

**Viability as a strategy of secession in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: different goals and outcomes**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on viability as a component of strategies of secession and does so by looking at two cases with very different goals and outcomes, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It traces the trajectories of the two cases and compares whether and how viability was developed, and whether and how it was integrated in the strategies of Abkhaz and South Ossetian secessionist authorities. It builds on an extensive doctoral research on the political economy of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian protracted conflicts (Prelz Oltramonti 2015) and on previous comparative work on viability in Abkhazia and Somaliland (Prelz Oltramonti 2019).

Introduction

Even a *de facto* state has to keep the lights on and sustain its institutions, albeit on the cheap. This calls for some sort of economic viability, whether on the shoulders of patrons or of diasporas, or on the revenues taken in through various forms of income generating activities. Some *de facto* states might choose to keep their budget to the minimum, other might engage in some form of positive sovereignty – either by building roads or by paying pensions.

In either case, a viability beyond the institutional one must be ensured in order to support the institutional viability that is the flagship of *de facto* state's claims for statehood. If a state cannot develop a certain level of viability, it is unlikely that it would succeed in its process of state making, hence undermining the secessionists' strategy for enshrining their secession.

Can secessionist movements (having first managed to achieve territorial dominion over given areas and then gradually established themselves as *de facto* states) do that, namely keep the lights on in the territories that they control – or strive to control? Can they ensure the viability of the new state that they aim to create? They are invariably adamant that they can; the states from which they have seceded usually argue that they cannot.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the latter often invest substantial resources in curtailing the viability of secessionist territories as self-standing entities.

Secessionist actors have to hold on tight to the case that their coveted state is viable, as a partial justification of their aspiration for statehood. Hence, the search for viability is part of the strategies that secessionist movements and entities employ when seeking *de facto* and *de jure* statehood, legitimacy, and recognition by the international community (albeit not necessarily conjunctly). At the same time, numerous secessionist movements, having unilaterally established territorial independence from their home state, need to establish viability to secure the *de facto* secession and create *de facto* statehood.<sup>2</sup> Viability is used as a strategy of secession both in the mid-term and in the

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1 These are alternatively called 'home state' or 'parent state' in the literature.

2 The appellation 'de facto state' is therefore understood as a state-like entity that lacks international recognition (Pegg, 1998; Lynch, 2004). There is no absolute consensus on the

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long-term, as a tool to achieve, respectively, de facto statehood and de jure statehood (or international recognition). There are different interlocutors at play, both internal and external, and they are baited with viability to provide legitimacy and support.

This paper traces how the different goals and strategies of the secessionist authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are reflected in their search for viability of their de facto states. In other words, it explores how and why de facto states have developed and sustained their capacity to operate. Understood in such terms, it is clear that viability is cannot be taken as an absolute measure, but relative one; that it is case specific and region specific; and that viability is also context specific, changing with time.

While the idea of viability is most closely connected with economic and financial factors, it also involves infrastructure, energy, and other aspects of public policy that allow for the provision of a minimum level of service in a given territory or to a given population. In other words, secessionist actors turn into service providers; this is due to a number of reasons, but crucial among them is that of putting viability at the heart of their discourse about independence, recognition, and legitimacy on the international arena, as well as harnessing viability for internal legitimacy. At the same time, viability is also closely linked to breaking away from the isolation given by a lack of international recognition; secessionist actors need to become facilitators of relations with the outside (whether political or commercial) that would ensure a survival of the secessionist entities in a globalised world. Abkhaz and South Ossetia have dealt with viability differently, reflecting their different approaches to secession and independence.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia's secessionist movements and conflicts are often treated in unison, especially with regard to the early post-Soviet years. However, 30 years after the beginning of a violent phase of ethno-political confrontations in the region, it has become clear that the two cases were diverse to start with and that their trajectories have further diverged with time. The two bear in common the historical context of secession, one of central weakening and centrifugal forces that led, to a large extent, to state collapse at the centre. And both secessionist movements, having established control over certain territories, have opted for maintaining the status quo and refusing reintegration into Georgia's constitutional realm.

However, the goals and the strategies of secession of the elites of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were different, as well as their relationship with the concepts of independence and statehood. In fact, it is worth remembering something that has too often slipped in the cracks of time, namely that South Ossetia's secession has always gone hand in hand with an irredentist project of joining North Ossetia, which was abandoned in the early 1990s as a consequence of Russian opposition, but which is still present below the surface. This difference with Abkhazia is reflected in how they positioned themselves and strived for viability.

The paper begins by differentiating between short-, mid-, and long-term strategies of secession, and explaining why viability is most relevant for the two latter ones. It shortly sketches out how Abkhazia and South Ossetia ensured viability since their

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characterization of these political entities. They are alternatively called 'unrecognized quasi-states' (Kolstø, 2006; Baev, 1998), 'unrecognised states' (King, 2001), 'pseudo-states' (Kolosso, & O'Loughlin, 1998), and 'contested states' (Geldenhuis, 2009; Ker-Lindsay, 2015). While at times the denominations are used interchangeably, for some authors they point towards important differences in the level of institutionalisation that these regions have established; however, as Pegg (2017) points out, the terminological proliferation creates a fundamental weakness of this literature.

