

KRISTEL VITS

**De Facto State Foreign Policy:
Seeking Agency Between Patron-Client
Relationships and Engagement
Without Recognition**



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Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This dissertation is based on the following original publications:

- I Berg, E., & Vits, K. (2020). Exploring De Facto State Agency: Negotiation Power, International Engagement and Patronage. In Baldacchino, G., & Wivel, A. (Eds.) *Handbook on the politics of small states*, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 379–394
- II Vits, K. (2025). From Nagorno-Karabakh to Taiwan: measuring patron-client relations of de facto states. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 13(1), 87–105.
- III Berg, E., & Vits, K. (2018). Quest for Survival and Recognition: Insights into the Foreign Policy Endeavours of the Post-Soviet de facto States. *Ethno-politics*, 17(4), 390–407.
- IV Berg, E., & Vits, K. (2022). Transnistria’s European Drive: A Means to What End? *Geopolitics*, 27(3), 852–874.
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Author’s contribution

- I The author of the dissertation contributed to research design, data gathering, and writing of the book chapter.
- II The author of the dissertation is the sole author of this publication.
- III The author of the dissertation contributed to research design, data gathering, including carrying out all the interviews, and writing of the article.
- IV The author of the dissertation contributed to research design, data gathering, including carrying out interviews at the European Union institutions and participating in the interviews in Moldova and Transnistria, and writing of the article.
- V The author of the dissertation contributed to research design, composing of the theoretical overview particularly on role theory, and led the writing of the empirical analysis of the Transnistrian case.

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INTRODUCTION

De facto states, secessionist entities that by all appearances look like “regular” states yet lack full international legal recognition, occupy an ambiguous position in international politics. Characterised as “anomalies” or “exceptional polities” (Caspersen & Stansfield 2011: 3; Knotter 2024), they challenge conventional understandings of sovereignty, statehood, and agency in the international system. Although many de facto states possess effective territorial control, functioning institutions, and the ability to engage externally, they remain excluded from full participation in international society due to the resistance of their parent states and the broader international community.

The continued persistence of de facto states highlights the limitations of state-centric approaches in International Relations (IR). Existing states generally seek to uphold the principles of territorial integrity and sovereign equality, which has resulted in a predominantly non-recognition-based approach towards secessionist entities. At the same time, de facto states are rarely completely isolated. External actors frequently engage with them in pragmatic ways for reasons related to conflict management, regional security, humanitarian concerns, trade, or geopolitical competition. Moreover, the survival of most enduring de facto states depends heavily on support from patron states, which provide security, economic assistance, and political backing. Consequently, de facto states exist within complex “triangles of interaction” involving the de facto state, the parent state, the patron state, and influential third parties.

These dynamics make the question of de facto state agency particularly important. De facto states are often portrayed as passive objects of geopolitical competition or as mere proxies of their patrons, with limited ability to pursue autonomous policies. However, such portrayals overlook the ways in which de facto states seek to navigate structural constraints, negotiate relationships with external actors, and pursue strategies aimed at ensuring their survival and advancing their political objectives. Understanding how de facto states exercise agency under conditions of non-recognition therefore contributes not only to de facto state scholarship, but also to broader debates in IR concerning sovereignty, hierarchy, asymmetrical relationships, and the role of non-recognised actors in international politics.

The central aim of the dissertation is to analyse how de facto states seek to exercise and negotiate agency within asymmetric international environments characterised by dependence, limited recognition, and geopolitical competition. To achieve this, the dissertation addresses the following central research question: *How is the agency of de facto states shaped and affected by patron-client relationships and engagement without recognition?*

The dissertation is based on five original publications that examine de facto state agency from complementary theoretical and empirical perspectives. The research questions from these publications form five additional subquestions that will help to answer the main research question. Together, these studies contribute

to the growing body of scholarship exploring how much agency, and what kinds, do they have. The dissertation contributes conceptually by integrating insights from agency-centred IR scholarship, patron-client relationship literature, engagement without recognition, and role theory. In one of the studies, an innovative measurement tool is offered for studying the intensity and scope of patron-client relationships, with the aim to ease comparison between cases. The dissertation also advances the application of a four-party relationship model and evaluates the previously underexplored potential of role theory in the study of de facto state foreign policy, with a focus on their geopolitical role analysis in particular.

Empirically, the dissertation examines a range of de facto states, with particular attention to comparative perspectives, including cross-regional comparisons. The period the studies address can be best summarised as “contemporary”, with articles analysing the main developments from the conception of these de facto states up to the time of writing (mainly from 2017 onwards). The analysis reflects, and is rooted in, the rather stable international order of pre-February 2022, Russia’s launching of a full-scale war against Ukraine. This is now commonly seen as a turning point after which the shift from the post-Cold War unilateral world order to a more multilateral one accelerated. The post-Cold War world put greater emphasis on peaceful means of conflict resolution and generally denounced the use of force. For the de facto states in question, it ensured survival for long enough to become to be seen as rather persistent elements of international life.

Importantly, the dissertation rests on the contention that de facto states do have agency, conceptualising it primarily as “capacity to do” and “exerting the power”. Additionally, rather than seeing de facto states as objects of engagement towards whom both the patrons and the interested third parties project their interests and policies, the dissertation centres the perspective of de facto states themselves, focusing on what they actually can or seek to do.

The analytical picture that emerges confirms the complex reality of de facto states’ existence that is also evident in existing literature. For example, the dissertation highlights the double-edged effect that (patron) recognition may have on de facto state agency but also showcases their resilience and ability to counteract the patron and/or the international community. However, the analysis also reveals that some de facto states fail to utilise all potential avenues for foreign interaction. Thus, one of the major findings of the dissertation is that de facto state agency should also be considered from the angle of what they could potentially do, or even from what they choose not to do.

The dissertation proceeds as follows. Section one develops the theoretical framework of the dissertation. It first conceptualises the key actors involved in de facto state conflicts and introduces the four-party relationship model connecting de facto states, patron states, parent states, and influential third parties through “triangles of interaction”. The section then examines four key theoretical concepts underpinning the dissertation: agency, patron-client relationships, engagement without recognition, and role theory and geopolitical roles. The section concludes by identifying the principal research gaps and outlining the research contribution made by the dissertation.

Section two outlines the research design, case selection, data, and methods used in the dissertation, while also discussing the limitations of the study. Section three presents the main findings of the dissertation concerning de facto state agency, patron-client relationships, engagement without recognition, and geopolitical roles. Section four discusses the broader implications of the findings for de facto state scholarship, while also identifying some avenues for future research. The conclusion summarises the main arguments and contributions of the dissertation.

1. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Conceptualisation of key actors in triangular relationships

A *de facto* state is a secessionist entity and sovereignty claimant that enjoys empirical statehood and has issued a unilateral declaration of independence but remains unrecognised due to the resistance of its parent state and the international community at large.¹ More specifically, a *de facto* state is a “state that fulfils all the criteria set in the Montevideo Convention but lacks sufficient recognition from fellow states” (Toomla 2013: 58), whereby “sufficient recognition” is understood as the ability to obtain UN membership – the reverse of what is “usually, though somewhat erroneously, termed ‘universal recognition’” (Keating 2008, as cited in Ker-Lindsay 2018: 363). Emphasising the Montevideo Convention implies that a *de facto* state must exercise relatively stable and sufficient control over the territory it claims, possess a relatively stable populace, and have established at least some governance institutions (Souleimanov 2020: 13). While the Montevideo Convention also emphasises the “capacity to enter into relations with other states” (Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention, 1933), it does not specify that such relations must exist in practice (Toomla 2013: 50), as *de facto* states may possess the necessary resources to establish foreign relations but face limited or no interest from other states in doing so. Scott Pegg’s original work noted that a *de facto* state should have maintained control “for a significant period of time” (Pegg 1998: 26), whereas Kolstø (2006: 725) set a clearer minimum threshold of two years in order to distinguish *de facto* states from more transient phenomena.

The use of the term *de facto state* is a conscious choice. The labelling of these entities has been the subject of extensive and drawn-out academic debate due to the somewhat haphazard development of the research field through disconnected case studies (see e.g. Toomla 2013; Caspersen 2017; Hoch, 2020; Souleimanov 2020; Kursani 2021). Some other commonly used terms include *unrecognised states* (King 2001; Matsuzato 2008; Caspersen & Stansfield, 2011; Caspersen 2012) and *contested states* (Geldenhuys 2009; Ker-Lindsay 2012), but they have also been described as *quasi states* (Kolstø 2006), *separatist states* (Lynch 2002, 2004), *pseudo states* (Kolossov & O’Loughlin 1999), *para-states* (Rossi 2020; Rossi & Castan Pinos 2020), *phantom states* (Byman & King 2012), *informal states* (Isachenko 2012), *almost-states* (Stanislawski 2008), or *puppet states* (Ivanel 2016). Some of these labels carry pejorative connotations that undermine the legitimacy of these actors from the outset, despite broad substantive agreement regarding the phenomenon itself. Over time, however, scholarship has largely converged on – or converted to (see e.g. Lynch 2007; Caspersen 2017; Kolstø

¹ In practice, claims to self-determination can take different forms, ranging from demands for greater autonomy within the parent state to aspirations for independence or unification with a kin-state. However, these objectives are not always explicitly articulated and may remain strategically ambiguous.

2022) – the term *de facto state*, with O’Loughlin *et al.* (2011: 2) describing it as “the most appropriate and most neutral”. A dissenting view is offered by James Ker-Lindsay (2018), who argues that even this term carries a negative connotation amounting to stigmatisation. Ultimately, the term *de facto state* highlights precisely what these entities lack but seek most strongly: *de jure* recognition.

More specifically, this dissertation focuses largely on cases that can be described as “mature” or “enduring” *de facto* states, since “having moved beyond the (initial) stage of active conflict, enduring *de facto* states have achieved some stability, allowing them to focus on state-, nation- and institution-building” (Study II; see also Dembinska & Campana 2017). Kasfir (2015: 31) similarly distinguishes *de facto* states from rebel governance by arguing that the former are “no longer governed under the pressure of anticipated violence”. However, as Nina Caspersen (2011, 2017) warns, the impact of potential resurgence of violence should not be underestimated in the context of *de facto* states, and the search for security remains central to *de facto* state existence. The settings where mature *de facto* states can survive may also be described as frozen conflicts: situations in which the active phase of the conflict has ended and the adversaries have reached a balance of power that is difficult to alter unilaterally, while the possibility of renewed violence persists due to the absence of conflict resolution.

As *de facto* states are viewed as infringing on the territorial integrity of their parent states, that is, the recognised states from which they seek to secede unilaterally and therefore unlawfully, the latter are generally considered entitled to impede or even militarily suppress these rebels or secessionists. *Parent state* is a relatively consistently used term in the literature and rarely provokes the lengthy terminological debates associated with *de facto state*, although Benedikt Harzl (2018: 1) argues that *metropolitan state* better reflects the terminology of international law scholarship. Rafael Biermann (2025: 6) notes that both the occasionally used term *mother state* and the gender-neutral *parent state* imply an emotional connection denied by the secessionists and therefore opts for the more neutral *host state*. Similarly, Byman and King (2012) use the term *base state*, though none of these alternatives have gained widespread acceptance in *de facto* state scholarship.

The continued existence of *de facto* states is usually secured by a patron – an external actor providing vital support to the *de facto* state, its client (Caspersen 2009). Biermann (2025: 14–15) distinguishes three ideal types of patron-client settings. A *master patron* setting involves one dominant state patron with potentially conflict-deciding resources, although the client may also receive support from additional state or non-state actors, including international organisations, diaspora groups, cross-border communities, or even the parent state (Caspersen 2012: 51). In a *multiple patron* setting, support is provided by several interacting state and non-state patrons, none of which is clearly dominant, at times creating the impression of a “patronless” client. Finally, in a *non-state patron* setting, critical support comes exclusively from non-state actors such as diasporas or civil society groups (see e.g. Brucker 2025). Most of the *de facto* states studied in this dissertation are in a master patron setting. The term *patron*

itself has not generated major controversy in de facto state scholarship, although alternatives such as *sponsor state* (Ivanel 2016) occasionally appear.

While the de facto state, the parent state, and the patron state form a triangular relationship in which each actor affects the others, this dissertation also considers the influence of what may collectively be termed *third parties*: influential and/or interested state and non-state actors, including international organisations, civil society organisations, and diasporas. These actors, often broadly referred to as the international community or international society, add a further layer of interaction. Figure 1 presents, in a simplified form, the four-party relationship model underpinning this dissertation. It illustrates how these secessionist entities are embedded within entangled relationship triangles that may be analysed jointly or separately, thereby forming two tiers of interaction. Tier 1 – depicted by black arrows – refers to the direct interactions between the de facto state and all other parties. Tier 2 – depicted by red arrows – captures a “higher-level” geopolitical game that excludes the de facto state itself. The model is simplified: depending on the context, some actors may be absent, some relationships may be considerably more intense than others, and interactions may be either cooperative or conflictual. Moreover, third parties rarely constitute a single coherent actor, as depicted in the model. Nevertheless, the four-party relationship model emphasises the interlinked nature of these relationships, and the need to consider their collective effect and various interplays when studying de facto state agency.

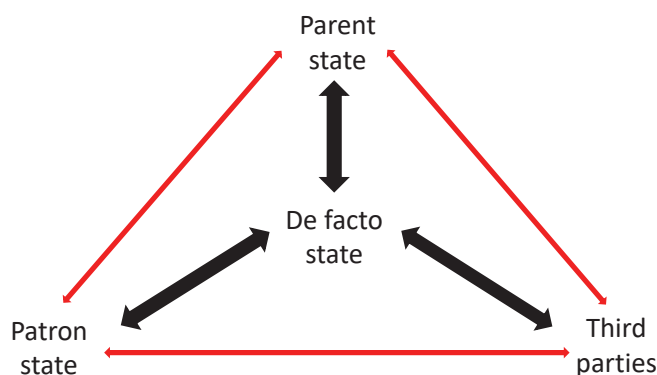


Figure 1. De facto state in an actor constellation in relation to its parent state, patron state, and influential third parties (adapted from the three-tiered relationship model by Kursani & Berg 2025).

From the perspective of this dissertation, placing the de facto state at the centre of Figure 1 is appropriate, as the question of de facto state agency is central to the thesis and the studies comprising the body of this dissertation are largely written from their perspective. If understood as a geopolitical game, de facto states, despite their small size and weakness (which will be discussed in more detail in the section Case Selection), matter because they tend to emerge on the fringes of geostrategic spheres where the interests of larger powers overlap and collide.

Nevertheless, questions regarding the extent to which *de facto* states truly matter and influence decisions affecting them remain central to *de facto* state scholarship. For example, Vits and Götz (2025) analyse Nagorno-Karabakh both as an object and as a subject of great power competition, concluding that for third parties, the *de facto* state may become relevant primarily due to their interest in the parent state and/or the patron state.

1.2. Theoretical framing of key notions

This section develops the theoretical framework of the dissertation by examining four interrelated concepts: agency, patron–client relationships (PCRs), engagement without recognition (EwR), and geopolitical roles. Together, these concepts provide the analytical tools necessary for understanding the behaviour of *de facto* states within complex international environments.

It begins by situating the concept of agency within International Relations theory. Agency is widely regarded as a foundational yet contested notion, reflecting ongoing debates over the extent to which actors can shape outcomes under structural constraints. The section outlines the evolution of these debates and the conceptual challenges in defining and assigning agency, particularly in empirical contexts. This is especially relevant for *de facto* states, whose ambiguous status raises questions about their capacity for independent action. The section then reviews how agency has been conceptualised and understood in the context of this dissertation.

Building on this, the section next examines patron–client relationships as a key framework for understanding asymmetric interactions in international politics. It traces the concept’s interdisciplinary origins and incorporation into IR theory before addressing ongoing issues of conceptual fragmentation, especially the blurred boundaries between patronage, dependency, and “puppetry”. Particular attention is paid to how PCRs have been applied to the study of *de facto* states, where questions of survival, recognition, and constrained agency are especially pronounced. This analysis highlights the need to better account for weaker actors’ agency within hierarchical relationships.

The section then turns to the concept of engagement without recognition, a framework largely specific to *de facto* state literature that captures how the international community interacts with such entities. Despite the formal primacy of non-recognition, grounded in the principle of territorial integrity, engagement has emerged as a pragmatic tool for conflict management. The section explores how this approach reflects a structural tension between sovereignty norms and practical governance needs, and how its form varies across different contexts. It also emphasises that engagement is not merely imposed from the outside but actively shaped by the agency of *de facto* states, their patrons, and other external actors.

The penultimate section of the theoretical framework focuses on role theory. After outlining briefly its development from the 1970s onwards and introducing

its key concepts, the section explores its underutilised potential for the study of de facto states. Emerging within Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), role theory offers a useful lens for understanding how political actors perceive themselves and their position in the international system, and how these self-conceptions shape their behaviour. The section then links role theory with geopolitical analysis and the concept of geopolitical roles, thereby bridging role theory and de facto state literature.

Taken together, these four strands of research highlight both the constraints and the opportunities facing de facto states. The final section of the theoretical framework summarises these discussions by identifying key gaps within scholarship on de facto states across these themes and outlining the dissertation's contribution to this body of literature.

1.2.1. Agency

Both international politics as a practice and International Relations as a discipline have a complex relationship with agency. As Colin Wight notes, IR scholars are rarely clear about “what agency is, what it means to exercise agency, or who and what might do so” (Wight 2006: 178), shifting its attribution as needed. Despite this ambiguity, agency, which is more often intuitively assumed than measuredly observed, carries significant normative and empirical weight, as it is closely tied to “attributions of moral responsibility, legal obligation and political representation” (Braun *et al.* 2019: 789, see also Schindler 2014). To attribute agency is therefore not only to recognise the capacity to act, but also to legitimise the right to act in international politics. This duality places agency at the centre of IR debates of sovereignty, legitimacy, and recognition. The ability to act meaningfully in international politics is closely interwoven with the recognition of sovereignty, understood both as supreme authority within a territory and as externally validated status.² Consequently, the attribution of agency shapes which actors are considered relevant and legitimate participants in international politics, as well as who or what is considered relevant to study.

Braun *et al.* (2019: 790) argue that IR's inability to reach consensus on agency partly stems from the “levels of analysis” problem. Since Kenneth Waltz's (1959/2001) formulation of the three “images” of international politics, organising inquiry across analytical levels has become common in IR. Yet there is no consensus on what the relevant levels are, nor on which actors correspond to each level. This forces researchers to try to address the agency problem theoretically

² Stephen Krasner (1999: 3–4) has famously argued that there are four dimensions of sovereignty: (1) international legal sovereignty referring to practices related to mutual recognition, (2) Westphalian sovereignty referring to autonomy from the control of external actors, (3) domestic sovereignty referring to the ability of the public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own polity, and (4) interdependence sovereignty referring to the ability of public authorities to regulate cross-border flows. The four dimensions of sovereignty contribute to the limited influence and challenging of any international system due to the logical contradictions they create.

before engaging with empirical material (Braun *et al.* 2019: 787–790). Samuel Knafo echoes this criticism, arguing that although many scholars recognise the importance of agency, discussions about it “remain mostly meta-theoretical and seem to have little impact on concrete studies in the field” (Knafo 2010: 493).

From the perspective of IR theory’s evolution, it is telling that the theoretical debate on agency only took off in earnest with Alexander Wendt’s introduction of the “agent-structure problem” (Wendt 1987). Before this, much of IR theory assumed that the international system centred on states as principal actors. This point will be elaborated below, but it is worth noting that “agency” as a specific term was also introduced into IR theory by Wendt through the agent-structure debate (Wille 2025: 3). This debate asks whether agents shape social structures – the broader systems that constrain and shape actors’ behaviour – or vice versa. The problem arises from the inability of most theories to simultaneously account for the “powers of [human] agents” and “the causal relevance of ‘structural factors’, that is, the conditions of action” (Dessler 1989: 443).

Wendt (1987) initiated this debate in response to then-dominant neorealism and world-systems theory, both representing “structural thinking”. According to Wendt, both approaches, by treating either state agents or system structures as ontologically primitive units, were “equally unable to explain the properties of those units, and therefore to justify [their] theoretical and explanatory claims about state action” (Wendt 1987: 337, 349). Instead, Wendt promoted the “structurationalist” approach developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens, describing it as “a relational solution to the agent-structure problem that conceptualises agents and structures as mutually constituted or co-determined entities” (Wendt 1987: 350).

Following Wendt’s intervention, structurationists dominated IR scholarship on agency for much of the 1990s, although the debate in essence remains unresolved to this day. Rationalist approaches still centre structural incentives as shaping strategic interaction, paying less attention to where these incentives and preferences originate. For constructivists and critical theorists, by contrast, structure is both a medium and an outcome of social action. Nevertheless, both structuralist and constructivist approaches treat agents and structures as meaningfully distinct categories. This view is challenged by post-structuralist thinkers (Ashley 1984, 1988; Campbell 1992), who argue that the agent-structure distinction is difficult to sustain because it is an unstable theoretical construct – a point returned to below.

