuildstrong*. The former focuses on the step from category 1 (low degrees of state building) to category 2 (moderate degrees of state building) and the latter focuses on the step from moderate degrees of state building to high degrees of state building. As this paper is interested in the variables that influence the step from separatist control to basic forms of civilian governance or from basic forms of civilian governance to coherent governmental structures, recoding the dependent variable allows us to analyse this step more clearly. Thereby, the independent variables that influence the change from low to moderate degrees of state building or from moderate to high degrees of state building can be measured. In addition, the time series cross-sectional panel data literature provides more sophisticated statistical functions and publications on binary variable in comparison to ordered categorical

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<sup>4</sup> The variable definitions are taken from Adrian Florea's De Facto States Dataset Codebook (Version 1.1 February 2016). Florea, A. (2014). De Facto States in International Politics (1945-2011): A New Data Set. *International Interactions* 40,5, 788-811

<sup>5</sup> "1 low degree of state building: de facto state separatists control the means of violence in the territory and provide minimal public goods (such as physical security)

2 moderate degree of state building; in addition to 1, separatists allocate resources for civilian governance (such as minimal public administration, social security, education, health)

3 high degree of state building: in addition to 2, separatists develop coherent governmental structures (institutions for extraction and redistribution; internal security and border management; courts; ministries)

4 very high degree of state building; the polity has most characteristics of a state (including external relations, representative offices abroad, commercial relations with international partners)." (Florea 2016: 14)

variables (see for example Beck, Katz and Tucker 1998).

The second dependent variable (*dfsinst*) is a count variable (that behaves similarly to a continuous variable) that measures the number of governance institutions in a de facto state in a given year (see Appendix D for the justification for using linear regressions). Florea (2016) does not distinguish between the origin of these institutions, which means that it can be inherited from previous autonomy rights or built by local separatist authorities. The variable has 10 categories<sup>6</sup>

*Table 2 TSCS Logistic Regression (Achieving Moderate Degrees of State Building)*

Odds of Achieving Moderate Degrees of SB

Patron	7.440***
Great Power Patron	8.274***
Contiguous Patron	5.835**

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

*Table 3 TSCS Logistic Regression (Achieving High Degrees of State Building)*

Odds of Achieving High Degrees of SB

Patron	-0.794
Great Power Patron	-0.392
Contiguous Patron	-0.599

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

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<sup>6</sup> “1 an executive supported by a military (coded as present if there is a clear executive authority that makes decisions in the de facto state)  
 2 a legislature and/or regional councils (coded as present if there is a legislative body in the de facto state capital and/or regional councils)  
 3 a court or semi-formalized legal system (coded as present if there is a formal or semiformal juridical authority that adjudicates disputes between individuals or institutions in the de facto state)  
 4 a civilian tax system (coded as present if there are institutions for regularized extraction of taxes from the local population/businesses and/or from the diaspora)  
 5 an educational system (coded as present if the authorities in the de facto state establish a system of education that functions in parallel with or in lieu of the one provided by the parent state)  
 6 a welfare system (coded as present if the authorities in the de facto state establish a system of welfare – healthcare and/or pensions – that functions in parallel with or in lieu of the one provided by the parent state)  
 7 institutions for foreign affairs (coded as present if the authorities in the de facto state engage in diplomacy – establishing missions abroad; engaging in contacts with IGOs and/or foreign governments)  
 8 media or propaganda system (coded as present if the authorities in the de facto state establish media or propaganda outlets)  
 9 police and/or gendarmerie system (coded as present if the authorities in the de facto state establish a system of internal control – police and/or gendarmerie – that operates separately from the army)  
 10 an independent central banking system (coded as present if the authorities in the de facto state establish an independent central banking system that functions separately from the parent state’s banking” (Florea 2016: 14-15)

The results in tables 2 and 3 reveal that patrons, great or regional power patrons and contiguous patrons alike have a statistically significant influence on the state building change from low to moderate degrees of state building in de facto states. When it comes to the step from moderate to high degrees of state building, however, the influence of patrons is not statistically significant. In more practical terms, patrons appear to matter most when de facto states go from a stage of separatist control over the means of violence to a stage of basic civilian governance, such as minimal public administration, health and education. Patrons do not significantly impact the change from basic civilian governance to coherent governmental structures, such as extraction and redistribution structures. However, a more nuanced analysis of the time series cross-sectional panel revealed that patrons only significantly impact the step from separatist control to basic civilian governance rather than the step to coherent government structures. This paper argues that patron states support de facto states in guaranteeing minimal civilian governance in order to ensure a degree of sustainability of the unrecognised entity and to reduce the likelihood of public discontent. Patrons are, however, not interested in creating coherent government structures in de facto states, as this would reduce the level of de facto state dependence on the patron state. However, if post-Soviet states are excluded from the sample set, the findings are no longer statistically significant, which indicates that the role of patrons in this region is particularly strong.

These statistical findings are reflected in the qualitative findings of this paper where the Russian financial support mechanisms focus predominantly on infrastructural initiatives and the provision of basic public services, rather than capacity building and methodological training. Thus, Abkhaz officials are reliant on coming up with own initiatives to develop the capacities of government, health and teaching staff unless they accept the continued reliance on Russian expertise or training sessions from local international organisations and NGOs. Potential explanations for Russia's limited action are that Russian and Abkhaz officials are not aware of this shortcoming, that they do not see it as a necessity or that Russia is reluctant to be more involved as it would reduce the level of de facto state dependence on the patron state.

*Table 4 TSCS Linear Regression Analysis (Governance Institutions)*

Number of Governance Institutions	
Patron	-1.071***
Great Power Patron	-0.997**
Contiguous Patron	-0.938**

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

The results of the time series cross-sectional regression analysis (table 4) highlight that patrons, great or regional power patrons as well as contiguous patrons statistically significantly decrease the number of state institutions in de facto states by around one institution (significant at a 99.9% confidence interval for patrons and a 99% confidence interval for great power and contiguous patrons). Initially, these findings appear to be counter intuitive, but the lower number of governance institutions in de facto states with a patron

may be explained by the fact that some patrons may be taking over some of the work done by an institution in a de facto state. It would, for example, be plausible if Abkhazia decided to forgo the development of a central banking system, because Abkhazia's official currency can be managed from the Russian central bank. In other words, these findings uncover institution sharing in the relationships between de facto states and patron states, where the patron state takes over governance tasks from the de facto states.