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unilateral declarations of independence (UDIs), and then tackles how viability is used as a mid-term strategy (to secure *de facto* statehood) and, less successfully, as a long-term strategy (to secure *de jure* statehood). Finally, it reflects on how the different approaches to viability reflect the different goals of Abkhaz and South Ossetian *de facto* authorities in relation to secession.

### 1. Short- mid- and long-term strategies of secession

By their very own definition, secessionist movements aim to create a new state on territory which previously pertained to a larger sovereign state (Griffiths and Muro 2019). The creation of a new state entails its recognition by the international community and its consecration of its membership in the club of states as one *inter pares*. To reach this goal, however, secessionist movements develop a range of short-, mid-, and long-term strategies that are meant to further their position in relation to their goals. This chapter is largely concerned with mid- and long-term strategies, as well as with uncoupling the two.

As pointed out in the introductory chapter of this volume, secessionist movements have two main avenues to gain international recognition as states: either through the acceptance of their home state, or through the support of the international community. Movements that unilaterally declare independence and that achieve some level of territorial independence through violent means are very unlikely to be successful in their quest for support from the home state. Consequently, their main long-term strategy is to circumvent the home state and appeal to the international community on a number of grounds. This is notwithstanding the fact that, as long as the home state opposes independence, the international community would be wary to infringe upon the territorial integrity of one of its existing members.

However, while striving for inclusion in the international community and addressing its members as part of its long-term strategy to gain it, secessionist movements have additional short- and mid-term avenues for action. For the sake of clarity, it is useful to reiterate what the short-term strategies are, although viability does not play a role there. For *de facto* states, which are the result of UDIs, these are the strategies that allow them to territorially break away from home states. While this is often achieved through violent means, it is not exclusively so, as shown by the cases of Somaliland and, to a lesser extent, Transnistria.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of unilateral declarations of independence, after establishing (including through violent means) the existence of a self-standing entity, secessionist actors have to focus on their mid-term strategies, ensuring the existence of a *de facto* state, which might not be recognised as such, but which will be territorially independent from the home state. In other words, secessionist movements can unilaterally take control of a given territory (whether the whole or part of the territory concerned by secessionist claims) and then resist re-integration into a wider national realm. This is what a number of secessionist movements have done in the past, some less successfully, others more so. While the former have been reabsorbed into their home states (Chechnya, Tamil Eelam), many of latter have formed *de facto* states, as a result of implementing their mid-term strategies of securing *de facto* statehood but failing to achieve their long-term goals (including Northern Cyprus, Transnistria, Nagorno

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<sup>3</sup> Broers (2013) highlights how comparatively low the level of violence was in Transnistria versus how much higher it was in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

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Karabagh). But such *de facto* statehood, which is not consecrated by the international community, is a hazardous position to be in. First, *de facto* states are under constant threat of reabsorption into the home states from which they seceded. Second, they are hampered by their lack of recognition, which often prevents them from acting as members of the international community in a vast range of realms (diplomacy, trade, finance, etc.).

In order of priorities, therefore, the strategy of secessionist movements that opt for achieving independence through UDIs run from short-term (territorial independence), to mid-term (*de facto* statehood), and long-term (international recognition). They first have to achieve control of a given territory and establish their *de facto* independence from the home country, then to ensure their *de facto* statehood throughout time, and finally achieve recognition in order to become fully-fledged states, which in turn then will guarantee international protection. In parallel, secessionist movements strive to become authorities of *de facto* states (mid-term strategy), and eventually of internationally recognised states (long-term strategy). Viability is a factor that plays a role in the two latter ones. The following section looks at if and how viability has been and is achieved in the two cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in order to illustrate the spectrum of factors that contribute to it.

## 2. Abkhazia's viability: ensure viability by limiting isolation

A comparative analysis of Abkhazia and Somaliland's viability (Prelz Oltramonti 2019) has shown similar factors contributing to it. For *de facto* authorities, viability is closely linked to breaking away from the isolation imposed by a lack of international recognition; secessionist entities need to become facilitators of relations with the outside (whether political or commercial) that would ensure a survival of the secessionist entities in a globalised world.

Abkhazia is a point in case. Abkhazia's history in its post-*de facto* independence era can be divided into three periods: isolation broadly characterised the 1993-1999 period; the 2000s witnessed a progressive easing of sanctions and opening of the *de facto* border with Russia; and after 2008, Russia's presence in Abkhazia became more open and dominant. The viability of the Abkhaz *de facto* state is to a large extent correlated.

In the 1990s, the Abkhaz *de facto* state, while broadly existent, had very limited viability. This was due to a combination of isolation, war damages, and botched post-Soviet transition. Sanctions banning trade, financial, transportation, communications, and other ties with Abkhazia at the state level were imposed on Abkhazia in January 1996 by the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In relations to the war in the north Caucasus, in December 1994 Russia closed its border to all men between the ages of 16 and 60 (Le Huérou et al. 2014; Zverev 1996). In addition, Soviet passports gradually expired, leaving the residents of Abkhazia with no documents to travel. This period is widely seen in Abkhazia as the time of the "Georgian embargo", irrespective of whether travel limitations on people were imposed by Russia.