Returning to the question of agents, constructivist approaches generally agree that actors are not entirely free to act, as their behaviour is shaped and constrained by structural expectations within the international system, which is itself reproduced through these actions. At the same time, actors retain the capacity to challenge and potentially transform these structures (Jackson & Nexon 1999: 295). Nevertheless, confusion persists regarding who or what qualifies as an agent in IR. As Wight (2006: 178, 190) notes, agency is frequently attributed inconsistently, with the terms *actor* and *agent* often used interchangeably.

This ambiguity extends to the centre of IR theory, which has traditionally treated the state as the primary agent in international politics (Wight 1999: 135; 2006: 177). Earlier IR theories also generally assumed that states existed prior to social interaction and focused primarily on how states act rather than on how political actors, including states, emerge in the first place (Jackson & Nexon 1999: 293; Coggins 2014). Although scholars disagree on whether states themselves “act” autonomously or merely provide a framework through which individuals and institutions exercise power (Wight 2006: 216–223), the state-as-agent remains a useful analytical abstraction and continues to dominate both IR theory and international political practice.

This dissertation adopts a similarly pragmatic approach. It treats *de facto* states as political actors capable of exercising agency, without attempting to disentangle which specific individuals or institutions act on their behalf. At the same time, it recognises that states are not the only actors capable of influencing international politics (see also Pegg 1998: 230). International organisations, NGOs, corporations, expert communities, and even insurgent groups have all been described as possessing varying forms of agency (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; Barnett & Finnemore 2004; Wille 2025). Yet none of these actors has displaced the centrality of states within the international system. Consequently, *de facto* states continue to seek recognition as sovereign and autonomous actors by emphasising their effective control over territory and population.

Recent approaches to agency reinforce this relational understanding. Relationalist and practice-based approaches argue that agency emerges through interaction rather than existing prior to it (Jackson & Nexon 1999; Bially Mattern 2011). Agency is therefore increasingly understood not as a fixed attribute, but as a context-dependent and relational phenomenon shaped by power relations and social practices (Braun *et al.* 2019; Marandici 2025).

Despite theoretical disagreement over who actors and agents are at different levels of analysis, there is some conceptual agreement. Agency is often described as the “capacity to act” or “capacity to do” (Braun *et al.* 2019: 788; Schindler 2014: 16). Some formulations also specify agency as the exertion of power (Buzan *et al.* 1993: 103; Wight 2006: 206), emphasising that “to ‘act’, a state must have ‘freedom of choice’: that is, it must possess enough deliberate will for independent action despite manifest structural constraints” (Buzan *et al.* 1993: 103, as cited in Berg *et al.* 2025: 2). Spivak argues that agency in the social world has three main elements: accountability, intentionality, and subjectivity, of which subjectivity is the most fundamental (Spivak 1996: 294 as cited in Wight 2006: 206). Similarly, Bhaskar (1993: 393) describes agency as “intentional transformative praxis”. From a relationalist perspective, agency may, however, not be constant for each agent (Jackson & Nexon 1999: 318), and depending on its definition, almost anything may possess it (Law & Hassard 1999). Wight (2006: 210, 213) concludes that agency requires a multi-layered view, referring to both individual and societal predicates embedded in specific contexts. Agency is therefore a practical achievement that can emerge in many contexts and forms (Braun *et al.* 2019: 788).

An agent is defined as an entity that can act in a specific context (Braun *et al.* 2019: 788). Wendt (1987: 359) proposes that an agent must possess three intrinsic capabilities: a theoretical understanding, however inaccurate it may be, of its activities; the ability to reflexively monitor and adapt its behaviour; and the capacity to make decisions. For Bhaskar (1978: 109, as cited in Wight 2006: 211), agents are centres of power: anything capable of bringing about change in something, including itself. States are often described as particular kinds of agents, simultaneously agents and structures (Ringmar 1996; Wendt 1999; Jackson & Nexon 1999). According to Wendt, the state-as-structure may emerge into a corporate agent, although not all structures are capable of this move (Wendt 1999: 216–217). Wight, however, argues that the state itself does not exercise power but facilitates its exercise by agents: “The powers of the state are only ever activated through the agency of structurally located political actors located in specific structural conjectures” (Wight 2006: 220).

An actor is an “identifiably human or collective subject that in principle can gain agency and thus become an agent in the context in question” (Braun *et al.* 2019: 788). Exemplifying the actor-agent confusion criticised by Wight (2006), Dessler argues that an *actor* can act socially only because a social structure exists to draw upon, and that structure is reproduced or transformed only through the actions of *agents* (Dessler 1989: 452, emphasis added). As this dissertation does not seek to contribute directly to the actor-agent debate, it notes only that there is disagreement over whether the two concepts differ and how. The terms are therefore used interchangeably here: even if *de facto* states cannot transform the international structure imposed on them, they help reproduce it through the challenges they pose. Overall, agency scholarship increasingly treats agents not as pre-given subjects, but as effects of concrete practices (Braun *et al.* 2019: 797). Agency is thus a highly relational concept (Marandici 2025: 581).

This theoretical discussion is particularly relevant for *de facto* states because they expose a fundamental tension between empirical capacity and recognised authority in international politics. *De facto* states often possess many of the practical attributes associated with statehood, such as territorial control, governance institutions, and the ability to engage in external relations, yet remain excluded from full participation in international society due to their lack of widespread recognition. As a result, they occupy an ambiguous position in which they may exercise agency in practice while simultaneously having that agency politically or legally denied. Studying *de facto* states therefore provides a useful lens through which to examine how agency is enabled, constrained, recognised, and contested within the international system.

While this overview suggests a disciplinary evolution towards more fluid and expansive understandings of agency, in the context of *de facto* states agency remains also a political matter: agency must be recognised and accepted by other actors. As discussed above, none of the “new” agents has challenged the centrality of states in international politics, partly because states themselves seek to preserve a social order that privileges their position. States continue to “assert their separateness, their exclusivity and their final sovereign authority in an

international system predicated on the symbols and the recognition of the centrality of the sovereign state” (Bahcheli *et al.* 2004: 1). Their actions also shape the structural framework within which non-state institutions operate (Holsti 1996). For de facto states, this structural framework manifests itself in two main constraints: the need for a patron for survival, and the resulting limits of the patron-client relationship; and limited engagement with the parent state and international society, particularly through engagement without recognition. These constraints strongly limit the foreign policy roles de facto states can pursue. Patron-client relations, engagement without recognition, and de facto states’ geopolitical roles are discussed in separate sections below.

Existing states have a particular interest in opposing secession and limiting the right of self-determination in order to safeguard their own interests. International law recognises the right for self-determination of former colonies separated from their metropolises by salt water, yet limits or outright denies it to regions of existing states seeking separation from the centre (McGarry, 2004: ix–x). De facto states, as secessionist entities, sit outside the established international order because they are seen as challenging it (Pegg 1998; Bahcheli *et al.* 2004; Caspersen & Stansfield 2011). In essence, however, they do not challenge the state-centric international order itself, but rather how statehood is assigned and recognised. Still, as they are not regarded as “proper” states, they are often isolated, marginalised, stigmatised (Ker-Lindsay 2018), and treated as pariahs (Bartmann 2004). However, Caspersen (2015: 184) notes that academic debate on de facto states has become more nuanced, with several authors analysing them through “degrees of statehood/legitimacy” (e.g. Berg & Kuusk 2010; Caspersen 2012), resulting in differentiated positions within the international system (e.g. Berg & Toomla 2009; Caspersen 2018; Berg 2023).

Agency has been central to de facto state studies since the field emerged in the late 1990s, despite much of the de facto state scholarship avoiding addressing agency directly, focusing rather on debates regarding their sovereignty and legitimacy. Early scholarship, exemplified by Pegg (1998), sought to establish de facto states as a distinct analytical category of actors in international relations (see also Pegg 2017: 2). Pegg emphasised empirical aspects of statehood such as effective territorial control, governance capacity, and popular support, as the basis of their agency (Pegg 1998; see also Dembinska & Campana 2017: 257). At the same time, he acknowledged the severe structural constraints these entities face: while they can act, they do so within rather narrow limits (see also e.g. Caspersen 2009: 50–58). This early literature thus established a still-influential dual framing: de facto states possess empirical capacity to act, but this capacity is fundamentally constrained by the international system.

Initial portrayals of de facto states were often negative (Hoch 2020: 16). Post-Soviet de facto states in particular were depicted as dependent, unstable, crime-ridden, and lacking genuine autonomy due to their reliance on external patrons (Kolossoff & O’Loughlin 1999; King 2001; Lynch 2004). Views of de facto states as mere puppets of their patrons emerged at this time, while Somaliland was described, for example, as a “pirate state” (Kolossoff & O’Loughlin, 1999: 152).

This perspective was reinforced by legal approaches that denied agency to entities lacking formal recognition, arguing that without juridical personality their actions lack legal validity (McGarry 2004). According to Harzl (2018: 29), the distinction between genuine state authority and puppet-state character “usually runs along the boundaries of Article 4(1) of the UN Charter.”³ He argues that if a state emerges through the prohibited intervention of another state, it should be denied recognition, whereas states emerging without such assistance could be assessed according to the Montevideo criteria, as the situation is not governed by international law. Such views reflect the state-centric bias of international law, which remains somewhat disconnected from empirical realities (Dembinska & Campana 2017: 258). As Pegg (1998: 187, 192) shows, the international legal system has in practice been flexible enough to provide limited accommodations to *de facto* states, highlighting the political nature of opposition to them. Another factor shaping their early treatment was the common view that *de facto* states were temporary, transitional anomalies whose endurance was explained by great power competition.

From the mid-2000s onwards, the literature became more nuanced, with scholars focusing increasingly on internal dynamics, including state- and nation-building processes of *de facto* states (Hoch 2020: 17). Yet these studies often linked internal political structures and processes to the likelihood of international recognition as well (see von Steinsdorff & Fruhstorfer 2012). Florea (2020) shows how governance practices contribute to both internal and external legitimacy. Although not framed in terms of agency, his analysis demonstrates how *de facto* states structure their internal order in response to threats and resource constraints, thereby indirectly exercising agency through governance choices. Some studies show how *de facto* states actively seek to enhance their legitimacy and international standing by instrumentalising domestic capacity-building and democratisation through “earned sovereignty” strategies, occasionally outperforming their parent states in Freedom House rankings of political rights and civil liberties (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2012). Non-recognition can thus incentivise democratisation and the instrumentalization of internal developments to demonstrate international capability. In essence, *de facto* states try to “earn sovereignty”, a strategy that became especially relevant in relation to the “standards before status” policy adopted by the international community in the case of Kosovo (Caspersen 2008; Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2012). *De facto* states also mimic recognised states, essentially “performing” statehood through, *inter alia*, diplomatic representation, bureaucratic standardisation, and international outreach (Bouris & Fernández-Molina 2018; Visoka 2018). Pacher (2019) shows that such practices go beyond symbolism, actively shaping legitimacy claims and external perceptions. He argues that by engaging with remote Pacific islands or Latin American countries, Abkhazia and

³ U.N. Charter art. 4, para. 1: Membership in the United Nations is open to all other peace-loving states which accept the obligations contained in the present Charter and, in the judgment of the Organization, are able and willing to carry out these obligations.

South Ossetia engage in external legitimacy-building through stigma rejection and ontological security attainment (Pacher 2019).

Empirical studies further show that de facto states engage in patterned interactions with external actors despite non-recognition. This topic is explored in more detail in the engagement without recognition subsection; here, it suffices to note that EwR allows de facto states to exhibit agency through limited diplomatic, economic, and administrative exchanges that fall short of formal recognition but still enable some political action (Ker-Lindsay 2018; Berg 2023). Berg and Toomla (2009), for example, demonstrate that no de facto state is entirely excluded from the international system, although levels of engagement vary significantly. Importantly, such engagement is partly shaped by the willingness and strategic choices of de facto state authorities themselves “to open up to the world”, indicating constrained but meaningful agency (Berg & Toomla 2009: 43). Some studies identify local agency through tensions between local and patron preferences. Defying patron preferences in particular is often treated as evidence of de facto states’ independent agency and as a denial of puppet status (Ambrosio & Lange 2016; Berg & Yüksel 2022; Yüksel & Berg 2024; Kolstø 2020, 2025).

More recent scholarship explicitly reframes de facto state agency as bounded and relational. Blakkisrud and Kemoklidze (2023: 113) argue that de facto states possess at least limited agency, enabling them to influence agendas and pursue strategic objectives within constrained environments. Rather than viewing them as passive recipients of external pressure, this literature emphasises their capacity to shape interactions within structural limits. Marandici (2025: 581) develops this further by defining de facto state agency as autonomy in relation to patron states, parent states, and domestic actors. He argues that international agency is shaped by the intensity and nature of patron-client relations, the geopolitical environment, and the domestic political order. He then demonstrates that agency is not uniform but varies across policy domains, particularly between high and low politics: it is especially visible in low-politics domains, while high-politics areas remain more constrained and subject to patron interference (Marandici 2024: 594–595). Similarly, Caspersen and Gueudet (2025) highlight the dynamic nature of patron–client relations, showing that even highly asymmetrical relationships can be renegotiated. They demonstrate that, especially in crises, de facto states can act strategically by courting alternative supporters or pressuring patrons through obstruction or appeals to domestic considerations, producing more flexible and less hierarchical relationships than often assumed, and thereby exerting political agency.

Berg *et al.* (2025:2) frame agency as a practical achievement, in line with Braun *et al.* (2019). While they examine how de facto states’ capacity to act influences outcomes in a specific international political context, they partly follow Marandici’s (2025) approach by analysing how de facto states handled the COVID-19 pandemic domestically. Through this approach, they seek to validate de facto states’ external agency by considering their ability to monopolise administrative force within their territories during an international crisis (Berg *et al.* 2025).

Because agency is often tied to recognition, and recognition is assumed to grant states greater agency (Krasner 2001), Blakkisrud *et al.* (2025) ask whether patron states are more inclined to treat recognised clients as “regular” states, or whether recognition further constrains *de facto* states’ internal sovereignty and agency. Their analysis of seven cases produces an inconclusive picture. In some cases, such as Abkhazia, patron-state recognition has been followed by increased penetration of the executive, while in others, such as the TRNC, there is no discernible effect. They also note, however, that there are no cases of decrease. Recognition may enable patrons to formalise military cooperation and security guarantees, but it may also lead to the outsourcing of security by the *de facto* state, as in South Ossetia. Finally, they find that patron-state recognition does not guarantee client survival (Blakkisrud *et al.* 2025: 81).

Alexandros Lefteratos (2025) examines Palestine and argues that when the UN “upgraded” its status from “non-state observer entity” to the “non-member observer state” in 2012, it validated Palestinian agency, transforming the manners, practices and language of Palestinian practitioners internationally. The adoption, or at least mimicry, of diplomatic practices and bureaucracies is one of the main ways that *de facto* states seek international legitimacy (see also Bouris & Fernández-Molina 2018). He concludes that UN recognition matters, as even this relatively ceremonial status upgrade allows Palestine to keep its statehood claim afloat and utilise a “recognition spillover” tactic, whereby the UN upgrade is emphasised in bilateral relations regardless of bilateral policies (Lefteratos 2025: 2451, 2453). This occurs despite international discourse treating Palestine “as a subordinate of the international system, contributing to the gradual ‘unmaking’ of its external statehood” (Lefteratos 2025: 2436). Gëzim Visoka (2018) similarly emphasises the importance of international recognition for Kosovo, arguing that for Kosovars, the failure to advance this cause is linked to overall state survival: “the absence of universal recognition has become a threat to Kosovo’s political existence [...] that undermines its domestic sovereignty and territorial integrity” (Visoka 2018: 4). To achieve full recognition, Kosovo often relied on liminal spaces and informal diplomatic networks to “perform its diplomatic agency” (Visoka 2018: 7).

In a rare example of applying post-structural approach to the study of *de facto* states, Hannes Černý (2024) rejects the conventional “fake versus real state” binary, arguing that these entities are not merely “putting on a show” while waiting for international recognition. Drawing on Bergson and Deleuze, he proposes a framework that conceptualises sovereignty as virtuality and statehood as only one of its possible actualisations (Černý 2024: 1339). Thus, Černý argues that sovereignty should be understood as an eternal state of becoming, disentangled from the modern state, recognising that past and present exist contemporaneously rather than in strict linear chronology (Černý 2024: 1347).

While case studies are common in *de facto* state research, Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2020) go exceptionally deep in their ethnographic investigation of the “local”, or what they call “sovereign agency”, of the Turkish Cypriots: the desire to enact one’s communal will. They identify a particularly important

dilemma for de facto state-builders: they can be viewed either as Turkish puppets, having “no will”, or as pirates, having “too much will” or “the wrong kind of will” (Bryant & Hatay 2020: 108). Regarding the former, they show how emphasising the connection to the Turkish state through frequent use of symbols such as the Turkish flag rendered Turkish Cypriot agency invisible (Bryant & Hatay 2020).

Much of the de facto state literature continues to approach agency indirectly through sovereignty and legitimacy, without conceptualising it expressly. But the dominant assumption in earlier IR literature that sovereignty is binary and indivisible has increasingly been challenged by approaches emphasising “degrees of statehood” and “degrees of legitimacy” (Berg & Kuusk 2010; Caspersen 2012; Berg 2012, 2013). This reconceptualisation allows for a more differentiated understanding of de facto states as entities that may possess partial or segmented sovereignty and, by extension, partial agency.

Explored in more detail in Study I, this dissertation conceptualises agency as “capacity to do” and “exerting of power”, operationalised for example through conflict management, international engagement, and countering the patron. It is bounded agency that nevertheless becomes visible in specific interactions. The dissertation therefore understands agency as context-dependent and relationally produced through three interlinked dimensions: patron–client relations, engagement without recognition, and the international roles de facto states perform and negotiate.

1.2.2. Patron-client relationships

In essence, patron-client relationships are asymmetric yet reciprocal relationships of material and/or immaterial exchange in which a more powerful actor, the patron, provides resources to a weaker actor, or the client, in exchange for support, compliance, or other concessions. The concept does not originate in IR scholarship but is rooted in a long-standing empirical phenomenon observable across historical periods, political systems, and levels of economic development. Early assumptions held that such relationships would decline with modernisation, economic development, and the institutionalisation of impersonal, centralised state authority. Yet empirical evidence has demonstrated their persistence and evolution across regime types and levels of development, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of PCRs (Eisenstadt & Roniger 1980: 46; Veenendaal 2017: 565). At the same time, their diffuseness, contextual variability, and informal institutionalisation make them difficult to delimit (Landé 1983).

Biermann (2025) provides a useful historical typology, distinguishing between ancient forms such as the Roman *clientele*, ecclesiastical and artistic patronage, feudal patron-client structures, modern party patronage and clientelism, and international PCRs. Within the latter category, secessionist PCRs constitute a distinct subtype, with de facto state-patron state relationships forming a particularly narrow and analytically relevant subset (Biermann 2025: 10–11). This typology also reflects the diffusion of PCR research across disciplines, which has produced

a fragmented and case-study-heavy research landscape. Until the mid-twentieth century, the concept was used mainly by historians studying ancient societies (Kolstø 2020: 141). From the 1950s onwards, it was adopted in anthropology, sociology, ethnology, and comparative politics, where it became central to debates on informal institutions, political order, and centre-periphery relations (Eisenstadt & Roniger 1980: 43; Biermann 2025: 11). In comparative politics, the focus gradually shifted from dyadic personal ties to broader network-based and systemic forms of clientelism, though still primarily within domestic political settings (Eisenstadt & Roniger 1984: 3).

The concept entered IR relatively late, initially through analyses of Cold War security alignments between superpowers and weaker states. In this context, patrons were typically great powers seeking clients largely in the Global South (Biermann 2025: 11; see also Shoemaker & Spanier 1984; Carney 1989). These accounts were strongly shaped by Cold War bipolarity, with PCRs understood as hierarchical security relationships embedded in global geopolitical competition (Kolstø 2020: 141). After the Cold War, interest in PCRs declined before re-emerging in the mid-2010s in a broadened conceptual form. Contemporary IR scholarship now recognises that patrons may include not only superpowers, but also regional and middle powers, as well as non-state actors such as international organisations, civil society actors, or even diasporas. What distinguishes a patron from a simple supporter or sponsor is the sustained provision of issue-specific resources that are valuable to the client and make a meaningful difference for it (Biermann 2025: 12; 15). This expansion has made PCRs relevant to the study of small states, asymmetric alliances, and contemporary hierarchical orders (Veenendaal 2017; Yüksel 2025;). Still, PCRs remain an underdeveloped area of IR theory, and scholarship on them is often idiosyncratic and non-cumulative (Biermann 2025: 11).

Conceptual proliferation has generated significant ambiguity. Related terms such as patronage, clientelism, (neo)patrimonialism, and dependency are often used interchangeably, despite their differing analytical assumptions (Hale 2015: 21–22; Veenendaal 2017: 565; Biermann 2025: 11). Dependency theory, for example, emphasises structural inequality in the international political economy (IPE) and has produced a rich literature around the concepts of *dependencia*, dependence, and dependency (Caporaso 1978). Carney (1989: 43) bridges these perspectives by arguing that PCRs incorporate not only socio-economic factors, but also ideological, cultural, diplomatic, and military dimensions. In other words, PCRs are multifaceted, multilayered relationships.