The initial findings of this paper offer some insightful results regarding the role of patrons as well as a set of domestic and international factor in the state and institution building processes of de facto states. Nonetheless, more in-depth qualitative analyses are needed to provide potential explanations for some of the findings of this paper. For example, this paper has shown that patron states increase the likelihood of state building in some cases, but not the exact ways in which patrons influence state and institution building.

### 3. Russian Involvement in Abkhazia's State Building Pursuits

The scope of the Russian-Abkhaz relationship and the extent to which Russia provided support to the de facto state has changed significantly over time and under different Abkhaz and Russian presidencies. Ultimately, the dynamics of Russia's relationship with Abkhazia cannot be considered linear.<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s and particularly during the so-called CIS blockade and embargo against Abkhazia, Russia provided limited yet necessary support to Abkhazia. Following floods in Abkhazia, for instance, Russia offered humanitarian support to Abkhazia in form of financial contributions and medical treatments in Russia to sick and injured Abkhaz citizens.<sup>8</sup> Under Yeltsin's presidency, Russia's official engagement in Abkhazia was restricted<sup>9</sup> and ultimately took place through Russian regions (see section on 'Russian Regional Support' for further details on decentralised Russian support channels).

The phase of restricted central Russian support came to an end in 1999 when Putin came to power and initiated a process of sanction reduction, aid increase and preparations to lift the blockade.<sup>10 11</sup> Russia eventually cancelled the travel restrictions for Abkhaz men that were part of the CIS blockade and regular official trading between Abkhazia and Russia resumed.<sup>12</sup> However, Putin did not immediately favour Abkhaz independence, but preferred Abkhazia's integration into a common state system.<sup>13</sup> According to one interviewee, Saakashvili's presidency in Georgia served as one reason for Russia attitude change vis-à-vis Abkhazia.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, the interviewee argues that the reunification of Adjara with Georgia marked a moment of no return in the Russian-Georgian relations, because it signalled to Russia the influence of Georgian nationalists on policy making and the support from Western powers on domestic affairs in Georgia.<sup>15</sup>

The very brief overview above demonstrates that Russia was involved in Abkhaz affairs long before Russia's official recognition of the de facto state in 2008. Nonetheless, the official recognition marks an important point in time for Russian-Abkhaz relations as it intensified the support. To this date, interviewees from Abkhazia view the first years of Medvedev's Presidency as the strongest period of Russian-Abkhaz relations. Following Russia's recognition Abkhazia in 2008, four more countries (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Syria) recognised the de facto state. Tuvalu and Vanuatu had also previously recognised Abkhazia, but decided to withdraw their recognition a few years later. Despite the recognition of more than one country, the actual economic, security, political and state building support comes predominantly from one source: their patron Russia.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>8</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>9</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>10</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>11</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>12</sup> Interview 9: Government representative of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>13</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>14</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>15</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)



### 3.1 The Russian Federation as a Patron State

The role of patron states in the post-Soviet space is “variously framed as a geographic and/or ethnic imperative (South Ossetia, NK), a contested blessing (Abkhazia), or they can be absent (Chechnya)” (Broers 2015: 142). According to Gerrits and Bader (2016: 299), “Russia’s overall goal in the former Soviet area is to strengthen its hegemonic position based on extensive political, economic and security ties, which link the neighbouring countries to Russia, without denying their formal sovereignty.” Moreover, despite the presence of a number of international organisations and initiatives like the CIS and the Eurasian Union, the area of the former Soviet Union is under-institutionalised, because of limited and unstable coordination and investments (Cameron & Orenstein 2012: 35). In order to maintain this hegemonic position and because of the instability weakness of regional organisations, Russia seems to prefer bilateral agreements with particular regions rather than multilateral agreements (Stewart 2010: 7). Generally, Russian security interests involve stable borders and the option to be present militarily in the region and beyond. Russian military involvement has been justified with ending ethnic conflicts and violence, securing of natural resources or to protect ethnic Russians (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 299-300). Furthermore, Russian political and economic interests are often intertwined which result in specific foreign policy measures (Wallander 2007).

Abkhazia holds a special position in terms of linkages and leverage with Russia. According to Gerrits and Bader (2016), particularly economic, intergovernmental, technocratic and social linkages are deep between Russia and Abkhazia. These linkages pop up throughout a closer observation of Abkhazia’s brief history. For example, Abkhazia has been integrated into the Russian economy via economic, investment and trade linkages. Intergovernmental linkages can be observed in form of “diplomatic, administrative and financial assistance by Russia to the governments of the two regions” (298). Russia also educates and trains Abkhaz cadres and elites, which forms an aspect of technocratic linkages between the Abkhazia and Russia (ibid.). In addition, Russia prescribes specific legislation and institutions to the region resulting in legislature and institution diffusion (ibid). These examples demonstrate that Russia has considerable and near-exclusive influence on Abkhazia (300).

### 3.2 Patron Communication

Since Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, the two entities communicate their interests and preferences predominantly through official diplomatic channels.<sup>16</sup> The Russian embassy, for instance, officially opened in Sukhumi in 2008<sup>17</sup> and is responsible for sending out statements that may indicate Russian policy preferences.<sup>18</sup> Abkhazia, on the other side, has special envoys responsible for relations with Russia.<sup>19</sup> The insistence on diplomatic relations

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<sup>16</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>17</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>18</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>19</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

is largely due to the fact that Russia attempts to show its respect and acknowledgement that Abkhazia considers itself as an independent states. In practice, the use of official diplomatic channels means that Russia respects the diplomatic protocol in most official meetings between Abkhaz and Russian official.<sup>20</sup> According to former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia Viacheslav Chiirkba, “all levels from [the lowest] level [...] to the superiors [follow a] very delicate etiquette. All the questions [...] are discussed very frankly.”<sup>21</sup> There are a number of examples where Russia has expressed its policy preferences in Abkhazia during ministerial meetings between Russia and Abkhazia. An assistant of Putin of Abkhazia, for instance, stressed during a meeting with Abkhaz officials that the limitations on selling property to foreigners should be lifted.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this signalling of respect, some interviewees argue that Abkhazia is seen by Russia as part of the Russian regions.<sup>23</sup> As it stands, Abkhazia has been grouped into the Caucasus group by Russia.<sup>24</sup> Russia has various offices that deal with Abkhazia and there may be different interests in play depending on the ministry or department in question.<sup>25</sup> One interviewee stressed the symbolic placement of the residence of the Russian ambassador to Abkhazia in the former residence of Beriya. The dacha is situated on top of the hills overseeing Sukhumi, which could be interpreted as the politicians in Abkhazia being subjugated to the Russian ambassador.<sup>26</sup> This importance of the embassy and ambassadors in Sukhumi as a centre of communication channels is similar to the model in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus where the Turkish ambassador is considered the most important person in terms of delivering Turkish interests and even political involvement.<sup>27</sup>