People survived with no support from the state, and the secessionist authorities drew legitimacy from their military victory but not by providing support to its population, aside from guaranteeing security from Georgia. The very limited viability that existed rested largely on coping and depletive strategies. Some of the coping strategies that were adopted in Abkhazia broadly resemble those that could be observed in the rest of Georgia – and in most of the former Soviet Union – in the early 1990s: return to subsistence

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agriculture, depletive strategies and migration. In Abkhazia, however, isolation and depopulation shaped those coping strategies in a unique way (Prelz Oltramonti 2017).

To fill up their coffers with a minimum of liquidity, the secessionist entities in Abkhazia exported scrap metal, its main export in the early 1990s (int. Bardon, 2012). The de facto government relied on the income of the sale of dismantled factories and facilities, being unable to raise revenues through taxation (as productive activities had collapsed) or customs, due to its lack of control of its de facto borders (int. Gagulia 2012).<sup>4</sup> With these revenues, basic food imports from Russia and Turkey were paid for – providing, inter alia, a daily loaf of bread to state employees (int. Gagulia 2012).

In parallel, shuttle trade was a crucial survival strategy throughout the period of isolation, and later. For this small-scale trade to continue as it did, notwithstanding the sanctions, an extensive network of corruption developed along the Psou border and at the checkpoints between Abkhazia and Russia, benefiting middlemen and Russian customs guards. Private initiative kept Abkhazia afloat, but the de facto authorities were largely unable to regulate or support it. On the contrary, de facto authorities benefitted from informality often on a personal basis (Prelz Oltramonti 2017).

The trickle of informal trade between Abkhazia and its neighbours is what allowed for a minimum amount of viability. This shows that viability is dependent on connections with the wider world, whether formally or informally. At the same time, however, showing the connections that Abkhazia maintained with its neighbours does not take away from the impact that severe isolation had on the region. It crucially curtailed access to credit and to aid for postwar rehabilitation of infrastructure, affecting Abkhazia's transition to a market economy and its reliance on distorted economic practices. Isolation, in fact, limited viability to a minimum.

The attempt to build greater viability into the Abkhaz de facto state started with the reinstatement of more stable and substantial links with the outer world (and Russia in particular). Travel and trade restrictions were slowly eased starting in 1999 (Diasamidze 2003) and Russian passports became available in 2002.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, citizens of Abkhazia may not hold dual citizenship; an exception was made for Russian citizenship, which provided a connection to the outside world. Russian and Turkish investments in transport, tourist infrastructure, and natural resources grew. This included investments in roads (International Crisis Group 2006), railroad (Lynch 2006; Sepashvili, 2004),<sup>6</sup> and tourist complexes on the coastline (Trier et al. 2010, 110). The opening of the border between Russia and Abkhazia in 2000 entailed a jump in foreign trade of up to 90% in exports of natural resources and agricultural produce (Baratelia 2007).

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4 Note that the official version, as of 2012, is that: "Budget revenues in the first post-war years derived from customs duties and taxes. By the late 90s, internal taxation began to exceed customs revenues." (int. Stranichkin, 2012)

5 As of 2002, granting Russian passports to Abkhaz residents became possible thanks to the passing of a new law on citizenship by the Russian State Duma (Russian Federation, 2002) and so allowing Abkhaz residents to seek employment and claim pensions. As of 2003, a majority of retirees started receiving Russian pensions, estimates of annual disbursements to Abkhazia by the Pensions Fund of the Russian Federation being calculated at more than 20 million dollars per year. (int. Baratelia, 2012)

6 An additional segment of the line (between Sukhumi and Ochamchira) was restored from May to August 2008 by Russian engineering troops. The Georgian government claimed that the refurbishment had military purposes in the build-up to the 2008 war (Trier et al. 2010, 108)

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While the partial easing of trade restrictions on the Russian side have meant that Abkhazia's viability has expanded, its overdependence on Russia, and still very limited access to the outer world aside from Russia, limit the scope of development and resilience that the Abkhaz authorities can aim to (International Crisis Group, 2018). This is why they are actively looking for other partners, although hindered in their search by the lack of recognition and the tensions between Russia on one side, and Georgia and its backers on the other, which Abkhazia is drawn into (int. Abkhaz de facto officials, 2015).

Abkhazia has, after the 2008 war developed a significant financial reliance on Russia, including which includes pensions, but also investments programs and direct budget assistance (International Crisis Group 2018), which have allowed it to significantly expand its budget expenditure. This arrangement, however, comes with two significant caveats: first, Abkhazia has increased its dependence on Russia and on its willingness and ability to continue to provide such funds. In case of financial issues in Russia, including a loss of value of the rouble, the Abkhaz budget is directly affected, as the purchasing power of the funds that it receives decrease. Second, while these funds are managed through the de facto state's budget, they come with Russian decisional power regarding how they are to be allocated.

