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Legitimation in De-Facto States: an Analysis of Media in the Pridnestrovian
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Introduction

During and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1990-1992 civil war in Moldova led to the formation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (hereafter referred to as “Transnistria” or “the PMR”). This conflict led to the creation of a de-facto state that is not recognized by most UN member states. Transnistria one is of four such post-Soviet de-facto states including Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

This study attempts to identify through content analysis the narratives, themes, and symbols present in Transnistrian official media and social media engagement that correspond to the legitimacy subtypes determined by von Soest & Grauvogel (2017) based on Easton (1965, 1975) and developed by Kosienkowski (2021) and others. This background will also introduce other specific legitimation strategies that were revealed in a content analysis of government press releases, local media, and social media discussions, and discuss their possible significance. To that end, this review aims to summarise the relevant literature relating to legitimacy and its various subtypes, legitimation strategies, and related concepts such as collective memory and identity formation.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What themes, narratives and symbols relating to national identity emerge in executive communications and news media broadcast online?
2. How do these themes, narratives and symbols align with existing analyses of Transnistrian national identity and nation-building in the context of legitimation?
3. How do individual viewers react to this content? What legitimation appeals are endorsed or contested by individuals?
4. How are relations and interactions with other de-facto states and the international community characterised?

The present research is a qualitative case study that combines discourse analysis and secondary source review. The subject of the present study is Transnistrian media discourse, while the theoretical frame of the inquiry is authoritarian regime legitimation in post-Soviet de-facto states. The primary data collection method is discourse analysis. This study has two central aims. First, following von Soest & Grauvogel, it aims to identify potential identity legitimation appeals in Transnistrian media discourse. Second, following Von Haldenwang, this study aims to identify points of contestation within the context of a legitimacy negotiation process between elites and individuals.

The theoretical background that follows this introduction will introduce three premises upon which the discussion of the discussion and conclusions will rely: 1) that elites engage in external

and internal legitimation processes through official announcements, including media discourse 2) “Russian World” ideology is a type of legitimation strategy (Kosienkowski) and de-facto state legitimation (Dembinska and Morar) and 3) that individuals engage with official discourse in a cycle (Von Haldenwang 2017) of legitimacy negotiation. This study will also introduce other specific legitimation strategies that are revealed in content analysis and discuss their possible significance in the conclusion section.

This study’s findings can be briefly summarised as follows. Broadly, this study argues that Transnistria is an example of a de-facto state that maintains its legitimacy by means of creating narratives in order to compensate for a lack of material resources. First, Transnistrian state media emphasises an ideologically-based relationship with its parent state that justifies the parent state’s involvement in Transnistrian affairs. To that end, Transnistria asserts an ideological association with Russia and the Russian World (Russkiy Mir). Second, Transnistrian media validates the status quo that keeps the de-facto state in a frozen conflict and frozen status limbo. Third, the state establishes group cohesion by means of creating a cohesive national origin myth that denigrates an out-group and unifies the in-group around shared ideology and experiences. Fourth, Transnistria uses this frozen, limbo status to its advantage, “balancing” (Dembinska) between East and West while collecting benefits from its relationship with each. Finally, Transnistrian state media emphasises international diplomatic norms when portraying the PMR’s international relations, using paradiplomacy as a legitimation mechanism in a vacuum of external legal legitimacy.

Further discussion will cover potential reasoning as to why Transnistria employs various legitimation strategies that validate existing theories on the means by which de-facto states legitimise themselves as well as current understanding of why Transnistria specifically maintains a frozen conflict and limbo status. Based on these questions, this study supports a potential understanding as to how legitimation techniques and strategies attempt to maintain a status quo, as well as offering a rationale that the maintenance of the status quo is precisely why certain techniques and rhetorical strategies are used while others are eschewed.

Legitimacy and Legitimation: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

1. Introduction to the Literature Review

To begin, this review of the literature examines conceptions of legitimacy and legitimation as well as modes of diffusion of the two. In general, this study attempts to identify through content analysis the narratives, themes, and symbols present in Transnistrian official media and social media engagement that correspond to the legitimacy subtypes determined by Soest & Grauvogel (2017) based on Easton (1965, 1975) and developed by Kosienkowski (2021) and others. To that end, this review aims to summarise the relevant literature relating to legitimacy and its various subtypes, legitimation strategies, and related concepts such as collective memory and identity formation.

2. Legitimacy

Schlumberger writes that “legitimacy is notoriously hard to define and operationalize,” (Schlumberger 2010, 234). At the very basic level, legitimacy can be divided into two main types: normative and empirical. Normative legitimacy refers to an institution's adherence to a set of values-based standards, including divine right or human rights. Empirical legitimacy, in contrast, refers to the perception of that institution: an institution has empirical legitimacy when there is social acceptance of its authority (authority understood as the unique ability (sometimes the right) to formulate rules and enforce obedience). An approach to legitimacy inspired by objective norms “seeks to identify normatively acceptable structures of rule” and therefore “is not concerned with what people actually think of the rule” (Hurd 2012, 1) For this reason, unlike empirical legitimacy, the concept of normative legitimacy “has less to say about why people behave the way they do toward sources of authority and more about which sources of authority we should respect,” (Hurd 2012, 1) Consequently, to take on a case study, I will be focusing on empirical legitimacy in order to discuss the relationship between individuals and authority.

Empirical legitimacy itself is the subject of an extremely broad debate, as scholars attempt to identify the conditions that determine whether a governance actor's right to rule will be socially accepted— regardless of prescriptive normativity or legality. When determining the presence or absence of empirical legitimacy, the debate becomes more complex thanks to a vast body of scholarly work centred around determining what factors engender social acceptance of the right to rule.

Toward the beginning of the modern debate, Karl Marx theorised three types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. These three factors work individually or in tandem to convince individuals of the authority of an institution. As they are highly subjective to the individual, they are distinct from legitimacy based on prescriptive norms. Later, Max Weber develops this understanding of subjective legitimacy by stressing the point that legitimacy is only as important as the belief in its existence. “Weber distinguished four bases of legitimacy: tradition, affectual faith, value-rational faith and legality, and he analysed a historical shift in modern Western societies from traditional to legal-rational authority types,” (Pakulski 1992, 26). Furthermore, he stressed that the social norms that engender social belief in an authority's legitimacy are subject to change and evolution. “In short: what humans consider ‘right,’ ‘justifiable’ or ‘legitimate’ differs across both time and space,” (Schlumberger 2010, 235; Weber 1922).

Easton's later contribution identifies a distinction in legitimacy between what he calls “specific” and “diffuse ” support (Easton 1965). Easton “conceived diffuse support as a basic ‘reservoir of favourable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effects of which they see as damaging to their wants’ (Easton 1965, 273). His work equates diffuse support to the belief in the legitimacy of the political object (a regime, a government or a politician) or, alternatively, to trust in the given object. By contrast, as he conceived of specific

support, it was related to ‘the satisfactions that members of a system feel they obtain from the perceived outputs and performance of the political authorities’ (Easton 1975: 437),” (Ares et al.: 1093). This distinction is useful for the present study because it will focus on legitimacy that would fall into the latter category according to the Eastonian tradition. Even when individuals in a government, or even large parts (e.g. programs, institutions) of that government are not socially accepted, a diffuse support can still exist for that regime. Risse and Stollenwerk build off of Easton’s conceptualization of legitimacy as diffuse support for governance actors or institutions when building their conception of “empirical legitimacy” in areas of limited statehood, saying “legitimacy or diffuse support allows governance actors (“governors”; Avant et al. 2010) to effectively carry out policies even if they lack specific support,” (Risse & Stollenwerk 2018) (Baranyi 2012) . This is especially relevant to the study of legitimacy in non-democratic regimes where legitimacy claims social acceptance of an individual leader or party’s authority is not substantiated by electoral processes.

Finally, realist approaches to legitimacy apply rational choice theory, suggesting that individuals accept the authority of an institution or rule structure from which they benefit most. For example, a university admissions policy that accepts a lower percentage of female than male applicants might be less socially accepted (and therefore less empirically legitimate) among the female applicants than the male applicants. Likewise, regimes that provide material benefits for certain constituents enjoy greater legitimacy among those groups.

Within the debate over which factors engender empirical legitimacy, there arises another distinction between material and social-emotional factors that engender empirical legitimacy, upon which the theoretical framework of this paper will rely heavily. This distinction originates with Easton: ““Following Easton (1965, 1975), legitimacy claims can be identity- and output-based” (Soest & Grauvogel 2017). This bifurcation in the literature as it has developed since Easton is excellently summarised by Morar & Dembinska: “According to Hillel D. Soifer and Matthias vom Hau (2008), who revisit the concept of the “infrastructural power of the state” of Michael Mann (1984), internal legitimacy can be subdivided into two components: identity legitimacy which depends on the strength of feelings of belonging and output legitimacy... (which) is a function of the effectiveness of political institutions (institutional legitimacy), social and economic well-being, as well as the degree of security (eudemonic legitimacy; Holmes 2016)” (Dembinska & Cloutier 2021, 10)

This dichotomy between types of legitimacy have been continuously reworked and reconceptualized, and expanded to apply to adjacent concepts. Soest and Grauvogel conceptualise Eastonian “output” claims “as “performance-based legitimacy claims, meaning a regime’s claim of being successful at producing socio-economic goods or security for its citizens” and Eastonian “input” claims as “identity-based claims” (Soest & Grauvogel 2017). Similarly, Kolsto and Blakkisrud (2008) link identity claims to nation-building: “These two aspects of internal legitimacy - identity and output - correspond respectively to the nation-building and state-building processes,

that is to say to the “soft” and “hard” aspects of state building (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008), “ (Morar & Dembinska 2021).

Dembinska and Campana’s description of this distinction is further useful: “*internal legitimacy can be subdivided into identity legitimacy, which depends on the strength of feelings of attachment; and output legitimacy, which is a function of the efficiency of political institutions, social and economic well-being, as well as the degree of security. These correspond respectively to the nation- and state-building processes or to the “soft” and “hard” aspects of state construction, that is to say, to the ‘construction of a shared identity and a sense of unity in a state’s population, through education, propaganda, ideology, and state symbols,’ on the one hand, and to the “establishment of the administrative, economic and military groundwork of functional states,” on the other (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 484) (Dembinska & Campana 2017).*

In sum, identity legitimacy has to do with the social and qualitative aspects of legitimacy while output legitimacy refers to the material benefits that the governance actor can provide both for its own citizens and externally. This distinction between types of legitimacy is extremely useful for understanding both the myriad of conceptualizations of legitimacy and legitimation that abound in the literature and for understanding the empirical legitimation strategies that will be expanded upon in this paper. Drawing a line between material legitimacy and identity-based legitimacy allows us to use the latter as a unit of analysis but also deconstruct it into constituent units¹.

This Soest and Grauvogel do in their 2017 study, as a part of which they also propose a new theoretical framework for understanding socio-emotional, “soft” legitimacy. After differentiating “identity” and “output” legitimacy following Easton (1965) (1975), they identify six subtypes of identity legitimacy. These are **foundational myth**, **ideology**, **personalism** (e.g., focus on an individual leader), **procedures** (e.g., democratic or other processes), **performance** (e.g., economy, national security, etc), and **international engagement** (von Soest & Grauvogel 2017: 3-4). This analytical framework will guide the following analysis of legitimation strategies of media in Transnistria. The present study will account for output legitimacy as a meaningful constraint on state behaviour, but will focus primarily on identity legitimacy as conceptually defined by von Soest & Grauvogel (2017), Kolsto & Blakkisrud (2008) (2011), Kosienkowski (2021), and von Haldenwang (2017).

3. Legitimation

“‘Every system of authority attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy’, Max Weber wrote, almost 100 years ago (1964: 325)” (Van Leeuwen 2007). “Every political order

¹ The previously discussed distinction between normative and empirical legitimacies brings to light the idea that “de jure” legitimacy is not “de facto” legitimacy. A state may adhere to prescriptive norms but still not enjoy social acceptance in practice, or vice versa. Another example might be a state that has external legal legitimacy but does not enjoy a monopoly on the use of force internally. A third example is that debate is ongoing as to whether regimes that eschew contemporary liberal democratic norms can be considered legitimate— for example, the question as to whether or not the Third Reich or Vichy regimes were legitimate governments as those regimes are characterised by activity incompatible with contemporary international law, let alone norms. Unfortunately, the scope of this study limits investigation into the latter debates.

conceived as a lasting institutional arrangement engages in the strategic procurement of legitimacy (see Weber, 1976, p. 122)” (Von Haldenwang 2017). This distinction between legitimacy itself and the “attempts to establish and cultivate” it has been expanded upon in the century since it was expressed. To understand legitimation, or the process by which institutions cultivate social acceptance of their authority, it is important to address the reasons why institutions undertake these processes and pursue legitimacy. First, it is recognized that legitimacy is useful to maintaining state stability because it lowers the social cost of rule (Hurd 2012). Tom Tyler says that if authorities “are not viewed as legitimate, social regulation is more difficult and costly” (Tyler 2001, 416) (Hurd 2012). Traditionally, scholars have maintained that coercion and repression (Von Haldenwang 2017) (Sedgwick 2010) (von Soest & Grauvogel 2017) are not enough to ensure the continuity of a regime structure. Notably, this point is also highly relevant to external legitimacy. For example, states that have greater external legitimacy enjoy greater ease benefiting from diplomatic partnerships, economic cooperation, and foreign aid, each of which can be easily instrumentalized in order to lower the social cost of rule (Tyler 2001).