Russia and Abkhazia have developed an extensive framework of communication channels within the political structure of the Abkhaz Republic. Most departments on the Russian and Abkhaz side developed interdepartmental agreements, for example between the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Abkhazia and Russia, the Prosecutor General’s Office and the Department of Custom Officers. The Ministry of Emergency Situations in Russia, for instance, offers support to Abkhazia in form of training, joint exercises and equipment, sending experts to Abkhazia or alternatively inviting Abkhaz specialists to Russia.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Abkhaz custom officers are trained by the Russian Custom Officers Department in form of training sessions and seminars taking place in Russia.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>21</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>22</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>23</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>24</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>25</sup> Interview 11: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>26</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>27</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>28</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>29</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

Moreover, there are regular exchanges on the ministerial level.<sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> Russia and Abkhazia established a joint information coordination centre at the Ministry of Interior<sup>32</sup> and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia and Russia have coordination mechanisms.<sup>33</sup> According to one interviewee who had previously spoken to an Abkhaz minister, Abkhaz ministers tend to spend one day per week in their office in Sukhumi and the remaining three to four days of the week are spent in offices in Moscow.<sup>34</sup> The regularity of meetings and the detailed exchange of opinions was also confirmed by a representative from the Abkhaz government, who added that in addition to monthly meeting in Moscow or Sukhumi, discussions take place in Geneva every three months. Meetings between Abkhazia and Russia also take place before and after the negotiations in Geneva.<sup>35</sup> Essentially, this signifies the centrality of Russia in Abkhaz domestic policy making and that Abkhaz domestic politics is partially made abroad. Abkhaz ministers focus primarily on meeting their counterparts in Russia or representatives from the Russian central bank in Moscow in order to identify financial support opportunities and settle state concerns.<sup>36</sup> Similar behavioural patterns can be observed by ministers or heads of government from the Donetsk Republic, Luhansk Republic and Transnistria, who spend several days each month in Moscow and have regular meetings with Russian officials.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond the formal diplomatic and governmental channels, Russia has also set up a framework of extensive links with Abkhazia in the security, business and media sector, that allows Russia to express its interests and political preferences beyond the official governmental channels.<sup>38</sup> Russia and Abkhazia communicate through a joint army, for instance.<sup>39</sup> In the case of diverging opinions or viewpoints, Abkhaz officials have shown that they are able to stand their ground in some instances. The most prominent example is the Abkhaz private property law that only permits ethnic Abkhaz to acquire private property on Abkhaz soil. Other areas of contention, that are also corner stones of the negotiations with Russia are church and internal affairs.<sup>40</sup>

### **3.3 Russian Regional Support**

The extent to which Russia provides support to Abkhazia and the channels that are used to influence the de facto state have changed significantly over time and under different Abkhaz and Russian presidencies.<sup>41</sup> In the 1990s and particularly during the so-called blockade and

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<sup>30</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>31</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>32</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>33</sup> Interview 9: Government representative of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>34</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>35</sup> Interview 9: Government representative of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>36</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>37</sup> Interview 18: Russian scholar (Moscow)

<sup>38</sup> Interview 2: Representatives of an international donor (Sukhumi)

<sup>39</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>40</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>41</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

embargo, the Russian central government provided limited yet necessary support to Abkhazia in form of humanitarian aid after floods and occasional trading opportunities for Abkhaz produce.<sup>42</sup> In this period of partial isolation from 1992 to approximately 1999, Russian regional governments offered support to Abkhazia despite the disapproval of the central Russian government.<sup>43</sup> Under Yeltsin, ties of Abkhazia were essentially much stronger with individual subjects of the Russian Federation than with central authorities.<sup>44</sup>

In 1994, shortly after the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, Abkhazia started developing connections with Republics of the Russian Federation and even signed treaties that were condemned by the Russian Foreign Ministry.<sup>45</sup> More specifically, Tatarstan, Bashkiria, Krasnodar and the republics of the North Caucasus supported Abkhazia in humanitarian terms<sup>46</sup> and signed official agreements with the de facto state in 1994.<sup>47</sup> These Russian regions were the first to allocate quotas to Abkhaz students, which meant that by 1994 and 1995 Abkhaz students started studying in cities such as Kazan, Ufa, Nalchik and Maykop.<sup>48</sup> In some instances, these Russian regions also sent teachers to Abkhazia or enabled traders to conduct business with Abkhazia.<sup>49</sup> Particularly the North Caucasus supported Abkhazia vigorously during and after the Georgian-Abkhaz war. As Abkhaz is linguistically tied closer to the North Caucasus and as none of the Caucasian republics enjoyed statehood, Abkhazia's independence campaign was seen as an opportunity for a Caucasus nation to achieve statehood.<sup>50</sup> During the blockade, people from the North Caucasus could come to Abkhazia, but Abkhaz citizens were not allowed to travel north of the border with Russia. During the blockade, people from the North Caucasus that supported Abkhazia during the war continued to come to Abkhazia mostly for business and tourism purposes.<sup>51</sup>

These relationships with Russian regions not only represented a significant breakthrough for the Abkhaz government in form of developing connections with outside entities, but it also meant that Abkhazia received some local assistance from these Russian Republics early on and that hundreds of students could study for free in these regions.<sup>52</sup> Following the first agreements, other local relationships with Russian republics started and slowly Abkhazia developed a network of business, cultural and education ties.<sup>53</sup> These

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<sup>42</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>43</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>44</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>45</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>46</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>47</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>48</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>49</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>50</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>51</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>52</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>53</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

relationships were partially possible, because the former version of the Russian constitution and the political climate granted republics more sovereign rights.<sup>54</sup> In the 1990s, Russia stressed in many CIS documents the special position and sovereignty of Georgia and in a way it was an artistic demonstration of sovereignty.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the Russian Foreign Ministry protested the regional agreements with Abkhazia.

