

The Do-or-Die Dilemma Facing Post-Soviet De Facto States

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Eiki Berg and Kristel Vits¹
University of Tartu (Estonia)

De facto states operate against unfavorable international legal conditions, combined with manifest security threats and widespread political disengagement from the international community. Moreover, they are affected by a mix of economic sanctions and are forced into socio-cultural isolation. This leads to an enduring “do or die” dilemma where de facto states either seek protection from external patrons (“do”) or face the prospect of forceful reintegration back into their parent states (“die”). Patron-client relations nevertheless come at a price. Although essential for de facto states’ survival, patron state involvement also constrains their independence, which in turn fuels the perception that they are simply extensions of their patron states, or puppets in power-plays between larger states.

This memo discusses the “do or die” dilemma of post-Soviet de facto states. Our examination looks in to patron-client relations that are highly unequal and asymmetric in terms of resources and capabilities: Russia vis-à-vis Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, and Armenia vis-à-vis Nagorno-Karabakh. While relying entirely on a militarily and economically resourceful external patron is often seen as the only viable option, de facto states may be risking the loss of their “independence.” Hence their “do or die” dilemma that structures many of their policies.

Strings-Attached Alignment

De facto states’ strategic alliances with Russia have always been controversial. For example, from early on, Russia secured its domination over Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s economic and military sectors, provided passports and social allowances to its extraterritorial compatriots, enabled (limited) recognition, and tightened its grip over local politics. Russia played a major role in the cancellation of the 2011 presidential elections in South Ossetia when Alla Dzhioeva led the opposition and won. In Abkhazia, Russian influence in 2014 led to the ousting of the moderately pro-Russian president

¹ [Eiki Berg](#) is Professor of International Relations at the University of Tartu (Estonia). Kristel Vits is a Ph.D. student and a Junior Research Fellow at the University of Tartu.

Alexandr Ankvab by the fully pro-Russian Raul Khajimba. About 60-70 percent of Abkhazia's and over 90 percent of South Ossetia's state budgets are currently supplied by Russian transfers.² Furthermore, Russian troops assist the de facto state authorities by guarding the Georgian border. Although recognizing these secessionist entities as independent countries in 2008, Russia today builds new roads and railways and carries out development programs as if these territories were integral parts of the Russian Federation.³

Russia has signed treaties with the Georgian breakaway territories as a way to further integrate them. The treaties offer a coordinated foreign policy, a common space in military and socio-economic spheres, joint actions for combating organized crime, and harmonization of customs regulations, welfare services, and social services. The 2014 so-called "treaty on alliance and strategic partnership" reflects the creation of supranational structures and Abkhazia's clear subordination to Russia. The 2015 so-called "treaty on alliance and integration" envisages, among other aspects, the joint management of South Ossetian military forces and should be read as Russia effectively taking it upon itself to ensure complete control over the territory.

In light of heightened tensions between the West and Russia over areas in their common neighborhood, and because of Georgia's past use of force (such as the Kodori operation in 2006 and Operation Clear Field in 2008), both the Abkhazian and South Ossetian leadership have been eager to accept their Russian patron's offer of implicit annexation. Although the treaties' provisions have turned out to be more problematic than initially anticipated, and some locals have strongly opposed Russian conditions as a threat to self-proclaimed sovereignty, the same people are nevertheless [wary of choosing the prospect](#) of extreme economic hardship and insecurity over increased Russian dominance.

Ambiguous Partnerships

De facto states may approve strong links with their patron, yet the outcome of patron-client relations might be somewhat more nuanced. Transnistria is an entity that firmly sets the maintenance of its ties with the "Russian World" as its policy goal and has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to join the Russian Federation. Its most recent [request](#) was filed by the speaker of the Transnistrian parliament (which is officially called the Supreme Council of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic) following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Russia, in return, supports the territorial integrity of Moldova provided that a "special status" is given to Transnistria with Russian military units positioned there to help to secure peace.

² See: "[Abkhazia: Long Road to Reconciliation](#)," Crisis Group Europe Report No. 224, April 10, 2013, and "[South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition](#)," Crisis Group Europe Report No. 205, June 7, 2010.

³ Examples include: road and broader infrastructure ([here](#)), railroad restorations ([here](#)), Enguri River boundary line ([here](#)), and Abkhazian railway ([here](#)).

Russia's financial support to Transnistria is consistent with its compatriot policies and is directed to ensure higher pensions and improvement of conditions at schools, kindergartens, hospitals, and other public institutions. Transnistria's gas debt to Russia exceeds more than three times its own GDP (2011) and renders doubtful the continued viability of it as a de facto state. This heavy financial bondage gives the patron state opportunities to direct its client's decision-making process. Russia's [role has been decisive](#) in that region's ongoing conflict dynamics; it has orchestrated peace-building projects and slowed down the pace of Moldova's Europeanization within the European Neighborhood Policy framework.