This proliferation has also prompted sustained criticism of conceptual overextension. Kaufmann (1974) and Hilgers (2011), for example, argue that clientelism risks losing analytical precision and, with it, usefulness, while Theobald (1983: 136) highlights the difficulty of distinguishing PCRs from general reciprocity. A central unresolved issue concerns the boundary between patron-client relationships and full dependency: at what point does a reciprocal relationship become structurally coercive, particularly where asymmetry becomes extreme? It is important to note that conceptual language often signals analytical

focus. Hale, for instance, argues that clientelism foregrounds the “clientele” (Hale 2015: 23). By contrast, the terms *depedencia* and dependency often signal an IPE focus, ignoring broader political, societal, or military ties that may introduce greater nuance and reciprocity into global interactions. As IPE literature focuses primarily on the exploitation of the Global South, it does not usually identify specific patrons that might act as champions of structurally disadvantaged states. Similarly, patronalism (used by Hale 2015) or patronage arguably directs attention to the patron’s side of the equation, whereas patron-client relationship carries stronger connotations of reciprocity and acknowledges that the two roles are mutually constitutive.

In response to this fragmentation, recent scholarship has sought conceptual consolidation by identifying the core features of PCRs. Most accounts converge on four key characteristics: asymmetry, reciprocity, compliance, and durability (Biermann 2025), with affectivity often treated as a contested additional dimension (Carney 1989, see also Veenendaal 2017; Yüksel 2025). Together, these features provide a minimal analytical framework for identifying PCRs across contexts. Asymmetry refers to the unequal distribution of power and resources between patron and client (Carney 1989; Kolstø 2020: 141). What produces this asymmetry is less straightforward. At the height of the Cold War, the focus was on differences in military capabilities (Shoemaker & Spanier, 1984: 13), while others have emphasised economic asymmetry (Carney 1989; Veenendaal 2017). In the case of *de facto* states, a key source of asymmetry lies in their status as non-recognised entities vis-à-vis patrons that are usually fully-fledged states.

Reciprocity captures the exchange of valued resources over time. Yet resources are broadly defined: they may be tangible, such as financial support, or intangible, such as loyalty (Biermann & Harsch, 2017), depending on what is needed and valued by the other party (Scott 1972: 93; Veenendaal 2017). These resources may also provide advantages to either patron or client in interactions with third parties. This resource exchange does not imply constant activity (Biermann 2025: 11), but it does mean that giving is contingent on later receiving (Hicken, 2011). PCRs are also described as relationships of diffuse obligation, based on informal understandings (Powell 1977: 157) that give both sides flexibility in responding to resource requests (Biermann 2025: 12). While some PCRs are underpinned by formal contracts (Hall 1977) – examples include Cold War-era treaties of friendship and contemporary alliance or integration agreements between *de facto* states and their patrons –, both sides ultimately retain some freedom to choose the scope and intensity of their commitment (Biermann 2025: 13). As discussed below, however, *de facto* states may be structurally disadvantaged in this regard.

The third dimension, compliance, reflects the client’s voluntary acceptance of constraints in exchange for benefits (Carney 1989). Crucially, both sides value the partnership and seek to maintain it. The literature particularly emphasises that clients, because of their reliance on patron resources, must show compliance with the patron’s demands and interests (Carney 1989: 45–46). However, although coercion, authority, or manipulation may be present, PCR’s break down if these

elements become dominant (Powell 1977: 148; Biermann 2025: 11). If the relationship becomes entirely one-sided, it is dependency rather than a PCR (Veenendaal 2017).

Durability refers to the long-term and iterative nature of these exchanges, with parties “maintaining accounts” over considerable time and repayment occurring when and how partners choose (Carney 1989; Hicken 2011). Yüksel (2025: 5) proposes that one way to identify a PCR is to examine whether the link survives political transitions and crises on either side. Shoemaker and Spanier (1984) similarly suggest that other actors should be able to perceive the relationship as a PCR, which implies an enduring link that is intense enough and has existed long enough to become externally recognisable.

Finally, affectivity – loyalty, trust, or perceived respect – may further stabilise the relationship, although its analytical status remains debated (Lemarchand & Legg 1972; Yüksel 2025). For Carney (1989), affectivity is one of the key characteristics distinguishing PCRs from dependency. It binds patron and client to one another (Lemarchand & Legg 1972: 151–153). The sense of having and helping a “friend” may prevent either side from feeling exploited, especially when requested resources are not provided because of competing interests. Reframing affectivity as perceived respect for a client’s identity, concerns, and self-defined goals, Yüksel (2025: 4) argues that affectivity is in fact a core feature of PCRs that remains underdeveloped. This perceived respect is particularly important for clients, who seek reassurance that they are valued partners, not merely someone to be managed. Yüksel therefore argues that Carney’s (1989) five-dimensional model that includes asymmetry, reciprocity, compliance, durability, and affectivity, captures the fluidity of PCRs better than Biermann’s (2025) more parsimonious four-dimensional model, which also subsumes compliance under exchange and obligation (Yüksel 2025: 4).

While IR scholarship provides a general framework for understanding asymmetric relationships, Biermann (2025) offers important contextual clarification for cases where the client is a secessionist entity. In such contexts, external patrons often play decisive roles in shaping conflict trajectories and outcomes, particularly through military and diplomatic support. PCRs are not merely background conditions but active determinants of political and territorial outcomes. De facto state–patron relationships can therefore be understood as a specific subtype of secessionist PCRs, characterised by heightened asymmetry and institutional vulnerability due to non-recognition. This makes de facto states a particularly useful empirical setting for examining the limits and dynamics of patron–client relationships.

In de facto state scholarship, PCRs are widely regarded as central to survival. Patrons provide essential resources, above all military protection and security guarantees, but also economic assistance, diplomatic support, and access to international networks. In some cases, the patron supplies most of the de facto state’s budget (see e.g. Ó Beachain *et al.* 2016: 443). Without such support, de facto states would struggle to survive (Kolstø 2020; Kopeček 2020: 159); Caspersen goes so far as to claim that the creation and continued survival of de

facto states are impossible without external actors (Caspersen 2009: 47). Empirical patterns strongly support this claim, as secessionist entities that have lacked or lost patron support have rarely survived for extended periods. One of the few longer-term examples of a patronless de facto state is Somaliland, whose survival has been enabled by parent state failure. Kosienkowski and Ženková Rudincová (2024), however, make a case for considering Ethiopia its quasi-patron, who, unlike a “full patron”, does not provide military protection. Arguably, PCRs in de facto state contexts are not merely one type of external relationship, but a structural condition of their existence.

Conversely, this dependence has often led to the characterization of de facto states as “puppets” of their patrons, implying a lack of meaningful agency (Caspersen 2015: 184; Kopeček 2020: 159). Yet such interpretations risk oversimplifying these relationships. As in the broader PCR literature, de facto state–patron relations are not purely hierarchical or coercive, but involve reciprocity, bargaining, and negotiated compliance. As Shoemaker and Spanier (1984: 24) argue, even highly asymmetric relationships should be understood as bargaining arrangements in which both sides seek to extract concessions at minimal cost. An additional dimension of this debate is what Pegg (2017) calls the polemical, highly politicised nature of studying these entities, or the “tabloid geopolitics” (O’Loughlin *et al.* 2014: 451), whereby academic scholarship on de facto states is often overshadowed by the popular portrayal of them by journalists and policy officials. While de facto state scholars are quick to point out that de facto states are not, in fact, puppets, it is also important to mention that the concept of puppet state remains underexplored. One study by Ivanel (2016) attempts to conceptualise puppetry, yet this conceptualisation is immediately contradicted by the following case selection. Thus, there is no clear understanding in de facto state literature on what constitutes a puppet state and when does a PCR turn into dependence or puppetry.

A key distinction between de facto state PCRs and other PCRs that partially feeds this puppetry narrative lies in the availability of alternatives. During the Cold War, client states could enhance their bargaining power by threatening to defect to a rival patron, thereby leveraging superpower competition (Shoemaker & Spanier 1984). Today, skilful manoeuvring and valuable resources may still give clients some choice between great-power and/or regional-power patrons. By contrast, de facto states typically lack such options. Due to their non-recognised status and limited international legitimacy, there is usually no meaningful competition for their patronage (Kolstø 2020: 142). This creates a structurally constrained environment in which dependence on a single patron is often unavoidable. It also raises an important analytical question: if clients lack viable alternatives, can these relationships still be considered “true” PCRs, or do they approximate dependency? While the absence of alternative patrons undoubtedly limits bargaining power, it does not eliminate it entirely. Rather, it reshapes the forms through which agency can be exercised. Kosienkowski (2020: 199), for example, argues that Transnistria successfully leveraged the threat of seeking an

alternative patron against Russia during the presidency of Igor Smirnov (1991–2011).

Even under extreme asymmetry, *de facto* states retain limited but meaningful agency, as discussed in the previous section. One mechanism is the ability to resist or defy the patron. Empirical studies show that *de facto* states have repeatedly challenged patron preferences, making them at times “troublesome” partners rather than passive recipients of support (Caspersen 2008; Kolstø 2020; Berg & Yüksel 2023; Yüksel & Berg 2025). Such defiance reveals that patron control is neither absolute nor uncontested. Given the reputational costs associated with supporting non-recognised entities, defiant clients raise the question of why patrons maintain them. In the absence of credible defection threats, traditional explanations based on competition for influence are insufficient. Scholars have therefore pointed to reputational and strategic considerations. Kolstø (2020) argues that patrons may wish to maintain a reputation as reliable allies, since abandoning a client could undermine their broader credibility in international politics. Similarly, Maczak (2005) notes that leaving a client “in the lurch” may damage a patron’s prestige and reduce its ability to attract or retain other clients. These arguments shift the analytical focus from client leverage to patron-side incentives, showing that PCRs are sustained not only by client dependence, but also by patron’s long-term strategic and reputational calculations.

Despite their necessity, PCRs impose significant costs on *de facto* states. As mentioned above, heavy reliance on external support can undermine claims to independence and international legitimacy, reinforcing perceptions of puppet status (Caspersen 2015; Kolstø 2020). But it may also have domestic consequences, as distrust of the patron state has been found to reduce trust in the *de facto* state president (Bakke *et al.* 2018: 159). As a result, *de facto* states often seek to frame these relationships as pragmatic and transactional rather than hierarchical (Bakke *et al.* 2018: 162). Dependence also creates vulnerability: patrons may reduce or withdraw support for strategic reasons, exposing *de facto* states to existential risks. Survey data from cases such as Abkhazia and Transnistria indicate that while populations value patron support, they often lack confidence in its long-term reliability (Toal & O’Loughlin 2016). Caspersen (2009: 47) also argues that external dependence creates significant dilemmas for *de facto* states: it undercuts their *de facto* independence, contradicts their strategy for gaining international recognition, and thereby undermines their long-term sustainability. This uncertainty incentivises *de facto* states to diversify their external ties, including engagement with other states, as well as with diasporas, international organizations, and non-state actors (Koinova 2011; Caspersen 2018: 385), and to pursue “earned engagement” strategies (Caspersen 2018). Conversely, strong patron backing may reduce incentives for broader international outreach, as illustrated by the narrowing of EU engagement space in Abkhazia following increased Russian involvement (Caspersen 2018: 384–385; De Waal 2018).

Patron involvement may also extend beyond external support into internal governance structures. In some cases, increased patron engagement has been associated with reduced autonomy, as seen in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after

Russian recognition in 2008 (Harzl 2018: 5). This suggests that patronage may involve not only resource provision but also varying degrees of institutional penetration, further complicating the distinction between clientelism and dependency. Recent scholarship emphasises the importance of crises in revealing and reshaping patron–client dynamics. Caspersen and Gueudet (2025: 178–180) show that crises, for example a military defeat or geopolitical shifts, can expose underlying tensions, generate mistrust, and trigger renegotiation of the relationship. Yet even severe crises do not necessarily lead to rupture; instead, they often result in recalibration within an enduring framework of dependence.

Study of elite navigations, categorised as defiance, dictation, and demand, helps to uncover how local leaders in *de facto* states utilise diplomatic and bureaucratic tools to manage ontological security concerns vis-à-vis the patron (Berg & Yüksel 2023; Yüksel & Berg 2025). In these studies of Turkish Cypriot and Abkhazian elites, *de facto* political elites emerge as “brokers” who can protect internal sovereignty and societal identity even while heavily dependent on a patron’s financial and military support. Similarly, Caspersen and Gueudet (2025) describe obstruction by *de facto* states as a tactical strategy to increase the cost of patron control. Such tactics may include bureaucratic and legal stalling, implementation sabotage, refusal to implement policies, and media or disinformation campaigns.

Crisis thus function as key moments in which the latent dynamics of PCRs become visible. As Lake (1996: 9) suggests, the extent of patron authority often becomes apparent only when the client tests its limits. This highlights the dynamic and contingent nature of PCRs, even in highly asymmetric settings. Despite these advances, the study of PCRs in *de facto* states remains fragmented. Much of the literature relies on single-case studies and emphasises dependence, while offering limited analysis of underlying mechanisms or variation across cases (Caspersen & Gueudet 2025: 180). Although some work acknowledges client agency and strategic behaviour within the PCR (see e.g. Caspersen 2008; Kolstø 2020), agency under conditions of extreme asymmetry and non-recognition remains insufficiently theorised.

Although PCRs are widely discussed conceptually, few systematic attempts have been made to operationalise or measure them. Kamilova and Berg (2012) offer the first such attempt, arguing that distinguishing puppet states from *de facto* states is “an empirical question” that can be addressed by measuring different forms and levels of dependence (Kamilova & Berg 2012: 153). They devise a four-category dependence matrix combining economic, social, and political factors with contrasting levels of *de facto* state dependence and patron state initiative, assigning numerical values to determine where an entity falls on the continuum from puppet state to full-fledged *de facto* state. Testing the matrix on Transnistria, they find that it falls into the category of being “under full control of the patron” (Kamilova & Berg 2012: 176). Tokarev *et al.* (2021) offer another attempt to “quantify” *de facto* state relations by comparing eight Eurasian *de facto* states’ interactions with both great powers and patron states in terms of military, political, and economic engagement from 2008 to 2020. Using expert assessments,

they measure the degree to which each case is engaged by patrons and great powers across military, political, and economic dimensions. Their results are first considered from “outside-in”: Russia engages *de facto* states more deeply than any other country, while the United States engages with more *de facto* states but less intensively. China, by contrast, purposefully distances itself from *de facto* states (Tokarev *et al.* 2021: 15). The “objects of engagement” are then also assigned “engagement points”, with Taiwan receiving the highest score and the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics the lowest (Tokarev *et al.* 2021: 15).

Overall, the literature suggests that PCRs in *de facto* states are best understood not as static hierarchies or simple dependencies, but as constrained bargaining relationships embedded in structurally asymmetric and politically contested environments. While *de facto* states face severe limitations due to non-recognition and lack of alternative partners, they retain limited forms of agency that allow them to negotiate, resist, and occasionally reshape their relationships with patrons. At the same time, the persistence of these relationships depends not only on client dependence but also on patron-side incentives, including strategic interests and reputational considerations. The studies included in this dissertation also emphasise the multifaceted and multi-layered nature of PCRs. Study II specifically contributes to the literature on measuring PCRs, proceeding from the assumption of Kamilova & Berg (2012) that their level of dependence could be approached as an empirical question.

1.2.3. Engagement without recognition

Despite international engagement with *de facto* states often being deemed unlawful, making non-engagement the default position (Lynch 2004, 2005; Caspersen 2012: 31, 40), complete isolation has rarely been achieved in practice. Depending on factors such as the root causes of the conflict, the position of the actors involved, and broader attitudes within international society, *de facto* states may engage in a wide range of interactions: economic exchanges involving trade, aid, and credit; political incentives, including diplomatic actions, implied recognition, and/or membership in international organisations; and societal or people-to-people contacts (Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018: 337; Berg 2023: 361). Dov Lynch points to inconsistency in the international community’s resolve to ignore or embargo *de facto* states (Lynch 2004: 112), and Berg and Toomla (2009: 31–33) also demonstrate that no *de facto* state has been entirely excluded from international society despite its illegality. Even international law has shown some flexibility in practice through small adjustments and accommodations for *de facto* states throughout their existence (Pegg 1998; see also Hadjigeorgiou 2024).

This empirical reality has been conceptualised as engagement without recognition, defined as interaction with *de facto* authorities “while maintaining the position that they are not regarded as independent sovereign actors in the international system” (Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018: 335). As Eiki Berg (2023: 360) argues, when military reintegration of *de facto* states is unfeasible due to high costs (whether stemming from scarce resources and parent state weakness, or the

reputational costs of instigating warfare) and recognition is politically unacceptable, engagement becomes the residual policy option. It is often pursued in the hope that it may help to “undermine illiberal practices and promote change” (Smith 2005, as cited in Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018: 337), making de facto states more amenable to conflict management, if not conflict resolution (Cooley & Mitchell 2010; Fischer 2010; de Waal 2018; Caspersen 2018). Cooley and Mitchell (2010) first articulated this logic in academic literature, while it was also adopted in policy debates. Indeed, the sudden attention to EwR was likely prompted by Peter Semneby, then-EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, who in 2009 presented his vision for engagement with Georgia’s breakaway territories after the August 2008 war – what became the “non-recognition and engagement policy” (Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018: 337). Analytically, EwR usually encompasses interactions between de facto states and the wider international community, including other states and international organisations, and the parent state (Caspersen 2018: 375–376; Berg & Pegg 2020), while relations with patrons are mostly treated separately under the PCR framework.

Engagement without recognition is embedded in the broader normative framework of sovereignty, where the principles of territorial integrity and self-determination coexist in tension. As George Kyris (2018: 431) argues, the post-1945 international system has clearly prioritised territorial integrity, rendering unilateral secession highly controversial, while being more accommodating towards secession with parent state consent (see also Fabry 2010; Griffiths 2016). Because sovereignty is treated as a zero-sum concept – the same territory cannot simultaneously belong to both the parent state and the secessionists –, engagement with de facto states inevitably carries political implications. Parent states and de facto states are especially prone to interpreting all levels and forms of interaction with recognised states and international organisations as implying recognition (Berg 2023: 361; see also Axyonova & Gawrich 2018; Kyris 2018), albeit for different reasons: for the former, it raises fears of “creeping recognition” (Fischer 2010), while for the latter, it tends to signify acceptance. However, Ker-Lindsay (2015: 276) argues that recognition requires explicit intent and cannot occur inadvertently, while Caspersen (2018: 376) emphasises that “in a legal sense, recognition does not creep”. Nevertheless, “less political” forms of engagement, such as civil society-level interaction, appear more acceptable to parent states and the international community (Berg & Pegg 2018; Kyris 2018; Relitz 2021).

EwR is underpinned by two main logics. First, engagement is seen as tool of conflict transformation. Broers (2005: 68) argues that promoting democratic governance and pluralism within de facto states may empower pro-settlement forces, potentially facilitating political change “through the backdoor”. Second, engagement is justified as a way to reduce isolation and dependency, particularly on patron states. Cooley and Mitchell (2010) argue that without external engagement, de facto states become more entrenched in clientelist relationships with their patrons. Conversely, isolation may reduce incentives for compromise and hinder conflict resolution (Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018). However, Berg (2023:

369) warns that patron's interests must also be considered when devising engagement strategies, since they may otherwise block such efforts. Where engagement aligns with patron interests, however, support for engagement may be quite strong.

The core dilemma remains that the longer *de facto* states survive, the harder they become to ignore (Axyonova & Gawrich 2018; Berg 2023: 360), and isolation has generally done little to quell their political objectives (Lynch 2005). Yet the effectiveness of engagement remains contested. Charles King captures the "dilemma and tragedy" of engagement aimed at conflict resolution: without recognition, the international community cannot propose effective policies beyond continuing with "negotiations" that are often "postponed, cancelled, or manipulated by all parties to ensure that they achieve little" (King 2001: 102), while recognition carries unacceptable political costs. Ker-Lindsay and Berg (2018: 339) conclude that the longer a conflict lasts and the more "frozen" it becomes, the more likely international engagement becomes. Berg (2023: 369), however, concludes that engagement frequently reinforces the *status quo*. For *de facto* states in particular, the *status quo* buys time, which they often see as advantageous: the longer they endure, the more time they have for state- and nation-building, and the "higher the practical and psychological barriers to reintegration" become (Blakkisrud & Kolstø 2012: 293).

Existing literature shows that engagement is neither uniform across cases nor stable over time. Rather, it is contingent on systemic, contextual, and actor-specific factors. Engagement is not simply present or absent; it exists along multiple dimensions that shape both its form and its political implications. Berg and Toomla's (2009) "normalization index" provides one of the earliest systematic attempts to capture this variation by comparing political, economic, and societal interactions across several *de facto* states. Their findings point to a spectrum ranging from quasi-recognition (e.g. Taiwan, Kosovo), through partial toleration (Northern Cyprus), to relative boycott (Abkhazia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Somaliland), while still emphasising that none are completely ignored or negated by international society (Berg & Toomla 2009: 43). This aligns with Pegg and Kolstø's (2015: 199) observation that some entities, such as Somaliland, benefit from extensive functional cooperation with international actors (the UN, the EU, the US), especially on security and counterterrorism, whereas others, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, remain highly isolated, with external engagement largely confined to diaspora links (see also Ó Beacháin *et al.* 2016). Ker-Lindsay (2018) observes similar variation through the prism of stigmatisation, identifying three broad factors shaping engagement: systemic factors, such as UN resolutions condemning secession; geopolitical alignment, particularly the positions of major powers; and contextual and domestic factors, including the behaviour of conflict parties and internal political considerations of the third party. Such variation strongly suggests that engagement is best conceptualised as a continuum, rather than a binary condition.