Also, since 2008, Abkhazia has been recognised by Russia and a handful of other countries.<sup>7</sup> While this would seem to entail a reduction of isolation, it is not so. Diplomatic isolation might have decreased, but through the establishment of links with countries that are themselves either isolated, or insignificant on the global stage. The outcome is that Abkhazia has been unable to establish links with the wider world (with the exception of Russia), and to diversify its relationships with international actors. At the same time, Russia has established a monopoly over Abkhazia's links to the outside, and meticulously maintains its role of self-imposed intermediary. As a result, Russia is also functioning as an actor of isolation, a role that numerous patron states have adopted with the de facto states that they back (Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh; Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), albeit to various extents and in conjunction with a support role.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. South Ossetia's viability: trade and patron support

The geographical configuration of South Ossetia has been a key determinant in prospects for viability. The region stretches from the water-divide of the Caucasus range, which is crossed by the Roki tunnel, to the Georgian plains. Along this axis, a trade corridor between the North and the South sides of the Caucasus was established; whether trade along the key route of the corridor, the Transkam,<sup>9</sup> was tolerated or hampered determined a large part of the economic dynamics that characterised South Ossetia between 1992 and 2008. This brings to the surface the key determinant of South Ossetian viability: the role and influence of its only two access points, Georgia and Russia.

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7 After the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, Abkhazia's (and South Ossetia's) independences were recognized by the Russian Federation, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and, intermittently, Vanuatu and Tuvalu.

8 It is worth noting that Somaliland's case lacks both a patron state and a decisive home state, but that the issue of limiting isolation has still been key to the de facto state's survival.

9 The Transcaucasian Highway, usually shortened as Transkam (from the Russian Транскавказская магистраль) is a road that connects North and South Ossetia via the Roki tunnel. It connects Russia to Georgia, as the older Georgian Military Road, to which it runs roughly parallel.

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Additional characteristics made South Ossetia's viability particularly vulnerable to its two only neighbours: it is a landlocked region, with no significant resources. As elsewhere in the FSU, economic unravelling followed the end of the Soviet command economy and, in the early 1990s, the only remaining operating productive activities in South Ossetia were a bread factory, a mineral water bottling plant and wood-processing plant, as well as some mines (int. Tarkhan-Mouravi). Their total output was estimated at 330 thousand USD per year, and suffered severely from power shortages (Chkhartishvili et al. 2004, 129). In this framework, coping strategies included migration and return to subsistence agriculture, the latter hampered by the deterioration of the irrigation system and the lack of credit for fertilisers and agricultural machinery. Administrative jobs, very much subject to political allegiances, became the only form of regular employment.

As a consequence, any discussion on the viability of South Ossetia before 2004 verges on the trade and business along the Transkam route, which became the main source of work and revenue for both population and de facto state. This key component of the South Ossetian economy between 1992 and 2004 rested on the extreme permeability of both the ceasefire line and the northern border with Russia.

The trade along the Transkam was the result of increasing interaction that started right after the war, and that continued until 2004. Notwithstanding the fact that the conflict had recently ended, residents of the region started to carry out small scale trade as soon as 1992 (int. Areshidze). The scale of the trade soon transformed from a local and improvised activity to a series of structured businesses that saw the participation of three different sets of official actors (South Ossetian elites, Georgian officials and law enforcement authorities, Russian peacekeepers), which colluded on the ground to share the revenues that the trade generated (int. Utiashvili).

Aside from being the main source of income for the South Ossetian population, the Transkam trade was the main source of revenue for the de facto government, as it taxed the traffic along the Transkam and levied custom payments on goods coming from Russia and Georgia, to the point that, in 2004, it was described as being "hyper-dependent on income from the Russian-South Ossetian-Georgian traffic".<sup>10</sup> Such was the importance of the Transkam trade for the de facto authorities that the South Ossetian de facto power ministries attentively monitored the trade and prevented other South Ossetian agencies from extracting bribes on South Ossetian territory (Dzhikaev and Parastaev 2004, 205). Some argued that trade-related money flows led South Ossetian de facto authorities to actively minimise instability along the Transkam and Ergneti for fear of losing a source of income (int. Chkhartishvili). At the same time, it was estimated that only a fraction of the collected revenues ended up in the de facto state coffers, with the rest being shared by custom officials, police and highway patrols (Chkhartishvili et al. 2004). In fact, an important aspect of the trade along the Transkam was its predatory character coupled with a displacement of part of the revenues outside of South Ossetia, whether the rest of Georgia or North Ossetia.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Data from the de facto ministry of South Ossetia show that 62% of the revenues came from the Transkam (Dzhikaev and Parastaev 2004, 194). Similar figures (custom duties as 54.5% of the budget) are given in Chkhartishvili et al. 2004)

11 The main promoters of the extremely profitable trade of alcohol, in the 1990s, dominated North Ossetia's political life (Gordadzé 2010). Wealth created in South Ossetia spread north and south of South Ossetia's de facto borders as shown by the booming real estate prices in Vladikavkaz, Gori and Tskhinvali, with prices almost as high as Tbilisi's (int. Utiashvili).

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When the revenues from the Transkam were not sufficient to cover South Ossetia's running costs, Russia supported the budget in the range of between 500 thousand to 700 thousand USD per year by the early 2000s (int. Sanakoev). These sums are only a fraction of the financial support that Russia provides to South Ossetia since 2008. However, since then, there seems to have been no Russian attempt to develop any sort of sustainability in South Ossetia.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, there was no attempt coming from South Ossetian authorities to reinvest the revenues of the trade in activities that would increase the viability of the region.