There has been a consistent contribution to the literature of analyses of legitimacy that differentiate between legitimacy itself and the process of legitimation. “We conceptually distinguish claims to legitimacy ‘made by virtually every state in the modern era’ about their ‘righteous’ political and social order (Gilley, 2009, p. 10) from legitimacy itself, understood as ‘the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society’ (Lipset, 1959, p. 86).” (von Soest & Grauvogel 2017)

A reason to emphasise the distinction between legitimacy and the process of legitimation is the ability to study either as a category of analysis. Legitimacy itself as a category of analysis or “ideational variable” (Berman 2001) is subject to substantial criticism (Schlumberger 2010) (Von Haldenwang 2017) (Berman 2001). For this reason it is not only important to differentiate the study of the two, but perhaps more rewarding to focus on the study of legitimation because there may not yet exist adequate framework to empirically study legitimacy between cases (see Schlumberger 2010 for more on this argument).

This study focuses on processes of legitimation as a consistent and ongoing process of negotiation, similar to the literature on national identity (Swann 1987; Šimičić 2018). To elaborate, legitimation (like identity) is a negotiation between two parties— the individual and the institution. Borrowing framework from von Haldenwang (2017) and inspired by a similar study by Kosienkowski (2021), this study focuses on the process of legitimation as a cyclical process that includes feedback from individuals who respond to the claims of the “representatives of the political order.” This is called the “supply cycle” by Von Haldenwang. (This theory also envisions a parallel demand cycle, which we will leave out for the purposes of this study in order to focus more on individual response to elite-driven narratives rather than the other way around.)

Following Von Haldenwang’s supply cycle, top-down, an institution attempts two processes simultaneously. First, it attempts to appeal to the pre-existing identity of the individual. Second, it attempts to shape individual identity and social norms by controlling discourse. Says Schlumberger

(2010): “autocracies have better chances of crafting effective frames² since they control the public discourse and the media much more closely than is possible in democracies. It is precisely for these reasons that autocratic regimes spend enormous resources (both finance and personnel) in order to control print and visual media but also internet contents.” (Schlumberger 2010). This implies an effort to promote certain narratives and silence others to exert control over public opinion and by extension society and identity (following the literature on opinions, values, and identity).

Recall the recent distinction drawn between output legitimacy and identity legitimacy. This distinction applies not only to legitimacy, but also to legitimation. I differentiate between two types of appeal— material/output and social-emotional/identity — and focus on the latter. A legitimation appeal made by an institution to an individual that strengthens output legitimacy would relate to material reward, for example tax breaks for those in her income bracket, labour law protecting her social group, or investment in public services and facilities she uses. These appeals require material resources from the state.

In contrast, a legitimation appeal made by an institution to an individual that strengthens *identity* legitimacy will, intuitively, appeal to that individual’s identity. Some subunits of this category of appeal (foundation myth, ideology, personalism) generally require less material resources from the institution (with the exception of performance, procedures, and international engagement). Under this Weberian interpretation, which emphasises the transmutability of individual perception, “legitimacy’s core condition is ‘the political identity or rather self-identification of the people involved’ (Cerutti 2008, 13) (Pansardi 2018). Therefore, it becomes advantageous to study the content of appeals to identity legitimacy in the context of the Von Haldenwang’s supply cycle. The content of these appeals can illuminate 1) how the regime perceives the political identity of the people involved and 2) how the regime wants the people involved to perceive it.

This leads to the rationale behind this study. This audit of PMR media and related social media discourse seeks to elucidate the nature of the legitimation appeals from the PMR regime to the individual citizen as well as those citizens’ responses. Although the data presented here only draws on a small sample, when analysed according to the framework of understanding media communication as an identity-based legitimation appeal & response cycle, the content of PMR legitimation strategies made via media illustrates 1) how the PMR both defines and interprets residents’ values and norms as it attempts to appeal to them 2) how the PMR attempts to shape values and norms within the material and political constraints via the “supply cycle” 3) how individuals accept and reject these appeals depending on their content 4) how the PMR understands/interprets *international* values and norms and how it wants to be perceived by the *international* community) and 5) whether the identity legitimation strategies used by the PMR conform or diverge from academic observations of other de-facto states and areas of limited statehood. It is important to note that example three is observed using a small, non-representative

² (a legitimation strategy to be discussed in the next section)

sample and is not indicative of more general opinions in the population, but rather are included for illustrative purposes.

This study does not look at the media as an actor that interprets and possibly revises narratives. This is a limitation that should be considered in further research. For the purposes of this study, state-owned media broadcasts are interpreted as the link between official narrative and public response, and are incorporated in order to connect public response to official narrative.

In sum, this framework was inspired by Kosienkowski's 2020 study of government communications in Gagauzia and application of ideology as a legitimation strategy. Kosienkowski's application of Russian World ideology as a legitimation strategy itself draws from Soest & Grauvogel six-factor framework for understanding identity legitimation and distinction of identity legitimacy from output legitimacy, which is 1) underpinned by Dembinska and Morar (2021) and 2) a substantial portion of the theoretical framework for this study. Soest & Grauvogel identity legitimation typology is applied to the cyclical negotiation system of identity developed by Von Haldenwang (2017) (and further developed by Kosienkowski (2021), which is itself underpinned by literature in the study of collective memory and memorialisation.

As Schlumberger writes, "what humans consider 'right,' 'justifiable' or 'legitimate' differs across both time and space," (Schlumberger 2010)." The impermanence of individual and societal-level factors (including identity, values, and norms) that confer legitimacy is essential for scholars who attempt to understand legitimation, as it allows for the possibility that identities, values, and norms— and therefore the potential success of legitimation attempts— can be shaped and influenced by governance actors.

4. The Media of Legitimation Appeals

"The type of legitimacy or content of legitimation strategies analytically should be separated from the mode through which it is purported by regimes" (Schlumberger 2010). In this following section, I will broadly discuss the verbal, narrative, and semiotic communication of power and how this language is used to bolster identity legitimacy as previously defined.

4.1. Language and Legitimation

"Language is without doubt the most important vehicle for these (legitimation) attempts," (Van Leeuwen 2007, 91). Written and verbal discourse is often the instrument of legitimation strategies as they relate to empirical identity legitimacy. Following this, Van Leeuwen identifies four types of linguistic legitimation attempts: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. First, authorization is "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority is vested" (Van Leeuwen 2007, 92). Legitimation through authorization may be of the personal kind, when linked to an individual's status and role or a particular expertise (see also Reyes 2011), or of the impersonal kind when related to a tradition or to

rules and procedures.” (Della Sala 2010: 5) Second, “‘moral evaluation is the ‘legitimation by reference to discourses of value’ (Van Leeuwen 2007, 92). It consists in the approval/disapproval or justification of some courses of action or states of affairs in terms of moral values” (Della Sala 2010: 5). Third, rationalisation, is “‘legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalised social action, and to the social knowledges that endow them with cognitive validity’ (Van Leeuwen 2007, 92). Through rationalisation, legitimacy is conferred in view of certain goals and effects” (Della Sala 2010, 5). Fourth and finally, Mythopoesis is “‘legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions’ (Van Leeuwen 2007, 92). In this case, legitimation is claimed through the presentation of ‘moral tales’ (Van Leeuwen 2007, 105) or ‘myths’, where myths can be understood as narratives providing ‘collective groups with a story about where they have come from and the values that set them apart from others’” (Della Sala 2010, 5). The first, second, and fourth types developed by Van Leeuwen overlap with concepts of identity legitimacy that are the focus of this study, while the third type corresponds directly to output, or performance-based, legitimacy. From this perspective, legitimation appeals are made by means of invoking custom/tradition, rationality, values, and narratives. If Von Soest and Grauvogel’s 6 types of legitimation explain *what* strategies are employed, these Van Leeuwen’s types explain *how* they are employed when distributed via language. For example, personalisation (von Soest & Grauvogel) is employed in language by means of authorization (Van Leeuwen).

Language is also a vehicle for communication frames following framing theory, which present a challenge to the research of legitimacy by influencing the perception of information. Broadly, “a frame in a communication “organises everyday reality” (Tuchman 1978: 193) by providing “meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson & Modigliani 1987: 143; 1989) and promoting “particular definitions and interpretations of political issues” (Shah et al. 2002, 343; Chong & Druckman 2007). Framing itself can be considered a legitimation strategy. Governance actors’ decisions and actions can be framed to appeal to social norms and values and consequently engender public approval or disapproval based on the frame via which they are communicated. Likewise, the concept of framing can be applied to identity legitimacy and specifically national myth as a subset according to Saust and Grauvogel. The past can be framed to underline specific social values that might justify contemporary decisions. It can also be used to ascribe favourable or unfavourable characteristics to external polities that justify contemporary foreign policy actions. “Chong & Druckman (2015) find that ‘opinions can be arbitrarily manipulated by how issues are framed.’” (Schlumberger 2010, 235). As previously referenced, “autocracies have better chances of crafting effective frames since they control the public discourse and the media much more closely than is possible in democracies.” (Schlumberger 2010, 236).

Next, language is used to construct narratives, which play a highly significant role in regime legitimation. Institutions can bolster their legitimacy by controlling narratives surrounding past and ongoing processes. Functionally, narratives promote legitimacy by characterising particular groups and retelling past events in a manner favourable to the institution of authority and its actions.

Authoritarian regimes, with a tighter control of public discourse, are particularly positioned to pursue this strategy of legitimation. Not only do they control the means of media distribution as just mentioned, but they also are able to suppress public dissent or alternative narratives and to digitally deconstruct the platforms on which opposing content is broadcast. Narratives are particularly important due to their relationship with foundational myth and mythopoesis. Discussing electoral politics in Croatia and Serbia, Boduszynski & Pavlakovic write that “foundational legitimacy... tends to be intricately linked to particular groups or factions and their claims of heroic exploits during a war of independence” (Boduszynski & Pavlakovic 2019, 801)

Finally, linking back to the study at hand, narratives are particularly prevalent via news broadcasts. Segments convey a particular narrative of a certain event, structuring the presentation of information (or disinformation) so as to create a story. Van Leeuwen’s identification of two language-based legitimation strategies: mythopoesis (myth-making) and authorization represent the intersection or overlap between identity-based regime legitimation as the *source of content* and language-based legitimation methods as the *medium of expression* or “vehicle” for these attempts (Van Leeuwen 2007).

4.2. Narratives, symbols and rituals

Following Van Leeuwen, language is a vehicle for legitimation attempts. Narratives, constructed by means of language, are an important mechanism in the relationship between language and legitimation. However, narratives can also be evoked, archived, and conveyed via other means than language. In other words, language may serve as an important vehicle for legitimation attempts, but it is certainly not the only vehicle. This leads me to the discussion of narratives, symbols and rituals as legitimation tools.

“Political elites use rituals and symbols to legitimise their hold on power. It is important to know, in understanding politics, how political actors purposefully or subconsciously manipulate symbols, and how this symbolism is linked to the material foundation of the structure of political governance” (Zelce 2018, 389). Symbols can serve to 1) evoke memory and narratives and to 2) prime communications frames. For this reason, the literature surrounding the relationship between symbols, collective memory, and identity becomes relevant to this project. Regarding commemoration, during which symbols feature significantly, the “study of holiday celebrations and commemorative days is based on the approach pioneered by Emile Durkheim, who envisaged such events as important components of social order. Celebrations, rituals, and related cultic activities are not just practises, but exemplify a system of ideas that reflects the existing world. Rituals help social groups to reconfirm and strengthen their existence, as well as to shore up social solidarity (Durkheim 2001: 287). To that end, celebrations and other commemorative events serve as a means of “bringing people together...to jointly honour their roots, relationships, ideals, and moral principles, while also sensing and renewing the strength of the existing social order.” (Zelce 2018, 388). This strengthening of the existing social order implies a strengthening of the social acceptance

of ruling elites' authority and relates back to Eastonian conceptualization of diffuse support. Based on this theory, this study analyses content describing commemoration ceremonies carried out in the PMR.

4.3. Memory and Legitimation

During commemorative practises, individuals experience the memory of events they did not personally attend, such as independence struggles, national tragedies, etc. This allows for the construction of collective memory, which crosses interpersonal and temporal boundaries and binds individuals together (See references to Halbwachs, Nora, and Durkheim in Misztal 2003). In turn, this shared memory is an important pillar of shared identity. For this reason, elites' ability to control public commemoration (whether through ritual practice, iconography, or typography) is paramount to an ability to influence public identity. Looking back to Von Haldenwang's supply cycle, the public display of particular symbols and the commemoration of particular individuals and events are also forms of legitimacy negotiation. Studying ideology as a legitimation strategy, Kosienkowski illustrates how "Russkiy Mir " (Russian World) ideology is used to legitimate local authority in Moldova's Gagauz republic. A relevant subset of this discussion is the theoretical background that supports the political geography approach to the study of political iconography and typography, due to the role of political elites in their construction and their relationship to collective memory and identity. "The form and location of a monument can reveal which historical narrative among the elites has triumphed...State ideology can be spoken, written but also publicised and public monuments are one such official form" (Cummings 2013, 607). Finally, this framework can also be applied to symbols. In the post-Soviet space, symbols including St. George's ribbon (Novikova 2011) and the EU flag (Svetlicini 2021) have been researched for their significance to identity and legitimation. In sum, This area of the literature underpins previously discussed conceptualizations of identity legitimacy. Mythopoesis (Van Leeuwen 2007) and foundational myth (Soest and Grauvogel 2017) (Boduszynski & Pavlakovic 2018) are perpetuated not only via language and narrative, but by symbol and ritual. Based on this framework of viewing symbols, narratives, traditions, and language as vehicles of identity legitimation attempts, and keeping in mind the negotiation-based nature of legitimation, it makes sense to study elite-issued press releases, elite-controlled news broadcasts, and individual reactions to these attempts as a means to better understand the process of identity legitimation, to draw preliminary conclusions about Transnistrian nation-building based on the content areas of these appeals, and to use this data to support a case study of identity legitimation strategies in post-Soviet de-facto states.