Engagement varies not only in intensity, but also in form, modality, and arena of interaction. Caspersen (2018: 377, 386) distinguishes between hard and soft

engagement, as well as between engagement involving the parent state and engagement involving the broader international community. Hard engagement entails direct interaction with *de facto* state institutions and authorities, which may strengthen their governance capacity and therefore carries a greater risk of being interpreted as implicit recognition. Soft engagement, by contrast, focuses on societal-level interaction, including civil society initiatives, educational exchanges, and humanitarian activities, and is generally regarded as more acceptable to parent states. These differing forms of engagement reflect broader differences in how engagement itself is understood by the actors involved. Parent states tend to view engagement primarily as a tool of conflict management, reintegration, and confidence-building aimed at maintaining links with populations they still consider under their jurisdiction, while avoiding the legitimization of *de facto* authorities. *De facto* states, by contrast, often favour forms of engagement that involve direct international interaction, as these are more closely tied to questions of status, legitimacy, and international standing (Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018: 339; Berg 2023: 362). This helps explain why *de facto* states may resist engagement with the parent state while simultaneously seeking broader international engagement. Beyond these dimensions, interaction may also occur between *de facto* states themselves, as demonstrated by Toomla (2016).

Ker-Lindsay (2018) emphasises that international responses to *de facto* states are not fixed but evolve in response to changing political conditions, developments on the ground, and shifts in relevant domestic politics. Conversely, he finds that the root causes of secession appear to have little effect on the degree of international engagement (Ker-Lindsay 2018: 366). The “multiplier effect” he identifies, where increased engagement begets further engagement (Ker-Lindsay 2018: 365), however, suggests a degree of path dependency. Systemic and structural factors, including UN Security Council resolutions condemning secession, the positions of major powers, and the general prioritisation of territorial integrity, influence the degree and form of engagement by shaping the international normative environment (Coggins 2011, 2014; Ker-Lindsay 2018: 370). These systemic constraints set the boundaries within which engagement policies are formulated and justified.

Actor-specific strategies and preferences also shape engagement, with the parent state’s stance often regarded as the single most important determinant of its scope and form (Ker-Lindsay 2018: 366–367; Harzl 2018). Parent states differ significantly in their willingness to tolerate or facilitate external interaction with secessionist territories. Azerbaijan and Georgia, for example, have adopted highly restrictive and isolationist approaches, limiting external access and framing engagement as legally problematic, whereas Moldova has been comparatively more permissive (Berg & Pegg 2020; Berg 2023: 369). Serbia, meanwhile, continues to oppose the recognition of Kosovo but has largely ceased taking punitive measures against states that recognise it (Ker-Lindsay 2018: 367). At the same time, parent states may also view engagement pragmatically, as a means of temporarily bracketing the issue of status in order to facilitate confidence-

building, improve relations, and potentially pave the way for a negotiated settlement (Caspersen 2018: 379–380, 386).

Parent states nevertheless often seek to tightly regulate the terms and modalities of engagement. This includes scrutiny of specific activities, demands that engagement be coordinated through the parent state, and even attempts to control the terminology used to describe *de facto* authorities and territories. Where patron involvement is strong, parent states frequently refer to breakaway territories as being under “illegal occupation” or “illegal annexation”, thereby framing engagement as problematic under international law (Harzl 2018: 9; Coppieters 2018). They may also delegitimise *de facto* state institutions through discursive practices, for example by placing “so-called” before official titles or avoiding formal terminology altogether. At Cyprus’s insistence, for instance, the UN refers to Turkish Cypriots as a “community” led by a “leader” rather than as being led by a president (Kyrus 2018: 433; see also Pegg 2017). Such practices restrict the scope of engagement and increase its political and diplomatic costs for external actors (Coppieters 2018: 357).

Pegg and Berg’s (2016) analysis of WikiLeaks cables shows how engagement with *de facto* states may vary even by a single state, revealing the inconsistencies in the US approach. Elsewhere (Berg & Pegg 2018), they argue that these differences are based on strategic calculations or a commitment to bringing about political change. They find evidence of the US campaigning against recognition of Abkhazia after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and discouraging any contacts between its diplomats and representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh, while also offering diplomatic support to Turkish Cypriots to ease their economic isolation and maintaining broad, sustained, and generally friendly interactions with Somaliland (Pegg & Berg 2016: 238). In seeking to increase its leverage and footprint in matters affecting its national interests, the US has given less weight to parent state sensitivities (Berg & Pegg 2018) than the international community more generally (Harzl 2018).

De facto states themselves can also shape engagement by accepting, modifying, or rejecting external initiatives (Caspersen 2018; Berg 2023). Their willingness to engage depends on factors such as strategic goals (e.g. prioritising recognition or consolidating *status quo*) and the degree of dependence on patron states (Caspersen 2018: 375). While *de facto* states may gain greater international acceptance by showing willingness to engage with the parent state (Ker-Lindsay 2018: 366), and while increased international engagement may raise their profile – helping explain their tendency to publicise even minor activities (Caspersen 2018: 384) –, not all engagement is considered beneficial. *De facto* states may worry that greater openness towards third parties could jeopardise patron support or steer them towards “creeping reintegration” (Caspersen 2018; Berg 2023: 366). This creates a dilemma: engagement is needed to strengthen the *status quo*, ensure survival, improve recognition prospects, and counteract the image of being a puppet (Caspersen 2015, 2018). Yet, as Blakkisrud and Kolstø (2011: 191) show in the Transnistrian case, extensive ties with the parent state may also prompt

accusations that independence is “imagined”. This in turn may increase pressure on de facto states to reintegrate with the parent state.

The EU deserves separate attention as a key case of EwR, given the high concentration of de facto states in its immediate neighbourhood. Since the 2004 enlargement, the EU has also included Cyprus, with its ongoing territorial conflict. In general, the EU’s approach reflects a dual commitment to non-recognition and pragmatic engagement, rooted in its broader objective of promoting regional stability and conflict transformation. As Coppieters (2019: 251) notes, the EU seeks to reconcile support for territorial integrity with the need to address realities on the ground, effectively “bracketing” status issues in order to enable interaction. This balancing act is especially visible in the so-called “non-recognition and engagement” (NRE) policy, first articulated after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War by Peter Semneby, as mentioned above. Initially designed for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, NRE maintained firm support for Georgia’s territorial integrity while promoting contact with local populations through confidence-building and development-oriented activities (Fischer 2010; Coppieters 2019: 241), such as civil society support, educational mobility, and technical cooperation (Berg 2023: 363–364).

However, the EU’s approach is also far from uniform and varies significantly across cases, reflecting both external constraints and internal divisions (Berg 2023). Access to Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, was severely restricted because of Azerbaijan’s strong opposition to EU engagement, while Georgia’s comparatively more permissive attitude allowed the EU to establish the office of the EU Special Representative and participate in the Geneva International Discussions (Harzl 2018; Relitz 2021). Even there, however, the EU has struggled to operationalise its engagement ambitions, with the “engagement” component of NRE often lagging behind the more consistently implemented policy of non-recognition (Harzl 2018: 51–52). The EU has been strongly inhibited by Georgia’s insistence on approving all international interactions with its breakaway territories.

In Eastern Europe, EU engagement has taken a more economic and regulatory form, particularly in Transnistria. The extension of Moldova’s Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) to Transnistrian firms is a notable example of direct engagement that incentivises compliance with EU rules without directly addressing status. This has produced some positive effects, including increased economic integration and some alignment with Moldovan and EU regulatory frameworks, suggesting that functional engagement can produce tangible outcomes even without political recognition. However, Kemoklidze and Wolff (2020) warn that these effects are highly context dependent, requiring interest and compliance both from the de facto state and the parent state. Their analysis of using trade as a confidence-building measure shows that similar results would be difficult to replicate with Georgia’s breakaway territories. The EU also engages directly with Kosovo, whose independence is recognised by most, but not all, member states. The five non-recognisers (largely because of domestic concerns) complicate how Kosovo can be addressed and included in political dialogue. While the EU has developed some strategies to mitigate this

issue, the result is an overreliance on a highly technical approach focusing on governance issues. Over time, this approach has become increasingly dissatisfactory for Kosovo, and has led to a standstill in terms of actual conflict management (Bargués *et al.* 2024: 32), while no progress has been made in overcoming the intra-EU disagreements over Kosovo's recognition either.

Overall, EU engagement is typically indirect and mediated, often implemented through international organisations, NGOs, or special representatives. It is also frequently needs-based and technocratic, focusing on areas such as development, education, and humanitarian assistance, rather than overtly political issues (Relitz 2021; Bargués *et al.* 2024). It remains highly sensitive to the positions of parent states, which often retain significant influence over the scope and modalities of EU involvement (Ker-Lindsay 2018; Harzl 2018). EU engagement is also largely *ad hoc* and under-institutionalised, lacking clear policy guidelines or long-term strategic coherence (Berg 2023: 368). Kyris (2018: 439) further notes the often short lifespan of EU initiatives due to political volatility and the difficulty of sustaining long-term commitments. Moreover, there is a persistent mismatch between the EU's ambitions and its instruments: while it aspires to play a meaningful role in conflict resolution and confidence-building, it often lacks the political leverage or operational flexibility to do so effectively (Harzl 2018: 48).

Another important limitation concerns local reception. Engagement policies do not automatically generate positive responses from *de facto* state authorities or populations. In Abkhazia, for example, EU initiatives have been perceived as overly constrained by the framework of territorial integrity, leading to scepticism or even alienation among local actors (Berg 2015; de Waal 2017). This underscores the importance of perceived neutrality and credibility: engagement is more likely to be effective when it is seen as beneficial, respectful of local agency, not overly subordinated to parent state agendas, and also acceptable to the patron state (Relitz 2021; Berg 2023: 366–369).

Overall, the literature suggests that engagement without recognition has not developed into a coherent or consistent strategy and its effectiveness is limited. While non-recognition policies remain stable, engagement is often fragmented and tends to reinforce the *status quo* (Berg 2023: 369). This may serve the interests of multiple actors: parent states maintain sovereignty claims, *de facto* states sustain autonomy, patrons retain influence, and external actors avoid more disruptive solutions. Engagement with *de facto* states remains stigmatised, but where there is a willingness to engage, almost any policy can be justified and there are few clear red lines (Ker-Lindsay 2018; Caspersen 2018). For example, the EU's engagement with Taiwan, which includes the establishment of the European Economic and Trade Office in Taipei, or its interactions with Somaliland, demonstrate that geopolitical considerations and economic interests can lead to relatively high levels of engagement even in politically sensitive contexts (Pegg & Kolstø 2015; Andrés & Arconada-Ledesma 2021). This dissertation contributes to the study of these varied and sometimes contradictory effects.

1.2.4. Role theory and geopolitical roles

Since its introduction into the study of political decision-making by Kalevi Holsti (1970), role theory has sought to explain foreign policy from the perspective of decision-makers (Breuning 2024a: 233). Emerging at a time when IR scholarship was dominated by structural approaches focused on systemic dynamics and material capabilities (Waltz 1959/2001; Singer 1961), role theory challenged the tendency to treat states as functionally similar units differentiated primarily by power. Instead, interested in understanding how states come to define their interests and appropriate courses of action in the first place, role theory asked how policymakers understand their state's position, responsibilities, and appropriate behaviour within the international system. In doing so, role theory bridges systemic, state-level, and individual-level analysis by linking foreign policy behaviour to decision-makers' understandings of national roles. As Wehner and Nolte (2017) note, role theory possesses descriptive, organisational, and explanatory value. Its descriptive strength lies in its rich conceptual vocabulary, its organisational value stems from its ability to bridge different levels of analysis, and its explanatory value derives from its adaptability and compatibility with other theoretical approaches (Wehner & Nolte 2017: 105, see also Walker 1987: 2; Thies 2010: 1).

Role theory has its roots in sociology, social psychology, and anthropology (Breuning 2011; Thies 2012). Two broad traditions have been particularly influential in shaping its development in political science and IR: structural role theory and symbolic interactionism, referred to as first- and second-generation role theory scholarship correspondingly. While both strands focus on actors' perspectives in social interaction (Stryker & Statham 1985), structural role theory emphasises socialisation into pre-existing roles, whereas symbolic interactionism highlights actors' capacity to interpret, negotiate, and reshape roles, and possibly the social structure itself through interaction (Stryker 2001, 2008; Breuning 2024a). Role theory is thereby closely connected to the agent-structure debate in IR. Following broader developments in IR, earlier role theory scholarship prioritised structural constraints, while later approaches increasingly emphasised agency, interaction, and interpretation.

First-generation role theory scholarship emerged from Holsti's (1970) seminal article and remained strongly influenced by the structural role theory and the approach Holsti adopted. Observing that both IR and Foreign Policy Analysis scholars referred to national roles without clearly defining them, Holsti argued that foreign policy behaviour could be better understood by examining how policymakers conceived their state's appropriate position, commitments, and functions within the international system (Holsti 1970: 234). His core contribution was thus the shifting of analytical attention from states as abstract units to the actual decision-makers: drawing on more than 900 statements by high-level policymakers in 71 countries, Holsti identified 17 national role conceptions (Holsti 1970). He additionally found that major powers tended to

articulate a broader range of roles than smaller states. Beyond the immediate findings, he established many of the field's core concepts, discussed below.

As noted above, this early scholarship reflected the broader intellectual environment of IR in the 1970s, when structural and system-level approaches dominated the discipline (Waltz 1959/2001; Singer 1961). Scholars such as Walker (1979, 1981, 1987), Wish (1980, 1987), Jönsson and Westerlund (1982), Hollis and Smith (1986), and Shih (1988) examined how states adapted their foreign policies to roles considered appropriate to their position within the international system. This work often linked national role conceptions to status, hierarchy, and material capability. Holsti (1970: 272), for example, identified overlaps between role types and states' systemic positions, while Wish (1980, 1987) similarly connected role and status. Although first-generation scholarship acknowledged that policymakers interpreted their state's role, it generally emphasised structural constraints more than the actors' ability to reinterpret or transform roles. It also focused primarily on role conceptions within individual states rather than on the interaction between one state's self-understandings and other actors' expectations (Breuning 2024b: 214–216).

Despite its conceptual promise, early role theory faced empirical and methodological difficulties. Walker (1979, 1987), attempting to replicate Holsti's approach, found only weak correlations between national role conceptions and actual foreign policy behaviour. Combined with its limited differentiation from structural role theories, these disappointing empirical results contributed to role theory's temporary decline. Nevertheless, first-generation scholarship established the field's core conceptual vocabulary and laid the groundwork for later interactionist, constructivist, and behavioural developments.

A second generation of role theory scholarship emerged from the late 2000s onward, driven by renewed interest in the individual level of analysis, the behavioural turn in IR, and growing engagement with constructivist and sociological approaches (Hudson 2005; Hafner-Burton *et al.* 2017; Breuning 2024a, 2024b). Drawing heavily on symbolic interactionism (Breuning 1995; Harnisch 2011; McCourt 2012; Wehner & Thies 2014), this scholarship places much greater emphasis on agency, interaction, and the dynamic processes through which roles are constructed, negotiated, contested, and transformed. Rather than treating roles as largely determined by systemic position, second-generation scholarship conceptualises them as products of ongoing interaction between actors.

This shift aligns role theory closely with key constructivist assumptions. Like constructivism, second-generation role theory assumes that actors' interests are socially constructed through ideas, norms, values, and beliefs (Wendt 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; Hopf 1998). It also shares the emphasis on the co-constitution of agents and structures, although role theory retains a distinctive focus on interaction between "self" and "other" rather than between "self" and structure (Breuning 2024b: 216). Building on Simon's (1985) concept of bounded rationality, role theorists argue that foreign policy behaviour can only be understood by examining how decision-makers interpret situations, define goals, and process information within cognitive and institutional constraints (Breuning 1995;

Breuning 2024b: 215–216). Role theory therefore forms part of behavioural IR, which highlights informational limitations, biases, and heuristics in decision-making (Mintz 2007; Breuning 2024a), rather than assuming fully rational actors.

Empirically, second-generation scholarship has moved beyond the relatively static and state-centric analyses of earlier work to focus on dynamic processes of role interaction. One major research programme examines role socialisation that also includes research on aspirant or emerging states, and how they are being socialised into the international society. Beasley and Kaarbo (2018) show that role socialisation begins prior to formal sovereignty, as actors debate both the desirability of independence and the roles a future state should perform. Thies (2012, 2013) conceptualises socialisation as a sequential and interactive “game” between an emerging state and a socialising actor, demonstrating how role conceptions develop over time through reciprocal interaction. His analyses of the United States and Israel show that socialisation is not a one-off adjustment, but an ongoing process shaped by historical junctures and strategic interaction. Related work by Walker (2011) develops binary role theory to analyse sequential interaction through formal modelling, although it retains a unitary actor assumption and is therefore less suited to capturing asymmetrical relationships (Breuning 2024b: 217). Other scholarship has applied role theory to supranational organisations, particularly the European Union, showing how roles are negotiated both internally among member states and externally with other actors (Aggestam & Johansson 2017; Klose 2018; Flockhart 2011). These developments highlight the flexibility of role theory in analysing a wide range of political entities.

A related strand of scholarship examines how weaker actors can shape the roles of more powerful states. Guimarães (2021), for instance, demonstrates that small states can influence regional hegemons by mobilising ideational resources such as norms and values, challenging assumptions that role socialisation flows only from strong to weak actors. This literature underscores that agency is not limited to materially powerful states, although its exercise remains contingent on contextual factors. Guimarães (2021) still concludes that the threshold for small states to influence change is rather high, requiring a confluence of several factors.

Another major research programme centres on domestic role contestation, moving beyond the elite-centric orientation of earlier scholarship. Recognising that states are collective rather than unitary actors, Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 2016) distinguish between horizontal contestation among elites and vertical contestation between elites and the public. Subsequent research shows that these forms of contestation may coexist (Özdamar 2016), vary across institutional contexts (Breuning 2016), or involve fragmented public role conceptions, particularly in newer states (Breuning & Ishiyama 2021). This line of inquiry significantly expands role theory by integrating domestic politics and highlighting how internal disagreement shapes foreign policy behaviour and role enactment.

Role theory scholarship is organised around a set of core concepts first articulated by Holsti (1970) and subsequently refined by later scholarship. At the centre is the concept of national role conception (NRC), referring to policymakers’

understandings of their state's appropriate position, functions, and patterns of behaviour in the international system. NRCs direct analytical attention to how decision-makers perceive commitments and responsibilities, rather than assuming that these are determined solely by material capabilities. Later scholarship further emphasises that NRCs are inherently relational because they are formulated in anticipation of interaction with others (Harnisch 2011; Breuning 2024a: 237). A second core concept is role enactment (or role performance), referring to actual foreign policy behaviour: the decisions, actions, and observable conduct of the state (Holsti 1970; Harnisch 2011). Role enactment is analytically distinct from role conception because states may fail to behave consistently with their articulated roles. This distinction is central to empirical role theory research, which seeks to explain both alignment and divergence between role conceptions and behaviour.

A third key concept is role expectations, sometimes called role prescriptions, which denote the expectations held by other actors regarding the appropriate behaviour of a given state (Holsti 1970; Harnisch 2011). Harnisch (2011) conceptualises this relationship through the interaction between *ego* (the actor's own role conception) and *alter* (external expectations). Foreign policy behaviour thus emerges through interaction between internal self-understandings and external expectations. Finally, Holsti (1970: 240) introduces the concept of position, referring to the broader system of role expectations within which actors operate. Roles are embedded within this social structure, which shapes, but does not fully determine the range of possible role conceptions and enactments. Roles may therefore be understood both as positions within an organised social system and as categories of actors within social life (Wehner & Nolte 2017: 105; see also Thies 2010; Harnisch 2011; Wehner & Thies 2014). Together, these core concepts – national role conception, role enactment, role expectations, and position – form the foundational framework of role theory (Breuning 2024a: 236).

To summarise once more some core premises of role theory: roles are dialectic, hierarchic, socially constructed, and relational. While guided by the structure of the international society that “shapes but does not entirely determine the possible roles a state can enact” (Wehner & Nolte 2017: 106), grounded in states' capacity to act (their resource base), and reflecting actors' self-identification, it is only through interactions with external actors that certain role projections are accepted or rejected (Elgström 2007: 448; McCourt 2012). Because roles are relational, each role presupposes a counterrole: for example, there cannot be a patron without a client. As roles emerge through interactions, they are not static, responding to the changes in the domestic circumstances and the international environment. They are also not singular: actors may perform several roles simultaneously depending on context. However, the range of feasible roles is generally linked to an actor's status within the international hierarchy and resource base, with higher-status actors possessing greater capacity to prescribe or shape the roles of others (Thies 2012: 33).