The phase of restricted central Russian support changed in 1999 when Putin came to power and initiated a process of reducing the sanctions, increasing aid and preparing to lift the blockade.<sup>56</sup> <sup>57</sup> Russia eventually cancelled the travel restrictions for Abkhaz men and regular official trading between Abkhazia and Russia began.<sup>58</sup> However, despite the official recognition of Abkhazia by Russia in 2008, education exchanges tend to take place regionally to this date, perhaps as way to show that they are organic activities, rather than centrally organised soft power.<sup>59</sup> Similar trends can be observed in the Donbas Republic and Transnistria where education exchanges also take place predominantly with Russian regions.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>55</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>56</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>57</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>58</sup> Interview 9: Government representative of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>59</sup> Interview 18: Russian scholar (Moscow)

<sup>60</sup> Interview 18: Russian scholar (Moscow)

## 4. Russian State Building Instruments in Abkhazia

*“If Russia could build Abkhazia as it imagines an ideal state, then there would not be what [there is] now.”*

**Abkhaz Scholar Residing in Saint Petersburg, Russia**

Russia employs a set of state building instruments in Abkhazia that have a direct impact on the state building process of the de facto state. An analysis of the most common Russian types of involvement in Abkhazia reveals three central trends: First, Russian support is linked predominantly to infrastructural reconstruction and not systematic change or the development of people’s capacity.<sup>61</sup> Essentially, this means that Russia finances Abkhazia’s institutional infrastructure that enables basic public service provisions and ensures an institutional basis for further domestic state developments.<sup>62</sup> Russia has passed a set of treaties and agreements with Abkhazia that specify such state building measures and infrastructural projects. Second, Russia and Abkhazia rely on institution sharing, which reduces Abkhazia’s self-sustainability opportunities, because it disincentivises institutional development in Abkhazia in some instances. This is particularly visible in the security services and the economy.<sup>63</sup> Third, Russia controls relevant de facto politicians or ensures that politicians have close ties with Russia. This dependency of politicians on Russia is achieved through Russia’s continued financial contribution to the Abkhaz state budget and military assistance. While Russia is not necessarily interested in micromanaging domestic politics and state building processes in Abkhazia, it is interested in having candidates in place that have a favourable view of Russia.

### 4.1 Financial Contributions Related to State Building

The Russian Federation provides significant direct financial support to the Abkhaz budgets (ICG 2010a; ICG 2010b). This makes the breakaway region one of a few places in the near abroad to receive direct development support (Wierzbowska-Miazga & Kaczmarek 2011). Revealingly, the financial coordination of infrastructure development is organised by the Russian Ministry of Regional Development, which focuses on domestic regions and not external countries (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 302-303). The following figures exemplify the asymmetric relationship between the Russian Federation and Abkhazia. Direct aid from Russia in 2009 accounted for 60% of the Abkhaz state budget (ICG 2010: 5). Three years later, direct financial support was considerably lower at around 22% of the Abkhaz budget. However, when infrastructural subsidies are included, the overall financial contributions amount to approximately 70% of Abkhazia’s budget (ICG 2013: 6). However, financial support from Russia does not always fully reach the de facto state due to corruption and funds being channelled back to Russia. This appears to be especially the case in South Ossetia, but is also

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<sup>61</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>62</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>63</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

a concern in Abkhazia.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the freedom that Abkhazia has had in distributing funding has decreased in recent years, as Russia has restricted its spending on Abkhazia and has become more strict on the allocation of funding.<sup>65</sup> The decreasing financial support may also be due to Russian economic struggles since 2014.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, Russian financial support was criticised by a number of interviewees for the low implementation rates,<sup>67</sup> lack of planning, which results in money not being spent and that it arrives in packages that do not reflect the needs on the ground.<sup>68</sup>

Russian financial support goes beyond state budget contributions as Russia provides funds for pension payments, humanitarian aid projects as well as civil infrastructure and reconstruction projects. This includes, for example, bridges, roads, railways and government buildings. In addition, Russia contributed \$465 million to Abkhaz military infrastructure.<sup>69</sup> These numbers are generally not included in the budget contribution figures of Abkhazia. Concurrently, Russia positioned itself as the main trading partner for Abkhazia. Russia is the biggest trading partner for Abkhazia with nearly 80% of consumer goods in Abkhazia being imported from Russia (ICG 2010: 6). The 2008 Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support with Abkhazia facilitates further economic integration between Russia and the breakaway region.

Following Russia's recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, the two parties have been taking joint decisions regarding the direction and extent of Russian funding to Abkhazia.<sup>70</sup> Russian financial assistance tends to be based on programmes,<sup>71</sup> which were previously called integrated mechanisms, but are nowadays referred to as investments.<sup>72</sup> Russian financial support arrives in Abkhazia through two channels. On the one hand, the budget contributions within the framework of an investment programme. This programme targets infrastructure developments, reconstruction and repairs covering areas such as health, education, transport and other basic needs.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, the Social and Economic Support Programme pays millions of roubles in lump sums for welfare and social transfers of the state.<sup>74 75 76</sup> The latter programme for instance finances top-up salaries for public sector employees,<sup>77</sup> benefits

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<sup>64</sup> Interview 2: Representatives of an international donor (Sukhumi)

<sup>65</sup> Interview 10: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>66</sup> Interview 6: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>67</sup> Interview 10: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>68</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>69</sup> Freedom House (2015). *Abkhazia*. Retrieved from: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/abkhazia>

<sup>70</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>71</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>72</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>73</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>74</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>75</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>76</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>77</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

and allowances of pensioners who hold Russian passports<sup>78</sup> as well as salaries of Abkhaz law enforcement.<sup>79</sup> According to a Russian scholar, Russia applies a similar social policy to Abkhazia as it applies to Russian regions.<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately, the state budget contributions as well as the trading with Russia have lasting effects on the state building efforts of the de facto state. Russia's provision of security and financial support in the region (particularly direct budget contributions and infrastructure projects) limits the ability of politicians to make and implement policies independently from Moscow (Freedom House 2015).<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the focus of Russian investments is predominantly on infrastructure projects rather than systematic change or the development of people's capacity. The lack of support for Abkhazia's soft component appears to be the biggest threat to the legitimacy of Russian actions according to the interviews of this paper.