Legitimacy in De-Facto States

Finally, it is important to situate this study within the literature regarding legitimation attempts not only in general or even within post-Soviet or post-Communist authoritarian regimes, but

specifically within the context of the post-Soviet de-facto states. Legitimation strategies in de-facto states present unique research opportunities because of the lack or dearth of external legitimacy. Unrecognised by the UN, they have no legality in the international legal system, while some enjoy limited recognition from a handful of neighbours, including Russia in all four cases following the Kosovo precedent (Bakke et al. 2018) (Pegg 2019).

For this reason, scholars have explored the longevity of de-facto states in general and the post-Soviet de-facto states specifically given their lack of external legitimacy (Florea 2017; Dembinska 2017; Comai 2018; Bakke, Linke, O'Loughlin, & Toal 2018). Not only do they have almost no external legitimacy, but they lack most aspects of internal legitimacy according to traditional definitions; procedures are nondemocratic, institutions are weakened by corruption, and material/output legitimation is hindered by lack of resources, and when there are resources they come in the form of foreign aid from external governance actors. If one keeps in mind the idea that legitimacy is important because it lowers the social cost of rule, and that intimidation and repression alone are usually too costly to maintain a regime, it opens the possibility to question whether de-facto states compensate for a lack of external legal legitimacy and a lack of internal output/material legitimacy through other means. Based on the framework built so far in this study, I suggest that in the Transnistrian case, identity legitimation and external legitimation by means of paradiplomacy are an important recourse for the state to compensate for low capacity to pursue legitimation strategies in other areas (external legal legitimacy and internal output legitimacy).

Methodology

1) Design Selection

The present research is a qualitative case study that combines discourse analysis and secondary source review. The subject of the present study is Transnistrian media discourse, while the theoretical frame of the inquiry is authoritarian regime legitimation in post-Soviet de-facto states. The primary data collection method is discourse analysis.

Why case study? The case study format was selected due to the ability to study a single concept in-depth through a single example. "Case studies in qualitative research are investigations of "bounded systems" with the focus being either the case or an issue illustrated by the case(s) (Stake, 1995). A qualitative case study provides an in-depth study of this "system," based on a diverse array of data collection materials. The researcher situates this system within its larger "context" or setting," (McCaslin & Scott 2003: 447). Recall that this study has two central aims. First, following von Soest & Grauvogel, this study aims to identify potential identity legitimation appeals in Transnistrian media discourse. Second, following Von Haldenwang, this study aims to identify points of contestation within the context of a legitimacy negotiation process between elites and individuals.

Some authors have suggested a greater need for more comprehensive studies of multiple de facto-states at once (Dembinska 2017). However, others have suggested that methodological issues with the uniform operationalization or quantification of legitimacy between cases necessitates an individualised approach (Schlumberger). For this reason I have decided to focus on a single case. However, my discussion section will refer to potentially significant comparisons with situations in other de-facto states that could motivate further research.

Due to the breadth of the theoretical framework presented, this study presents an opportunity to evaluate multiple theory areas through the study of a single case. These include the negotiation cycle of legitimation, identity legitimation, and legitimation via diverse media (iconography & language), and external legitimation.

2) Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

5. What themes, narratives and symbols relating to national identity emerge in executive communications and news media broadcast online?
6. How do these themes, narratives and symbols align with existing analyses of Transnistrian national identity and nation-building in the context of legitimation?
7. How do individual viewers react to this content? What legitimation appeals are endorsed or contested by individuals?
8. How are relations and interactions with other de-facto states and the international community characterised?

Aims:

This study has two central aims. First, following von Soest & Grauvogel, this study aims to identify potential identity legitimation appeals in Transnistrian media discourse. Second, following Von Haldenwang, this study aims to identify points of contestation within the context of a legitimacy negotiation process between elites and individuals.

3) Case selection

Those who study legitimation have long understood the necessity of assessing the bottom-up attitudes of individuals to authority. This stems from the previously discussed empirical approach to legitimacy, where legitimacy depends on the social acceptance of an authority's right to rule. An ideal way to determine the degree of social acceptance is by means of surveys and interviews. In contrast, there is less methodological consistency or consensus on how to evaluate individual opinions when it comes to measuring national identity. This study, which focuses on identity legitimacy, which is an intersection between the concepts of national identity and legitimacy.

There are a few reasons why the Transnistrian case is useful to consider when investigating these theories. First, Transnistrian identity is less tied to ethnicity than the other post-Soviet de facto states. Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia each are home to a titular ethnic group and their localised identities correspond to the individuality of that group (despite increasing Russification of Abkhazia). Transnistria is not made up of a majority population of ethnic Russians. There is no titular nationality in Transnistria, which is made up of Russians, Ukrainians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, and other groups, each of which is a national minority. For this reason it is interesting to study what makes up national identity in Transnistria and it is not straightforward what the nature of identity-based legitimation appeals will be.

Second, Transnistria is the most frozen conflict of the post-Soviet de-facto states, illustrating an archetypal example of frozen conflict and status quo perpetuity in de-facto states (Fischer 2016). While violent armed conflict, including direct involvement of Russia, has occurred in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia since those polities gained de-facto independence, this is not the case for Transnistria, where the 1992 ceasefire has held to the present without resumption of hostilities.

4) Primary data collection

This study depends on discourse analysis of three main data sources. These are press releases from the office of Vadim Krasnoselsky, president of the PMR; newscasts by Perviy Pridnestrovsky, a significant state-owned telecommunications network and news broadcasting service (accessed via YouTube), and the individual comments on the youtube-based publications of PP broadcasts.

These sources were chosen for their relevance to Von Haldenwang's supply cycle of legitimacy. When understanding legitimation as a negotiation process that takes place between elites and individuals, it is important to consider discourse that emerges not only from elites but also from individuals. In this study, not only is elite (presidential) and individual (social media) discourse considered, but the content of news broadcasts, which are a medium of communication from the elites to the public, are also considered. This approach offers a diversity of voices from throughout the supply cycle. First Pridnestrovian news channel in particular was selected for two reasons: accessibility (thousands of its broadcasts are published on Youtube and the page is updated daily) and the channel's lack of insulation from the state authorities, creating what could be considered a public-focused government mouthpiece. The basis of that claim is found in the origin of the channel. Consider this description of the channel in an address given by then-president of the PMR Igor Smirnov on the 15th anniversary of the channel's establishment: Said Smirnov: "At the end of 1991, the Government and the Supreme Council of the republic decided to create a state television. It was an important political decision to ensure the information security of the young state, to inform the population and the international community about the events taking place in our country...The information blockade established by Moldova was broken. The world learned about the construction of a new state, about achievements in industry, agriculture, education, health care, culture, sports,

about the life of ordinary citizens, their daily routine and worries,” ([ava.md 2007](#)). From this, researchers can discern that Perviy Pridnestrovsky was created by the new PMR in opposition to narratives about Transnistria emerging from the republic of Moldova. Therefore, the narratives broadcast by the channel can be reasonably assumed to represent pro-regime and regime-approved narratives.

Finally, each of these 3 spheres of analysis corresponds with a specific data source that I coded for the aforementioned national identity markers. To analyse executive-level engagement with national identity factors, I analysed the discourse of press releases from the office of Vadim Krasnoselsky, the President of the PMR, which are published on [president.gospmr.org](#). To analyse media engagement with national identity factors, I analysed the discourse of the dominant Transnistrian telecommunications network, Perviy Pridnestrovsky, which is published on [Youtube](#). Finally, to analyse individual-level engagement with national identity factors, I analysed the discourse of individual youtube comments engaging with the material published on the Perviy Pridnestrovsky Youtube channel. “Social media enable broad and diverse publics to mobilise around a shared collective identity” (Boichak & Jackson 2020).

5) Sampling

The data selection process differed between the three sources. In order to identify potential identity legitimisation claims in the presidential press releases, I developed a framework to code for national identity-related information present in the data sources, as not all the content was relevant to identity legitimacy and the limitations of the project did not allow for a qualitative analysis of every single press release. In order to identify potential instances of identity-based legitimisation appeals, it was necessary to identify content that was thematically relevant to identity. National identity is an extremely broad concept, so the parameters developed to code for relevant content were relatively broad. These parameters developed as follows. First, coding parameters were limited to reflect the “soft” side of national identity, associated with nation building (opposed to the “hard” side of national identity, associated with state building (Dembinska 2017). Next, “soft” national identity factors were consolidated into three content areas, titled the “self,” the “other,” and the “past”. The first category, hereafter referred to as the “self,” was the broadest and required the most qualitative judgement from the researcher. This category included, but was not limited to, references to culture, language, and ethnicity. In addition to these more or less intuitive components, this category included content related to the definition of values. For example, press releases and news broadcasts announcing awards ceremonies from the state to individuals were included in this category, based on the rationale that these events illustrate values (certain behaviour from individuals or institutions is officially rewarded/commemorated). The second category, the “other,” included references to external political entities and representatives of those entities. Examples of these actors include the larger community of de-facto states, NATO, the EU, and the Russian Federation.. The final category, the past, referred to references to historical events and individuals.

These references varied in presentation; examples include naming ceremonies wherein the name is a historical figure and memorial events.

After developing this set of criteria, I accessed the online collection of press releases from the office of Vadim Krasnoselski, president of the PMR, hosted at <http://president.gospmr.org/press-sluzhba/novosti/>. I then used the search by date function to display the 448 press releases published between 1 January and 31 December 2020, Recalling that 2020 - year of two important for the Transnistrian people anniversaries - the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory and the 30th anniversary of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. Among these, I selected 144 press releases based on the aforementioned theory-informed selection criteria.

The second phase of data collection used the online database of broadcasts from the state news channel Perviy Pridnestrovsky hosted at <https://www.youtube.com/c/%D0%9F%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B9%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9/videos>. Videos were sorted by “most popular” to identify the videos with the highest level of user engagement. Reviewing in this order, 8 videos were selected based on the same criteria used to select for press releases (focused on either the “self” the “other” or the “past”). The videos that were selected based on these criteria ranged in post date from January 2016 to June 2021. Once again, they were relevant to the same themes of national identity used to select press releases from president.gospmr.org (see aforementioned selection criteria). This window is larger than the window of press releases because the press releases were released very frequently over a year period whereas news broadcasts with significant engagement (enough to be categorised as “popular” in YouTube’s algorithm) appear much less frequently, so a 5 year window was applied in order to collect a similar amount of relevant data from that source.

After selection, I reviewed these news broadcasts and recorded observations on their general content so as to have context for the comments and in order to glean any potential interesting observations that might inform my discussion of the primary data sources. (I did not do a content analysis of these videos, but this is an opportunity for further research and the identifying information of the videos including title, url, etc is stored in a database available upon request to the author). I then downloaded the comments on these videos and compiled a database of all the comments.

6) Analysis

Finally, I coded these one hundred and forty-four press releases and over five hundred Youtube comments for themes discussed and recorded additional specifications (example: if a press release was selected because it related to “the past” I would specify that it was related to Russian imperial history in PMR).

This was a relational content analysis because in addition to noting the themes that were discussed, I recorded my interpretation of the sentiment expressed regarding those themes.

Once the databases were coded, themes were identified that will be discussed and evaluated in the context of identity legitimation theory. These themes are evaluated as potential legitimation strategies based on the theoretical framework of this study. Corresponding content areas between the press releases and the comments were evaluated for similarities and differences. For the comments database, after compiling the data, I then coded these comments for themes discussed. I selected the specific quotations relevant to negotiation and contestation as well as identity and legitimacy, translated them into English, paraphrased them, and then reduced them to a code. Finally, I coded these comments for self-identified regions of residence/origin, where present. For the press releases database, I coded the releases based on their primary themes, also according to the national-identity based self/others/past trichotomy.

7) Limitations

The main limitation for the study is that there was no access to social media data that indicated the location or nationality of the authors of comments. In fact the researcher is not party to most personal information about the persons who posted comments, including but not limited to their background (levels of education, profession, income, age, political orientation) and motivations for posting. What is presented here by means of social media commentary is an illustration of some responses to official narratives. For this reason it was not possible to discern whether individuals' contributions to online fora were correlated to their place of origin or nationality. However, nationality or place of origin were self-reported in some comments. Due to the limited size of this more topically valuable sample, these comments that include national origin are used anecdotally to illustrate points in the discussion to follow and will be compared to existing research.