Second-generation scholarship has expanded this conceptual toolkit further. Role socialisation, as mentioned above, captures the interactive processes through

which actors learn, internalise, negotiate, or resist roles in relation to others (Thies 2012, 2013). Another major development concerns the topic of role conflict. Building on earlier observations that states may hold multiple roles, Brummer and Thies (2015: 279) distinguish between interrole conflict, where actors simultaneously hold incompatible roles, and intrarole conflict, where conflicting expectations surround a single role. These concepts allow for a more nuanced understanding of inconsistency and tension in foreign policy behaviour. Closely related is the distinction between master roles and auxiliary roles. Thies (2013) defines master roles as roles salient across contexts, anchoring an actor's position in the international system (e.g. a great power), whereas auxiliary roles relate to specific issue areas or relationships, and functions that actors can carry out (e.g. a mediator). This distinction helps explain how actors organise multiple role commitments and how role hierarchies evolve (Wehner 2015; Wehner & Nolte 2017).

Second-generation scholarship also introduces the concept of role contestation, reflecting the recognition that states are not unitary actors. Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 2016) distinguish between horizontal contestation among elites and vertical contestation between elites and the public, thereby integrating domestic politics into role theory. Additional refinements include role coherence, referring to the alignment between role conceptions, role enactment, and external expectations, as well as greater emphasis on roles as relational, dynamic, and socially constructed (Elgström 2007; Wehner 2015; Guimarães & Maitino 2019). Finally, scholars have explored the relationship between roles and identity, generally concluding that while roles express aspects of identity, they remain analytically distinct and more directly observable (Stryker 2001; Harnisch 2012).

Particularly relevant for this dissertation is the emerging integration of geopolitics and role theory, an area that remains comparatively underdeveloped despite considerable analytical overlap. Both approaches examine how political actors understand and position themselves within wider international structures, but they traditionally emphasise different dimensions. Role theory focuses on socially constructed expectations and patterns of behaviour, whereas geopolitics highlights territory, spatial positioning, and the strategic significance of geography. Nevertheless, some scholars have attempted to bridge these perspectives by showing how geographical imaginaries and territorial considerations shape national role conceptions and foreign policy behaviour (Guzzini 2012; Wehner & Nolte 2017).

The clearest attempt to integrate these perspectives is offered by Wehner and Nolte (2017) in their study of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). They develop a role-theoretical framework designed to identify the geopolitical roles employed by policymakers (Wehner & Nolte 2017: 102). Their argument is that geopolitical thinking aligns naturally with role theory because it defines foreign policy roles through geographical markers such as territory, resources, population, and strategic location (Wehner & Nolte 2017: 106). Guzzini (2012: 4) further argues that geopolitics often relies on forms of environmental determinism derived from both physical and human geography, particularly in discourses that

essentialise nations. In this understanding, geopolitics reflects the interplay between geography, territory, and identity politics in shaping how states define themselves and their place within regional and international orders.

Wehner and Nolte (2017) build on Guzzini's (2012) earlier work on post-1989 foreign policy identity crises in Europe. Guzzini (2012: 3–4) argues that geopolitical narratives become especially attractive during periods of ontological insecurity, when states seek to redefine their place within the international system. Spatial narratives and territorial references can help stabilise national role conceptions at such times. At the same time, Guzzini notes that the mobilisation of geopolitical thought in these circumstances is not inevitable and depends on broader political and historical developments (Guzzini 2012: 4). He further warns that when geopolitical reasoning becomes dominant, its tendency to essentialise geography and identity may contribute to a more securitised international environment (Guzzini 2012: 5). By contrast, Wehner and Nolte (2017: 103) argue that geopolitical thinking has long been embedded in South American foreign policy narratives.

Despite these contributions, the integration of geopolitics and role theory remains limited, if not entirely non-existent, in de facto state scholarship. Urban Jakša employs the concept of geopolitical roles in his dissertation on Abkhazia's foreign relations (Jakša 2019) and a later article on Abkhazia's position within the Russia-EU-Georgia triangle (Jakša 2023). But Jakša draws on empirical constructivism and critical geopolitics, not on role theory itself. He argues that the concept of geopolitical roles “brings together ideational and material aspects of de facto state identity” (Jakša 2019: 36). Observing that the term is frequently used by policy practitioners and media but lacks conceptual clarity in academic literature, he defines a geopolitical role as:

a set of behaviours exhibited by a certain political entity in international politics, which reflects its position, importance and ability to project power and exert influence. This is in turn influenced by material-territorial factors, such as physical location, size, climate, topography, demography, natural resources, and technological factors that determine its strategic value for other (national, regional or global) players in international politics. The geopolitical role thus depends on geographical factors as well as on subjective perception and interpretation of these factors (strategic importance ascribed to them) by themselves and other political entities. (Jakša 2019: 39).

Jakša (2019: 43–44) also develops a typology of six geopolitical roles played by de facto states: divider, middle man, tollman, extorter, keeper of the *status quo*, and emulator. His analysis of Abkhazia demonstrates how these roles shift over time depending on regional dynamics and relations with external actors. In the 1990s, Abkhazia functioned primarily as a “middle man” relying on informal economic networks across the Georgian–Abkhaz boundary. Later, it increasingly adopted the roles of “keeper of the *status quo*” and “divider” through its strategic relationship with Russia and its contribution to obstructing Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Jakša also argues that Abkhazia gradually abandoned the role

of “emulator”, through which it sought to mimic recognised democratic states in the hope of gaining greater Western engagement and recognition (Jakša 2019: 263).

In a later article, Jakša (2023) examines Abkhazia’s foreign policy after the adoption of the “Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Abkhazia” in 2020 and its revision in 2021. He focuses on three geopolitical roles: the (in)stability entrepreneur, the keeper of the *status quo*, and the emulator, and argues that Abkhazia employs strategies of audience segregation and strategic ambiguity to perform multiple geopolitical roles simultaneously within the Russia-EU-Georgia triangle (Jakša 2023: 244).

Although Jakša’s work represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to apply geopolitical role analysis to de facto states, it also highlights some unresolved conceptual issues. Most notably, he does not clearly specify what distinguishes geopolitical roles from broader national role conceptions in role-theoretical terms, nor does he systematically identify the geographical markers from which these roles derive in the manner originally proposed by Holsti (1970). Nevertheless, his work demonstrates the potential analytical value of integrating geopolitics and role theory for understanding how de facto states position themselves within asymmetric regional and international environments. This dissertation, and most notably Studies IV and V, advances this scholarship.

1.3. Research gaps

The previous sections demonstrate that de facto state scholarship has become considerably more nuanced over time. Earlier debates focused primarily on whether de facto states constituted a distinct and analytically meaningful category in the first place and, if so, how they should be conceptualised. More recent research has expanded to cover a much broader range of topics, including external relations, internal governance, legitimacy, identity, and everyday politics (see overviews for example in Pegg 2017; Dembinska & Campana 2017). Nevertheless, research gaps remain. Some are more closely linked to the four themes discussed above, while others cut across the literature more broadly. This section first outlines the theme-specific gaps before turning to some more general limitations in the field. It concludes by outlining the specific contribution of this dissertation.

The discussion of agency demonstrates that important advances have been made in recognising de facto state agency as bounded, relational, and context-dependent. Nevertheless, three key shortcomings remain. First, agency is rarely conceptualised directly, instead being fragmented across discussions of sovereignty, legitimacy, governance, and recognition. This creates ambiguity regarding where de facto state agency is located and how it can be observed or compared across cases. Second, existing scholarship does not sufficiently integrate the internal and external dimension of agency into a unified analytical framework. Research on agency remains heavily elite- and foreign-policy centric, with limited incorporation of local elites, social accommodation, and everyday governance into explanations of de facto state action. Third, the broader structuring

dynamics shaping de facto state agency, particularly patron-client relationships and engagement without recognition, as well as international role performance, are often treated separately rather than as interconnected mechanisms. Similar concerns are raised by Dembinska and Campana (2017), who call for stronger integration between comparative politics and IR approaches for the study of de facto states.

Despite extensive scholarship portraying patronage as close to a structural condition of de facto state survival, important gaps also remain in the literature on PCRs. While some work has already been done on some of these topics, each would require additional testing, including, where possible, comparatively. First, there is still limited theorisation of the mechanisms through which clients exercise agency under conditions of extreme asymmetry, including through the use of reverse leverage, bargaining strategies, or attempts to pursue “multi-vector” foreign policies – although some new directions are proposed by Marandici (2025). Second, while some work is already being done on the role of crises as mechanisms of change within PCRs (see e.g. Berg *et al.* 2025; Caspersen & Gueudet 2025; Kolstø 2025), the topic remains underexplored. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is still no clear conceptual or empirical framework for distinguishing patron–client relationships from full dependency or “puppetry”. In many ways, the field is still consolidating around the basic defining features of PCRs, as illustrated by ongoing debates over whether affectivity should be treated as a core dimension (see Yüksel 2025). Relatedly, there remains unresolved tension regarding which dimensions constitute a PCR: whether the focus should rest primarily on security and economic ties or also encompass broader societal and cultural relations alongside politics, and whether some dimensions should be considered more important than others. Kamilova and Berg (2012) suggest that the distinction between de facto states should be empirically measurable, yet this possibility remains largely unexplored, highlighting the need for more systematic operationalisation and testing.

Engagement without recognition has emerged as a pragmatic middle ground between military reintegration and formal recognition. Yet this literature also contains several unresolved issues, relating both to underexplored cases and actors and to the conceptualisation, operationalisation, and explanation of engagement itself. Existing scholarship still lacks robust evidence regarding implementation, causal effects, and the conditions under which engagement alters governance practices or conflict trajectories rather than merely stabilising the *status quo*. At the same time, research often under-specifies engagement as a reciprocal and socially embedded process by insufficiently tracing how de facto authorities, patron states, parent states, and their populations interpret, resist, or instrumentalise engagement initiatives. Earlier scholarship frequently assumed that de facto states sought to maximise international engagement as a pathway to recognition, although more recent studies have begun to challenge this assumption (e.g. Comai 2017). We still know relatively little about how de facto states themselves evaluate different forms of engagement, under what conditions they accept or reject external initiatives, and how domestic political dynamics shape these

choices. The relationship between EwR and patron–client relations also remains insufficiently explored. Although the two are often treated as analytically distinct, in practice they are deeply intertwined, with all sides adjusting their approaches based on developments along the other axis. More research is therefore needed on how engagement policies intersect with patron interests, how *de facto* states navigate between patrons and other external actors, and whether engagement can meaningfully alter patterns of dependency.

The application of role theory and geopolitical roles to the study of *de facto* states likewise remains one of the underdeveloped and underexplored approaches to the study of *de facto* states, despite considerable analytical potential. Role theory offers useful tools for examining how *de facto* state foreign policy is shaped through interaction between national role conceptions and external role expectations. It may also help to illuminate the “attempted roles” through which *de facto* states seek to legitimise themselves internationally. At the same time, the geopolitical nature of *de facto* state survival suggests that closer integration of role theory and geopolitics may also be fruitful. Bringing together sovereign role conceptions, alter expectations, and territorial imaginaries could deepen our understanding of how *de facto* states position themselves within conditions of non-recognition and geopolitical contestation.

Taken together, these four themes also reveal several broader, cross-cutting limitations within the field. Most importantly, the literatures on agency, patronage, engagement, and roles often remain analytically disconnected despite their clear empirical overlap. There is therefore a need for more integrated approaches that treat internal governance, external validation, and international interaction as mutually constitutive processes. More broadly, *de facto* state scholarship would benefit from stronger engagement with adjacent fields studying other forms of limited statehood, such as microstates or what Comai (2017) terms “small dependent jurisdictions”. The field also remains heavily reliant on single-case studies or limited comparisons (Pegg 2017; Marandici 2025), with post-Soviet cases continuing to dominate the literature. More cross-regional and historical comparison would help improve generalisability. In methodological terms, the field would benefit from greater methodological pluralism, new sources of data, and more cumulative research designs. Longitudinal research also remains limited, as many studies focus on particular moments in time, which may partly explain why analyses of the same cases sometimes reach contradictory conclusions.

At the same time, many of these limitations stem from genuine practical constraints, including restricted access to *de facto* states (which in some cases is worsening again after years of moving towards increased openness and improved access), or limited data availability. While *de facto* states are no longer informational black holes *per se*, they are still sites where the data that is of interest to researchers may be considered sensitive. Research funding is also an issue, as some institutions may not be willing to fund research in “places that do not exist”. Additionally, the aforementioned issues of politicisation of this research continue to plague the field (Pegg 2017). Some of these challenges have also

affected the studies included in this dissertation, as discussed in the limitations section.

This dissertation does not seek to address all the gaps identified above. Instead, focusing specifically on the foreign policy of de facto states, it makes eight main contributions through its five studies and the ensuing discussion in this introductory chapter:

- 1) The dissertation develops a clear and consistent conceptualisation of de facto state agency rooted in its capacity to act: to negotiate, govern, engage externally, manage patron relations, and exploit geopolitical uncertainty. This contrasts with existing research which has tended to discuss agency in a more roundabout manner, through the analyses of sovereignty or legitimacy or implying that some activity is proof of de facto state agency, without conceptualising it.
- 2) The findings suggest that de facto state agency may also be about what de facto states could potentially do or even what they choose not to do. This is a significant contribution to the study of de facto states, since most of the literature assumes that in their quest for international recognition, they would utilise all possibilities for engagement and for diversifying their foreign policies.
- 3) In relation to patron-client relationships, the dissertation makes a significant original contribution by developing a comparative tool for measuring patron-client dependence in a multidimensional manner. More generally, this advances the strand of de facto state research dedicated to developing novel indices for measuring various aspects of de facto statehood and adding new methods of comparison. More specifically, the tool helps to test the assumption that through measuring levels of dependence, it is possible to distinguish de facto states from puppet states.
- 4) The dissertation contributes to the literature on engagement without recognition by demonstrating through both a single-case study and comparative case studies that EwR is a double-edged mechanism. While it may reduce isolation and expand agency, it can also inadvertently consolidate de facto statehood rather than promote reintegration and, in some cases, reinforce dependence on patron states. Coupled with similarly contradictory findings from existing literature, the dissertation thus reaffirms that the success of engagement strategies tends to be limited and is highly context dependent.
- 5) The dissertation introduces geopolitical roles as a conceptual tool for understanding how de facto states utilise geographical markers like territory, resources, populations, and strategic location to expand their foreign policy manoeuvring space. This is a novel contribution to de facto state literature, which has made very limited use of role theory so far. Additionally, the use of role theory allows to reconceptualise agency as role-making, opening another useful avenue for the study of de facto state agency.

- 6) The dissertation contributes to greater comparative breadth within the field. All but one of the five studies are comparative, with Studies I and II covering eight and six cases respectively, thereby facilitating broader cross-regional comparison.
- 7) The dissertation consistently centres the perspectives of de facto states themselves. Rather than treating them merely as objects of engagement shaped by parent states, patrons, or third parties, the studies approach them as political actors and examine how they engage with others despite significant structural constraints.
- 8) The dissertation advances the use of a four-party relationship model for the study of de facto state foreign policy endeavours, emphasising the inter-linked nature of the relationship dynamics between de facto states, parent states, patrons, and third parties, and the need for more holistic analyses based on this approach. Potentially, such analyses could also provide better insights for the EwR literature and policy recommendations built on it, as successes and failures of engagement are often influenced by the other relationship dynamics.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Case selection

The studies included in this dissertation mostly focus on contemporary cases that in addition to being mature *de facto* states, also have a specific patron *state*, whose support is widely acknowledged as being crucial in allowing the *de facto* state to maintain its independence, even if the patron state itself withholds *de jure* recognition (see Study II). These cases represent what Biermann (2025: 14) calls master patron settings, where there is a long-term association between a *de facto* state and a main patron state, whereas other interested parties and supports are relegated to the role of “third party”.

The cases covered in the five studies are Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria whose patron state is Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh whose patron state was Armenia,⁴ Northern Cyprus with Turkey as the patron state, as well as Kosovo and Taiwan, whose patron is the USA. Arguably, these latter cases might also be considered to represent other types of patron-client settings: regarding Kosovo, the EU’s importance as a patron has risen over time. However, this dissertation argues that it was the tacit support of the USA that allowed Kosovo to declare independence unilaterally in the first place, and that bolstered subsequent recognitions by other states, and that the US still holds an outsized influence on Kosovo’s political life (see Study II). Similarly, in Taiwan’s case, the US has at times been reluctant to fully and openly embrace the role of a patron (occasionally leaving Taiwan as appearing patronless), but it is still the main security provider for Taiwan that has also influenced the internal political developments and considerations over time (Tucker 2011). In all these cases, the *de facto* states have achieved a relatively high level of statehood but differ in terms of wider acceptance of their agency. In addition to these cases, Studies I and V also include Somaliland as a contrasting case of a patronless *de facto* state, whose survival is made possible by the extreme weakness of the parent state, Somalia.

Table 1 provides an overview of the eight cases covered across the five studies. What emerges from this comparison is that each *de facto* state separately is rather marginal when looking at their territory and population, as well as their recognitions. Exceptions here are Somaliland with a claimed territory of 177 000 km² (placing it between Cambodia and Uruguay in comparison) and a population size that would place it between Kuwait and Panama if it were a recognised state. Kosovo as well has over 1.5 million people – more than Estonia – and while Taiwan is small in size, its inclusion in the list of *de facto* states brings the number of people living in *de facto* states close to 30 million. The table further reveals their relative longevity. Taiwan can be considered the

⁴ Regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, the analysis focuses on its situation prior to the Second Karabakh War in the autumn of 2020. This *de facto* state fully ceased to exist from 1 January 2024.

oldest, although it is also a special case among other de facto states in that it started out as a fully recognised state that has gradually lost recognition by other states as the People's Republic of China has gained weight in international politics. As such, Taiwan has not issued a formal unilateral declaration of independence, and the "date of birth" in the table below reflects the moment that transferred China's representation in the UN from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China.

Focusing on mature de facto states in stable patron-client relationships excludes a few prominent cases. For example, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR, also known as Western Sahara), does not have stable control over most of the territory it lays claim to, and its government operates in-exile from refugee camps in Algeria, where most of the people they represent also live. Despite this reality, more than 40 states recognise SADR.⁵ Another excluded case is Palestine: while the Palestinian Authority (PA) is nominally recognised as the government, in practice, their control is only limited to parts of the territory considered as Palestinian (West Bank; Gaza has been out of PA control since 2006), and even in the West Bank, their governance is limited due to increasing interference by Israel. Still, the state of Palestine has over 150 international recognitions.⁶ Returning to the discussion on the Montevideo Convention in the conceptualisation section, these two cases illustrate further that the "capacity to enter into relations with other states" is often more related to international politics and strategic considerations than actual state capacity, as most of the mature de facto states have considerably fewer recognitions than these two entities.

⁵ As of the beginning of 2026, 46 UN member states still recognise SADR. This represents a considerable decline: as many as 84 UN member states have recognised SADR in the past, but many have subsequently withdrawn their recognition in favour of Morocco's claim over the disputed territory. See Reis (2024).

⁶ As of September 2025, 157 UN member states recognised the State of Palestine. See Ali (2025) for an overview.

Table 1. Surveyed de facto states in comparison

	Abkhazia	NKR	Transnistria	South Ossetia	TRNC	Somaliland	Kosovo	Taiwan
Area (km ²)	8,660	4,400 ⁷	4,163	3,900	3,355	177,000	10,887	36,197
Population	244,926 ⁸	146,100 ⁹	475,665 ¹⁰	53,532 ¹¹	550,000 ¹²	4,294,135 ¹³	1,585,566 ¹⁴	23,235,002 ¹⁵
UDI	23 July 1992	2 Sept 1991	2 Sept 1990	28 Nov 1991	15 Nov 1983	18 May 1991 ¹⁶	17 Feb 2008 ¹⁷	(25 Oct 1971) ¹⁸
Parent state	Georgia	Azerbaijan	Moldova	Georgia	Cyprus	Somalia	Serbia	PR China
Patron state	Russia	Armenia	Russia	Russia	Turkey	none	U.S.	U.S.
Recognitions (August 2026)	4	0	0	4	1	1	110 ¹⁹	12

⁷ While the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast covered approximately 4,400 km², the territory controlled by Armenian forces following the First Karabakh War expanded to around 11,500 km² before being reduced to approximately 3,170 km² after the Second Karabakh War. Nagorno Karabakh Republic ceased to exist on 1 January 2024.

⁸ Source: State Committee of the Republic of Abkhazia on Statistics (2021).

⁹ Source: Artsakh Republic National Statistical Service (2017).

¹⁰ Source: Government of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (2016).

¹¹ Source: Department of State Statistics of the Republic of South Ossetia (2016).

¹² This figure reflects de facto population and is based on estimates; see Hatay (2024).

¹³ Source: UNICEF (2022).

¹⁴ Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2024).

¹⁵ Source: National Statistics, Republic of China (Taiwan) (2026).

¹⁶ Somaliland first proclaimed its independence on 26 June 1960 and received formal recognition from 35 sovereign states. On 1 July 1960, Somaliland merged with the Trust Territory of Somaliland (former Italian Somaliland) into the Somali Republic (Kaplan, 2008).