#### **4.2 Agreements and Treaties**

An additional dimension of Russian influence on state building in Abkhazia is the formulation of agreements and treaties between the patron and de facto state. The quote below by former Deputy Foreign Minister of Abkhazia Irakli Khintba stresses the significance of Russian involvement in Abkhazia, both in terms of socio-economic development and state building in general. In addition, Khintba makes references to a contractual framework that regulates the relations between Abkhazia and Russia, which probably refers to the agreements and treaties signed between the two parties.

*“Russian influence in Abkhazia certainly does exist. It is natural, since Russia is currently the only country in the world, which provides enormous assistance to Abkhazia, not only in socio-economic development, but also in strengthening and improving the efficiency of the Abkhaz state as a whole. It is some kind of "Marshall Plan" for Europe, as Russia is helping us to cope with the consequences of the war to strengthen the Abkhaz statehood as much as possible. All aspects of the Russian-Abkhaz cooperation are regulated by a solid contractual framework that exists between our two countries.”<sup>82</sup>*

**Former Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Abkhazia, Irakli Khintba**

Shortly after the recognition of Abkhazia, Russia signed the Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Treaty on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2008 with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The treaty covered the pledge for economic integration and military support to defend Abkhazia's

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<sup>78</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>79</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>80</sup> Interview 14: Russian scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>81</sup> Freedom House (2015). *Abkhazia*. Retrieved from: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/abkhazia>

<sup>82</sup> Abkhaz World (2013). *Russian Influence in Abkhazia Certainly Does Exist: Interview with Irakli Khintba*. Retrieved from: <http://abkhazworld.com/aw/interview/83-interview-with-the-deputy-foreign-minister-ir-khintba-for-the-magazine-kommersant-vlast>



sovereignty (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 301-302). Since Russia's recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, the Abkhaz economy has indeed become more integrated with the Russian economy. State building itself does not appear to be the priority, but economic, military, economic and administrative integration is high on the list (Kereselidze 2015: 205). The economic integration of Abkhazia and Russia was operationalised by transferring economic and infrastructural assets (i.e. electricity grids, rail network, oil reserves), adopting technical and commercial standards, lifting trade barriers and installing the rouble as a common currency (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 301). Furthermore, Russia provides direct budget contributions, aid packages, pension payments and investments (ICG 2013: 6; Kolosov O'Loughlin 2011).

On 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014 Abkhazia and Russia signed the Alliance and Strategic Partnership Treaty,<sup>83</sup> however the first draft of the agreement had to undergo redrafting as it raised concerns among the Abkhaz population and politicians regarding a possible threat to Abkhazia's independence.<sup>84</sup> Among other changes, the word 'integration' was dropped, Abkhaz and Russian military forces worked jointly under Russian command, and Russia was obliged to facilitate international recognition as a sovereign state of Abkhazia.<sup>85</sup> Instead of using the word integration, the word strategic partnership was used. Moreover, Abkhazia managed to ensure that "the foreign policy of both countries will not be 'coordinated' but instead 'agreed' upon."<sup>86</sup> Thereby, Abkhazians hoped that the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia is not endangered and that it reduced the threat of a possible annexation.<sup>87</sup> While these changes can certainly be considered an achievement from the Abkhaz negotiation side, it would be too early and too optimistic to argue that "Abkhazia has achieved to keep its military, political and economic independence, while at the same time securing stronger cooperation in foreign, defence, economic and social policy with Russia."<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the treaty between Russia and Abkhazia (2014) made it easier for the citizens of the breakaway region to obtain Russian citizenship (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 301-302).

The association agreement between Abkhazia and Russia in 2014 indicates that Russia will spend up to 12 billion roubles to Abkhazia by 2017. Russia is Abkhazia's main trading partner (low degrees of trade with Turkey and Georgia) and source of foreign direct investment (Relitz 2016: 11). The agreement foresees that Abkhazia passes on the management and modernisation of central infrastructure over to Russia for ten years such as

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<sup>83</sup> ДОГОВОР между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Абхазия о союзничестве и стратегическом партнерстве. Retrieved from:

<http://m.government.ru/media/files/wNsltFsYzes.pdf>

<sup>84</sup> Nationalia (2016). *Will South Ossetia be the next Crimea?* Retrieved from:

[http://www.nationalia.info/noticia/10770/ossetia-del-sud-sera-la-propera-crimea?lengua\\_ant=en](http://www.nationalia.info/noticia/10770/ossetia-del-sud-sera-la-propera-crimea?lengua_ant=en)

<sup>85</sup> Nationalia (2016). *Will South Ossetia be the next Crimea?* Retrieved from:

[http://www.nationalia.info/noticia/10770/ossetia-del-sud-sera-la-propera-crimea?lengua\\_ant=en](http://www.nationalia.info/noticia/10770/ossetia-del-sud-sera-la-propera-crimea?lengua_ant=en)

<sup>86</sup> UNPO (2014). *New Russian-Abkhaz Treaty on 'Alliance and Strategic Partnership' Not a Threat to Abkhazia's De Facto Independence*. Retrieved from: <http://unpo.org/article/17796>

<sup>87</sup> Nationalia (2016). *Will South Ossetia be the next Crimea?* Retrieved from:

[http://www.nationalia.info/noticia/10770/ossetia-del-sud-sera-la-propera-crimea?lengua\\_ant=en](http://www.nationalia.info/noticia/10770/ossetia-del-sud-sera-la-propera-crimea?lengua_ant=en)

<sup>88</sup> UNPO (2014). *New Russian-Abkhaz Treaty on 'Alliance and Strategic Partnership' Not a Threat to Abkhazia's De Facto Independence*. Retrieved from: <http://unpo.org/article/17796>

the Abkhaz railway and airports in return for investments and loans (Hewitt, 2012). In addition, “Abkhazia was promised \$68 million from the federal Russian budget” (ibid.). The treaty includes provisions to make Russian citizenship easier and the levelling of public service wages similar to Southern Federal District of Russia wages (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 301-302).