Another limitation was the subjectivity of the content selection process for the discourse analysis. A set of relevancy criteria following a preliminary literature review on national identity and legitimacy were developed before the data collection process. However, the researcher relied on her judgement to decide which content met the criteria to be considered relevant, which presented difficulties due to the thematic diversity within the texts evaluated. Furthermore, the theoretical framework was only finalised after the initial data collection, presenting the possibility that not all relevant content underwent discourse analysis. For this reason, it is not possible to be certain that the selected content includes all of the relevant content within a source, because it was selected based on an earlier version of the theoretical framework that focused more heavily on national identity than on legitimacy. The researcher attempts to address this shortcoming by supplementing secondary literature regarding the aspects of identity legitimation that were not included with the original research framework. For example, procedural legitimacy (which is included in identity legitimacy but not in this project's initial national identity framework) was not explicitly coded for in the data selection process.

Finally, the time period covered by the second data set (social media videos and comments) takes place over a period of 5 years (2016-2021) while the time period covered by the first data set (executive press releases) takes place over a single year. As previously explained, this is due to the lesser relative density of relevant information in the former.

8) Ethical Considerations

This project was approved by Glasgow University School of Social Sciences's research ethics board in 2021. The only information incorporated into databases constructed for this project was freely volunteered by individuals to public online fora. To further protect anonymity, individuals' comments were translated and paraphrased before inclusion into this publication.

Findings Part One: Press Releases

In this section I present the results of the first part of the study, which was the analysis of press releases from the office of President of the PMR Vadim Krasnoselsky collected over a 1-year period. There are several ways to group, or categorise the results of the content analysis. First, I will present the results of the conceptual content analysis, which presents the subject areas that were discussed within press releases originating from the president's office.

Once again, these press releases were selected based on a sampling method of selecting for content that related to the self, others, and the past. These factors allow for a broad and encompassing net to catch content related to identity and therefore identity legitimacy. However, some of this content, while relating to these three initial factors, also relates to the non-identity types of legitimacy theorised by Saust and Grauvogel. For this reason, in the discussion to follow, it will be possible to make some analysis of procedural and performance-based legitimacy claims, despite the fact that the original sampling process selected for content related to identity legitimacy and not performance legitimacy (see "limitations" in the previous section for further information). It is important to note that if a press release contained more than one theme, more than one code was recorded.

1) The Self

The content analysis of press releases related thematically to "the self" in Transnistria (Economy, Culture, Society) revealed the following themes. These themes can be broken down into three sub-categories: Social/Civic, Cultural, and Economic.

Social/civic:

- Accessibility (for the physically disabled)
- Health
- Ecology
- Holidays (secular)
- Military
- Infrastructure
- Political Procedures
- Social Services

Cultural:

- Protection of cultural heritage/protection of culture (general)
- Film
- Moldovan Culture
- Music
- Orthodoxy
- Religion (In General/Not Exclusive to Orthodoxy)
- Traditions (General)

Economic:

- Agricultural Economy
- Local Tourism

The first sub-category of themes that emerge relating to “the self” is social/civic themes. These themes illustrate social and civic *values* expressed within press releases. For example, Vadim Krasnoselsky’s speech at the official opening of a park, or a graduation ceremony suggests that the thing being honoured or commemorated is something of value to the PMR.

The second sub-category of themes that emerge relating to “the self” is Cultural. Press releases released by this office speak frequently about religion (Orthodoxy). Other themes in this subcategory include music, and film as well as the protection of cultural heritage more broadly, as an imperative. A potential notable absence here is discussion of language and minority language dynamics.

The third sub-category of themes that emerge relating to “the self” is Economic. In general, this subcategory was less prevalent than the former two. In terms of local industry, emphasis was placed on Transnistria being an agricultural economy, and the need to stimulate local tourism. A potentially notable absence here was economic issues, which are highly prevalent in the individual-level discourse. Economics were also discussed with relation to mutual aid and economic partnerships

with other countries, but this will be discussed as part of “others”.

2) Others

The content analysis of press releases related thematically to “Others” in Transnistria (Economy, Culture, Society) revealed the following themes:

- All de-facto states in general
- China, Russia
- Czechia
- EU/EEA
- Great Britain
- OSCE
- Other de-facto states
- ROM & OSCE
- ROM
- Russia
- Russia, Abkhazia
- Russia
- Turkey
- USA
- Ukraine

These themes can be thematically organised into a few sub-categories: Other de-facto states, Transnational actors, the sovereign states (Republic of Moldova, Russia, and others).

The first sub-category of themes that emerge relating to “others: is other de-facto states. De facto states are congratulated on successes such as the anniversary of independence, and references are made to the larger community of de-facto states. Next, we see mention of European institutions— ECHR, the EU, the EEA, and the OSCE. Notably, Russia is the most frequently mentioned “other,” followed by the republic of Moldova. Third party UN member states that are mentioned include Turkey, Ukraine, the USA, the United Kingdom, China, and Czechia.

3) The Past

The content analysis of press releases related thematically to “The Past” in Transnistria revealed the following themes:

- The Second World War/Great Patriotic War
- The Holocaust

- Soviet-Afghan war
- Transnistria War
- Russian Empire

The most commonly mentioned past event/phenomenon/entity is WW2, followed by the Transnistria war, and then the Russian Empire. These are addressed in the discussion to follow.

Findings Part Two: Online Commentary on News Broadcasts

1) Youtube Comments

In this section I present the results of the second part of the study, which was the analysis of Youtube comments from the channel “First Pridnestrovian.”

- 1992 Memory
- Ageing population
- Anti-EU sentiment
- Authoritarianism
- Censorship
- Chaos
- Russian Empire connection
- Corruption
- Crime
- Orthodoxy
- De-facto state community (negative)
- Ethnicity
- Exodus (of population)
- Fake news accusations
- Fantasy/absurdity
- Gas debt
- General negativity/Criticism
- General positivity/praise
- International law
- Executive admin
- Language
- History/memory
- Moldova

- Moldova as enemy/obstacle
- Transnistria is better off than Moldova
- Transnistria is illegitimate
- Transnistria is Moldova
- Nato
- No economic opportunities
- Nostalgia
- People-to -people diplomacy
- Illegitimacy of PMR
- Poor quality of life
- Poverty
- Rights of Russian-speakers
- Romania
- Romania is better off than Moldova
- Transnistria is Romania
- Russia (general)
- Russia as occupier
- Russia is overly influential
- Russia as aggressor
- Russia as saviour
- Russian World (Russkiy Mir)
- Censorship
- Pride
- Self-determination
- Sheriff
- 1992 War
- World War II
- The USA
- Self-determination
- Separatism
- Russian world
- Transnistria is unrecognised
- Ukraine (general)
- Ukraine as enemy/obstacle
- Ukraine is comparatively better off than PMR
- Wages are too low or prices are too high

In sum, these are the themes that arise when individuals are primed to think about Transnistria, Transnistria's neighbours and other states, and Transnistria's past by news broadcasts. Themes and

narratives present in executive-level and media-level discourse are both supported and contested by individuals engaging in online fora. Self-identified PMR residents and former residents are critical of the government and economy, citing poverty, corruption, corporate oligarchy, and inadequate social services. However, this group also expresses positive sentiment and pride relating to local identity, for example a particular village or city. Other non-location specific comments criticised gas debts owed by the PMR. Individuals that engage with the content support their opinions with themes including the right to self-determination, territorial integrity, and international law.

Discussion Part 1: Identity Legitimacy

This section will discuss the themes that arose in the content analysis and their relevance to *identity legitimacy*. As previously discussed, identity legitimacy consists of ideology, national myth, and personalization. It is the “soft” side of legitimacy, as opposed to “hard” factors more to do with financial or military power.

1. Foundational Myth

The first of the three subsections of identity legitimacy I will discuss is foundational myth. According to Von Soest and Grauvogel, (2017), “Incumbents, ruling elites, and parties all refer to their role in the state-building process in order to legitimate their rule: ‘historical accounts are significant and contentious precisely because of their relationship to the legitimacy of power in the present’ (Beetham, 1991, p. 103).” Furthermore, “Particularly strong solidarity ties are established during periods of violent struggle such as war, revolutions, and liberation movements (Levitsky & Way, 2013, p. 5), which are often used as powerful legitimization narratives. Moreover, parties that emerge from a successful national liberation struggle often claim an entitlement to steer the country’s future based on past achievements and a fusion of the (former) liberation movement and the state (Clapham, 2012; Schedler, 2013, p. 227)” (von Soest & Grauvogel, 4).

It is difficult to approach this topic due to the width of its scope and the multitude of viewpoints presented on various subtopics at every level. Nevertheless, this section will summarise what this study says about how history is conveyed via Transnistrian media and how this legitimises the current regime, based on the assumptions that ‘historical accounts are significant and contentious precisely because of their relationship to the legitimacy of power in the present’ (Beetham, 1991, 103).

As may be expected, the pre-independence history of Transnistria featured heavily in the discourse analysed in this study, starting with the history of the Russian empire. These linkages are established in executive rhetoric. As an example, during a celebration of Russia’s national unity day,

which is also commemorated in the PMR, on November 4, 2020, Vadim Krasnoselsky had the following to say:

“If we take the history of Pridnestrovia, then it - the history of our land, our cities and regions - is inextricably linked with the history of Russia - the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Tiraspol owes its appearance on the map to Catherine II and then Field Marshal Suvorov. The city was created as a military garrison, the construction of the Middle Fortress was started. All this has become the symbols of Tiraspol. It is enough to look at the monument to Catherine: there are eternal sentries in the arch, the eternal guard of the Catherine Park - Suvorov grenadiers, they are the first Tiraspol residents. These are the grenadiers of the Suvorov companies who entered Tiraspol, set up a tent camp here and began the construction of a fortress. Since those distant times - 1792 - the history of Tiraspol has become the history of Russia. We in Pridnestrovia honour our history. I see. Not in words, but in deeds. In Pridnestrovia, the history of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and Pridnestrovia unites very harmoniously without a conflict of generations. There is no conflict. There is a story. It must be honoured. Therefore, in all cities and regions of the republic, the history of our homeland is revived” ([Official Site of the President of the PMR, 2020j](#)).

This speech is a clear example of the connections drawn between Russian and Transnistrian history, firmly cementing the PMR in the Russian “neighbourhood.” This occurs by means of a foundation myth centred on characters from Russian Imperial history. Catherine the Great and Alexander Suvorov not only serve as the main characters in the condensed, brief foundation myth outlined in this passage, but also as the main characters of the geographic landscape of central Tiraspol, whose main square is dominated by an imposing statue of Suvorov facing Ekaterininsky Park and a similarly imposing monument to Catherine the Great. As discussed in the literature review, political elites design urban geography to legitimise their regimes. The centrality of Catherine and Suvorov in Tiraspol’s urban geography serves the same purpose as the centrality of these characters in the Transnistrian origin myth as it relates to the Russian empire— it places Transnistria in the oath of the legacy of the Russian empire and by extension, that of its modern-day heir—the Russian Federation.

Furthermore, concerning this passage, it’s interesting to focus on the image used to link Russian and Transnistrian history – a fortress and military garrison in Tiraspol established by Suvorov’s army. Those familiar with the region will note that the oldest, largest, and most striking monument just outside of Tiraspol, in Bender— a hero city critical to Transnistrian identity as the location of the independence conflict— is the Tighina Fortress. The absence of reference to this fortress in discussing the history of Transnistria can’t be definitively attributed to rhetoric— but when the whole set of details is considered through the assumption that history is portrayed with the intention of legitimising policy, it makes sense that the fortress originally built under Stefan Cel Mare and re-built under Suleiman I (Sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1520-1566) is not mentioned. The focus on the Russian empire’s median fortress/military garrison as one of the founding monuments and critical events in the history of Transnistria is a conscious rhetorical decision to legitimise current relations with Russia by creating a historical narrative that intertwines Transnistria with the Russian empire.

Regarding social media commentary, the legacy of the Russian Empire in the Transnistrian foundational myth also features in the social media commentary analysed for this

study. For example, commentators referenced Transnistria's inclusion in the Kherson governorate of the Russian empire as well as Catherine the Great's and Alexander Pushkin's visits to Transnistrian territory.

Finally, further casting the PMR as the victim in the foundational myth and casting Moldova as the aggressor, Krasnoselsky also warned against the younger generation in the future not internalising the foundational myth. "A completely new generation of people has grown up in Moldova in 28 years, the next generations are growing, who do not know the horror of that war and know very little about the conflict. I talked with young people from Moldova. Their complete lack of information is shocking. And it's dangerous. Why? Because people don't know their history. And the story is tragic for both Transnistria and Moldova... Citizens of Moldova who died here - what did they die for? We are definitely not the aggressors." (Official Site of the President of the PMR, 2020l) .

In conclusion, Russian imperial history is instrumentalized to create an origin myth that legitimises Transnistria's present-day relationship with Russia. As Krasnoselsky says in that same Unity Day speech, "One of the most important decisions or tasks in this promise, the people in the union - is a harmonious mix of history of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and today's Russia and Transnistria. This harmony, this union allows us to forget old grievances and unite for the sake of the future. This is what we are doing in the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic" (Official Site of the President of the PMR, 2020i).