In 2004, the new Georgian presidential administration of Mikheil Saakashvili decided to increase the pressure on South Ossetia, aiming to gain control over the region. Among other measures, it decided to curtail the trade along the Transkam route. This was in line with the changes taking place in Tbilisi as a consequence of the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's much publicised clampdown on corruption. However, it had a series of consequences on the stakeholders of the boundary system described above, reducing revenues for residents, de facto authorities, and border entrepreneurs.

After the trade corridor was closed down in 2004, the residents of South Ossetia who had been working there had to devise alternative income strategies. As many as 5000 of them were taken on by the South Ossetian armed forces, which was made possible by additional Russian financial support to the South Ossetian budget (int. Sanakoev). Reliance on Russian pensions increased, and with it the desirability of Russian citizenship (ICG 2007, 23). Others, especially young ones, left for Vladikavkaz or Sochi in search of work, creating a new wave of emigration.

Within a few months, trading stopped outright, but by the end of 2004, a trickle of the existing flow had resumed.<sup>13</sup> Between 2004 and 2008, the area of South Ossetia under the control of the de facto authorities<sup>14</sup> became increasingly integrated in Russia's economic space, as the result of its increasing direct funding and of Georgian attempts to isolate the South Ossetian administration.

Russian influence in South Ossetia grew exponentially since the early 2000s, as its policy appeared, by the mid-2000s, to have shifted towards a more significant intervention in the region and increasing integration of South Ossetia into the Russian economic space, which included building new connecting infrastructure and providing investment. This trend ballooned after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war,<sup>15</sup> which led to an even greater isolation of South Ossetia and greater reliance on Russian budget support (ICG 2018). In other words, what allowed people to live in South Ossetia, if not after 2004, then definitely after 2008, and de facto authorities to keep the lights on, is the direct

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12 "There was no economic development in South Ossetia. The only thing that Russia was doing was to finance directly, sustaining the population and allowing it to live in the region." (int. Sanakoev)

13 Estimated at 10% of the previous volume (int. Areshidze). The small-scale trade was carried out by locals, who devised new secondary routes, operated under cover of darkness, or by carrying suitcases of goods between Gori and Tskhinvali. Nevertheless, new cases of corrupted Georgian officials, who resumed trading with their Ossetian counterparts, surfaced, including Shida Kartli's chief of police, who was arrested in May 2005 (Freeze 2004).

14 Parallel elections were promoted by the Georgian authorities and carried out in 2006, with the resulting establishment of pro-Georgian authorities in parts of South Ossetia.

15 Russia has also contributed to the recovery of South Ossetia recover from the destruction of the 2008 War, about \$28,000 per person according to the Russian Deputy Minister of Regional Development (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2011).

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contribution of Russia. In order to ensure its own viability, South Ossetia opted to rely on its patron state.

In this context, what kind of viability can South Ossetia develop, given its dependence on Russia and showing very little interest in developing alternative sources of income to support its secession? As mentioned at the beginning, it is worth remembering that while South Ossetia's goals included secession from Georgia, the establishment of de facto statehood and independence have been much more ambiguous than in the case of Abkhazia. As recently as September 2008, de facto authorities admitted aiming for integration in the Russian Federation (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013). At the same time, surveys show that in South Ossetia the Russian troop presence is firmly welcomed by the vast majority of local Ossetians.<sup>16</sup> As Russia has repeatedly denied any desire to annex South Ossetia, the latter is hence left with its second best option – that of establishing de facto independence to secure its secession from Georgia.

#### 4. Mid-term strategy: securing de facto statehood?

The first step of de facto states' secessions (securing territory) often occurs via violent means, but not necessarily. The South Ossetian War (1991-2) and the Georgian-Abkhaz war (1992-3) are good points in case of the employment of violent means, and so are the wars in Nagorno Karabagh, in Transnistria, and in Northern Cyprus, among other cases – although the level of violence employed varied sharply in terms of intensity and duration.<sup>17</sup>

Also, this first step of acquiring territorial control may be drawn out in time and fuse into the secessionists' strategy to secure the perimeters of the territory that they control. In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the first key step in the establishment of their de facto statehood (securing territory) was not complete until the second decade of de facto independence. In the 1990s, the Abkhaz government controlled the north and centre, but the Gali district, which straddles the ceasefire line with Georgia, remained a sort of Far West until 2008.<sup>18</sup> In South Ossetia, the territorial control of de facto authorities also remained spotty until the 2008 war, when Russian troops pushed into Georgian territory and then retreated to the ceasefire line, which included the entirety of South Ossetian territory.

In addition to taking control over a given territory, secessionist actors need to maintain that control – without the protection of the international community – and manage the territory and the resident population or, in other words, establish de facto statehood. How do they do this? Partly by ensuring their viability or, in other words, keeping the lights on. Viability is a multidimensional concept better understood in terms of continuum. At one end, the lights are switched off, and secessionist entities are unable to sustain secessionist claims. At the opposite end, the lights are on and secessionist entities operate as fully-functioning states, regardless of their juridical status in the

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<sup>16</sup> When we asked about the Russian troop presence, 82% of our respondents choose the strongest option we provided in the questionnaire: "they are our allies and must remain in South Ossetia indefinitely" (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013).