A closer look at the agreement reveals some aspects that can be considered significant in terms of their effect on state building in Abkhazia. Article 10 of the agreement lays out the internal affairs coordination. Article 11 sets out the harmonisation of laws, including the budget (4) and customs (1) legislation. Article 18 focuses on similar measures for individuals and organisations in the field of pharmaceutical or medical activities. Article 14 of the Alliance and Strategic Partnership Treaty outlines that “the Republic of Abkhazia shall gradually increase the average wage in main areas of public employees such as health care, education, science, culture, sports and social services to a level comparable with the level of wage payments of appropriate categories of workers in the southern federal districts of Russia”<sup>89</sup> Article 20 of the agreement states that:

“in order to improve the quality of education in the Republic of Abkhazia with the assistance of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Abkhazia within 3 years from the date of entry into force of this Treaty: Develop the education system of the Republic of Abkhazia and the support of the organisations, carrying out educational activities in the Republic of Abkhazia, normative legal acts correspond to the legislation of the Russian Federation in education; organise the development of educational programs, training and professional development of teachers organisations carrying out educational activities; implementing agreed measures aimed at training professionals in priority areas of science and technology, as well as the mutual recognition of studies and qualifications.”<sup>90</sup>

6 months from the entry into force of the agreement an implementation action plan by the authorities should be achieved. Article 20 is a good example of the treaty between Russia and Abkhazia that involves specific criteria and plans for the provision of public services in

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<sup>89</sup> “Республика Абхазия поэтапно осуществляет повышение средней заработной платы основных категорий работников государственных учреждений в сфере здравоохранения, образования, науки, культуры, спорта и социального обслуживания граждан до уровня, сопоставимого с уровнем оплаты труда соответствующих категорий работников в Южном федеральном округе Российской Федерации.” Retrieved from <http://m.government.ru/media/files/wNsltFsYzes.pdf>.

<sup>90</sup> “В целях повышения качества образования в Республике Абхазия при содействии Российской Федерации Республика Абхазия не позднее 3 лет со дня вступления в силу настоящего Договора: принимает направленные на развитие системы образования Республики Абхазия и обеспечение деятельности организаций, осуществляющих образовательную деятельность в Республике Абхазия, нормативные правовые акты, корреспондирующие с законодательством Российской Федерации об образовании; организует разработку образовательных программ, подготовку и повышение квалификации педагогических работников организаций, осуществляющих образовательную деятельность; осуществляет согласованные меры, направленные на подготовку специалистов по приоритетным направлениям науки и техники, а также на обеспечение взаимного признания образования и квалификаций.” Retrieved from <http://m.government.ru/media/files/wNsltFsYzes.pdf>.

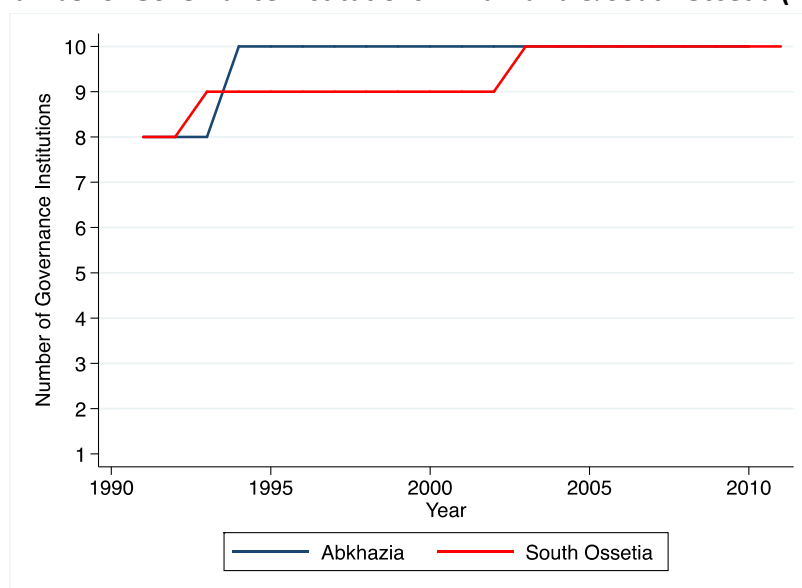
Abkhazia. While the focus of the treaties and agreements is primarily on economic development and integration as well as military relations, the provision of security, institutional and technocratic state building takes place as well.

In the previous section, it appeared that Russia did not necessarily feel obliged to be involved in domestic politics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, because Russia represents the only viable option for political elites. The resignation of de facto president Aleksandr Ankvab in 2014 is argued to have taken place with Russian assistance (Kereselidze 2015: 206). However, Russian involvement goes even further than the interference in top-level politics. The strategic partnership treaties with Abkhazia (2014) and South Ossetia (2015) as well as over 80 additional agreements between the patron and the two regions facilitate or foresee the implementation of “large-scale programmes related to infrastructure, economic development, and the modernisation of social facilities, all testament to Russia’s embracement policy.” (Kereselidze 2015: 206). These are signs that Russia goes beyond pure military and economic support by influencing Abkhazia’s state building development and the provision of services.

### 4.3 Institution Sharing

State building is not necessarily limited to the building of new government institutions and the provision of services. The graph below (graph 3) outlines the number of governance institutions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia between 1991 and 2011. Both de facto states had a relatively high number of eight governance institutions when the Soviet Union dissolved, according to Florea’s (2016) classification. Therefore, the focus of state building is not limited to the building of new governance institution, but it also includes the maintenance, funding and reorganisation of governance institutions and the provision of public services.

**Graph 3 Number of Governance Institutions in Abkhazia & South Ossetia (1991- 2011)**



The results of the statistical analysis highlight that patrons, great or regional power patrons

as well as contiguous patrons decrease the number of governance institutions in de facto states by around one institution (statistically significant at a 99.9% confidence interval for patrons and a 99% confidence interval for great power and contiguous patrons). Initially, these findings appear to be counter intuitive, as patron support should ensure a more stable security situation and financial contributions for de facto states that benefit the building of new governance institutions. Nonetheless, the lower number of governance institutions in de facto states with a patron may be explained with patrons taking over some of the responsibilities and tasks of governance institutions in a de facto state. It would, for example, be plausible if Abkhazia decided to forgo the development of a central banking system, because Abkhazia's official currency, the Russian rouble, can be managed from the Russian central bank. In other words, the statistical findings of this paper uncover institution sharing in the relationships between de facto states and patron states, where the patron state takes over certain governance tasks from the de facto states.