¹⁷ Kosovo first proclaimed independence on 2 July 1990; however, this declaration resulted in the creation of parallel institutions rather than effective territorial control.

¹⁸ Although Taiwan has never formally proclaimed itself an independent state and instead views itself as the legal continuation of the Republic of China, established on 1 January 1912, its emergence as a de facto state is often traced to UN General Assembly Resolution 2758. Adopted on 25 October 1971, the resolution, titled *Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*, the resolution recognised the representatives of the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations and expelled "the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek" from the organization (United Nations General Assembly, 1971).

¹⁹ This figure remains contested, as Serbian authorities maintain that several states have subsequently withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo.

2.2. Research questions and analytical focus

Building on the theoretical and empirical discussions outlined above, this section presents the central research question of the dissertation, as well as the specific research questions addressed by each of the five individual studies. These study-specific questions function as subquestions which, taken together, contribute to answering the overarching research question. In addition to presenting the questions themselves, the section briefly outlines the aims and analytical focus of each study, highlighting how they collectively contribute to understanding the agency of de facto states in the context of patron–client relationships and engagement without recognition.

The central research question of the dissertation is: *How is the agency of de facto states shaped and affected by patron-client relationships and engagement without recognition?*

Study I focuses on the limited agency of de facto states. Its central research question is: *how far, and in what ways, have unrecognised entities been able to act within and upon the international system?*

Conceptualising de facto state agency as both the “capacity to do” and “exerting the power”, the study compares eight cases to examine whether de facto states can be understood as agents in their own right. By analysing (1) their role in the conflict management and conflict resolution processes, (2) their capability to enter into international relations; and (3) their ability to counter the patron, the study explores the extent of their subjective freedom being exercised and the ways in which “being an agent of something” has been strategically used by de facto states during negotiation processes. The study also considers how agents’ role positions, which may either empower or constrain de facto states, shape their relationships with external supporters. In doing so, this study highlights how the ambiguities and grey zones of the international system empower and enable de facto states to persist and exploit uncertainty to expand their actorness.

Study II focuses on patron-client relationships. It introduces a measurement tool designed to capture the multidimensional nature of PCRs, addressing the following research question: *How can the intensity and scope of patron-client relationships be explained by measuring the variables that characterise resource exchanges across four dimensions of interdependence: (1) economic, (2) political-military, (3) social-cultural, and (4) connectivity?*

Comparing six cases, this study examines how dependence is sustained within de facto state-patron state relationships. It argues that patronage cannot be understood solely through security dependence, a dimension earlier scholarship, partly under the influence of the Cold War, tended to overemphasise. Instead, the study advances the argument that PCRs are sustained through multiple overlapping forms of resource exchange, with social and cultural ties playing a particularly important role in maintaining perceptions of patronage as mutually beneficial and benevolent. The study also contributes to the debates on different

types of PCRs, but on a broader level, it explores the possibility of quantifying the complex PCRs, with the aim of easing systematic comparison. For that end, an original dataset (compiled between 2015 and 2017) comprising 20 indicators across the four dimensions outlined in the research question.

Study III examines whether de facto states can be understood as foreign policy actors in their own right, and whether their agency plays a more significant role in strategic manoeuvring than is generally acknowledged. Focusing on the four post-Soviet cases, the study addresses the following research question: *How do Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh differ in their foreign policy strategies and in their capacities and capabilities for external engagement?*

The study explores how de facto states, driven by their need for physical survival and pursuit of legal recognition, are pushed into complex patron-client relationships by their small size and international isolation. At the same time, it demonstrates how they can pursue independent foreign policy strategies through paradiplomacy, diaspora networks, and engagement without recognition. The study offers a systematic comparison of the foreign policy institutions and strategies of the four de facto states.

Study IV focuses on the single case of Transnistria, examining the motives and instruments through which both the EU and Russia project influence towards the territory, while also analysing how de facto state authorities manage tensions arising from externally assigned roles. The study addresses the following two-part research question: *how does an actor seeking to determine its future trajectory, navigate between competing allegiances and spheres of influence, and how can it pursue dual alignments perceived as complementary rather than contradictory?*

Transnistria represents a particularly useful case for examining how the simultaneous utilisation of patron-client relationships on the one hand and engagement without recognition on the other may enable de facto states to shape allegiances, construct new geopolitical roles, and potentially alter conflict dynamics, in the context of the strategic competition between Russia and the EU.

Study V continues the discussion of geopolitical roles by seeking to theorise geopolitical role constructions more systematically. The study aims to better understand (1) the mechanisms linking geographical markers (territory, resources, and population) to geostrategic value, and (2) the logic of mutually constitutive interaction through which de facto states shape geopolitical roles in response to external actors and their geostrategic calculations, thereby increasing their agency. Its central research question is: *How can role theory be adapted to incorporate geographical markers through the lens of power contestations and actor-centred interactions?*

Unlike the other studies, this contribution is primarily conceptual and theoretical. It seeks to advance the discussion of geopolitical roles by bringing together role theory, geopolitics, and de facto state studies within a single analytical

framework. Although the theoretical propositions will remain subject to future empirical testing, the study draws on the cases of Somaliland and Transnistria to provide illustrative examples through selected elite-level self-perceptions, expert analyses, and behavioural extrapolations demonstrating the usefulness of the proposed framework.

Taken together, the five studies approach the central research question from complementary theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives. While Studies I and III focus primarily on de facto state agency and foreign policy behaviour, Study II examines the multidimensional nature of patron–client relationships and develops a tool for measuring dependence. Study IV explores how de facto states navigate competing external influences through the combined dynamics of patronage and engagement without recognition, whereas Study V advances a conceptual framework linking role theory and geopolitics to the study of de facto states. Collectively, the studies aim to demonstrate that de facto states, despite operating under severe structural constraints, possess meaningful, if bounded, forms of agency that shape their external relations, strategic positioning, and survival.

2.3. Data and methods of analysis

The dissertation employs a research framework that combines qualitative comparative analysis, mixed methods, and conceptual theorisation. Most of the included studies are qualitative and comparative in nature (Studies I and III; Study IV is a single case study) and rely on multiple methods of data collection. Study II adopts a non-traditional quantitative approach, while Study V is primarily conceptual and theoretical. Although the studies use different methodological tools and analytical approaches, they all focus on the agency and external relations of mature de facto states, meaning those that have mostly moved beyond active conflict and possess nascent foreign policy institutions.

All studies also employ forms of data triangulation in order to address the persistent problem of data access when it comes to de facto states. The dissertation combines primary sources, such as official de facto state statistics, institutional documentation, speeches and statements by relevant parties, news media material, and expert interviews, with secondary sources like academic literature and policy reports. All studies except Study IV are comparative in design. While Study III focuses specifically on post-Soviet cases, Studies I, II, and V adopt broader comparative perspectives that place post-Soviet cases alongside examples from other regions.

More specifically, **Study I** employs a qualitative comparative research design focused on eight “least contested” cases of de facto states globally: Abkhazia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, Northern Cyprus, Somaliland, South Ossetia, Taiwan, Transnistria. The study adopts a transactionalist perspective, conceptualising agency not through legal status, but through behavioural “capacity to do” and “exerting the power”. It therefore shifts the analytical focus from external

juridical sovereignty to subjective freedom of action by analysing de facto states' governance practices and external interactions across three areas: (1) participation in conflict management and conflict resolution processes; (2) their capability to enter into international relations, particularly through paradiplomacy and mimicry aimed at demonstrating actorness; and (3) the ability to resist or counter patron influence through internal political complexity or opposition to specific patron demands.

The eight cases in this study vary significantly in terms of recognition and patronage, ranging from Somaliland, which remains unrecognised and lacks a clear patron, to Taiwan and Kosovo, which enjoy relatively high levels of recognition and have a major power for a patron. The analysis draws on a combination of sources: interviews, the official sources of de facto states, and secondary-source analysis, such as academic literature and policy reports. Although not explicitly identified as such in the article itself, the methodological approach exhibits the characteristics of structured focused comparison method (George & Bennett 2005) that allows to systematically compare multiple cases while still preserving rich contextual detail.

Study II is a mixed-method study examining resource exchanges between patrons and clients through the development of an original multidimensional measurement tool. The study seeks to explain the scope and intensity of PCRs, which helps to understand how they are maintained. Additionally, a typology of PCRs is developed. The study focuses on six patron-client pairings: Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey and Northern Cyprus, Russia and Abkhazia, Russia and Transnistria, the United States and Kosovo, and the United States and Taiwan. However, dependence is measured exclusively from the client perspective. Since the exchanged resources are often not directly comparable and indicators of dependence do not operate symmetrically, the study concentrates on the client side, where dependency is more clearly observable.

The measurement tool consists of 20 indicators distributed across four dimensions: (1) the economic dimension, capturing reliance in terms of economic viability and external trade access; (2) the political-military dimension, assessing the extent of overlap between political and security structures; (3) the social-cultural dimension, examining affective and identity-based ties; and (4) the connectivity dimension, assessing infrastructural integration as a means of overcoming international isolation. Rather than applying statistical analysis, the study uses a non-traditional quantitative approach that assigns quantitative-style scores (0–80 points) to qualitative and empirical data triangulated from institutional websites, academic literature, media reports, analytical and policy reports, and expert interviews conducted with de facto state representatives between 2016 and 2017.

Indicators were harmonised into comparable scales and aggregated across dimensions to produce an overall dependence profile for each case. Two types of scales were used: five-point scales (0–4) for percentage-based indicators, such as trade shares or identity affiliation levels, and three-point scales (0, 2, 4) for categorical indicators, such as currency use or postal links. The original dataset

was compiled between 2015 and 2017. The resulting scores are used both to assess variation across PCRs and to evaluate the usefulness of the measurement tool itself, including its potential for developing a broader categorisation of patron–client relationships.

Study III is a qualitative comparative analysis of four post-Soviet de facto states – Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria –, focusing on their foreign policy approaches. The study examines whether these entities can be understood as foreign policy actors in their own right by analysing both their capacity and willingness to act under conditions of smallness, patronage, and limited international recognition.

The study draws on 26 expert interviews conducted in Sukhumi (June 2016), Tiraspol (June 2016), and Yerevan (June 2016 and May 2017), as well on news articles, statistical data, official statements and institutional documents, policy reports, and academic literature. Like study I, this study too has features of structured focused comparison method (George & Bennet 2005), as the four cases are systematically examined through a shared analytical framework.

Study IV is the only single-case study included in the dissertation. Combining role theory, particularly the notion of geopolitical roles, with the context of patron-client relations and engagement without recognition, the study examines how Transnistria navigates the competing influences of Russia and the EU and explores the geopolitical roles it seeks to perform.

The analysis is based on 10 expert interviews conducted in Brussels in January 2019 and in Moldova and Transnistria in December 2019. These are supplemented with statements published on the website of Transnistria’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, articles from the *Novosty Pridnestrovia* online newspaper covering the period 2015–2019, as well as academic literature and policy reports.

Study V is a conceptual paper that theorises the construction of “geopolitical roles” through the integration of the structural and spatial logic of geopolitics with the identity-based agency emphasised by role theory. Rather than engaging in exhaustive empirical testing, this study relies on holistic reasoning and behavioural extrapolations derived from two contrasting cases: Somaliland, which relies heavily on a single geopolitical role, and Transnistria, which operates between competing spheres of influence and can therefore draw on multiple geopolitical roles.

The study theorises how geographical markers (territory, resources, and population) are used to form geopolitical roles and how actors within triangles of confrontation and cooperation prescribe roles to one another on the basis of geostrategic calculations. The case illustrations are intentionally limited and are not intended as full comparative analyses, but just to sketch how geopolitical role manifestations may vary across temporal and spatial contexts. The study relies primarily on secondary sources, including academic literature discussing the geostrategic location, material value, and demographic characteristics of de facto states, as well as elite-level self-perceptions drawn from official statements and the foreign policy concepts of Transnistria and Somaliland.

2.4. Limitations

The five studies share several limitations, which are briefly summarised here. The first concerns data availability and reliability. Despite careful efforts to triangulate data across all studies, inaccuracies may still occur. Information about *de facto* states, and information produced by *de facto* states themselves, has proliferated over the past three decades as these entities have attracted growing scholarly and public attention, while developments in information and communication technologies have increased their accessibility. Nevertheless, access to data remains uneven. For example, South Ossetia was excluded from Study II because insufficient reliable data was available on some of the indicators that proved to be more niche and access to the territory itself proved difficult. For example, details on the use of education materials and access to various TV channels were among details most often verified during field visits and in interviews. In comparison, South Ossetia's inclusion in Study III was possible even without interviews conducted in Tskhinvali because the focus of that study was on the foreign policy behaviour of *de facto* states – this has proved to be an area where *de facto* states tend to make the most effort in developing and updating their online presence, and this proved to be the case for South Ossetia as well. Still, accessibility may also fluctuate over time depending on local political developments and the broader geopolitical context, complicating both the replicability of studies and the possibility of longitudinal analysis.

A related issue concerns data sensitivity. In some cases, *de facto* states are believed to withhold or manipulate information perceived as potentially damaging to their image or independence project. Such information may include population and citizenship figures, the scale of patron's financial assistance, or the extent of patron's military involvement, including troop presence and size. In Transnistria, for example, the statistical service was responsible for collecting public data, whereas ministries retained information considered politically sensitive. In 2016, this included statistics on "border" crossings. The statistical office was only able to report tourist numbers based on visits organised through Transnistrian tour companies.

But it should be emphasised that except for security-related data, there was no consistent pattern across cases in terms of particularly hard-to-obtain data. Sometimes, gaps in data reflected not political sensitivity but the underdeveloped nature of statistical institutions, which often operate with limited resources and technical expertise. The *de facto* states with higher levels of development and international engagement (Kosovo, Taiwan, Northern Cyprus) tend to be more open in sharing their data overall and tend to have made more information directly available on their institutional websites. They also tend to have more active and open civil societies and NGO sectors, which publish their own reports and analyses on the functioning of the *de facto* state, thereby adding another layer of data control. In cases of poorer online presence, reliance on secondary sources did increase, but to reiterate once more, efforts were made to triangulate all data, and to keep track of the data sources.

Interviews with de facto state representatives are useful for clarifying data sources and contextualising information and were conducted whenever possible. However, limited funding for fieldwork meant that these visits were often relatively brief and did not always allow sufficient time to establish the trust, networks, and longer-term relationships necessary for sustained and repeated data collection. Additionally, although interviews allowed to access some information not available through other sources, some interviewees also relied on estimates.

Operationalisation posed an additional challenge. Available data did not always lend itself easily to the requirements of specific research designs, particularly in comparative studies where equivalent information was needed across all cases. This was especially challenging for Study II where, for instance, 32 indicators were initially considered, but constraints relating to cross-case data availability contributed to the eventual reduction to 20 indicators. Some of the indicators that proved difficult to measure or obtain data on included the share of foreign direct investments from the patron in the total FDI, the level of legal harmonisation of de facto state laws compared to the patron state, the share of political leaders with patron state or other state citizenships in de facto state government and share of immigrants of patron state origin.

Additionally, security integration was excluded as a separate category in Study II, as it was difficult to produce a comparable number of indicators to ensure the balance between the various dimensions. Some potential indicators initially considered under that category – whether there are patron’s military bases on the territory of the de facto state and whether mutual defence agreements exist – would have introduced a binary logic to the measurement tool, complicating the analysis. The finalised measurement tool represents a balance between various dimensions of dependence, and as explained in Study II, the results reflect the patterns identified in existing scholarship.

As other studies are more reliant on qualitative data, such as statements, opinions, policies, and analyses, data verification was more reliant on checking whether a finding represents a larger pattern and is repeated in various sources, to avoid giving weight to one-off or sensationalist views. This was also kept in mind when using interview material, as interviewees may also carry their own agenda.

Still another limitation concerns generalisability. The relatively small number of de facto states already restricts the potential sample size, while each case is also shaped by highly specific historical and geopolitical circumstances, as noted in Study I. Moreover, the dissertation’s focus on mature de facto states excludes some fringe or short-lived cases that may exhibit different dynamics. This limitation is particularly relevant for Studies I and III, which focus on agency and foreign policy behaviour.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Agency

Contributing to the discussion on de facto state agency, the studies collectively argue that de facto states are intrinsic actors in international relations who exercise varying degrees of agency to secure their survival and advance their causes. De facto states may hold considerable power as custodians of geopolitical fault lines, and they have the potential to disrupt the strategic balance of the entire region. The findings nevertheless acknowledge that their agency is constrained, and they must act within limits imposed by parent states, patrons, non-recognition, and limited resources. However, as some findings show, in the case of de facto states, agency is sometimes evident not only in what they can do, but also in what they could potentially do or even in what they choose not to do despite existing opportunities. The studies that most clearly address the question of agency (Study I, Studies III–V) do so from the perspective of agency as action and capacity to do. The issue of internal versus external agency is also addressed through the analysis of how de facto states manage their foreign policy apparatuses.

More specifically, Study I addresses the topic of de facto state agency most directly. It concludes that de facto states have displayed surprising amounts of resilience despite constant attempts to curtail their activities that become agents of change simply through existing – by preventing parent states from exercising their political will across their whole de jure territory, and forcing them to either live with the conflict, or attempt to compromise. The study demonstrates that all de facto states have a variety of ways to “be an agent of something” by taking an active stance in forging new relations and economic cooperation, trying to open representation offices, or simplifying access for tourists – something they have done to different degrees over the years.

Importantly, Study I argues that participation in negotiations increases agency even without resolving their status: participation in talks rarely produces recognition, but it gives de facto states time to build institutions, consolidate legitimacy, and harden bargaining positions. Thus, de facto states may participate in conflict management processes for “devious objectives”. It also outlines that de facto states may decide to instigate the normalisation of relations with their parent states – while not used in practice, it remains as a theoretical option for getting out from under the patron’s thumb and addresses the debate on whether lack of credible alternatives in patronage means that de facto states are not true clients. The study also points out that some of the limitations on their activities are similar to “regular” small states: de facto states often lack the people-power and monetary resources to build up large-scale bureaucracies. Other factors identified as limiting their “capacity to do” are, however, more specific to de facto states, such as being born out of conflict situations and being under international boycott.

Study III shows that smallness and non-recognition have a negative impact on capacity-building and independent agenda-setting, shaping how institutions and interaction networks are developed. It also discusses how patrons can both enable and constrain *de facto* state agency: while patrons supply security, money, diplomatic cover and administrative capacity, they can also deepen dependence. In other words, patron-client relations can be both costly and beneficial. The study finds that the presence or absence of recognition by a patron state has significant implications for the autonomy and agency of dependent entities. Contrary to expectations, formal recognition by a patron does not necessarily enhance *de facto* sovereignty or international agency. Instead, recognition may lead to increased policy coordination with the patron, thereby reinforcing perceptions of dependency and limiting independent action on the international stage. In contrast, entities that do not receive formal recognition from their patron appear to retain greater room for manoeuvre, allowing for more flexible engagement and a higher degree of strategic autonomy. Additionally, strong patron involvement can shift the framing of the conflict, transforming it from a local dispute into a broader geopolitical confrontation between larger powers. This dynamic tends to marginalise the dependent entities in international processes and reduces their visibility and influence in conflict resolution efforts.

Study III also shows that engagement without recognition can expand agency – the study investigates the use of paradiplomacy, diaspora networks, representation offices, and trade links. However, *de facto* states are also found to be mistrustful of international engagement which they see as externally imposed reintegration attempts, and they may therefore decline from participating in such initiatives. A crucial finding of Study III from the perspective of their agency is that *de facto* states have far more chances to conduct independent foreign policy than they are able and willing to utilise. If the main goal of the foreign policy is to ensure survival (even if this means a loss of autonomous decision-making), then after this target is met, the next steps might not be seen as necessary, and the foreign policy activities of *de facto* states lose their impetus.

Finally, Studies IV and V engage with the topic of how geopolitical competition may empower *de facto* states. These studies assume that *de facto* states would act pragmatically and attempt to construct a broader security arrangement that maintains several alignments. Consequently, *de facto* states may take up different roles, change, and combine them. Study IV finds that *de facto* authorities often adopt highly pragmatic strategies by balancing relations between their parent state, patron state, and external actors, resulting in a form of dual alignment that can reinforce their claims to statehood. Despite structural constraints, these entities are capable of maximising their agency through selective engagement with international frameworks, sometimes producing unintended effects that do not necessarily promote reintegration. Agency is also expressed through limited acts of resistance to externally imposed policies, demonstrating a capacity to shape outcomes within constrained environments. More broadly, Study V reconceptualises agency as a process of role-making. Rather than acting merely as passive or dependent actors, *de facto* entities actively leverage their territory,

resources, population, and strategic position to perform specific geopolitical roles, such as bridgeheads, buffers, gateways, isolates or safe havens. This perspective highlights the capacity of such actors to navigate and reinterpret structural constraints in pursuit of their own strategic objectives.

3.2. Patron-client relationships

Across the five publications, patron-client relationships emerge as the central structural condition shaping the survival, behaviour, and external agency of *de facto* states. The findings show the complexity of PCRs: they are neither simple cases of domination, nor cases of equal partnership. In essence, PCRs are consistently described as asymmetric but reciprocal arrangements in which *de facto* states retain limited bargaining power despite deep dependence. They are also dynamic relationships, changing over time. The findings also point to significant variation in the scope and intensity of PCRs.