<sup>17</sup> This is not the exclusive method, however. In the case of Somaliland, for example, the establishment of a separate entity was partly a response to the violent process of state collapse taking place in Somalia, and an attempt to curtail the violence spreading from the home state.

<sup>18</sup> Abkhazia also established control over a remote and sparsely-populated mountain area – the Kodori Gorge – during the 2008 conflict, which it retains to this day.

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international arena. This is dependent on economic and financial factors, and as well as the management of infrastructure, energy, and other aspects of public policy that allow for the provision of a minimum level of service in a given territory or to a given population.

It is worth here pointing out that ensuring viability serves numerous pillars that support the larger mid-term strategy of securing de facto secession. On the one hand, viability serves survival and goes hand in hand with state-making processes; on the other hand, secessionist movements harness viability for internal legitimacy. This is in addition to the longer-term strategy of putting viability at the heart of their discourse about independence, recognition, and legitimacy on the international arena.

Secessionist actors' ultimate goal is to create a new state. However, the issue of statehood is dependent, in addition to international recognition, on governance, involving state capacity and institutionalisation.<sup>19</sup> Secessionist actors in control of given territorial areas strive to develop both, with various results. Just as varied is how observers rate the results of these attempts.

For example, the field was quite evenly split in its pre-2008 evaluation of Abkhazia's strengths and weaknesses. If Pegg (1998), Kolossov and O'Loughlin (1998), and King (2001) underlined its robustness, Lynch (2002), Fairbanks (2002) and Kolsto (2006) argued that Abkhazia was deficient, if not in their institutional structure, then definitely in their governmental capacity. However, conflicting assessments on the strength of de facto states concern not only Abkhazia, but also South Ossetia, Nagorno Karabagh, and other non-Caucasus cases such as Somaliland and Transnistria (Kolsto 2006).

This is due a few elements. First, the development of the institutional capacity of a de facto state should be examined in its regional context. In the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for example, this means taking into consideration the institutional collapse that affected the former Soviet Union. Second, institutional capacity varies throughout time and, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia's cases, it has varied considerably throughout the 1990s and 2000s. But conflicting assessments are also due to the predicament of establishing what states' weaknesses and strengths are, spanning from the definition of a weak state as one that "meets minimum Weberian definitions of institutions of rule and is able to carry out some basic functions but is far from performing according to domestic and international expectations of a 'normal' state" (Young, 2002, 446), while a strong ones are "states that are capable of carrying out functions that they themselves claim and that they are reasonably expected by their populations to carry out" (Nodia 2002, 415).

Notwithstanding the difficulty that scholars encounter in computing the success and failures of secessionist movements in establishing their de facto states, secessionist movements are often busy in building institutions characteristic of independent states. While there is no scope here for detailing the various developments of the two cases examined in this chapter throughout a timespan of 25 years, it can be asserted that Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been undergoing – non-linear and certainly not unidirectional – processes of state-making in the years since their declaration of secession.

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<sup>19</sup> While it cannot be developed here, for a matter of length, an argument has successfully been made that there is a strong relationship between state-building, security provision, and war. In parallel with keeping the lights on, a (contested) state also needs to find resources to fund its security arrangements; at the same time, its security needs lead to an expansion of state capacity and institution building.

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However, it is useful here to qualify two different aspects of state-making, along the lines of Lonsdale's distinction between state building and state formation. If the former refers to the conscious process to create a state apparatus, which Lonsdale saw in terms of an apparatus of control, state formation designates the unintended result of interactions of individuals and groups who struggle for the establishment of their own position in the process of state-making (Berman and Lonsdale, 1992). The literature on informality shows that this coexistence of state institution and private actors is present even after the process of state-making is consolidated (Ledeneva, 2018). A symbiosis between the two exists to the point that they can be seen as the two ends of a formality/informality continuum.

This double-faced understanding of state-making carries a few implications. On the one hand, state making is only partly the result of the policies designed and implemented by state actors, in line with goals of state building; the result of processes of state making must therefore be seen as a concomitance of institutional and non-institutional factors. On the other hand, the state building strategies of state actors do not exist in a void, and must contend with a series of other actors, interests and processes. What is more, they do not only contend with private actors, but they largely rely on them. I have previously shown how Abkhaz authorities relied, especially in the 1990s, on informal practices (Prelz Oltramonti, 2017); even more widely known is the reliance of the de facto authorities of South Ossetia on the Ergneti market before 2004 (Dzhikaev and Parastaev 2004).

If there is a symbiosis between authorities and private actors in the process of state making, there must be benefits for both sides to nurture this interdependence. Secessionist authorities – either openly or tacitly – rely on private actors and on the informal sector for a range of purposes; at the same time, however, they must also provide support to their counterpart. They can do so by providing environments that are supportive enough of their counterpart that their counterpart feels compelled to remain in this relationship – and not actively undermine the state.