One interviewed Russian foreign policy expert compares the Russian-Abkhaz patron-client relationship to parasites and symbiosis. According to him, de facto states do not necessarily need to possess all state institutions in order to function as a state and are oftentimes unable to develop an extensive institutional framework themselves. Therefore, as in most cases of natural symbiosis, de facto states utilise patrons for some areas of their state institutions and public service provision while patrons achieve some sort of geopolitical advantage of supporting the de facto state.<sup>91</sup> Ultimately, there are a variety of reasons for Abkhazia to pursue institution sharing with its patron. Abkhaz elites may not have the capacity, know-how or financial opportunities to build certain institutions in Abkhazia themselves.<sup>92</sup> For instance, Abkhazia relies almost exclusively on Russia for telephone, internet and sometimes even power connections.<sup>93</sup>

Beyond these infrastructure areas, Abkhazia and Russia also share some institutions in the military and security sectors. The treaties between Abkhazia and Russia from 2008 and 2014 facilitated further military integration and establish joint troops between the two parties. Particular the focus on a "coordinated foreign policy" and a "single space of defence and security" signifies the military involvement of Russia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 301-302). In practice, this means, for instance, that Abkhazia and Russia have a joint military force<sup>94</sup> and that Abkhazia does not control its border independently as Russia also controls the border at the Inguri bridge. While the Abkhaz side checks whether the documents are in order, the Russian FSB checkpoint also checks the passports of incoming people.<sup>95</sup> Since the early 1990s, Abkhazia has relied on Russia for security provision, which is one of the reasons, besides limited financial means, why Abkhazia

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<sup>91</sup> Interview 16: Russian scholar (Moscow)

<sup>92</sup> Interview 15: Abkhaz scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>93</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>94</sup> Interview 1: Georgian scholar (Tbilisi)

<sup>95</sup> Interview 1: Georgian scholar (Tbilisi)

did not commit to the development of its own security and military institutions.<sup>96</sup> This is an example where institution sharing and dependence on Russia decreases the state building progress of Abkhazia.

Another Abkhaz state sector that is heavily reliant on institution sharing is the Abkhaz monetary sector. Abkhazia uses Russian roubles as its currency<sup>97</sup> and the Abkhaz Apsar currency is essentially not in use.<sup>98</sup> This is one of the reasons why Abkhaz citizens cannot make international transactions without a Russian bank being the mediator.<sup>99</sup> The Central Bank in Abkhazia works like a chancellery. The focus is primarily the clearance of bank and social transfers, whereas actual monetary policies are taking place in Moscow.<sup>100</sup> There are signs of task sharing in certain ministries and departments as well. In the Ministry of Interior, Russia and Abkhazia have a joint information coordination centre,<sup>101</sup> whereas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia employs a coordination mechanism with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia.<sup>102</sup> Gerrits and Bader (2016: 298) even argue that Russia “carries out part of public administration” in Abkhazia. In education, on the other hand, Abkhazia relies a lot on international organisations such as the UN and UNICEF.<sup>103</sup>

#### **4.4 Technocratic Influences**

Scholars such as Skalov (2011) and Sukhov (2009) argue that Russia does not need to interfere directly in the every day political decision making of Abkhazia, because it holds a monopoly position as their sole patron. From their perspective, all major parties and candidates in Abkhazia are aware of their de facto state’s reliance on Russian support and thus the election outcome is to large extents irrelevant, as the stance towards Russia will remain largely positive. The fact that Russia interfered in previous presidential elections in Abkhazia weakens Skalov’s (2011) and Sukhov’s (2009) argument. Alternatively, the interference in presidential elections might mean that Russia is not necessarily interested in micromanaging politics and state building in Abkhazia, but in having candidates in place that have a favourable view on Russia and can be manipulated more easily.

The 2004 presidential election in Abkhazia when a Moscow backed candidate lost to a candidate that was supported by “civil society organisations, the veteran’s association, businessmen and disgruntled former government ministers” was a first sign that the patron influence is not absolute and that the role of civil society is growing (Caspersen 2011: 343). At the same time, the fact that Russia supported a specific candidate in the presidential election shows that Russia interfered in domestic politics during the easing phase. The 2004 election

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<sup>96</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>97</sup> Interview 1: Georgian scholar (Tbilisi)

<sup>98</sup> Interview 15: Abkhaz scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>99</sup> Interview 1: Georgian scholar (Tbilisi)

<sup>100</sup> Interview 15: Abkhaz scholar (Saint Petersburg)

<sup>101</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>102</sup> Interview 9: Government representative of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>103</sup> Interview 8: Adgur Kakoba – current Minister of Education of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

is also an example of interference in high level appointments and blocking attempts.<sup>104</sup> While Russia is not necessarily interested in micromanaging domestic politics and state building processes in Abkhazia, it is interested in having candidates in place that have a favourable view of Russia.

Some key positions in Abkhaz ministries are filled by ethnic Russians and even Russian citizens. More specifically, Russians can be found at ministerial (for example the previous Minister of Health), deputy ministerial level<sup>105</sup> and in law enforcement agencies.<sup>106</sup> Two of the five deputies of the chairman of the Abkhaz Security Service are Russian citizen (non-Abkhaz), who did not previously worked in Abkhazia during the Soviet Union, but joined Abkhazia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>107</sup> As previously mentioned, there are also coordination mechanisms between certain ministries and departments that tie Russian and Abkhaz officials closer together.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, many Abkhaz officials, such as custom officers, have been trained in Russia.<sup>109</sup> These developments surrounding technocratic influences signified that Russia controls relevant de facto politicians or ensures that politicians have close ties with Russia. This dependency of politicians on Russia is achieved through Russia's continued financial contribution to the Abkhaz state budget, military assistance but also as shown here through coordination mechanisms at the ministerial and departmental level.

#### **4.5 Infrastructure**

The complex development plan under which Russia provides Abkhazia with financial support for Abkhazia's infrastructure and the provision of public services.<sup>110</sup> Russian support is directly linked to infrastructural reconstruction rather than systematic change.<sup>111</sup> One interviewee argues that the focus of Russia's financial activity in Abkhazia is predominantly on the hard component in form of equipment, infrastructure redevelopment and building renovations. The soft component, such as training courses for teachers or capacity building, however, is insufficient. The focus on infrastructure appears to be, at least in the medium to long run, a main cause for limited legitimacy of Russian involvement. Essentially, Russian financial support focuses on sustaining socioeconomic structures.<sup>112</sup> Schools were rebuilt using money from the Russian fund for instance.<sup>113</sup> While Russia supported infrastructural development

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<sup>104</sup> Interview 2: Representatives of an international donor (Sukhumi)

<sup>105</sup> Interview 6: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>106</sup> Interview 6: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>107</sup> Interview 6: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>108</sup> Interview 9: Government representative of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>109</sup> Interview 13: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>110</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>111</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>112</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>113</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

for some time, it was recently willing to change the nature of its investment by initiating economic projects, but the Abkhaz government was allegedly not prepared for that.<sup>114</sup>