1.1. The Second World War

In general, Transnistrian characterization of WWII events fits with official Russian discourse on WW2. Broadly speaking, the USSR is considered a liberating force from Fascism. The transfer of power from axis powers to USSR governance is celebrated and portrayed as "liberation." For example: "Today Tiraspol, Dubossary and Grigoriopol residents celebrate the 76th anniversary of the liberation of Transnistrian cities from the German-Romanian invaders. Every year on April 12 hundreds of grateful descendants come to the Memorial of Glory, the monuments and graves of the Great Patriotic War, to lay down flowers on the plates with the names of the heroes, to honour the memory of the liberators. The circumstances of the current year do not allow for traditional rallies and public events dedicated to the Day of Liberation. On behalf of the Transnistrian people scattering flowers as a symbol of eternal gratitude, Vadim Krasnoselsky left flowers at the foot of the memorials" (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020e).

Next, the generation of citizens that fought in WWII, and veterans in general, are discursively venerated. Said Krasnoselsky "For me this is the story of a whole generation of real people who know what they want to aspire to, that protect it, and die for it. This is a generation of winners." Veneration of veterans is also present in the form of positive representation of those who serve in the military today. Consider this example from a press release concerning May 9th victory day celebrations: "Speaking on May 9, Vadim Krasnoselsky stressed that it was important to pay more attention to the veterans. Each of them will be awarded gifts from the state. The state should be active and interact with veterans' organisations: they must support maximum involvement in the

related organisational and preparatory work, the President said,” (Official Site of the President of the PMR, 2020a). Not only are veterans venerated, but those who serve in the military are positively portrayed in Transnistria at every level. This may seem intuitive, but is significant because the positive image of modern-day soldiers is conveyed by means of an association with the historical legacy they are a part of— therefore entrenching them in national myth— rather than by means of discussing their current actions or ability to protect the PMR against present safety threats. By giving contemporary soldiers a historical legitimacy and associating them with a larger tradition of (primarily Russian and Soviet) military legacy, Transnistria’s contemporary military policy gains legitimacy via this appeal to history. See the example: “Congratulating the winners and participants of the competition, the President of the PMR Vadim Krasnoselsky noted that the current military are the descendants of the heroes who defended the Transdnestrian frontier in Suvorov's time, of the soldier-liberators of Great Patriotic War and of the defenders of Pridnestrovia early 90s of the last century. Vadim Krasnoselsky emphasised the role of soldiers as the peacemakers of the Russian Federation. ‘Together, we protect the peace and quiet of our land, our people. Today, some would-be politicians - in fact, accomplices of modern fascism - have questioned the feat of the Soviet people. What can we oppose them? Our memory and history of loyalty, ‘- said Vadim Krasnoselsky. He also stated that 2020 is a year of two important anniversaries for the Transnistrian people - the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory and the 30th anniversary of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. The President of the PMR stressed that “the memory of the heroism of the Soviet soldier--defender of Pridnestrovia, peacekeeper-- is a sacred duty for each of us.” (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020a).

Further serving to construct the idea of history under threat, a release just a month later stated “Celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory was another theme of the meeting. Roundtable participants spoke of the need to adhere to a common policy of preserving the memory of the great feat of the Russian people, the fight against the falsification of history, “ (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020b).

Not only are veterans discursively venerated, but the shared military history is used to associate Transnistrian victory with Russian success, implying that in the present, as in the past, Russia’s successes are Transnistrian successes. Consider the following example from the same press release, featuring a quote not from Krasnoselsky but from another minister: ““In Transnistria, *we should work together with Russia as a single organism*, as a state, to celebrate the greatness of our victory. We must work together with you to develop a program and take part in the festivities, both in Russia and in Transnistria. To the citizens of Pridnestrovia feel that they are part of the great Russia, we celebrate with you this great achievement of our fathers and grandfathers, ”- said the deputy chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Science, Education and Culture Igor Morozov” (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020b).

Finally, commemoration of the Second World War is state-sponsored and prevalent in the media in a way that is similar to Russia. In Russia, official discourse casts EU countries as the inheritors of the axis powers’ guilt and culpability for the atrocities of world war two, casting them

as contemporary villains. In contrast, Russia is cast as the inheritor of the USSR's victory and a positive force continuing to protect Europe from fascism. This is the same with Transnistrian media. The ROM specifically is the heir to the negative legacy of the fascist regime in Romania, while the PMR is the heir of the Soviet victory and the legacy of the "liberators," who are the heroes of the narrative. In this way, through historical narrative, the PMR is normatively legitimised as a positive player via its association with liberation, and the ROM is de-legitimised as the heir to the legacy of this narrative's villain. For example: *"In Transnistria, we honour the past. We have absorbed the history of Russia, the Soviet Union and its successors. We have paid great attention to the preservation of memory. We will continue to cherish and honour her. This is what we can do for those who protect us and who gave their lives for freedom. It can be no other way"*, - said the President of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic Vadim Krasnoselsky at the end of the ceremony of laying flowers, stressing that each flower left today on behalf of all Pridnestrovians at the Eternal Flame, on the monument of stone slabs on which the names of heroes are carved, symbolises the gratitude of descendants," (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020f).

Furthermore, the contributions of the Allied powers not including the USSR to the defeat of fascism are diminished relative to USSR contributions. Consider this example: "I can immediately name about two dozen successful defensive and offensive operations of the Soviet army, which brought the victory over fascism closer. At the same time, it is difficult to find even a couple of such successful allied operations. Of course, the allies should not be belittled - a common victory, the coalition won, but the contribution of Soviet weapons to the liberation of Europe, to the victory over Nazism is undeniable and absolutely obvious," (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020f). Moreover, Western states are accused of trying to "rewrite history" in order to make an undue claim to a legacy of victory that according to PMR rhetoric is the property of the USSR and its successor states. Said Krasnoselsky: "In many states, they are trying to rewrite history, come up with new versions of the development of events, identify those responsible; disputes about who made the main contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany, to the liberation of Europe do not cease ... For me, a person who knows and respects history, everything is clear." (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020f).

1.2. The Soviet-Afghan War

The USSR is not only cast as the saviour of Europe, but also as a benevolent actor in its next chronological direct and major conflict - the Soviet-Afghan war. Said Krasnoselsky: "When people talk about the heroism of Soviet soldiers, then usually we are talking about military exploits. But why not say that the Soviet people for 9 years were building in Afghanistan, thousands of hospitals, schools, kindergartens, public facilities, roads and so on? And while there were forces who provoked the conflict, they were shot in the back, killing them and what they created. It was a big, Soviet project, a huge investment, and it should have been protected. And the Soviet troops withdrew. And that: someone building something? Not. There is only the fact that it was built by the

Soviet people, what's left. Nobody invests anymore Afghanistan has become a territory where they grow drugs that are distributed worldwide. The feat of the Soviet soldiers and officers of the Soviet people is undeniable.. It will forever remain on Afghan soil and in our hearts, "- said Vadim Krasnoselsky. The president spoke about the heroism and sacrifice of Soviet soldiers." He also argued that "80% Pridnestrovians returning from Afghanistan in the early 90-ies again took up arms to defend their homeland, to defend the independence of Transnistria." (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020k) . Once again, we see that Transnistria is cast as a loyal subordinate to USSR military victory or aid, establishing the contemporary PMR as the heir to that victory and glorifying the USSR.

1.3. The 1992 War

Moving forward in time after the Soviet-Afghan war, we arrive at the dissolution of the USSR and the events that led to the independence of Moldova and splintering of the former MSSR. This conflict is the origin myth of the PMR, and its use as a legitimization strategy is critical to the existence of the current de-facto state.

There are several aspects of the narrative constructed by the state surrounding the events of the 1991 war that serve to legitimise the Transnistrian state. First, the ROM is portrayed as the aggressor, while the PMR is portrayed as the victim. For example, a press release states: "On June 19, 1992 into the peaceful city of Bender came the Moldovan aggressors. Forty days of undeclared war claimed hundreds of lives. President of the PMR Vadim Krasnoselsky with his wife, the First President of the PMR Igor Smirnov, heads of public authorities and management, OGRF, as well as priests honoured Their memory on behalf of the Transnistrian people by the laying of wreaths and flowers... The representatives of the republic's leadership and the city gathered at the Memorial of Remembrance and Sorrow. There was a minute of silence and laying of flowers. As a symbol of undying memory, they lay at the Eternal Flame a monument to Lieutenant General Alexander Lebed and the memorial wall, featuring stone wings covering the city from disaster." (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020l). Another significant statement was "Another important factor: literally two days before June 19, before the day of the invasion, the Moldovan Parliament decided on an exclusively peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. As a result of this decision, the city of Bendery was unblocked, posts from the main directions were removed. In the evening of June 19th... the armed formations of Moldova broke in. And the killing of peaceful people began - women, the elderly, residents of the city of Bendery. How should we call it? Meanness, deceit, cynicism?And because of this deceit, because of this meanness, because of the invasion of the city of Bendery, people died - civilians and defenders of Transnistria. We honour their memory. People remember and know that one must always be ready to defend oneself," (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020l).

Taking into account the individual-level discourse surrounding the Transnistrian national origin myth, one interesting anecdote that appeared in a comment on a [2018](#) video titled "28 Facts About

Pridnestrovie” (Perviy Pridnestrovskiy 2018d) was an argument from a commentator that compared PMR independence to the independence of the USA from Great Britain, invoking the language of international norms concerning independence and the right to self-determination of states. Similar language is used in Transnistrian official discourse, for example the name of the union of de-facto states known as the “Community for Democracy and the Rights of Nations.” There has already been work on analysing Russian Federation discourse and the use of the language of international law to justify socially conservative or international norm-breaching policy and actions (see Allison 2020 for more information).

Another video from the Perviy Pridnestrovsky YouTube channel that wasn’t initially selected based on the methods of this study (i.e; wasn’t popular according to YouTube’s algorithm) warrants discussion due to a potentially significant narrative of the events of the 1992 war. This news broadcast explains to the viewer that the PMR is *not* a separatist republic. It argues that it was actually the ROM that illegally separated from the MSSR, leaving the PMR as the legal successor state to the MSSR and casting the ROM as a legally illegitimate identity. Using legal legitimacy to denigrate the ROM may seem ironic given the PMR’s status, but actually makes sense considering that de-facto states don’t rebuke legal recognition in the international community, they actively seek it while considering it a consequence of legitimacy rather than a prerequisite). This origin myth is the linchpin of Transnistria’s claim to legal legitimacy as well as an attack on the legitimacy of the ROM, perpetuating the frozen conflict not only on identity-based grounds but on legal grounds, which is perhaps more relevant to “output” legitimacy as a category that will be discussed in the next section.

2. Ideology

The second of the three subsections of identity legitimacy I will discuss is ideology. But what does it mean for ideology to be a legitimisation strategy? “Soest and Grauvogel (2017, 291) denote ideology as “a belief system intended to create a collective identity and, in some cases, a specific societal order,” pointing out that this notion includes not only grand ideologies such as communism, but also nationalism, societal models and religion...”. As for how ideology leads to legitimacy, they consider it to be “a narrative concerning the righteousness of a given point of view on how the world should look like,” which serves to legitimise either the status quo or the government’s plan for the state.” (Soest and Grauvogel 2017, 291).

The findings from the present study present a few themes that can be conceptualised as pillars of ideology legitimisation in Transnistria. These are 1) **civic nationalism**, 2) **ethnolinguistic diversity (multinationalism)**, and 3) **Russian language**. Furthermore, Russkiy Mir insofar as it has been theorised to be an ideology (Kosienkowski 2021) is also supported by the themes found in this study. Russkiy Mir relevance will be presented in this section, while discussion of its wider significance can be found in the conclusion.

2.1. Multinationalism

According to Voronivici (2019), “A specific strategy of self-legitimization and self-representation, emphasising multiethnicity and declarative rejection of ethnic nationalism, influences the way these separatist regimes employ historical politics and instrumentalize their “historical statehood.” He calls this process “internationalist separatism.”

In the PMR, declarative rejection of ethnic nationalism legitimises the regime in two ways. First, rejection of ethnic nationalism offers a foundation for “social cohesion” in a multi-ethnic state. This rejection is declared in executive rhetoric. On November 4th, 2020, Krasnoselsky stated: “If we discuss the uniqueness of the Transnistrian national unity, the secret lies in the fact that on the territory of Pridnestrovie live 72 different nationalities. We have three official languages. ***On our land, there has never been a national conflict. Why is it so for us, and not for our neighbours? Because we do not have a titular (nationality).*** We have no nation; one nationality does not rise above the other. We are all equal. We are all languages, all nationalities, all religions. This is how it should be. This is the basis of social cohesion. This is the basis of national unity in its essence. This is how it is in Transnistria,” (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020i). By casting the current social policy as the keystone of social cohesion— suggesting that a non-multi-ethnic, nation-state policy like there is in Moldova would lead to the opposite of cohesion— splintering. In this way, it is projected that the multinational character of the regime serves the public interest.

Second, multi-ethnic governance is offered as a rejection or opposition of the ROM, which is portrayed as ethnonationalist or even “fascist.” This claim is based on multiple factors. Foremost, the primacy of the Moldovan language in the ROM is in direct opposition to the ethnic nationalism of the ROM (as background the Moldovan national anthem is entitled “Limba Noastra”-- meaning “Our Language” in Moldovan/Romanian-- while the official languages of Transnistria are Russian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian). Relevantly, scholars have recognized the portrayal of nationalising states as fascist in the former FSU (Zhurzhenko 2015; Siddi 2017; Spiessens 2019). As previously discussed, much of this is based on historical memory, as nationalising states are likened to axis powers and in this manner associated with Fascism. One relevant comparison is the symbolism used in public media in Crimea surrounding the 2015 independence referendum, during which Ukraine was likened to the Nazi regime (Spiessens 2019). This is also reflected in the PMR: “Today, some would-be politicians - in fact, *accomplices of modern fascism* - have questioned the feat of the Soviet people. What can we use to oppose them? Our memory and history of loyalty, ‘ - said Vadim Krasnoselsky,” (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020i).