In other words, secessionist authorities need to create and nurture stakeholders of independence. They can do that by showing that the project of independence is a viable one, and that such stakeholders are better off by opting in than by calling themselves out.

This concerns also the residents of de facto states – secessionist actors need to turn a sizeable portion of them into stakeholders of secession. Patriotism and nationalism are the tool of choice; however, economic opportunities also factor in. In fact, secessionist movements sometimes spring up and gain momentum in regions that are more prosperous – or have more generous social security systems – than the rest of the home state. This was the case of Abkhazia in the late Soviet period but has also been the case in places where secessionism has led to less violent outcomes (such as Catalonia for example).

Secessionist authorities argue that residents are better off in a newly independent state than as part of a larger polity. To back this claim they need, if not in the short-term than definitely in the mid-term, to turn into service providers. In order to do so, however, they must develop an adequate level of state capacity that would sustain the provision of all sorts of services. In the process of establishing the new state – whether de facto or de jure – secessionist entities try to expand their positive sovereignty, ie. their capacity to support their residents, in tandem with their coercive power.<sup>20</sup> This is especially true in

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that many de facto states devote a disproportionate share of their very limited revenues to security/military forces, partly as a consequence of the lack of security

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situations, such as those faced by de facto states, where their statehood is unrecognized, and authorities lack the legitimacy of international recognition.

##### 5. Developing legitimacy through viability? The case of Abkhazia

As explained above, viability can be harnessed by secessionist movements as a source of legitimacy, in addition to keeping the lights on, and as such it plays into mid-term strategies.

In Abkhazia, isolation imposed from the outside was a key factor in limiting its viability; but there was also an endogenous factor that severely limited its ability to keep the lights on. This is de facto authorities' management of transition and their role, in the 1990s, as actors – or obstacles – to the economic development of Abkhazia.

Abkhaz de facto authorities had very little tradition of state management before 1991 and were not qualified for devising and implementing the necessary reforms, for transitioning away from a centrally planned Soviet economy. Few programmes aimed at kick-starting privatisation and supporting the development of businesses, were designed to maximise political returns, showing little concern for their economic impacts. Privatisation of large businesses reinforced a system of clientele which centred on the two successive de facto presidents, while the Fund for Support of Enterprises operated as a dispenser of cash in return for political support, and not as a tool for encouraging business.

A state rhetoric on trade sanctions masked an absolute stasis with regard to establishing the foundations of a new, and more viable, Abkhaz economy and this resulted in a decline of key industries, which came to come to terms with the change in market conditions for Abkhaz produce and services (tea and tobacco production, tourism). Across the FSU, governments struggled with the modalities of transition; in Abkhazia the issue of transition was mostly sidelined, while creating opportunities for a few strategically positioned members of the elites. To sum up, two factors made Abkhazia in the 1990s largely unviable/ or very limited viable: first, isolation, over which de facto authorities had little control; and second, lack of reform, which was swept under the carpet and left unacknowledged. This was possible thanks to the depletive strategies put in place by the residents and the legitimacy that the political elites drew from the war victory.

This sort of legitimacy started waning in the late 1990s. As early as 1996-7 a switch occurred in how the residents of Abkhazia attributed legitimacy to the government – from drawing legitimacy from winning the war, to seeing the government as a provider of governance, services, and security, both external and internal (int. Inal-Ipa, 2012). The shift became apparent in 1999, when the first serious opposition movement, “Vozrojdenie” (Rebirth), was registered, and started questioning the government and advocating for services. Previously, as the post-ceasefire society was based on an idea of unity and on Ardzinba as a hero-like figure, it had been largely unacceptable to express criticisms towards the government (int. Inal-Ipa, 2012). However, the corruption and the mismanagement of resources, which had initially been accepted as a matter of fact, led to

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guarantees from the international community, partly because of the very limited resources that they can count on to begin with. This share diminished when a patron state (such as Russia) guarantees a de facto state security through its own military apparatus.

a change of power in 2004-5.<sup>21</sup> The role of the government as a guarantor of viability for Abkhazia became a central issue of the political debate.

In the mid-term, then, viability is therefore harnessed for internal legitimacy in a process of state consolidation and in the production of stakeholders' constituencies. But viability is also used to sustain a longer-term strategy of secession, namely the search for independence, recognition, and legitimacy on the international arena.

#### 6. Long-term strategy: securing de jure statehood?

Securing de facto statehood is not enough for secessionist entities, as lack of recognition threatens both their security and their ability to develop internal viability. The long-term goal remains international recognition as states or, in other words, full membership of the international community. Granted, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have received some degree of recognition after 2008, but hardly as 'international' recognition. They were recognised by their patron state and a handful of its allies, and so turning them into pariahs on the international arena instead of making them members of the international community. Whatever security guarantee Abkhazia and South Ossetia draw from Russia, it does not come from recognition but by Russia's successful attempt to push its own security border South (Prelz Oltramonti 2016).

As mentioned above, as a long-term strategy, secessionist movements opt to engage with the international community and circumvent the home state, especially in cases of UDIs. To achieve their goal, they exploit a number of channels, including para-diplomacy and membership of bodies such as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) or the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (CONIFA), as well as informal links provided by the diaspora. The arguments that they put forward in favour of their claim for international recognition are just as varied, some of which have received considerable attention in the literature on secessionist movements, such as remedial rights theories (Caspersen 2009).