Although Moscow has played a crucial role in Transnistria's survival as a de facto state, it has gained some economic advantages independently. Transnistria is the only post-Soviet de facto state that has been included in trade agreements with the EU (DCFTA) through its parent state, Moldova. As a result, Transnistria is able to export its products to Western Europe—to such an extent that this trade revenue is now dominant. While Russia dominates Transnistrian imports (mainly due to reliance on Russian gas), its [exports](#) to Russia were only 8 percent (2015) with 49 percent going to Moldova and 32 percent going to the EU. This arrangement means that Russia has not yet fully extended its patronage of Transnistria. One of the reasons for this is arguably that, unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Transnistria does not have a joint border with Russia, which seems unwilling to create another Kaliningrad, and is dependent on Moldova for continued access to Transnistrian territory (and on Ukraine, though to a decreased degree after 2014).

In contrast, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia function very much as a single space. Because Nagorno-Karabakh is landlocked between its patron (Armenia) and parent (Azerbaijan) states, the only way that residents can connect with the outside world is through Armenia. Armenia's contribution to Nagorno-Karabakh's budget (2016) has [reached](#) as much as 58 percent of total expenditure. Within the security context, its dependence on Armenia is remarkable, though the actual depth and types of involvement are unclear. A 2008 research paper [claimed](#) that at that time more than half of the 20,000 strong "Karabakh force" was comprised of "proper Armenians." Other reports point out that its army maintains a separate operational command, and President Vladimir Putin's decree on November 14, 2016, on the creation of a Russian-Armenian joint military force, [pointedly excludes](#) Nagorno-Karabakh units. Although there has been a push for independence within the territory in recent years, some see this as an intermediary step before a possible joining with Armenia at a later date. This push is based on opinion [polls](#) conducted in the territory that show a 35 to 49 percent rise in support for Karabakh's independence between 2015 and 2016, especially among younger and slightly higher income groups, and 51 percent of those questioned in July 2016 (two months after the war that April) felt that Armenia [should recognize](#) Nagorno-Karabakh's independence.

The Armenian diaspora has played an equally important role in increasing Nagorno-Karabakh's viability by helping to reduce its dependence on financial support of the Armenian state. Largely thanks to the diaspora, the de facto state authorities have, over the years, gained access to high-level politicians in the United States and Europe. In March 2018, Nagorno-Karabakh's president, Bako Sahakyan, managed to gain a visa to the United States and [visited](#) Washington. It is perhaps the most successful of the post-Soviet de facto states in this regard. Locally, a so-called "Karabakh clan" has strong ties to the Armenian body politic and its actors have reached high political posts in Yerevan. It is unclear whether these political elites have provided any direct benefits for Nagorno-Karabakh, but it was [arguably](#) the perception of former President Robert Kocharian representing both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh simultaneously that led to the exclusion of the latter from the OSCE-chaired peace negotiations in 1998.

Conclusion: Power of the Powerless

Generally, the [main drivers](#) of a patron-client relationship are ideological convergence, international solidarity, and strategic advantages. Here, we can distinguish between Armenia, which supports Nagorno-Karabakh because they are seen as forming a culturally and economically uniform space, and Russia, where any traditional allegiances with its de facto states have been transformed by geostrategic context. (Russia had kinship with Transnistria and Donbas but not with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are not ethnic Russian regions.) As such, Russia is strengthening and expanding its "Russia World" civilizational realm in these areas.

Supporting de facto states offers Moscow considerable strategic advantages in its quest to counter the prevailing Western hegemony that emerged after the Cold War and which does not take into account Russia's interests in its perceived spheres of influence. When Russia supported military insurgents against Georgia's central authorities at the beginning of the 1990s, it was to deliberately assert Moscow's stakes throughout the post-Soviet space. When it decided to recognize South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence in 2008, it was less driven by sympathy for the self-determination of these populations and more by the strategic calculation that this policy would undermine Georgia's opportunity to eventually become a NATO member. (Moscow-backed security forces have repeatedly moved the South Ossetian administrative boundary line a few hundred meters into Georgia, [leading](#) to a segment of the BP-operated Baku-Supsa pipeline to now be inside the occupied territory.) At the same time, Russia seems to be in no hurry to annex Transnistria, as long as Moldova stays undecided on its geopolitical orientation.

Post-Soviet de facto states are small in size, however, due to their geographical location and the stakes involved, these territories hold considerable power as custodians of geopolitical fault lines and they have the potential to disrupt the strategic balance of the entire region and even the international system. To be sure, this is also the same power

that these entities try to leverage in exchange for their patron’s military and economic support. This, paradoxically, leads them toward their “do or die” dilemma, rendering them almost powerless within their patron-client relationship because any alternative foreign policy directions are subsequently sharply constrained. This helplessness raises recurring questions about the true feasibility of their independent, albeit de facto, statehood. Their “do or die” dilemma may not necessarily be enduring, because both reintegration with their parent state or incorporation into their patron state refers to the “end game.” Still, the power of the powerless depends on their capabilities and perceptions on how further engagement and internal resistance to subjugation might be beneficial or harmful for them in the long run.

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