Language is also highly relevant to the national origin/origin myth of the PMR. Returning to theory, secessionist conflict can be attributed to the new regime’s inability to credibly commit to securing the rights of national minorities during periods of regime change. This framework is highly applicable to Transnistria’s origin, which can be attributed as the reaction of left-bank authorities to the declaration that Romanian would be the state language of the newly independent from the USSR Republic of Moldova. The new regime failed to credibly commit to the well-being (in this case, the ability to use their main language in public life) of ethnic minorities, leading to secession. These

circumstances continue to influence Transnistrian policy; language is a central tenet of the identity of the state. The three official languages are Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan; as opposed to the Moldovan constitution which outlines that Moldovan/Romanian is the official language. In this way, language is a key pillar to the multi-ethnic “Internationalist separatism” (Voronovici 2019) concept that normatively legitimises Transnistria’s current government and existence as a (de-facto) state internally.

2.2. Orthodoxy

Religion featured prominently in official discourse. It serves 3 purposes - to unite Transnistria with Russia (see “Russkiy Mir” in this chapter and in the conclusion), as a platform to perform tolerance of diversity, and as a way to honour the past and ancestors, and finally as a values-based legitimisation appeal.

First, religious discourse associates Transnistria with Russia via Orthodoxy. On July 30th, 2020, Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox church donated to Pridnestrovie State University a wooden temple to be erected on the university campus. Similarly, the following passage illustrates how Orthodoxy as observed in Transnistria is connected with the Moscow Patriarchate:

“Orthodox Christians celebrate today one of the greatest holidays - Christmas. In Pridnestrovie, as in many countries of the world, this is not only a church holiday, but also a state holiday. In honor of the birth of the Son of God, Christmas services are held in all Orthodox churches. The festive service gathered hundreds of residents and guests of Tiraspol under the vaults of the cathedral, which bears the name of the Nativity of Christ...

Among the parishioners who arrived for the festive service is the President of the PMR Vadim Krasnoselsky. The liturgy was held by the Archbishop of Tiraspol and Dubossary Savva, who was co-coordinated by the cathedral of the Pridnestrovian clergy. After completing the Christmas service, **Archbishop Savva read out the Christmas message of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia**, which says that “the miracle of the Incarnation, which took place more than two thousand years ago, still fills souls with unspeakable joy.” **The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church urged everyone to pay attention to their loved ones during these holidays**, find kind words for them, and thank them. Archbishop Savva also addressed the parishioners with a similar appeal in his welcoming and congratulatory speech: “I wish that the holy days of the feast of the Nativity of Christ will help us all to be in peaceful unity with our relatives, friends and acquaintances. And not only close in yourself, in your heart with this joy, but also share it with those who need it. These are those who, due to circumstances, could not be with us today in this divine service. It is our Christian duty to honor such people, to come to their homes or hospitals and congratulate them with love on the world-saving holiday of the bright Nativity of Christ. May these holy days be joyful and blessed,” (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020m).

In this same press release, religious celebration is associated with national peace and prosperity. Consider the following:

“The head of the Pridnestrovian state Vadim Krasnoselsky also congratulated Vladyka Savva, the clergy, parishioners who gathered in the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ, and all Orthodox Christians on the great holiday. ‘I wish that the power of the holiday, the power of Christmas, would give everyone what they need and save them from what is alien to a believer. I wish that on these bright holidays there are people dear to your heart near you. I wish you health, love and harmony. Take care of yourself, your loved ones and loved ones. Be happy and make your families, your environment happier. May every family, every home, all our beloved Pridnestrovie be filled with happiness and prosperity. Peace to you, peace to Pridnestrovie!’” (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020m).

Notably, the PMR authorities showed a value for religious worship by refusing to close the churches during peaks in the pandemic when other social lockdowns were implemented (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020m). Religion is also a platform to express diversity and tolerance, one of the rhetorical pillars of Transnistrian legitimation (see discussion of multinationalism and “internationalist separatism (Voronovici 2019). For example, on the 3rd of June, 2020, the website of the president’s office reported that Vadim Krasnoselsky “received representatives of religious denominations at the site of the Administration of the President of the PMR. The meeting was organised in compliance with the safety measures. Speaking invited Archbishop of Tiraspol and Dubossary Savva, Archimandrite John Archimandrite Pitirim, the parish of the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Trinity's father, Peter, a priest of the Russian Orthodox Old Believers Church and Father Andrew Bishop PMR churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists Peter Kuz'minskii. PMR Head of the Presidential Administration Sergei Belous also took part in the discussion” (Official Site of the President of the PMR, 2020n). The reason for the characterization of this strategy as *performance* (in the sense of feigning or acting, not providing benefits) is that evidence suggests lack of actual tolerance (although extensive research is needed on this topic). Finally, religion may serve as a values-based appeal for legitimacy. As discussed in the literature review/background, institutions not only shape norms, but simultaneously try to appeal to existing norms in the population in order to procure legitimacy. If a majority of the Transnistrian public hold pro-orthodoxy views, then the executive’s adherence can be considered an appeal to pre-existing ideology in the population.

When considering the second part of the data collection (1st Pridnestrovian news broadcasts and associated comments), religion was not a significantly discussed theme. The sampling method, which selected the 8 “most popular” news broadcasts related to national identity (the self (including religion), culture, and the past), did not collect any broadcasts about religion. This may suggest that either 1) the 1st Pridnestrovian news channel does not focus on making news content about religion, in contrast to the executive level press releases which publish widely on religion, or 2) individuals who watch 1st Pridnestrovian news broadcasts on youtube do not engage with content covering religion in a way that would confer a designation of “popular” to those videos according to Youtube algorithms.

If there is any truth to the latter, it could potentially mean that religion is not as important to Transnistrian individuals as it is to the executive, suggesting that this is a norm-shaping appeal that is more related to connecting Transnistria to Russkiy Mir ideology than it is an appeal to pre-existing norms among the population. More research is needed.

2.3. Russkiy Mir

Kosienkowski argues that “leaders of various communities in the post-Soviet area use the Russian World ideology for legitimation purposes,” and accounts for non-rhetorical policy actions as relevant to ideological legitimacy. He finds that during her first term, the governor of Gagauzia Irina Vlah employed Russian-World based legitimation strategies by analysing official discourse from her government. In order to evaluate whether Russian-World based modes of legitimation appeared in Transnistrian discourse, it is first necessary to define the concept of Russian World, or Russkiy Mir. Following Kosienkowski (2021) Makarychev and Yatsuk (2018) and Feklyunina (2016), the Russian World is an ideology “proclaiming the existence of an imagined transnational community of people identifying themselves with Russia through a common language, religion, conservative values (in opposition to Western liberal values), culture, history, emotional attachment, or political, economic and security considerations and practises.” (see also Feklyunina 2016, 781)” (Kosienkowski 2021, 320).

How is this legitimation strategy manifested in discourse? Kosienkowski argues that political leaders who invoke Russian World ideology as a legitimation tool bring up the following socio-cultural themes:

- 1) Russian language
- 2) the Orthodox church and “associated conservative values”, including “the heterosexual family with children”
- 3) “Russian culture broadly speaking, or at least cultural proximity, as well as taking actions aimed at preserving and developing these identity markers,”
- 4) “common history” with Russia, which includes commemoration of Russian imperial history and Soviet history while simultaneously “rebuking different interpretations of the past”
- 5) “Emotional attachment” via “warm feelings toward Russia” as well as “solidarity with the Russian people and officials during tragic or happy moments”

In addition to this, there are also several political and economic themes that Kosienkowski identifies as indicative of Russian World ideology. These include:

- 1) “designating Russia as a strategic partner”
- 2) “the frequent meeting of Russian representatives, enhancing cooperation with Russia including its regions”
- 3) “preferring to trade with Russia”
- 4) “defending Russia’s good reputation”

- 5) “developing ties with other communities of the Russian World”
- 6) “avoiding relations with communities critical of Russia,”
- 7) “supporting Russia-orchestrated Eurasian integration projects (since 2015 it has been the Eurasian Economic Union, EEU) and rejecting the idea of integrating with the European Union (EU)”
- 8) perceiving NATO as a “security threat” (Kosienkowski 2021, 328).

The findings of the present study suggest that Kosienkowski’s position also applies to Transnistria, as several Russian-World based modes of legitimation appeared in Transnistrian discourse at both the official and vernacular levels. In other words, I find evidence suggesting Russian-World based ideology legitimation in Transnistrian discourse, supporting Kosienkowski’s proposal that polities in the post-Soviet space use this ideology as a legitimation strategy. There are a handful of ways in which the present study shows evidence to support Russian world ideology in Transnistrian discourse. These include:

1. Common history with Russia and rebuking the past
2. Orthodoxy
3. Russia as a strategic partner
4. Russian imperial history
5. Soviet history
6. Denigration of NATO³
7. Russian language⁴

Each of these themes is a pillar of Russian World ideology as theorised by Kosienkowski. Furthermore, Kosienkowski expands the conception of ideology as a legitimation strategy to also include policy actions that use “symbols and ideals” of a given ideology (and not only official discourse). For this reason, his concept of ideology as a legitimation tool also includes some performance-based modes of legitimation, including international engagement. These also were reflected in findings regarding Transnistria’s international engagement. Kosienkowski alludes to Transnistria in his own findings - Contextualising the Gagauz case, Kosienkowski identifies other polities that invoke Russian World discourse as a legitimation strategy, including Transnistria: “These communities include states, sub-states, regions and de facto states. For example, in Moldova, the Russian World is exploited not only by the authorities of the sub-state of Gagauzia, but also by the Moldovan president, Igor Dodon, who has been in power since 2016. Other such leaders are found in the de facto state of Transnistria, the Russian-speaking region of Bălți and the Bulgarian region of Taraclia (Nizhnikau 2016; Kosienkowski and Schreiber 2014). These people also include the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, authorities of the de facto states of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics in Ukraine and South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, as well as the leaders of Ukraine’s south-eastern regions during the pre-Euromaidan period (see Pyrlík 2018;

³ Only present in Youtube commentary

⁴ Only present in Youtube commentary

O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2016; Feklyunina 2016),” (Kosienkowski 2020). This discourse analysis supports assertions that communities of non-ethnic Russians outside of Russia are also targeted by Russki-Mir ideological legitimation discourse used by local authorities.

Five of the seven themes here are discussed in other sections of this chapter, as they have more to do with other factors of legitimation. Ideology as legitimation, the focus of this chapter, calls for the discussion of language and religion, both previously discussed in this chapter. The discussion continues here. How does Russkiy Mir ideology relate to orthodoxy in Transnistria? The findings of this study show that Orthodoxy as described in official discourse in Transnistria has a distinctly Russian flavour: "Orthodox Christians celebrate today, one of the greatest holidays - Christmas. In Transnistria, as in many countries of the world, it is not only the church, but also a public holiday. In honour of the birth of the Son of God, Christmas worship is held in all Orthodox churches. Holiday Service has brought together hundreds of residents and guests of Tiraspol and under the arches of the cathedral, which bears the name of Christ. As a model of temple architecture of ancient Russia, the Church is relatively young: it was built by the end of 1999, and was consecrated in 2000. January 16 Cathedral of the Nativity to celebrate the 20th anniversary of his ministry. Here tonight celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.” Furthermore, On July 30th, 2020, Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox church donated to Pridnestrovie State University a wooden temple to be erected on the university campus. Next, one can observe a relationship between Russkiy Mir ideology and language in Transnistria. As previously discussed, language is the linchpin of multi-ethnic “internationalist separatism” (Voronovici 2019) in Transnistria. The Russian language is the symbol of multinationalism, due to its historical status as the language of interethnic communication throughout the USSR.

Finally, it is interesting to note that not only is Russian-world based ideological legitimacy a pillar of Transnistrian legitimacy, but there is some evidence that it is accepted by individuals as compensatory for a lack of performance legitimacy. Significantly, when performance legitimacy was questioned, ideological legitimacy was invoked to compensate for it in commentary. Consider this example from a social media user: “We (Transnistrians) do not care who recognizes us or does not recognize us. The main thing is that we are independent from Moldova. Yes, Transnistria is dying, pensions are two times higher than in Moldova, salaries too, gasoline is cheaper and much more. But you (ROM Moldovans) consider yourself Romanians, so what can be done? Go ahead, but you don't need to drag us there with you. We have nothing in common with you. Our homeland is Russia, so none of your meanness, blockades, your hatred, murders will help you. Our paths have diverged forever.” This is an example of Russian World legitimacy used to, in one commentators’ opinion, compensate for lack of performance legitimacy. If this is the case— that individuals accept ideological legitimation as compensatory for lack of performance legitimacy— then it could further be argued that associating ideologically with Russia via media is beneficial for the executive in Transnistria as it attempts to legitimise itself.

In conclusion, the *ideology* category of identity legitimacy is relevant to Transnistrian discourse, which can be viewed as employing ideology as a legitimation strategy according to this

theoretical framework. The content of the ideology legitimization strategies discussed here include multinationalism/ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, and orthodoxy. The data collected from social media suggest a possibility that ideology as a legitimization tool can compensate for lack of performance legitimization, but more research is needed.