Russia has helped to renovate transport links, such as the railway running from Sochi to Sukhumi. There was likely some self-interest involved, as this also benefited Russia in terms of the tourist infrastructure and military purposes.<sup>115</sup> In 2008, for example, Russia used the railway link to introduce weaponry into Abkhazia.<sup>116</sup> Russia also helps to keep the airport in Sukhumi operational, but only for flights to Russia, as it is not internationally recognised.<sup>117</sup> Abkhazia is also reliant on mobile, internet and power connections from Russia.<sup>118</sup> It is in Abkhazia's interest to have banking system, not to be isolated and to have tourists, which are areas of symbiosis.<sup>119</sup>

The health care sector in Abkhazia is an insightful case exemplifying Russia's focus on infrastructure rather than soft components. Russia provides financial resources that are spent predominantly on physical infrastructure and equipment. Before 2010, investments in health from the Russian side were minimal and only started to pour in in 2011 and 2012. This does not necessarily result in better quality of the health services, due to insufficient investments in soft components such as staff capacities, maintenance, management and methodologies. Russian specialists have been increasingly aware of this but only few experts from Russia come to Abkhazia to discuss the soft component of the health sector. This might be due to limited resources, insufficient capacities and expertise or not enough interest to enforce a change in the existing approach.<sup>120</sup>

#### **4.6 Territorial Control**

Russia supported Abkhazia militarily long before their official recognition in 2008. Abkhazia enjoys significant military support from their patron state beyond direct military involvement by Russian troops. Since the early 1990s, Russia has used a number of military instruments to influence the de facto states including security alliances, the stationing of military and peacekeeping troops, covert military operations, building of military bases, active involvement in defence, protection of borders, organisation of joint troops and the supply of logistical and military aid (German 2012; Hedeskog & Larsson 2007; Gerrits & Bader 2016). Russia has also intervened militarily in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on a number of occasions, most notably during the wars in 1992-1993, 1998 and 2008. The great power military support of Russia helped to fight Georgia's military offensives in Abkhazia.

Nonetheless, the point of official recognition marked a relevant point of military

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<sup>114</sup> Interview 11: Representative of a non-governmental organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>115</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>116</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>117</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)

<sup>118</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>119</sup> Interview 7: Viacheslav Chiirkba – former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhumi)

<sup>120</sup> Interview 10: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

involvement by Russia for Abkhazia, as it resulted in a further intensification of military relations. Russia signed military cooperation treaties with Abkhazia (Caspersen 2014: 4). The 2008 Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Treaty grants Russia to establish Russian military bases and station soldiers on Abkhaz territory and promises the protection of Abkhazia's de facto borders and sovereignty (ICG 2010; Gerrits & Bader: 2016: 298). To this date, the Abkhaz border is controlled together by Abkhaz and Russian forces at separate checkpoints.<sup>121</sup> A couple of years later, Russia signed the Alliance and Strategic Partnership Treaty with Abkhazia in 2014. Both treaties facilitate further military integration and establish joint troops between the de facto states and Russia. Particular the focus on a "coordinated foreign policy" and a "single space of defence and security" signifies the military involvement of Russia in Abkhazia (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 301-302). Because of the reliance on Russia in security matters, Abkhazia has not developed its own military institutions as extensively.<sup>122</sup> The fact that Abkhazia does not independently control its borders and is largely reliant on external support is a sign that Abkhazia does not fulfil the strict understanding of the state, as it does not hold the monopoly of force and is unable to protect its territory independently.

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<sup>121</sup> Interview 6: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>122</sup> Interview 3: Former Georgian diplomat (Tbilisi)



## 5. Conclusion

Whether or not Russia is indeed required to intervene directly in the de facto states of its near abroad, this paper has shown that Russia does actively engage with these entities. Thus, a close examination of the ways in which Russia influences Abkhazia benefits our understanding of Russian foreign policy in general and state building in de facto states in particular. The statistical analysis of this paper showed that patron states generally support de facto states in guaranteeing minimal civilian governance. Patrons are, however, not interested in creating coherent government structures in de facto states, as this would reduce the level of de facto state dependence on the patron state. The number of governance institutions, on the other hand, tends to drop with the presence of a patron state, which this paper explains with institution sharing between patron and de facto states.

The analysis of Russian influences on Abkhazia revealed three central dimensions of Russian involvement in the South Caucasian de facto states. First, Russian support is linked predominantly to infrastructural reconstruction and not systematic change or the development of people's capacity.<sup>123</sup> This basically means, that Russia finances an institutional infrastructure that enables basic public service provision in Abkhazia and without which further state development would struggle.<sup>124</sup> This becomes particularly visible in the education and health sectors of Abkhazia. At the same time, the high degrees of financial contribution may mean that the sustainability of state functions, governance institutions and the provision of public services is not guaranteed. Second, Russia provides significant financial contributions to the Abkhaz budget and secures its de facto territory with a high number of Russian troops. This ultimately gives Russia considerable leverage over de facto politicians, public administration and the provision of public services. Thus, Russia controls relevant de facto politicians or ensures that politicians have close ties with Russia. While Russia is not necessarily interested in micromanaging politics and state building in Abkhazia, it is interested in having candidates in place that have a favourable view on Russia and can be manipulated more easily. Third, Russia and Abkhazia rely heavily on institution sharing, which reduces Abkhazia's self-sustainability opportunities, because it disincentivises institutional development in Abkhazia. This is particularly visible in the security services and the economy.<sup>125</sup> Especially the reliance on Russia in security matters resulted in ill-equipped Abkhaz military institutions. This is probably the most obvious sign where institution sharing and dependence can decrease the state building of a given state.

Finally, this paper highlighted that support for Abkhazia did not always take the official central channel, as Russian regions, particularly in the 1990s, offered humanitarian support, education exchanges and trading opportunities. This paper also outlined how Russia's communication of its interests has changed over time. Russia adapted its communication and influence channels to the context. While in the 1990s, there were very limited centralised

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<sup>123</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>124</sup> Interview 5: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

<sup>125</sup> Interview 12: Representative of an international organisation (Sukhumi)

influences, as support happened through non central state channels in Russian regions, after 1999 and especially after 2008, more centralised and diplomatic channels were used including regular meetings.

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