One of the tactics for appealing to the international community is that of mobilising the argument of democracy and showcasing democratic achievements, sometimes in the context of less democratic home states. The elites of Abkhazia strived to build institutions characteristic of independent democratic states, both as a strategy of state consolidation and as a tool for claiming international recognition. Repeatedly staged elections in Abkhazia led to a change of leadership in 2004. While no external monitors were present, the loss by the incumbents shows that the electoral results were far from predetermined. Even South Ossetia partakes in the electoral game, albeit often not as convincingly.

As an argument in favour of recognition, viability is less prominent but nonetheless present. This argument can be traced back to the decolonisation period, when sovereignty in international relation was largely attributed on the basis of what was then considered as viability and stability – largely in line with colonial institutions. This is one of the reasons why the colonial borders and administrations were maintained and supported in their post-colonial transitions (Barkin and Cronin 1994, 112). Seen from today's perspective, it might appear that, post-1945, the international society forsook viability as a criterion for statehood. According to Jackson (1990), to be a state today you need only have been a former colony yesterday. It is worth noting, however,

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<sup>21</sup> For a review of the electoral system in Abkhazia and an assessment of its dynamism, see Ó Beacháin (2012)

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that a former colony yesterday was perceived, on the international arena, as a bedrock of the international order – and hence the only guarantee of stability and the only envisaged territorial expression of viability. It is precisely as a consequence of decolonisation that a shift from empirical to juridical statehood occurred. While the results of this shift clearly surfaced during the processes that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, de facto states are still playing yesterday's game (empirical statehood) in violation of today's rules (juridical statehood).

As statehood is largely understood in its normative dimension (a population; a territory; a government; and relations with other states), sovereignty follows suit, entailing the need to assess the ability of the state to control or develop those attributes. In fact, when the link between viability and institutional makeup has been made, it has entered the discourse on sovereignty (Hobsbawm, 1990, 31-2). Viability is associated to sovereignty in function of a state being able to act as an enforcer – which is able to control its territory, its population, and protect its borders: “State sovereignty emphasizes the integrity of borders based on historical possession, national frontiers, and viability. If we follow this logic, the viability of a state is based on the ability of established institutions to exercise authority over the population. This control is best assured by stable, effective states with strong institutions rather than by newly defined nations that may lack administrative competence and social stability” (Barkin and Cronin 1994, 112).

It is important to note that many cases of secession took place in the framework of declining stability and viability of the home states. As mentioned previously, when looking at Abkhazia and South Ossetian, for example, it is worth keeping in mind the regional context of institutional collapse after the end of the Soviet Union. The end of the Soviet Union engendered a process of institutional collapse, which was observable to various degrees throughout the newly-independent states. Institutions in charge of maintaining internal and defence security had to be reorganised around a new centre, and that would no longer be Moscow. This was a lengthy process, and, in the meanwhile, levels of violence rose exponentially. It could hardly be argued that states such as Georgia had the monopoly over organised violence. For most of the 1990s, Georgia could also not claim to be in control of its territory, even leaving aside the separatist territories. The process of consolidation of institutional control over its borders and territory is a process that took more than a decade, starting from less than zero in the early 1990s, when Russian troops manned the border with Turkey.<sup>22</sup> This was the case not only for the provision of security, but also of services.

#### 7. Different approaches to viability: different goals

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<sup>22</sup> Shevardnadze relied on bilateral agreements signed in 1992 for protecting the borders and providing border-guards for the following two years (Serrano, 2007)

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#### List of interviewees

- Abkhaz de facto government officials, Sept 2015, Sukhumi
- Areshidze, Mamuka (Analyst and Director of Caucasus Centre for Strategic Studies), November 2012, Tbilisi
- Baratelia, Beslan (Dean of the Economics Department at Sukhumi's Abkhaz State University), November 2012, Sukhumi
- Bardon, Antoine (President of the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie Française en Géorgie), November 2012, Tbilisi
- Chkhartishvili, David (former head of the income section of the Budget Office of the Georgian Parliament from 1998 to 2003), November 2012, Moscow (e-mail)
- Gagulia, Gennady (Head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry; previously: former de facto Prime Minister of Abkhazia 1995-7, and 2002-3), November 2012, Sukhumi
- Inal-Ipa, Arda (member of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes), Oct 2012, Sukhumi
- Sanakoev, Dimitry (Head of the [Provisional Administration of South Ossetia](#) (previously South Ossetia's de facto defence minister 1996-8; South Ossetia's de facto vice-Prime Minister 1998-2001; South Ossetia de facto Prime Minister 2001)), October 2012, Tbilisi
- Stranichkin, Alexandr (De facto Vice-Prime Minister of Abkhazia), October 2012, Sukhumi
- Tarkhan-Mouravi, George (Political analyst, Co-Director of Institute for Policy Studies), December 2012, Tbilisi
- Utiashvili, Shota (Head of Analytical Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia), July and December 2012, Tbilisi