The last of the identity legitimacy subtypes, personalism, was not observed in the data. Rather than discussing individual leaders (apart from the press releases which related back to Krasnoselsky but didn't centre on him thematically), material at both the executive and in social media commentary referred to groups and institutions more generally, such as the Republic of Moldova or Sheriff. In social media commentary, Sheriff was widely denigrated and criticised. For example, at least one commentator pointed out that while public infrastructure crumbled in their hometown in Transnistria, Sheriff stores were well maintained and multiplying.

Discussion Part 2: Output Legitimacy

1. Introduction

In contrast to identity legitimacy (which consists of national myth, ideology, and personalization), there exist 3 types of output legitimacy according to Von Soest and Grauvogel: International Engagement, Performance, and Procedures. These are the “hard” side of legitimization. This second part of the discussion will focus on the relevance of this side of the theory to this study's findings. It's useful here to refer back to Dembinska and Campana's differentiation between identity/soft and output/hard legitimacy – “the “soft” and “hard” aspects of state construction, that is to say, to the “construction of a shared identity and a sense of unity in a state's population, through education, propaganda, ideology, and state symbols,” on the one hand, and to the “establishment of the administrative, economic and military groundwork of functional states,” on the other (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 484)” (Dembinska & Campana, 2017). In this section, I will discuss subtypes of legitimacy in order of significance to this study, starting with international engagement, leading to performance, and then finally procedures.

2. International Engagement

The data collected in this study, as well as the Transnistrian case in general, both support and refute existing scholarship on de facto states' international engagement and the way de-facto states pursue internal and external legitimacy vis-à-vis external actors. In this section on the “international engagement” subtype of output legitimacy, I argue that in the Transnistrian case, external legitimization by means of *paradiplomacy* and internal legitimization facilitated by *patronage* may be a recourse for the de-facto state to compensate for low capacity to pursue output legitimization strategies in these areas.

International engagement is a form of “output” legitimacy according to Von Soest and Grauvogel. Legitimation strategies in de-facto states present unique research opportunities precisely because of their definitive lack of external legal legitimacy. In other words, if a state fails to meet the international legal definition of statehood, does it establish legitimacy through alternative means? As previously mentioned, the post-Soviet de-facto states lack most aspects of output, or “hard” legitimacy. First, procedures are non-democratic. Second, institutions are weakened by corruption. Third, materially based means of legitimation are hindered by lack of resources; where there are adequate resources, they come in the form of foreign aid from external governance actors. If one keeps in mind the idea that legitimacy is important because it lowers the social cost of rule, and that intimidation and repression alone are usually too costly to maintain a regime, it opens the possibility to question whether de-facto states compensate for a lack of external legal legitimacy and a lack of internal output/material legitimacy by other means.

The findings of this study suggest that Transnistria engages in paradiplomacy as a legitimation method. First, it’s necessary to establish a definition and framework for the concept of paradiplomacy. According to Paquin, “The neologism “paradiplomacy” appeared in scientific literature in the 1980s, during a revival in the study of federalism and comparative politics. It was basically used to describe the international activities of Canadian provinces and American states in the context of globalisation and an increase in cross-border relations in North America.... The concept’s inventor, Panayotis Soldatos, defined paradiplomacy as “a direct continuation, and to varying degrees, from sub-state government, foreign activities” (Soldatos 1990, 34)” (Paquin 2019) . Although Soldatos’s definition is the most widely used definition of paradiplomacy, (Paquin, 2019), it remains contested by some who “prefer to use the expression “regional sub-state diplomacy” (Criekemans 2011)” or prefer “multi-track diplomacy or “multi-level diplomacy” (Hocking 1993).” Furthermore, “In France, the expression “decentralised cooperation” is sometimes used.” (Paquin, 2019). Detractions acknowledged, this study follows Soldatos’s definition of paradiplomacy as it remains the most commonly used.

The findings of the first part of this study (the review of press releases, show that Transnistria does engage in paradiplomacy (as defined by Soldatos (1990)) with other states, based on interactions between Vadim Krasnoselsky and government representatives from:

- China, Russia
- Czechia
- ECHR
- EU/EEA
- Great Britain
- Multiple
- OSCE
- Other de-facto states
- ROM & OSCE
- ROM

- Russia
- Russia, Abkhazia
- Russia, ROM
- Russia, Turkey
- USA
- Ukraine

Interactions between Krasnoselsky and the leaders of these states serve as a legitimization strategy because of 1) international optics/reputation (norm adherence, the PMR is a state that follows procedural diplomatic norms), 2) legitimising all de-facto states by creating a diplomatic community, and 3) patronage and performance (i.e. getting aid from “patron” states allows the PMR to perform better domestically).

First, paradiplomacy allows the PMR to appeal to international norms and establish itself as a polity that plays by the rules of the international community. This study finds that in PMR media, relationships with other states are portrayed as adherent to the traditions and norms of international diplomacy among recognized states. For example, summits are held and representatives are hosted.. That said, these relationships are bi- or multi-lateral. According to Pegg and Berg, although “De facto states are typically *seen* as marginal actors in the international system, which are either ignored or viewed with hostility by the vast majority of sovereign states,” this is not the case according to their research (Berg & Pegg 2016). They argue that recognized states engage with de-facto states in a similar manner to the way they interact with recognized states in the case of the USA and four de-facto states (Somaliland, Northern Cyprus, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Abkhazia). This is absolutely the case with Transnistria, which in the year analysed received representatives in an official capacity from UN member states and European multinational organisations. Notably, being unrecognised, Transnistria is not in a position to ratify treaties, so to comply with these rules and norms is not mandatory. Paradiplomacy, then, is a way to access the legitimising influence of international institutions despite not being able to formally ratify treaties.

Second, Transnistria’s portrayal of its international relations affords the same façade of normality to its interactions with other de-facto states as it do to their interactions with UN member states. In other words, relations with other de-facto states are afforded the same formality and procedure as relations with UN member states. Consider this example: “Next to the raised canvases symbolising the triumph of independence, peace and freedom of the Pridnestrovian people, flags of cities and regions of Pridnestrovie, as well as friendly PMR states - Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh-- flutter on small flagpoles” ([Source](#)) This create a kind of dual-level legitimization strategy – through paradiplomacy, the PMR legitimises itself as an international actor that follows international diplomatic norms, and also legitimises the entire de-facto state community based on international norm adherence.

One so far under researched example of this phenomenon is the ConIFA World Cup, the football tournament that represents de-facto states, which was held in Abkhazia in 2016 and attended by the 4 post-Soviet de-facto states. Also relevant to this discussion is Transnistria's membership in the Community for Democracy and the Rights of Nations, otherwise known as the Commonwealth of Unrecognized States (Dembinska & Cloutier, 2021).

Of course, there is particular significance to the relationship demonstrated with Russia at the executive level. For example, Transnistria has physical diplomatic representation in Russia. "The representative office of the PMR (in Russia) is located in the centre of Moscow - Povarskaya street, 11, office 35 (Arbat district). In addition to the staff of the institution, official meetings and events, including receiving citizens, are held during working visits to Moscow by the President of the PMR, the head of the foreign policy department, representatives of the executive and legislative branches of the republic" ((Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020b).

This leads to the relevant discussion of the relationship between diplomacy and patronage, and lends insight into how Transnistria wants itself to be perceived in order to maintain legitimacy internally and externally. Most fundamental to this discussion is the link between patronage and performance; specifically, how the former promotes the latter. As is well-established, Transnistria interacts with Russia as a patron state. Transnistria depends on Russia to survive in terms of military might and economically. The close ties between the two states are what allows that supply to continue and what allows Transnistria to continue to exist as a de-facto state, due to the pipeline of financial aid and military assurance that those close ties maintain. In theory, this situation would make it advantageous for PMR governments to ideologically justify their policy actions to their domestic population. By purporting a relationship with Russia that is cultural, historical, and existential, domestic support for policy actions that bring Transnistria close to Russia are justified in an ideological way regardless of the actual performance rewards transferred to the individual (which are low, and as findings from this study's social media analysis suggest, may be publicly perceived as inadequate) and regardless of whether de-facto statehood is actually beneficial for Transnistria in the long term. As Dembinska and Merand (2019) write, Transnistria plays a balancing act between Europe and Russia—ideologically lauding Russia, a player that they depend on to maintain the status quo, they are able to rhetorically defend a position of balancing between the two powers. "Despite an active nation-building project to support Transnistria's independence and a stated willingness to join Russia, Transnistria is juggling between Russia and Europe" (15). In other words, courted by Moldova and the EU but dependent on Russia to create the instability that makes them a target of aid & beneficiary of EU aid, Transnistria plays a balancing act between the two parties. If the PMR didn't have a close ideological relationship with Russia (exhibited and strengthened by paradiplomacy), it would be a weaker argument that Russia is a better partner for them than Moldova or the EU, because (for example the Moldovan export sticker case) the EU actually allows them access to more profitable trading markets (Dembinska & Merand 2019).

There is a relationship based on kinship ties here that goes back to Rogers Brubaker's triadic configuration. Within this framework, Russia acts as a kin state which is the external homeland of

the Transnistrian people. Notably, and as previously mentioned, Transnistria is an exceptional case to which to apply the triadic configuration because, as a minority population within Moldova, it's not made up of a majority population of ethnic Russians. There is no titular nationality in Transnistria, which is made up of Russians, Ukrainians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, and other groups, each of which is a national minority. Some work has been done on applying the triadic configuration model to other populations of non-Russian communities besides Transnistria, including Gagauzia (Kosienkowski 2021) and the Russian-South Ossetian/Tskhinvali relationship (King 2001). This relationship is reinforced by paradiplomacy between the PMR and Russia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the finding of this study corroborate that Russia is the primary focus of PMR external diplomacy. This is not surprising and has been well-established in pre-existing analysis.

However, it is still interesting to look at the patron-client relationship between the national minority and the kin state considering paradiplomacy and ideological legitimation. PMR media illustrates the patron-client relationship as a diplomatic relationship between two states. It's significant because even though signs and symbols in the PMR (like billboards and monuments) refer to Russia as the national homeland of the Transnistrian people, the Russian government is not cast as the government of the Transnistrian people. This distinction needs further research to be understood, but a potential explanation based on the framework laid out in this study is that these relationships are legitimation strategies. They serve to legitimise the status quo, which is a balancing act between Russia and Transnistria. Incorporation of Transnistria into Russia would be disadvantageous to Transnistrian elites, so by means of paradiplomacy, they maintain a patronage relationship that allows them to secure a certain amount of material well-being for citizens *and* they maintain a military presence that makes them the object of EU aid and interest, but the nature of that paradiplomatic relationship allows elites to remain elite with the performative façade of bilateral relations. Furthermore, it legitimises the status of Transnistria internally – Russia is a helpful partner, not the shadow government of Transnistria, because the Transnistrian regime is legitimate. It doesn't *need* Russia to survive; because Russia is a partner, not a parent (it's important to note that from a Russian perspective, this characterization of the relationship is also advantageous).

Finally, the relationship with Russia in terms of international relations also ties into Russkiy Mir ideology. Two components of this ideology as a legitimation strategy as theorised by Kosienkowski are the portrayal of Russia as a “strategic partner” and the denigration of communities unfavourable to Russia, of which NATO is an example he provides.

2.1. Russia as a strategic partner

This theme occurred many times in the selected press releases and is discussed in the section devoted to Transnistria's “others.”

2.2. Denigration of NATO

Nato was not mentioned at all in any presidential press releases. On 1st Pridnestrovian comments, Nato received only negative commentary, and was called a “gangster organisation”, on the video “Moldova and the US - Dangerous games on the Dniester.”

In sum, the findings presented in this section suggest the possibility that in the Transnistrian case, external legitimation by means of *paradiplomacy* and internal legitimation facilitated by *patronage* may be a recourse for the de-facto state to compensate for low capacity to pursue traditional output legitimation strategies via external legal legitimation.

3. Performance Legitimacy

Von Soest and Grauvogel’s 2017 concept of performance-based legitimation is based off of Easton’s (1965) concept of “specific support,” which “refers to regime legitimacy that stems from success in satisfying citizens’ needs...”, and develops that idea into determining “the extent to which the regime either deliberately cites its achievements in fulfilling societal demands such as material welfare and security or, alternately, employs claims of achievements in the absence of real improvements” (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017, 5).

In the Transnistrian case, it’s argued that there were at one point “real improvements,” but they were still material for a legitimation claim since they were only made possible by Russian support. . As Oleg Protsykh points out, “As a number of observers pointed out, Transnistrian authorities managed to provide the region’s population with a degree of economic stability, social welfare, and personal security that is comparable or in some respects even somewhat higher than the benefits enjoyed by the population of its parent state (Kolsto 2006; King 2001). Although much of these achievements cannot be credited to the policy effectiveness of the secessionist government – they are often the result of major financial and economic subsidies provided by Russia and motivated by the latter’s geopolitical considerations – these social, economic, and security provisions are, nevertheless, real and palpable achievements.” (Protsykh 2012, 177). The significance of this to legitimation is that it raises the question that since Transnistria is dependent on Russia to help it establish domestic performance legitimacy, is the legitimation of the relationship with Russia simply a means to protect a performance legitimacy claim predicated on good relations with Russia?