Study III, in line with earlier literature, also recognises that patron-client relationships come at a price: while they remain essential for *de facto* state survival, they also constrain *de facto* state independence. The article demonstrates how PCRs are both costly and beneficial – they set limits on political manoeuvring of *de facto* states, while at the same time bolstering their resilience against existential threats. As was discussed under the topic of agency, Study III demonstrates how patrons can both enable and constrain agency, and how a patron's recognition does not always lead to increased agency, but rather to a deepening dependence between the patron and its clients.

While the patron state remains the primary source of security, economic support, and diplomatic backing, *de facto* states are not entirely passive. Instead, they engage in strategies aimed at negotiating the terms of dependence and preserving a degree of agency. Study III shows that some *de facto* states remain deeply embedded within patron structures, relying heavily on the patron's resources, expertise, and international representation. Others, however, pursue strategies of partial diversification, seeking to expand their external linkages through alternative diplomatic, economic, or diasporic channels. This variation reflects differing capacities to recalibrate the patron–client relationship and reduce overdependence. Within this framework, *paradiplomacy* can be understood as a *de facto* state strategy to renegotiate asymmetry. By developing limited external contacts beyond the patron, *de facto* authorities attempt to broaden their room for manoeuvre and mitigate the risks associated with exclusive reliance. Nevertheless, these efforts do not fundamentally alter the hierarchical nature of the relationship. Instead, they illustrate how clients operate within structural constraints, balancing dependence with selective autonomy in order to sustain both their internal legitimacy and external positioning.

Additionally, Study IV offers a good example of how *de facto* states can avoid passive obedience to patrons, arguing that they can leverage geopolitical rivalries to renegotiate their positions. This thought is developed further in Study V with

the review of possible geopolitical roles that de facto states may adopt. From the perspective of PCRs, this review reveals that de facto states may function as bridgeheads/bastions, creating secure defensive lodgement areas for patron states. By utilising the client's territory, the patron gains a geopolitical advantage over its adversaries and can retain leverage over the parent state and the region.

The most significant contribution to the study of patron-client relationships comes from Study II. The article's primary contribution is methodological: it develops a multidimensional comparative measurement tool specifically designed for analysing the resource exchange in de facto state-patron state relationships. Theoretically, the study argues that patronage cannot be understood solely through security dependence (a dimension that earlier literature, partly because of the Cold War influence, overemphasised), advancing the idea that PCRs are sustained through multiple overlapping forms of resource exchange, whereby social and cultural resources are especially significant for maintaining an understanding of a PCR as mutually beneficial and benevolent. Thus, the final tool measures dependence across four dimensions: the economic, political-military, social-cultural, and connectivity dimensions.

Study II demonstrates that patronage exists on a spectrum, rather than as a binary condition. It can be stated that there is some clustering in the sense that kinship-based PCRs have higher levels of dependence than those rooted in historical-cultural relations, whereas great power dominance patronage (without pre-existing links) results in a narrower scope and intensity of resource exchange.

These findings also highlight a limitation of conventional measurement approaches within PCRs. High dependency scores tend to imply extreme vulnerability, yet empirical evidence shows that some clients can remain resilient despite asymmetrical ties. This is particularly evident in relationships grounded in ethnic or kinship-based linkages, where intense connections do not necessarily translate into full subordination. In extreme cases, elites from a de facto state may take over the governance structures of the patron state, turning high levels of support into an expectation. Such cases point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of dependency that accounts for relational and political embeddedness. Furthermore, the analysis raises the question of how to distinguish between patrons and supporters. In some relationships, direct resource exchange is limited, and interactions occur primarily at a strategic or systemic level. Nevertheless, the involvement of a powerful external actor can still significantly alter the client's position, particularly in the security domain. This suggests that security guarantees rather than material transfers alone constitute a central foundation of PCRs and should still be treated as a key dimension of asymmetry.

Thus, Study II demonstrates that PCRs can be operationalised and measured. However, there are also some serious shortcomings related to difficulties in operationalisation and data availability that affect the results. In pursuit of uniformity in measures, the tool sometimes "erases" or glosses over the complexities on the ground. These findings will be considered further in the subsequent discussion.

3.3. Engagement without recognition

Engagement without recognition is consistently referred to as the main mechanism through which *de facto* states interact with the outside world despite lacking international legal recognition. The studies collectively show that EwR is inherently ambiguous: it can reduce isolation and create opportunities to expand *de facto* state agency, but it may also reinforce dependence due to *de facto* state mistrust, entrench separation, and unintentionally strengthen *de facto* statehood. It is also selectively offered, and at varying levels, exposing the underlying politicised nature of engagement. Importantly, the studies examine engagement from the perspective of *de facto* states. Rather than focusing on what third parties have to offer, they foreground what the *de facto* states themselves seek and actually do.

Study III addresses the topic of engagement without recognition most directly and systematically. It makes the claim that post-Soviet *de facto* states increasingly pursue foreign policy strategies that go beyond the narrow search for formal recognition, focusing on practical external engagement instead. The study comparatively analyses whether and how *de facto* states engage in paradiplomacy, examining their use of representation offices, the extent of trade relations, as well as their engagement with NGOs and diaspora networks. However, the study also emphasises that access to the international system is feasible only if two conditions are met: (1) there is a strategic calculus that outweighs the rationale for the conventional treatment of *de facto* states, and therefore supports the openness of communication channels, and stimulates exchanges; (2) *de facto* states themselves search for alternatives in the form of a multi-vector foreign policy, to counterbalance a patron's heavy domination. When the second condition is met, interactions at the sub-state level increase, with diasporas playing an important role in expanding the reach and visibility of *de facto* states.

The findings suggest that EwR creates a structurally constrained form of interaction between *de facto* states and the international community. External engagement is largely limited to conflict management and technical cooperation and is often perceived by *de facto* authorities as reflecting the interests of parent states rather than supporting their own political or societal development. As a result, such engagement generates persistent mistrust toward international actors and institutions. This dynamic creates a fundamental dilemma. While *de facto* states rely on external engagement for survival, economic stability, and partial normalisation, they simultaneously interpret this engagement as conditional and ultimately oriented toward reintegration. The absence of recognition, combined with externally imposed terms of interaction, restricts their ability to pursue genuinely diversified foreign policies, despite formal commitments to multi-vector strategies. In this context, EwR functions as a "constraining framework": it enables limited cooperation and stability yet reinforces perceptions of bias and limits the autonomy of *de facto* actors.

Interestingly, Study III also reveals that third parties sometimes conceal their engagement in order to make progress. This, in turn, reinforces perceptions among local populations that the international community has abandoned them

and is doing little to help. This again leads to greater reliance on the patron states, whose contributions, especially if they come in the form of direct social benefits, are more visible and recognisable to local populations. In sum, opportunities for international engagement vary across de facto states due to differences in levels of recognition, the engagement strategies of external actors, and the influence of their diasporas. It can be argued that para-diplomacy has become a compensatory tool to somewhat balance the patron's influence and widen the scope for foreign interactions. When it comes to the EwR initiatives offered by the international community, a deep distrust exists since these are largely considered as externally imposed reintegration attempts which rarely offer sufficient incentives.

Yet this study's most surprising finding is that there are more opportunities to pursue an independent foreign policy than these de facto states are able or willing to utilise. Once these entities have ensured their survival, further steps towards gaining additional recognition may no longer be perceived as necessary. EwR is thus treated as a pragmatic survival strategy that allows de facto states to partially overcome isolation, but one that is embraced selectively: they welcome cooperation that enhances autonomy while resisting initiatives perceived as reintegration mechanisms.

Study IV explores EwR in practice and finds that engagement produced highly pragmatic rather than transformative outcomes, thereby reinforcing dual alignments. Study IV shows how, from the perspective of de facto states, EwR might become a tool of regime survival and strategic balancing. This is also reflected in Study V, where EwR is examined as part of broader triangular relationships in which parent states and third parties interact pragmatically with de facto states. EwR is expected to increase de facto state agency by enabling them to renegotiate their geopolitical roles, balance patrons, and gain leverage in regional competition.

3.4. Geopolitical roles

The second major original contribution of this dissertation lies in advancing the application of role theory to the study of de facto states, particularly through the concept of geopolitical roles. This topic is first introduced in Study IV, before being considerably expanded in a conceptual study: Study V. These studies advance the broader argument that, although de facto states are embedded in geopolitical structures, they are not fully determined by them and retain limited agency to shape their own roles. The use of role theory and the study of geopolitical roles appear particularly promising as an avenue for future research because geopolitical roles are relational and dynamic, reflecting the dynamism of de facto states themselves. For de facto states, such roles emerge through interaction with patrons, parent states, and third parties.

Study IV defines geopolitical roles as actors' understandings of who they are, what they aspire to be in relation to others, and how they should behave in international interactions. Roles are treated as relational, interaction-based, and

shaped through both self-perception and external expectations. The study illustrates how a secessionist entity can utilize international engagement without recognition to solidify its own statehood and navigate the pressures of rival great powers. Although geopolitical competition may be utilised to buy time to further consolidate contested statehood and strengthen de facto state agency, this may not be sufficient to fundamentally transform their geopolitical identity.

Study V demonstrates that role theory is so far underutilised in de facto state research but may offer new insights into their functioning. As roles develop dialectically through interactions between the Self and the Other, they evolve constantly as actors attempt to adopt new roles and become established when recognised and supported by others, thereby facilitating their maintenance. Accordingly, greater attention should be paid to the foreign policies of de facto states themselves, acknowledging both their agency and the opportunities for manoeuvring created by geopolitical competition.

Study V introduces a further dimension to role theory by examining geopolitical roles grounded in geographical markers such as territory, resources, and population. Role theory has traditionally been underused in geopolitics, where analyses have focused more on material power, territory, and structural constraints than on identity, self-perception, and relational interaction. This study bridges that gap through the concept of geopolitical roles, which are rooted in geographical markers, but are also shaped through interaction, interpretation, and strategic meaning.

The existence and behaviour of de facto states are influenced by a specific set of relationships that can, in a simplified form, be conceived as triangles of confrontation and cooperation involving the de facto state, its patron and parent states, and influential third parties. The specific roles each actor within such a triangle can pursue derive from their position in the international structure, but they are also subject to constant renegotiation through the acceptance or rejection of these roles by others.

The study finds that de facto states are aware of their “geostrategic value” and strategically engage with the interests of their parent and patron states, as well as influential third parties. By identifying and leveraging their geostrategic value, for example through offering military basing rights or controlling key transit routes, de facto states may increase their bargaining power in asymmetric relationships by casting themselves, for example, as bridgeheads or bastions, buffers, or gateways.

4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Some of the findings of this dissertation merit further discussion, as they raise additional points for consideration beyond what is explicitly argued in the individual publications. Summarily, at the empirical level, the findings are broadly consistent with existing scholarship. In other words, the dissertation largely reiterates, but also refines, clarifies, and systematises previous knowledge by offering new, mostly comparative perspectives. It does not fundamentally challenge earlier conclusions regarding, for example, which *de facto* states are more accepted by the international community or more dependent on their patrons. Rather, several of the included studies, especially the earlier publications, have already served as foundations for subsequent research and further refinements in the field.

Similarly, regarding *de facto* state agency, this dissertation aligns with the broader literature in treating agency as something expressed through practice, in line with constructivist approaches and what Braun *et al.* (2019) describe as agency as a practical achievement, while fully acknowledging that such agency remains limited or bounded. As discussed in the theoretical framework, however, *de facto* state scholarship has generally avoided direct engagement with broader theoretical debates on agency and the agent-structure problem. Nor is it the primary aim of this dissertation. Nevertheless, the consistent framing of agency throughout the dissertation as “capacity to do” and “exerting of power”, together with the systematic exploration of what this means in practice for *de facto* states’ foreign policy options, constitutes an important contribution that may help connect *de facto* state research more closely to broader IR debates on weak actors and constrained sovereignty, as well as inspire more rigour in future research on *de facto* state agency that so far has tended to discuss agency in a more round-about manner.

Two additional observations emerge from the discussion of agency. First, conceptualising *de facto* state agency as “capacity to do” and “exerting the power” may initially direct attention towards cataloguing instances in which *de facto* states visibly acted, for example, by opening foreign trade offices or emphasising democratic credentials as a strategy for engagement. Yet agency is not only evident in what *de facto* states do, but also in what they deliberately choose not to do.

This is not an entirely novel insight and is reflected in the findings of this dissertation itself, most clearly in Study III, which concludes that *de facto* states often appear to have more opportunities for international engagement than they actually utilise. Existing scholarship already notes that *de facto* states may prefer the *status quo* in the short term (e.g. Caspersen 2009) or that, once a certain level of security has been achieved, they may abandon efforts to seek further recognition (Comai 2017). However, this literature remains fragmented. In the context of patron–client relations, refusal to act is usually discussed in terms of defiance towards the patron (see e.g. Berg & Yüksel 2023; Yüksel & Berg 2025),

while in the engagement without recognition literature it is more commonly framed as rejection of engagement initiatives (see e.g. Caspersen 2013; Berg 2023).

The prevailing assumption nevertheless remains that *de facto* states will seek to maximise all available opportunities for interaction, and that inactivity results primarily from external constraints or lack of internal resources. Arguably, however, in some cases inaction may itself represent a conscious strategic choice. Different strands of scholarship could therefore be connected more systematically through the study of when and why *de facto* states choose not to act despite existing opportunities. One possible example is Transnistria, which Study III identifies as showing little interest in developing an extensive network of foreign representation offices. To summarise, the findings of this dissertation highlight the need to re-examine and reassess some of the common assumptions about *de facto* state behaviour. They also highlight the need for more in-depth studies that would look beyond the foreign policy “output” of *de facto* states, into the internal debates and discussions on foreign policy options to better identify the instances when *de facto* states elect not to act. Another point that merits more attention is that *de facto* state agency is commonly identified through episodes of defiance, especially when *de facto* states defy their patron. When the *de facto* state goes along with patron’s policy directions, even in issues that to an outsider seem illogical, it is taken as a sign of patron’s influence. However, we should not entirely discount the possibility that the *de facto* state has chosen this course of action willingly – *de facto* state people and authorities still have the potential to make bad decisions. In-depth analyses of *de facto* state decision-making would provide insights on this matter as well.

The second observation relates to the agent–structure debate. Although the dissertation does not engage with this debate explicitly at the theoretical level, the findings nevertheless allow for some reflection on it. On the one hand, the dissertation confirms the enduring importance of structural constraints. International non-recognition, exclusion from international institutions, dependence on patron states, and the norm of territorial integrity significantly narrow the range of actions available to *de facto* states. Patron–client relationships themselves emerge almost as structural conditions of *de facto* state survival, shaping foreign policy options, security calculations, and access to external resources. On the other hand, the findings also demonstrate that these structures do not fully determine political outcomes. Great-power interests, geopolitical rivalries, and pragmatic political calculations frequently override otherwise dominant structural principles, including the exclusionary effects of non-recognition. This creates openings that *de facto* states can strategically exploit through engagement, balancing behaviour, and geopolitical role construction. The dissertation therefore supports a relational understanding of the agent–structure relationship, in which structures constrain political action but are themselves unevenly applied, politically negotiated, and continually reproduced or challenged through practice.

The four-party relationship model, based on the work of Kursani and Berg (2025), is another important contribution for moving in that direction, and would

merit future development and use. The model invites us to consider *de facto* state agency and its manifestations as the result of various interactions as well as counteractions. For example, this approach may help to explain the diverging outcomes uncovered by the engagement without recognition literature: engagement is never an isolated relationship between the *de facto* state and the parent state or a third party, as it will always produce reactions by the other actors in the respective triadic nexuses. Most significantly, external engagement will always interact with the patron-client relationship. The model may also help to refine our understanding of whether *de facto* state agency is primarily affected by its proximate environment (Tier 1 relationships that the *de facto* states have with the other actors), or by the relationships that the other actors in this constellation have with each other (Tier 2 relationships).

It is also important to acknowledge that the studies included in this dissertation were written during a period when the international order still appeared relatively stable and largely dominated by Western influence. Arguably, while this order constrained *de facto* states, it also protected them, as they could invoke competing principles of international law in support of their claims and benefit from the general condemnation of the large-scale use of force. Early scholarship on *de facto* states tended to view them as transient entities, whereas later research increasingly assumed that most would continue to exist in relatively stable forms for the foreseeable future. The studies included in this dissertation were written largely within this latter understanding. Yet the international order is now undergoing significant transformation. Emerging multipolarity and renewed competition for regional dominance may fundamentally alter the position of *de facto* states themselves – it has already done so in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh – and may require scholars to reconsider some earlier assumptions. Initial work addressing this changing environment has already begun (see e.g. Caspersen & Gueudet 2025; Kolstø 2025).

Turning to patron–client relationships, one of the most significant original contributions of this dissertation stems from Study II and its development of a measurement tool for comparing the scope and intensity of PCRs. This study contributes to the line of research that develops novel indices for the comparative study of different aspects of *de facto* statehood, introducing new data into the field (Pegg 2017). The idea for this specific study originated in Kamilova and Berg’s (2012) argument that dependence can be measured and that the distinction between a *de facto* state and a puppet state can therefore be empirically assessed. The underlying logic is straightforward: the deeper and more multidimensional the dependence, the more likely it becomes that a *de facto* state resembles a puppet. Study II reconsiders the different dimensions through which PCRs operate, drawing on conceptualisations by Carney (1989), Veenendaal (2017), Gerrits and Bader (2016), and Geldenhuys (2009). While the findings show that a multi-dimensional tool for measuring patron-client dependence does aid comparison, the evaluation of the results also shows that higher dependence scores do not directly translate to puppetry, and that the type of patronage matters. As outlined in the findings section, the study concludes that the highest levels of dependence

occur in cases rooted in ethnic kinship. However, the study also reveals that while the ties may be broad and deep, support may be offered voluntarily and without an explicit expectation of total control from the patron. From the client's perspective, support may even be perceived as something owed to the de facto state, rather than as assistance that necessarily entails reciprocal obligations. This raises interesting questions about popular understandings of patronage within de facto states themselves.

At the same time, the measurement tool also reveals certain limitations. While the empirical findings produced by the tool broadly align with existing scholarship regarding the expected scope and intensity of dependence, some difficulties in operationalisation, as well as in data availability, may have affected some of the results. Therefore, further engagement with the topic of measuring engagement and dependence would be welcome. Additionally, the results of the current measurement show that the tool could not be used to clearly distinguish between puppetry and de facto statehood, as discussed above: for this purpose, other indicators may still be needed.

The issue of puppet states also highlights a broader conceptual problem. As discussed in the theoretical framework, there is no academic consensus on what exactly constitutes a puppet state, despite the term being used frequently and often polemically in discussions of de facto states. As this dissertation does not engage directly with that conceptualisation, either, it points to a need for future research. At least two different categories should be considered: puppet states created as such from the outset, and de facto states that gradually regress into deeper forms of dependence and eventual puppetry.

Finally, as discussed above, further empirical research on geopolitical roles is needed. More broadly, applying general role theory to the study of de facto states may also generate novel insights and contribute to wider role theory debates, especially those concerning emerging states. The reconceptualization of agency as role-making may similarly provide a new and useful lens for analysing de facto state agency.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined how the agency of de facto states is shaped by patron-client relationships and engagement without recognition as the two principal relational “poles” structuring their external opportunities. It also explored how de facto states navigate these interactional “triangles” through the construction of geopolitical roles. Addressing the tension between the severe structural constraints facing de facto states and their demonstrated ability to act strategically in international politics, the five studies included in this dissertation collectively demonstrate that de facto states possess considerably greater strategic agency than earlier scholarship often assumed. In particular, the findings challenge portrayals of de facto states as passive proxies or mere puppets of their patron states. At the same time, the dissertation does not suggest that de facto states act freely or independently of external constraints. Rather, it demonstrates how these entities retain limited but meaningful scope for manoeuvre, adaptation, and strategic calculation despite operating within highly asymmetric conditions.

The dissertation advances the understanding of de facto state agency by conceptualising it consistently as “capacity to do” and “exerting the power”. Agency is therefore expressed through the ability to navigate constraints, exploit openings, and shape interactions within unequal political environments, making it relational, conditional, and strategically negotiated. Patron–client relationships, international non-recognition, and geopolitical competition undeniably restrict the range of choices available to de facto states, yet these structures do not fully determine outcomes. De facto states continue to negotiate, adapt, resist, and reposition themselves vis-à-vis patrons, parent states, and third parties. In this respect, the dissertation aligns with more recent International Relations scholarship that understands agency as context-dependent and produced through interaction rather than as an attribute possessed exclusively by fully sovereign states.

On a broader level, the dissertation also contributes to debates on hierarchical international orders, asymmetrical relationships, and the fragmented and contested nature of sovereignty in contemporary international politics. The findings reinforce the idea that sovereignty and agency should not be understood as binary categories, but rather as matters of degree that are continuously negotiated in practice. By focusing on de facto states, the dissertation therefore broadens IR understandings of who can act in international politics and how constrained actors seek to exercise influence within an international system that simultaneously excludes and engages them.