This study finds that the press releases from the office of Vadim Krasnoselsky made frequent claims to performance-based legitimacy based on economic performance. Furthermore, these performance-based legitimacy claims also featured in Perviy Pridnestrovskiy news broadcasts. The Russian Federation was discussed in both the news broadcasts and the press releases in the context of performance-based legitimacy claims.

In any case, thanks to Russian support, the PMR can legitimise itself with a performance-based legitimacy claim. By claiming to provide economic security, it establishes itself as a legitimate government and political entity to its citizens. Performance-based legitimacy is not only economic,

however, and security can be an important part of these claims. By defining itself as “guarantor of stability, territorial integrity or state building after a civil war (Radnitz, 2012)” – a state can also make a performance-based claim to legitimacy, which we also see in the Transnistrian case. Consider the following statement made by Krasnoselsky on Jun 19, 2020, legitimating the presence of peacekeepers in the PMR “ We have one philosophy of life - this is peace. And the peacekeepers are the guarantors of this peace... I am absolutely convinced that **if peacekeepers had been here on June 19, 1992, there would have been no war, no casualties.** This is the answer to those who say that it is necessary to withdraw, it is necessary to remove the Russian troops, it is necessary to eliminate the military presence. They stand guard over the world. Those who want to bring them out, to eliminate this presence, have nothing to do with the world. History must be remembered. Do not live in the past, but remember, honour it and think about tomorrow, relying on the history that was, especially on the tragic history of our region, our Motherland, our Pridnestrovie,” (Official Site of the President of the PMR 2020l) This statement can be interpreted as an assertion that Transnistria is safe at present from threat from Moldova thanks to the presence of Russian peacekeepers.

Performance based claims of legitimation were subject to the most contestation in the social media commentary analysed for this study. When individuals contested or disagreed with the content of a 1st Pridnestrovian news broadcast, or expressed discontent with the PMR government in general, it was usually as a rejection of a performance-based legitimacy claim. For example, in the video about Russian aid in the form of pensions⁵, people wrote comments complaining that the amount they receive in pensions is not enough. Furthermore, people also wrote about how they are struggling to make ends meet in general on low salaries and facing high prices. In the feature-length “28 Facts About the PMR” that was released on the First Pridnestrovian YouTube channel and produced by 1st Pridnestrovian to commemorate the 30th anniversary of independence of the PMR, there were comments asking why information about Sheriff was not included in the video given the corporation’s role in Transnistrian governance. However, there was also a theme of pride for Transnistrian performance and accusation of the Republic of Moldova trying to take credit for good performance. For example, on the video about Moldova’s 2018 Eurovision performance (for which the performing group was from the PMR), one commentator wrote about how the ROM not only tried to lay claim to the Eurovision performance but also to the Sheriff football team and Sheriff stadium in Tiraspol. Finally, another potentially significant finding is that when performance legitimacy was questioned, ideological legitimacy was invoked to compensate for it in commentary (see example in the previous section in Russian World ideology).

⁵ Russia subsidises every pensioner in Transnistria, regardless of their nationality, with a monthly stipend.

4. Procedural Legitimacy

Finally, procedural legitimacy is the 3rd component of output legitimacy theorised by Von Soest and Grauvogel. A procedural legitimacy claim is the claim that a regime adheres to certain procedures, such as holding elections, that legitimise it in the eyes of its citizens. According to Von Soest and Grauvogel, “Attempts to create procedural legitimacy can be based on the carrying out of elections and other rule-based mechanisms for handing over power through ‘orderly’ process, be it nominally democratic through elections, hereditary power transfer (Yom & Gause, 2012), within a ruling party or based on mechanisms for the implementation of policies. This applies to more than just democracies. Bureaucratic–military authoritarian regimes, for example, go to considerable lengths to operate within a legalistic framework despite the many arbitrary elements in their exercise of authority (Linz, 2000, p. 186),” (Von Soest & Grauvogel 2020, 291).

This study finds that executive-level media (press releases and news broadcasts) made fewer legitimacy claims based on procedures than they did based on other legitimisation methods, including ideology, national myth, international engagement, and performance. However, some content could be considered a performance legitimacy attempt. For example, diplomatic relations between the PMR and de-facto states, as well as between the PMR and UN member states follow a normatively standard procedure (see section on Paradiplomacy). Democracy is not mentioned in the executive level data, except for one pejorative mention of the ROM government, which is referred to as a “so-called democracy” (June 19 2020).

Furthermore, the institutions of the state security service and state police were also glorified in the executive press releases. For example, a January 9th report stated “Turning to the security officers, Vadim Krasnoselsky noted the importance of their work, said that the history of the GSO is inseparably linked with the creation, formation and development of the state as a whole” (Official Site of the President of the PMR, 2020a). Another report stated “Regarding the police, the Krasnoselsky said the following: ‘29 years have passed like one day for many. The formation of the militia took place in very difficult conditions, when a single state collapsed, when the nationalists of Moldova raised their heads and began aggression against our republic. It is impossible not to remember the difficult 90s, when after the hostilities, the police resisted the rampant crime in our state. Police officers have always emerged victorious from these confrontations. It is impossible not to recall the veterans of the internal affairs bodies - the veterans of the Soviet militia, who made up the backbone of the militia of Transnistria. Their experience formed the basis for the creation of bodies and subdivisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the PMR. The Transnistrian militia managed to preserve the best of the Soviet militia - a system of prevention, a system of solving crimes. These methods have taken root and are still operating here, in Transnistria. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, consisting of the criminal police, the public security police, the special police, educational institutions (Cadet Corps, Tiraspol Law Institute), is a well-coordinated system of combating crime, preventing and saving a person and his life ,’ - said Vadim Krasnoselsky, stressing

that even today, when the whole world is fighting the pandemic, the Transnistrian police officers, along with the doctors, are again on the front line” (Official Site of the President of the PMR, 2020j).

Evidently, this passage not only glorifies the contemporary police system, but also holds significance regarding previous discussions about relationships toward Russia, toward the ROM, and attitudes toward Soviet history and the Transnistrian foundational myth.

At the individual level, however, corruption was the basis of commentary that contested narratives shared in the youtube videos. That is to say, corruption was an aspect of procedural legitimacy that was decried in the youtube comments. Sheriff, like with performance legitimacy, was also referenced in comments contesting procedural legitimacy claims. Accusations of corruption were made citing Sheriff— references were made to Sheriff as the power controlling the Transnistrian government.

Finally, allegations of “absurdity” also were made as contestation of procedural legitimacy claims. Transnistria was referred to as the “Bermuda triangle”, a “fairytale land”, and a “banana republic”. Revisiting the theory, it’s possible to interpret these responses as calling out Transnistria’s failure to adhere to international legal procedures and procedural norms.

Conclusions

This study had two central aims. First, following von Soest & Grauvogel, this study aimed to identify potential legitimation appeals in Transnistrian media discourse. Second, following Von Haldenwang, this study aimed to identify points of contestation within the context of a legitimacy negotiation process between elites and individuals. As the study traces discursive Transnistrian legitimacy claims through the six factors of legitimacy (foundational myth, ideology, personalism, international engagement, performance, and procedures) three main conclusions emerge. First, Transnistria asserts an ideological association with Russia and the Russian World. Second, that the Transnistrian case supports theories that de-facto states engage in procedural paradiplomacy as a legitimation strategy. Third, that the Transnistrian case generally supports typologies of legitimation that discriminate between identity-based and output-based appeals.

Conclusion #1:

This study suggests that Transnistria asserts an ideological association with Russia and the Russian World. To restate, following Makarychev and Yatsuk, The Russian World is an ideology “proclaiming the existence of an imagined transnational community of people identifying themselves with Russia through a common language, religion, conservative values (in opposition to Western liberal values), culture, history, emotional attachment, or political, economic and security considerations and practises (see also Feklyunina 2016, 781–85; Herd 2015).” (Kosienkowski 2020) (Makarychev & Yatsuk 2018).

The findings of the present study suggest that Kosienkowski's position also applies to Transnistria, as several Russian-World based modes of legitimation appeared in Transnistrian discourse at both the official and vernacular levels. In other words, I find evidence of Russian-World based ideology legitimation in Transnistrian discourse, supporting Kosienkowski's proposal that polities in the post-Soviet space use this ideology as a legitimation strategy. There are a handful of ways in which the present study shows evidence to support Russian world ideology in Transnistrian discourse. These include, in Kosienkowski's words (2021, 328):

1. Common history with Russia and rebuking the past
2. Orthodoxy
3. Russia as a strategic partner
4. Russian imperial history
5. Soviet history
6. Denigration of NATO⁶
7. Russian language⁷
8. "designating Russia as a strategic partner"
9. "the frequent meeting of Russian representatives, enhancing cooperation with Russia including its regions"
10. "preferring to trade with Russia"
11. "defending Russia's good reputation"
12. "developing ties with other communities of the Russian World"
13. "avoiding relations with communities critical of Russia,"
14. "supporting Russia-orchestrated Eurasian integration projects (since 2015 it has been the Eurasian Economic Union, EEU) and rejecting the idea of integrating with the European Union (EU)"
15. perceiving NATO as "a security threat"

Each of these themes is a pillar of Russian World ideology as theorised by Kosienkowski. Furthermore, Kosienkowski expands the conception of ideology as a legitimation strategy to also include policy actions that use "symbols and ideals" of a given ideology (and not only official discourse). For this reason, his concept of ideology as a legitimation tool also includes some performance-based modes of legitimation, including international engagement. As regards an ideology-based legitimation strategy, they consider it to be a narrative concerning the righteousness of a given point of view on how the world should look like (Soest and Grauvogel 2017, 291). This means that they treat this legitimation mode as a purely rhetorical strategy, excluding policy actions." (Kosienkowski 2020). Kosienkowski expands the conception of ideology as a legitimation strategy to also include policy actions that use "symbols and ideals" of a given policy. For this reason, his concept of ideology as a legitimation tool also includes some performance-based modes of legitimation, including international engagement.

Conclusion #2: The PMR case supports theories that de-facto states engage in paradiplomacy as a legitimation strategy. This study finds that in PMR media, relationships with other states are portrayed as adherent to the traditions and norms of international diplomacy among recognized

⁶ Only present in Youtube commentary

⁷ Only present in Youtube commentary

states. Interactions between Krasnoselsky and the leaders of these states serve as a legitimization strategy because of 1) international optics/reputation (norm adherence, the PMR is a state that follows procedural diplomatic norms), 2) legitimising all de-facto states by creating a diplomatic community, and 3) patronage and performance (i.e. getting aid from “patron” states allows the PMR to perform better domestically). These conclusions are based on interactions between the PMR executive, including Vadim Krasnoselsky, and representatives from other Sovereign states as well as other de-facto states. Finally, Regarding the relationship between Transnistria and Russia, I find evidence to support Dembinska and Campana’s 2019 argument that Transnistria plays a “balancing” act between Russia and the EU in its international policy.

Russkiy Mir also were reflected in findings regarding Transnistria’s international engagement. Kosienkowski notes that the significance of this is that it shows that the Russian-World strategy is applicable not only to ethnolinguistic Russian communities outside of the Russian Federation, but also to other communities.

Conclusion #3: The Transnistrian case generally supports theories of legitimization as made up of six subtypes- both a “hard side” (output) and a “soft side” (identity). As Cloutier and Dembinska write, “These two aspects of internal legitimacy - identity and output - correspond respectively to the nation-building and state-building processes, that is to say to the “soft” and “hard” aspects of state building (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008), “ (Cloutier & Dembinska 2021, 10). This was the case in Transnistria, where official media reflected five of von Soest and Grauvogel’s 6 types of legitimization: National Myth, Ideology, International Engagement, Performance, and Procedures. However, one type of legitimization— personalization— was not present in the media broadcast in the study. No one central politician or public leader was instrumentalized for legitimization purposes.

To summarise, the findings of this study suggest that Transnistria is an example of a de-facto state that maintains its legitimacy by means of creating narratives in order to compensate for a lack of material resources. To that end, Transnistrian state media emphasises an ideologically-based relationship with its parent state that justifies the parent state’s (Russia’s) involvement in Transnistrian affairs. Furthermore, Transnistrian media validates the status quo that keeps the de-facto state in a frozen conflict and frozen status limbo. The state establishes group cohesion by means of creating a cohesive national origin myth that vilifies an outgroup and unifies the in-group around shared ideology and experiences. Finally, Transnistrian state media emphasises international diplomatic norms when portraying the PMR’s international relations, using paradiplomacy as a legitimization mechanism in a vacuum of external legal legitimacy. The executive uses this frozen, limbo status to its advantage, “balancing” between the EU and Russia while collecting benefits from its relationship with each.

In conclusion, Transnistria employs various legitimization strategies that 1) validate existing theories on the means by which de-facto states legitimise themselves, and 2) support current understanding of why and how Transnistria maintains a frozen conflict and limbo status. Based on an identity legitimization framework, this study supports a potential understanding as to how legitimization techniques and strategies are used to maintain a status quo in Transnistria, and argues

that as in other de-facto states and areas of limited statehood, identity-based legitimation attempts are disseminated via language and symbols to compensate for lack of output legitimacy, as well as justify political balancing between multiple opposing third party interests. Furthermore, this study supported arguments that legitimation is a process of cyclical negotiation between individuals and elites. Further research is needed to discern whether these conclusions are applicable to other post-Soviet de-facto states and areas of limited statehood in general.

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