The dissertation contributes to the literature on patron-client relationships by demonstrating that dependence is multidimensional and while security arrangements remain central, PCRs are also sustained through societal, cultural, economic, and infrastructural linkages. An important methodological contribution of the dissertation is, however, the development of a measurement tool for making the comparative analysis of PCRs more systematic and measurable. This follows previous suggestions in the literature that measuring dependence could bring

clarity to the puppet-de facto state debate. However, the results remain somewhat inconclusive, pointing to the need for further conceptual and methodological refinement.

Concerning engagement without recognition, the dissertation contributes to the existing scholarship that shows engagement as not merely externally imposed but actively interpreted, instrumentalised, and sometimes resisted by de facto states themselves. The dissertation also argues that engagement without recognition interacts with patron-client relations rather than functioning independently from them, suggesting that the two are best analysed together. The four-party relationship model, advanced in this dissertation, is another important contribution that advances the relational analysis of de facto state agency and foreign policy.

The dissertation makes a significant theoretical contribution, extending de facto state scholarship conceptually by introducing geopolitical roles as a framework for understanding how de facto states position themselves within wider patterns of geopolitical competition, and making the case for the use of role theory in the analysis of de facto states' foreign policies. Continuing the theme that de facto states are parts of sets of triangular relationships involving patron states, parent states, and third parties, role theory with its focus on how roles are interactively, socially constructed and require both internal conviction and external validation, may provide fresh insights into the functioning of de facto states, and contribute to role theory's understanding of emerging states.

Methodologically, the dissertation contributes through comparative, mixed-method, and conceptual approaches. Four of the five studies are comparative, ranging from two to eight cases and promoting cross-regional comparisons. However, the overall small number of cases raises questions about the generalizability of these research findings, with the empirics-heavy discussions occasionally revealing how much context matters in the study of de facto states.

Cumulatively, this dissertation provides rich insights into how de facto states manage their external relations, as well as proposing some innovative approaches to their study. The dissertation advances the argument that de facto states are best understood as adaptive political actors embedded in triangles of interaction involving them, their parent and patron states, as well as interested third parties within evolving networks of dependence, contestation, and geopolitical negotiation.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

De facto riikide välispoliitika: agentsus patrooni-kliendi suhete ja tunnustuseta kaasamise tingimustes

Käesolev väitekiri uurib, kuidas kujuneb ja avaldub tunnustamata ehk de facto riikide agentsus rahvusvahelistes suhetes. De facto riigid on setsessionistlikud poliitilised toimijad, millel on küll enamik omariikluse tunnuseid, kuid mille iseseisvustaotlusel puudub laialdane rahvusvaheline tunnustus. Enamik de facto riike püsib pikema aja jooksul tugevama patroonriigi toel, samal ajal kui nende emamaad ehk riigid, millest nad püüavad eralduda ning kolmandad osapooled, näiteks teised riigid ja rahvusvahelised organisatsioonid, peavad otsustama, kas ja mil määral nendega suhelda. Nende rahvusvahelist tegutsemisruumi kujundavad seega ühelt poolt patrooni-kliendi suhted ja teiselt poolt tunnustuseta kaasamine (*engagement without recognition*). Väitekirja keskmes ongi pingeväli, mis tekib ühelt poolt de facto riikide ees seisvate sügavate struktuursete takistuste ning teiselt poolt nende tõendatava strateegilise rahvusvahelise tegutsemisvõime vahel. Mittetunnustamine, sõltuvus patroonriigist ja geopoliitiline konkurents piiravad de facto riikide välispoliitilisi võimalusi, kuid ei määra nende käitumist täielikult. Väitekiri küsib seetõttu, kuidas de facto riikide agentsus sellistes piiratud tingimustes kujuneb ja millistel viisidel see avaldub.

Uurimisprobleemi lahendatakse läbi viie uurimuse, mis käsitlevad de facto riikide välispoliitika eri tahke. De facto riikide välissuhteid käsitletakse väitekirjas omavahel seotud nelja osapoolega suhete süsteemina, kus de facto riigid, nende patroonid, emamaad ning huvitatud kolmandad osapooled moodustavad omavahel seotud „suhtekolmnurki“. Muutused ühes suhtes võivad luua või piirata võimalusi teistes suhetes. Väitekiri uurib muu hulgas, kuidas de facto riigid selles suhete süsteemis navigeerivad ning kuidas nad püüavad oma positsiooni kujundada geopoliitiliste rollide loomise kaudu.

Doktoritöö teoreetiline raamistik ühendab neli uurimissuunda: agentsuse käsitlelused rahvusvaheliste suhete teoorias ja de facto riikide uurimustes, patrooni-kliendi suhete uurimise, tunnustuseta kaasamise käsitlelused ning rolliteooria, mida täiendatakse geopoliitilise vaatega. Töö lähtub arusaamast, et agentsus ei ole absoluutne omadus, mis toimijal kas on või puudub, vaid suhteline ja kontekstist sõltuv nähtus, mis avaldub praktilises tegevuses ning suhetes teiste toimijatega. Sellest lähtuvalt uurib väitekiri:

- kuidas patrooni-kliendi suhted kujundavad ja piiravad de facto riikide tegutsemisvõimet;
- kuidas tunnustuseta kaasamine mõjutab de facto riikide agentsust;
- millistel viisidel püüavad de facto riigid mittetunnustamisest hoolimata rahvusvahelises süsteemis tegutseda ja seda mõjutada;
- kuidas aitavad geopoliitilised rollid mõista de facto riikide välispoliitilist käitumist ja ellujäämisstrateegiaid.

Doktoritöö metodoloogiline lähenemine on valdavalt kvalitatiivne ja võrdlev. Erandiks on uurimus II, mis kasutab ebatraditsioonilist kvantitatiivset lähenemist: tegemist on väikese valimiga võrdleva uurimusega, milles töötatakse välja ja rakendatakse kvantitatiivset indeksit. Viiest väitekirja osaks olevast uurimusest neli on võrdlevad, hõlmates kahte kuni kaheksat juhtumit, olulisel kohal on eri regioonides paiknevate de facto riikide võrdlemine. Uurimustes kasutatakse mitmekesiseid andmeallikaid, sealhulgas ametlikke dokumente ja statistikat, poliitilisi avaldusi, meediakajastusi, varasemat teaduskirjandust ning mitmes uurimuses ka poolstruktureeritud intervjuusid nii de facto riikide esindajate kui ekspertidega.

Uurimus I keskendub de facto riikide agentsuse kontseptualiseerimisele ja võrdlevale analüüsile. Varasemas kirjanduses on nende agentsust käsitletud pigem kaudselt, eelkõige suveräänsuse ja legitiimsuse kaudu. Uurimus I käsitleb de facto riike poliitiliste toimijatena, kelle piiratud agentsus väljendub eeskätt nende „võimes teha“ (*capacity to do*) ja enese kehtestamises (*exerting the power*). Kaheksa de facto riigi võrdluses analüüsitakse nende agentsuse ulatust ning käitumisviise läbi nende osaluse konfliktilahendamise- ja konfliktihalduse protsessides, nende võimekuse kaudu astuda rahvusvahelistesse suhetesse ning nende võimekuse kaudu patroonile vastu astuda. Uurimus I näitab, et de facto riikide agentsuse ulatus ja avaldumisvormid varieeruvad märkimisväärselt, kuid mitmetunnustamine ja sõltuvus patroonist ei välista nende iseseisvat strateegilist tegutsemist ega võimet oma väliskeskkonda mõjutada.

Uurimus II käsitleb patrooni-kliendi suhteid ning nende võrdlevat mõõtmist. Uurimuses töötatakse välja mitmemõõteline kvantitatiivne mõõtmisraamistik, mille abil võrreldakse kuue de facto riigi sõltuvust oma patroonist majanduslikus, sõjalises ja poliitilises plaanis, aga ka ühiskondlikke seoseid. Analüüs näitab, et patrooni-kliendi suhted ei ole staatilised ega ühesugused. Need erinevad märkimisväärselt nii sõltuvuse ulatuse, intensiivsuse kui ka iseloomu poolest ning sõltuvust ei saa taandada ühele valdkonnale või näitajale. Uurimus pakub seega vahendi patrooni-kliendi suhete süstemaatilisemaks võrdlemiseks. Mõõtmistulemuste täiendav analüüs näitab ka, et de facto riikidel võib isegi tugevalt asümmeetrilistes suhetes olla teatav läbirääkimisruum, iseäranis siis, kui patrooni-kliendi suhe põhineb rahvastevahelisel sugulusel.

Uurimus III käsitleb postsovetlike de facto riikide välispoliitilisi strateegiaid. Abhaasia, Lõuna-Osseetia, Transnistria ja Mägi-Karabahhi võrdluse kaudu uuritakse, kuidas de facto riigid püüavad tagada oma ellujäämist ning saavutada rahvusvahelist legitiimsust ja tuge olukorras, kus ametlik tunnustamine on raskesti saavutatav. Uurimus III näitab, et de facto riikide välispoliitika ei piirdu üksnes tunnustuse otsimisega, vaid hõlmab ka pragmaatilist kohanemist, alternatiivsete partnerlussuhete otsimist, sealhulgas paradiplomaatiat, ning muude geopoliitiliste võimaluste ärakasutamist. Samas ilmneb, et de facto riikidel võib olla iseseisva välispoliitika kujundamiseks ning välissuhtluseks rohkemgi võimalusi, kui nad tegelikult kasutavad. Patrooni pakutav julgeolek võib tajutavalt tagada ellujäämist sellisel määral, et väheneb vajadus või motivatsioon taotleda aktiivselt edasist tunnustamist ja välissuhte mitmekesistamist.

Uurimus IV keskendub Transnistria suhetele Euroopa Liidu ja Venemaaga ning analüüsib, kuidas de facto riik navigeerib konkureerivate geopoliitiliste mõjude vahel. Uurimus IV näitab, et Transnistria on suutnud ühendada jätkuva julgeolekupoliitilise sõltuvuse Venemaast pragmaatilise majandusliku lõimumisega Euroopa Liidu suunal. Majanduslik lähenemine ELile ei ole seejuures toonud kaasa vastavat geopoliitilist ümberorienteerumist, vaid on Transnistria aidanud kasutada mõlema poole pakutavaid võimalusi. Uurimus IV näitab kuidas de facto riigil, millel on võimalik samaaegselt ära kasutada nii patrooni-kliendi suhteid kui tunnustuseta kaasamist ning patrooni ja kolmandate osapoolte vahelist geopoliitilist võimuvõitlust, võib avaneda võimalusi kujundada oma liitlassuhteid, luua uusi geopoliitilisi rolle ja potentsiaalselt muuta ka konflikti dünaamikat.

Uurimus V arendab edasi rolliteooria rakendamist de facto riikide uurimisel, ühendades selle geopoliitilise lähenemisega ning tuues analüüsi geopoliitiliste rollide mõiste. Geopoliitiliste rollidena käsitletakse välispoliitilisi rolle, mille kujundamisel on keskse tähtsusega sellised geograafilised tunnused nagu territoorium, elanikkond, ressursid ja strateegiline asukoht. Tegemist on teoreetiliskontseptuaalse uurimisega, mille raames ei ole läbi viidud põhjalikku empiirilist uuringut, kuid siiski näitlikustatakse analüüsi sellest, kuidas de facto riigid püüavad patrooni, emamaa ja kolmandate osapoolte vahel navigeerides kujundada oma geopoliitilist tähendust ja positsiooni, Transnistria ja Somaalimaa näitel. Uurimus V näitab, et de facto riigid võivad oma geostrateegilist väärtust aktiivselt tõlgendada ja kasutada ning kujundada selle kaudu rolle, mis soodustavad väliste osapooltega suhtlemist. Geopoliitiline konkurents ei ole seega de facto riikide jaoks üksnes piirang või oht, vaid võib pakkuda neile ka võimalusi oma agentsuse ja rahvusvahelise tegutsemisruumi suurendamiseks.

Doktoritöö viis uurimust võimaldavad koos täpsustada, mida de facto riikide agentsus piiratud rahvusvahelise staatuse tingimustes tähendab. Nagu eelpool viidatud, raamistab doktoritöö de facto riikide agentsust kui „võimet teha“ (*capacity to do*) ja „end kehtestada“ (*exerting the power*). Agentsus väljendub nende võimekuses piirangute kiuste rahvusvahelises poliitikas navigeerida, kasutada ära erinevaid võimalusi ja omalt poolt suhtlust kujundada. Näiteks võib see avalduda rahvusvaheliste suhete arendamises, konfliktilahendusprotsessides osalemises, patrooni mõjutamise püüdlustes, või ka kolmandate osapoolte pakutavate majanduslike ja poliitiliste võimaluste kasutamises ja oma geopoliitilise rolli kujundamise püüdlustes. Patrooni-kliendi suhted, mittetunnustamine ja geopoliitiline võistlus piiravad neid, kuid need struktuurid ei määra täielikult tulemusi. Doktoritöösse kaasatud viis uurimust näitavad kokkuvõtlikult, et de facto riikidel on rohkem agentsust kui sageli arvatud. Samas osutavad uurimused vajadusele pöörata tähelepanu ka sellele, mida de facto riigid võiksid, kuid otsustavad mitte teha. Üldistatult suunavad doktoritöö järeldused meid kaaluma seda, et kuigi mingi võimaluse kasutamata jätmine ei tähenda iseenesest agentsust, võib juhul, kui de facto riigil on olemas realistlik tegutsemisvõimalus ning sellest loobumine tuleneb strateegilistest valikutest, olla ka mittetegutsemine agentsuse väljendus. Selline vaatenurk suunab kriitiliselt suhtuma varasema

kirjanduse eeldusse, et de facto riigid püüavad alati maksimeerida rahvusvahelisi kontakte ning kasutada kõiki võimalusi oma välispoliitika mitmekesistamiseks.

Patrooni-kliendi suhete analüüs näitab omakorda, et sõltuvus on mitmetahuline. Kuigi patroonisuhete kujunemisel on enamasti keskne roll julgeolekul, sõltub patrooni-kliendi suhete ulatus ja püsivus ka poliitilistest, majanduslikest, ühiskondlikest ja kultuurilistest sidemetest ning mõnel juhul isegi olulise taristu jagamisest. Tugev sõltuvus kujundab de facto riikide välispoliitilisi võimalusi, kuid ei kaota tingimata nende autonoomiat. Isegi väga asümmeetrilistes suhetes võivad de facto riigid säilitada läbirääkimisruumi, püüda patrooni mõjutada või otsida täiendavaid suhteid teiste toimijatega.

Samas näitab doktoritöö, et patrooni-kliendi suhet peaks analüüsima koos de facto riikide suhetega kolmandate osapooltega. Tunnustuseta kaasamine võib vähendada de facto riikide rahvusvahelist isolatsiooni ning pakkuda neile uusi poliitilisi ja majanduslikke tegutsemisvõimalusi ka ilma ametliku tunnustamiseta. De facto riigid tõlgendavad neile pakutavaid võimalusi oma eesmärkidest ja olemasolevatest suhetest lähtuvalt ning kaasamisest loobuda, iseäranis juhul, kui suhtlus kolmandate osapooltega võib ohustada nende suhet patrooniga või kui kaasamist tajutakse vahendina emamaaga taasintegreerimiseks. Paradoksaalselt võib patrooni toetus luua de facto riigi jaoks ka teatava mugavustsooni, mille tulemusena loobutakse ressurside kulutamisest välissuhete mitmekesistamisele. Seetõttu osutavad doktoritöö tulemused vajadusele analüüsida de facto riigi, patrooni, emamaa ja kolmandate osapoolte suhteid tervikliku ja vastastikku sõltuva süsteemina.

Seda relatsioonilist arusaama täiendab rolliteooria. Geopoliitiliste rollide mõiste aitab näha agentsust mitte ainult tegutsemise või otsese mõjutamisena, vaid ka rolliloomena (*role making*). De facto riigid võivad püüda muuta oma geograafilise asukoha, territooriumi, elanikkonna, ressursid või strateegilise tähtsuse poliitiliseks ressursiks ning kujundada seeläbi, kuidas teised toimijad neid rahvusvahelises poliitikas mõtestavad.

Doktoritöö teadusliku panuse võib koondada nelja suuremasse valdkonda. Esiteks on töö peamine kontseptuaalne panus de facto riikide agentsuse süsteemaatiline käsitlemine. Doktoritöö asetab de facto riikide agentsuse analüüsi keskmesse ning käsitleb seda suhtelise ja kontekstis sõltuva tegutsemisvõimena. Lisaks laiendab töö agentsuse käsitlust, juhtides tähelepanu nii strateegilisele mittetegutsemisele kui geopoliitilisele rolliloomele kui võimalikele agentsuse avaldumisvormidele.

Teiseks panustab doktoritöö de facto riikide välissuhete relatsioonilisse käsitluse. Nelja osapoolega suhtemudel, kus de facto riigid, patroonid, emamaad ja kolmandad osapooled moodustavad üksteisega põimuvaid „suhtekolmnurkasid“ võimaldab süsteemselt uurida de facto riikide välispoliitilise tegutsemisruumi kujunemist. Rolliteooria ja geopoliitiliste rollide mõiste täiendavad seda käsitlust, võimaldades uurida, kuidas de facto riigid ise püüavad neis suhetes oma positsiooni ja tähendust kujundada.

Kolmandaks annab doktoritöö metodoloogilise ja võrdleva panuse patrooni-kliendi suhete ning de facto riikluse uurimisse. Töö arendab välja mitme-

mõõtmelise raamistiku patroonisõltuvuse ulatuse ja intensiivsuse võrdlemiseks. Samas näitab selle raamistiku rakendamine, et sõltuvuse taseme mõõtmisest üksi ei pruugi piisata de facto riigi eristamiseks marionett- või käpikriigist. Seega seisneb doktoritöö panus nii sõltuvuse süstemaatilises operatsionaliseerimises kui ka sellise mõõtmise kontseptuaalsete piiride esiletoomises. Laiemalt panustab töö de facto riikide võrdlevasse uurimisse: viiest uurimusest neli on võrdlevad ning mitmes neist võrreldakse eri regioonides paiknevaid juhtumeid.

Neljandaks, asetades järjepidevalt keskele kohale de facto riikide perspektiivi ja tegutsemisvõimalused, näitab töö nende käsitluste piiratust, mis näevad de facto riike pelgalt geopolitiiliste objektide või patroonriikide instrumentidega. Doktoritöö tulemused ei eita patroonide, mittetunnustamise ega geopolitiiliste jõuvahekordade tugevat mõju. Need näitavad aga, et struktuurne sõltuvus ja agentsus võivad eksisteerida samaaegselt.

Laiemas plaanis aitab doktoritöö paremini mõista, kuidas rahvusvahelise süsteemi äärealadel tegutsevad poliitilised üksused kohanevad mittetunnustamise, geopolitiilise konkurentsi ja sõltuvussuhete tingimustes. Töö näitab, et ka piiratud rahvusvahelise staatusega toimijad võivad omada märkimisväärset mõju oma keskkonnale ning osaleda aktiivselt rahvusvaheliste suhete kujundamises.

PUBLICATIONS

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- Berg, E. & Vits, K. (2026). Mind the Conceptual Gap: Making Sense of the Geopolitical Roles of De Facto States. *Geopolitics*, 31(4), 1757–1786. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2586759>.
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Õpetamis- ja juhendamiskogemus

- 2022– Juhendaja kursusel „Rahvusvaheliste suhete alused“ (2 EAP e-kursus Eesti gümnaasiumiastme õpilastele)
- 2019–2022 Lektor kursusel „Režiimi siirded“ (6 EAP; bakalaureuseõpe)
- 2013–2018; 2021–2023 Õppeassistent kursusel „Poliitiline geograafia“ (6 EAP; bakalaureuseõpe)
- 2018 Õppeassistent kursusel „Kvalitatiivsed ja interpretatiivsed uurimismeetodid“ (6 EAP; magistriõpe)
- 2017 Õppeassistent kursusel „Sotsiaalteaduslik metodoloogia“ (6 EAP, magistriõpe)

2014–2026 (kaas)juhendanud 9 magistritööd ja 12 bakalaureusetööd

Osalus uurimisprojektides

- 2023–2027 Eesti Teadusagentuuri rahastatud projekt (PRG1798), „Külmutatud konfliktide“ dünaamika läbi toimijakeskse suhestumise. Vastutav täitja: Eiki Berg
- 2022–2023 Eesti Siseministeeriumi ja Kaitseministeeriumi rahastatud projekt (7–4/2240–2), Kagu-Eesti piiriala sotsiaal-majandusliku olukorra, siseturvalisuse, piirijulgeoleku ja kogukonna uuring. Vastutav täitja: Veiko Sepp

- 2021–2021 Eesti Välisministeeriumi rahastatud projekt (LSVJS21277), Euroopa Liidu liikmetest Vahemere-äärsete riikide omavahelised suhted ja regionaalne ning rahvusvaheline koostöö. Vastutav täitja: Maili Vilson
- 2014–2019 Eesti Teadusagentuuri rahastatud projekt (IUT20–39), Poliitiline kogukond muutuste keerises. Identiteet, suveräänsus ja demokraatia teiseks maailmas. Vastutav täitja: Eiki Berg

Muud tegevused

- 2020– Emerging Scholars Workshops on De Facto States – korraldusmeeskonna liige

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